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Publication Date

2026-08-21

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Understanding the Impact of Alvin Ailey's *Cry* Solo

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Tyra Janae Logan

Thesis Committee:
Professor S. Ama Wray, Chair
Professor Jennifer Fisher
Associate Professor Lindsay Gilmour

2026

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincerest appreciation for my committee chair, Dr. S. Ama Wray and acknowledge her mentorship, commitment, support, and encouragement. I am deeply grateful for her insights and advice that helped navigate my research process. I appreciate her guidance, which shaped my research and personal growth during my time at University of California, Irvine (UCI).

To my committee members, Dr. Jennifer Fisher and Professor Lindsay Gilmour, thank you for supporting this thesis. Your valuable feedback, insights, and encouragement helped in strengthening this paper. I appreciate how their openness to my ideas supported my research journey.

I am immensely thankful for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's archivist Dominique Singer, who provided the video link to Judith Jamison's *Cry* performance. Her contribution served as a valuable resource that helped make this research study possible.

I am deeply grateful to all survey participants for sharing their time and dedication for this study. Thank you for expressing your insights and perspectives, which were essential for my research topic.

To my talented dancers Eilah Brooks and Nadine Cobourn, who supported my artistic visions for my choreographic work, thank you for trusting me. Their collaboration, artistry, and passion helped bring my choreography to life.

Special thanks to my parents Clifton and Shironda Logan, and sister Jazmine Logan, thank you for always believing in me. Their endless love, encouragement, and support always uplift me to keep working hard and striving towards success.

I am incredibly fortunate for the support provided by UCI's Graduate Dean Dissertation Fellowship. The fellowship's funds allowed me the opportunity to forgo non-research related employment obligations during summer 2025 to focus fully on my research.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Understanding the Impact of Alvin Ailey's *Cry* Solo

by

Tyra Logan

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2026

Dr. S. Ama Wray, Chair

Alvin Ailey's *Cry* is a modern dance masterwork of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's Repertory that has been performed many times since its 1971 premiere. What makes Ailey's *Cry* so impactful to contemporary audiences is the cornerstone of this inquiry. This thesis explored Alvin Ailey's *Cry* and its interpretation from various perspectives that led to the creation of my own choreography entitled *Weathered*. Along with experts' analyses, I examined how audiences respond to *Cry* and integrated their insights into the development of a new choreographic work. My methodology utilized reception theory and a survey to uncover the moments deemed most impactful by voluntary respondents. These survey findings went on to serve as data points to inform my choreographical choices. I included two dancers plus myself to create three solos that built upon the themes that resonated widely through kinesthetic empathy entwined with the lens of their own lived experiences. I concluded that Ailey's *Cry* is timelessly impactful because of the breadth of people that are able to relate with it in their own way.

INTRODUCTION

The Impact of Alvin Ailey's *Cry* Solo

Alvin Ailey, an African American choreographer, was a modern dance pioneer who transformed the trajectory of the dance field. Dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz describes the Ailey company arrival in opera houses around the world as “an ambassador of black experience in dance proving that aspects of core black culture could be represented in concert dance and that representation could survive transference to extremely unfamiliar settings” (2004, p. 71). Through the company, Ailey essentially created a space for African American experiences to be shared internationally and elevated through choreographic storytelling.

As I grew into a dance artist, I found inspiration in Alvin Ailey, whose company created a powerful space that showcased and celebrated the talents of Black dancers. I am constantly captivated by the artistry and athleticism portrayed by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's performances that I observe through online recordings. At age 17, my admiration for Ailey's work led me to begin training in Horton technique¹, which is deeply rooted in the company's choreography. Additionally, as an African American choreographer, I believe that utilizing the modes of storytelling within dance, similar to Ailey, allows the stories of African Americans to be shared in ways that words alone cannot fully express.

For this thesis, I chose to examine Ailey's *Cry* solo which illuminated the experiences of Black women living at the intersection of oppression, consisting of racism, sexism, and classism. I connected to *Cry* because as an African American woman, I recognized its portrayal of struggle and resilience that resonated with my own experiences. In addition to the personal connections

¹ Holtzman, Emma (2020) "Lester Horton: A Revolutionary," Proceedings of GREAT Day: Vol. 2019, Article 14. Researcher Emma Holtzman explains that Lester Horton developed a modern dance technique based on Native American dances, anatomical studies, and other movement influence. Horton technique is deeply rooted in Ailey's choreography.

outlined above, I honored the Black women who endured hardships before me which drove my interest regarding what makes Alvin Ailey's solo *Cry* so impactful. In this regard I sought answers from the audience, people who view the dance. I introduced the solo to an audience to learn directly from them how they perceived the solo. Also, I explored the use of a survey tool to deduce how they felt about the solo and then analyzed this with the goal of understanding what makes *Cry* endure as a masterwork. Building from this understanding, I then created a work inspired by Ailey's masterpiece by integrating performance-based research in my dance making process.

The following section is an overview of my thesis chapters. Chapter One draws on literature about Alvin Ailey, Judith Jamison, Ailey's *Cry* solo, and Black feminism. I introduce frameworks of Black feminists Maya Angelou, bell hooks, and Deborah K. King. Their work reflects the lived experiences of Black women which informs the themes portrayed within *Cry*. Furthermore, I also utilize the concepts of reception theory and performance-based theory which investigate the audience's perception of the solo and how I utilize their perception as data as a choreographic method. Chapter One analyzes the solo work from multiple perspectives such as Judith Jamison's interpretation, my own analysis, and reviews from dance critics. Chapter Two outlines the methodological approach to investigating the solo with an audience and my introduction of a survey tool. My goal in Chapter 2 is to discover in what ways new audience members' interpretations of *Cry* align with my articulations of Black female empowerment. Additionally, I analyze participants' perceptions through reception theory. This chapter also introduces performance-based research that involves transforming the survey data into a method for developing my choreographic work. In Chapter 3, I present the survey results, revealing common themes or patterns that arose within the collected responses. In Chapter 4, I integrate

all the research elements together by creating a new choreographic work entitled *Weathered*.

Finally, in my concluding chapter I offer what I discovered through my research journey.

CHAPTER ONE

Historical, Theoretical, and Critical Perspectives on *Cry*

Analyzing Alvin Ailey's *Cry* requires examining its choreographic style, historical context, Judith Jamison's leading role, and critics' reviews². This chapter includes a review of literature with an analysis examining *Cry* through multiple perspectives. This section of the chapter focuses on four major topics: Alvin Ailey, *Cry*, Judith Jamison, and Black Feminism, which will enable a richer understanding of this seminal work. Through my research, I am examining what makes Ailey's *Cry* so impactful to contemporary audiences. My research goal was to understand the *Cry* solo and investigate what has sustained its reputation as one of Ailey's distinguished works. To me, Ailey's choreographic method of storytelling allows the audience to gain meanings from his choreography, and because everyone perceives things differently, it is possible to envision that there are multiple interpretations.

Building upon this historical and theoretical foundation, I will introduce Judith Jamison's perspective; she is the original performer of *Cry* who embodied Ailey's ideas of Black womanhood. Then, I will introduce my analysis of the piece using selected Black Feminist frameworks alongside other dance critics' interpretations, also examining specific gestures and choreographic structures within *Cry* through my own interpretation. The dance is organized in three sections distinguished by different songs that join together to make up the sound score of the piece. To support the analysis of the choreography and the music that it is grounded by, I introduce themes articulated by Maya Angelou, bell hooks, and Deborah K. King. Their intellectual frameworks advocate in different ways for Black women, often reflecting the lived

² This link is Judith Jamison's 1972 *Cry* Performance. I reached out to the Ailey Company's archivist Dominique Singer for a link to Jamison's *Cry* solo since there wasn't any full versions available on youtube. <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/rir79q5o0uvk2gsgj5l3n/1972-Cry-from-Dance-Collection-Gala.mp4?rlkey=jp5yn1o5o85scrkvjhrqqiicc&st=8peofmzi&dl=0>

experiences that parallel the themes that are portrayed within *Cry*. These themes include emotional hardships, hope, determination, celebration, and strength. Added to this, I will integrate perspectives on the gestural language through as interpreted by dance critics Clive Barnes and Harmony Holiday, along with dance scholars Thomas DeFrantz, Brenda Dixon Gottschild and others.

Alvin Ailey

In this section, I will elaborate on Alvin Ailey's dance background and career in the dance field. Alvin Ailey is an African American choreographer who has created many sensational dances such as *Revelations*, *Blue Suites*, and *Masekela Languages*. Dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz explains the Ailey company arrival in opera houses around the world as "an ambassador of black experience in dance proving that aspects of core black culture could be represented in concert dance and that representation could survive transference to extremely unfamiliar settings" (2004, p. 71). Ailey essentially created a space internationally for African American experiences to be shared and elevated through storytelling within his choreography.

Researcher and professor Julia Foulkes in "Modern Bodies" (2002) explains a pivotal moment that began Ailey's dance career after he saw talented Black dancers in Katherine Dunham's company (p. 180). This performance prompted Ailey to begin formal dance training with Lester Horton, a pioneer of Modern dance (Foulkes, 2002, p. 180). Foulkes also mentioned that Horton was one of the first choreographers to insist upon racial integration in his company (2002, p. 180). When Horton died in 1953, Ailey took over his company and became the artistic director after three years of training with Horton (Foulkes, 2002, p. 180). In 1958, Ailey created

his own company “Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre” which included other dancers from the Horton company³.

Ailey’s utilization of storytelling as a choreographic method centered African American experiences. Ailey was concerned that African American dancers lacked concert opportunities and gave them a space to share their own experiences (Foulkes, 2002, p. 180). As mentioned by Foulkes, “Two signature Ailey dances, *Blue Suite* (1958) and *Revelations* (1960), focused on the experience of African Americans.” (p. 180)

Alvin Ailey’s *Cry* (1971)

Alvin Ailey’s *Cry* is a modern solo work lasting around 16 minutes, set to music from Alice Coltrane “Something About John Coltrane”, Laura Nyro “Been On A Train”, and Voices of Harlem “Right On, Be Free”. It first premiered in New York City Center on May 4th, 1971, and performed by Judith Jamison. This solo was a birthday gift for Alvin Ailey’s mother, Lula Cooper, and was dedicated to all Black women everywhere- especially our mothers (DeFrantz, 2004, p.182). DeFrantz mentioned that *Cry* was “choreographed quickly, with only five days of rehearsal, Ailey made the dance ‘to say something about the huge influence that black women have had in my life’ (182)”.

Choreographer and arts journalist Rennie McDougall mentioned that eighteen women in the Ailey company have performed *Cry* after Judith Jamison premiered it (2024a). There is a distinct process through which the solo is taught, as writer Valerie Gladstone explained in her 2000 New York Times article, that there is a designated *Cry* teacher in the Ailey Company.

Historically Nasha Thomas Schmitt teaches the choreography for *Cry* then traditionally Jamison

³ See AILEY. (n.d.-a). *Lester Horton*. <https://ailey.org/people/lester-horton>. This citation is from the AILEY company website. As provided by archivist Dominique Singer, this source is attributed to AILEY as the author.

would step in later to coach and fine tune the dancer to ready them for performance (2000)⁴.

Gladstone (2000) mentions that Jamison did not want future dancers to replicate her version of the solo but rather find their own *Cry* journey and personality on stage. Jamison stated in the interview, “I choose women for the ballet who can carry its weight... they must be able to fill the stage at the very beginning and understand their individuality and dig down deep to deliver something new to the audience” (Gladstone, 2000). For me, this statement from Jamison explains how *Cry* is personified through the personality and experience of its performers, adding to its impact transferring to the public.

Cry- Costume & Prop

In this section, I describe the symbolism of the white costume and the meaning of the white long cloth prop that Jamison is seen carrying as the solo begins. I include analysis from dance critics and scholars Brenda Dixon Gottschild and Clive Barnes who have also analyzed these two elements contributing to these layers of meaning.

Judith Jamison wore a white leotard that was sewn onto a skirt from the “Wade in the Water” section of *Revelations* (McDougall, 2024a). Created in 1960, *Revelations* is another iconic work in Ailey’s repertoire. My interpretation of the white costume is that it symbolizes vulnerability, alongside the resilience that Jamison displays through her emotionally expressive journey through *Cry*. Another interpretation of the monochrome costume is that it carries a feeling of an openness. I associate the color white with the emptiness of a painter’s canvas, symbolizing open-ended meaning. By contrast, dance critic and dance historian Brenda Dixon Gottschild perceived Jamison’s white costume as symbolic of religion and spirituality. In a 2025

⁴ Gladstone, V. (2000). *Dance; The Long Shadow of Ailey's Great 'Cry'*. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/26/arts/dance-the-long-shadow-of-ailey-s-great-cry.html> discusses an interview where Jamison reflected on *Cry*’s 1971 premiere night.

lecture, Dr. Wray's Graduate Pro Seminar at UC Irvine⁵ included Gottschild as a speaker, she reflected on her recent article "Phoenix: The New Wisdom" (2024), and she aligns the meaning of the costume in *Cry* to the significance of the color white used ceremoniously in African religions. In the lecture, Gottschild clarified that the color white in African religion means purity, peace, and new beginnings, quite distinct from my perspective. Although I did not perceive the costume through a spiritual lens, I acknowledge its significant and consistent role within African American historical and cultural experiences. Drawing from Gottschild's analysis, I conclude that the dress and the multi-use cloth evoke layers of transcendent meaning, for each viewer it can elicit different perspectives. Her costume can go beyond its physical form and connect to a deeper emotional and spiritual meaning.

In addition to the luminous white costume, Jamison is also seen holding a long white cloth. *Cry* begins with Jamison standing center stage with the white material draped over her raised hands swaying from side to side. Dance critic Clive Barnes saw the cloth as symbolizing breaking out of confinement. Barnes appeared to view the prop as enabling Jamison to escape limitation. In Barnes's *New York Times* "The Dance: Judith Jamison's Triumph" (1971), he mentions the long scarf being used as a head dress and as a dramatic metaphor for flight or freedom. My own interpretation of the white cloth falls in line with Barnes's analysis. When I observe Jamison's manipulation of the cloth it suggests confinement as the fabric wraps around her entire body, then quickly releases allowing her to move freely once again.

Cry- Lighting

Next, I will examine the lighting of the piece and explain how it supports the choreography unfolding through each of the three sections of *Cry*. I include my own analysis, as

⁵ The Graduate Pro Seminar event hosted by Dr. S. Ama Wray was held both on zoom and on campus at University of California Irvine November 19, 2025

well as a 1971 early review from Clive Barnes to show how the lighting can enhance storytelling within choreography.

In *Cry*'s first section set to "Something about Alice Coltrane", the lighting starts off with a blue spotlight with dimmed navy colored surrounding light as Jamison uses the white cloth to hide her face. I interpret this blue state as Jamison being submerged by a deep sadness and heartache that she is feeling from her own lived experiences and her ancestors. In second section set to "Been on a Train", a spotlight appears center stage illuminating Jamison. As she lays in the bright circular yellow light it reveals a moment when she appears to be releasing from the grip of her sorrows and moves toward grasping hope. This moment is quickly interrupted with the disappearance of the spotlight; as the next piece of music begins with soft piano sounds revealing that the tribulations never went away. The piano notes begin with an underlying somber tone, reflecting the emotional weight of Jamison reemerging. The center pool of warm light reappears again and expands covering most of the stage. The lighting transitions from the dimmed blue to a warmer yellow color. This lighting sequence amplifies the built-up pain releasing, revealing she is now feeling freer. The third section of *Cry* set to "Right on, Be Free" is danced in golden lights that radiate across the stage. Jamison dances with a sense of praise in her achievements, seemingly not letting the ongoing hardships diminish her greatness as the lights amplify this feeling. This is seen as Jamison dances with high energy moving freely across the stage, performing vibratory movements releasing built up tension through her limbs and body.

Barnes's review praises *Cry*'s design, writing that "the simplicity of the staging was exemplary, and the lighting by Chenault Spence made a most telling contribution in varying the effect of each section and matching the work's favor" (1971). I agree with Barnes's reviews pertaining to the hues of light in a blue night sky to show her beginning journey of physical and

emotional pain throughout the first section. Following this section, the color of the lights progresses from the whole stage covered in blue to a spotlight of yellow with surrounding dimmed blue light to convey determination and hope. Finally, Spence uses a bright golden yellow to build an immersive feeling of celebration of the Black Woman in the last section.

Judith Jamison

Alvin Ailey choreographed *Cry* specifically for Judith, but also as a birthday gift for his mother, then as an honor to all Black Women, as the subtitle states. As stated by McDougall (2024a), “Ailey tasked Ms. Jamison with evoking the enduring strength that Black women have held for generations.”

The following section examines Judith Jamison’s background and how she came to have a successful dance career. After premiering *Cry* in 1971, Judith Jamison left a long-lasting legacy of being the “face of ‘Cry’”. McDougall also states that “Jamison also left an unforgettable personal stamp on many of Ailey’s ballets, most powerfully in the solo *Cry*” (2024b). Jamison in her autobiography *Dancing Spirit* (1993), describes herself as an African American woman who was tall, lean, and long-legged. Dance critic Deborah Jowitt in *New York Times* “Call Me a Dancer” (1976) observed that “Jamison is 5 feet 10 inches. Anyone who’s seen her on stage is convinced she is 6 feet 5. [...] Jamison stands out for the subtlety with which she shapes dance movements, for the intensity and lavishness of her performing”. Jamison started dancing when she was six years old with her first ballet teacher Marion Cuyjet (1993, p. 5). In 1963, Jamison saw Alvin Ailey’s dance company perform, and just two years later, Ailey invited her to join (McDougall, 2024b). After training with Ailey for about six years, he choreographed *Cry* for her. She danced with Ailey’s company until 1980 and established her own company the “Jamison Project” in 1988 (McDougall, 2024b). McDougall also notes that “Ms. Jamison carried on Mr.

Ailey's legacy, after his death, by mentoring, nurturing, and uplifting hundreds of dancers involved with his companies" (2024b).

Writer and curator Valerie Gladstone interviewed Judith Jamison in October 2000 about the night that *Cry* premiered. Jamison explained that the choreographic process of learning *Cry* was in a span of eight days (2000, p.3). Ailey utilized images to support the emotional depth of the solo (2000, p. 3). Gladstone mentions that "Ailey gave her specific images, one of them from a photograph in Life magazine of a starving woman during the famine in Biafra, with a baby in her lap, her arms outstretched, silently screaming" (p. 3). Jamison recalled Ailey interpreting this specific image, embodying what the woman's pain would look like (2000, p. 3). The significance of Jamison's interpretation of *Cry* will be discussed in a later section of this chapter. After the *Cry* premiere performance, the audience would not stop cheering for Jamison (2000, p. 1). The way Jamison carries herself throughout the dance shows a woman's journey through pain, tension, poise, and triumph.

***Cry* and Black Feminism**

The 70s, a time when the second-wave of Black feminism occurred in the USA, was concurrent with Ailey's creation of *Cry*. When understanding Ailey's purpose for his dedication to "all Black women", it is important to acknowledge the historical background of their experiences. Within this section I address some theoretical terms that identify Black feminism such as double jeopardy, intersectionality, and white supremacist capitalist. Black feminist theorist Deborah K. King in "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness" (1988) discusses the term double jeopardy that Frances Beale introduced, to describe the "dual discriminations of racism and sexism that subjugate Black women" (pg. 46). Double jeopardy essentially explains the unique experience that Black women faced when experiencing oppression (King, 1988). This

term is important to the ideology of Black feminism because it outlines the marginalization that Black women faced during the mainstream feminism and Black Liberation movements. Similarly, Black feminist and scholar Kimberle Crenshaw created the term intersectionality to help explain the oppression of Black women. In a Columbia Law School interview (2017), Crenshaw elaborated on intersectionality as “a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it intersects and interlocks.” This term is important because it examines how the oppressions of race, gender, and class intersect one another creating a system of discrimination towards Black women.

Black feminist pioneer bell hooks explains that Black feminism is a movement that emerged due to the overshadowing and silencing that privileged white women had inflicted on Black women in the era of mainstream feminism. In hook’s “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory” (2000), she states that the Feminist movement enforces white supremacy and does not reflect the reality of all women’s experiences. Theorist bell hooks also believed that the movement should be centered on marginalized groups such as women of color and poor women (2000). She further explains that there is not a universal experience that all women face. Additionally, hooks elaborates on this idea by stating that “Black women have faced economic and racial discrimination that other women had not experienced” (2000). An analysis of *Cry* and selected Black feminist frameworks will be outlined in the next section of this chapter.

Analyzing *Cry* through Multiple Perspectives

I will begin with Jamison’s perspective, who was the first dancer to perform *Cry* in 1971. Jamison, in her autobiography *Dancing Spirit*, stated that Ailey had not specifically explained what “the woman” depicted in the solo *Cry* represented (1993, p.132). Since Ailey never

explicitly defined the woman in *Cry*, Jamison developed her own interpretation of her role based on what she felt Black women had experienced. This section provides an overview of Jamison's perception of each part of *Cry*'s three sections.

In her autobiography Jamison says her character “represented those before her who came from the hardships of slavery, through the pain of losing loved ones, through overcoming extraordinary depressions and tribulations. Coming out of a world of pain and trouble, she has found her way– and triumphed” (1993, p. 132). Jamison felt that each part of *Cry* had its own meaning that was resonant with these experiences. She viewed the first section as asserting a position by projecting a powerful stance at the start of the dance. Jamison says “Look at me. I’m a gorgeous being. I have something to say. I’m *here*” (1993, p. 132). Jamison also explains that within the first section she is displaying the burdens she carries as well as the blessings (1993, p. 132). In the second section, Jamison mentions that the woman she embodies symbolizes the devastations of the world (1993, p. 132). She also says in the second section of *Cry* “Here Alvin used Laura Nyro’s song ‘Been on a train’, which speaks of the catastrophe of drugs– how, instead of eating life, you let life eat away at you” (1993, p. 132). Lastly, Jamison acknowledges the last section of *Cry* of having a celebratory feeling. She mentions the woman she depicts as “She is going to keep her ‘eyes on the prize’ despite the odds. She is full of pride and elegance, and represents the strength of women who have endured since the beginning of time– the head is held high” (1993, p. 132).

Analyzing Cry's Gestures & Choreography

Section 1- Emotional Hardships. In the first section of *Cry*, I gleaned a strong sense of emotional hardships. The heavy quality of the movement evokes feelings of sadness, loneliness, and distress that Judith Jamison portrays through the solo. I see a relationship with the work of

Black feminist poet and activist Maya Angelou. Her poem “Still I Rise” reflects my observations. Maya Angelou (1978) writes:

You may shoot me down with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I’ll rise.” (lines 21-24)

The emotional weight behind the words expressed by Angelou is reflected through Jamison’s movement in the first section when she repeatedly curls into her body and quickly picks herself back up utilizing her inner strength to not let the emotional pain take control of her body. As Jamison stands, she throws her fist up into the air as her torso caves into a forward curved position. She releases herself from this tense position letting her arms move her across the opposite side of the stage. Within this section, I also observe Jamison performing a series of tense arm movements that show struggle and a type of agonizing pain that is running through her body. In lines 29-32 of “Still I Rise” Angelou (1978) states that:

Out of the huts of history’s shame
I rise
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain
I rise

Angelou’s words express the distress and trauma from the oppression that she overcame. These lines written and spoken by Angelou also describes the quality that Jamison applies to the movement as she sways side to side on her knees, with a low gaze tossing her head from side to side, almost like a demand for attention to be paid.

Harmony Holiday, a writer and activist, also analyzed Judith Jamison's performance through a Black feminist framework. In Holiday's *LA Times* article "By Deifying Alice Coltrane..." (2025) she speaks on *Cry*'s opening section. Holiday says, "Her body maps the path and rites of passage of Black womanhood so eloquently that the stamina the dance requires is hardly perceptible to the spectator, which itself speaks to the conditions of Black Femininity: Make harrowing exertion appear effortless, gorgeous, all by yourself, and don't act isolated, be your own accompaniment" (2025, p. 3). Holiday's analysis is exemplified when Jamison gracefully runs from one side of the stage to the other continuously moving as if her limbs are pulling her in different directions. Her momentum never stops resembling the stamina mentioned by Holiday, as she begins to effortlessly spin in place and her ruffled skirt takes on its own spiral. I perceived Holiday's analysis as describing the Black women's experience of persevering through emotional and physical pain while showcasing strength and elegance in defiance of the forces of oppression that seek to crush her.

Section 2- Hope: Foreseeing Future Change. The second theme emphasized in *Cry* is hope, determination, and foreseeing that better things will happen in the future. bell hooks in her article "Feminism is for Everybody" discusses sharing the promise and hope of the Feminist movement to others (2000, p. x). The second-wave feminism movement, started by white women in the early 1960s was meant to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression for both males and females (hooks, 2000, p. x). However, in hook's article "Shaping Feminist Theory" (1984) Black women were not promised the same gender solidarity that white women and Black men experienced (p. 4). In Ailey's second section I recognized the theme of hope and determination that Jamison embodies in the solo. At the beginning of the song, she places one hand on her chest, slowly raises her other arm above her head reaching towards the sky, with a high gaze

transitioning into a moment where she is seen grasping her head. Jamison is seen in this upward motion giving the impression of attempting to reach towards something better, reflecting this aspiration and determination. DeFrantz also elaborates on the moment that “Her dance follows the contours of Nyro’s song closely, rising in physical intensity with a series of leaps as the singer wails a lament, then stopping suddenly as a piano interlude falls silent” (2006, p. 184). From my perspective this moment shows the feeling of determination through the intensity that Jamison amplifies through her relationship to the music.

Further analysis by DeFrantz offers that “The final posture mirrors the opening posture of the dance, suggesting a cyclical, inevitable progression of frustration and despair” (2006, p. 184). I related this moment to the cyclical pattern of Black women experiences being constantly overlooked, relating to the oppression they face from enduring racism, sexism, and classism. As mentioned in hook’s article, Black feminism emerged out of the prioritization of white women centering their own needs while overlooking the realities of those who were marginalized (1984, p.4). Black feminism does the work of reflecting a recurring pattern of Black women advocating for themselves, because of their concerns not being addressed by society.

Section 3- Resilience & Celebration: As a Form of Strength. The last section in *Cry* combines celebration, triumph, and relief. DeFrantz reveals that, “The final section of *Cry* is set to the Voices of East Harlem recording of ‘Right On, Be Free,’ a gospel song about the triumph of will and spiritual rebirth” (2006, p. 184). Within this final part of the solo, I examine the piece through Black feminist thinker Deborah K. King, exploring the concepts of Black women manifesting their power, strength, and independence through their lived experiences of oppression. King acknowledged that “Black feminism asserts self-determination as essential. Black women are empowered with the right to interpret our reality and define our objectives.

While drawing on a rich tradition of struggle as blacks and as women, we continually establish and reestablish our own priorities” (1988, p. 72). These ideas of agency, resilience, and empowerment identified within King’s vision of black womanhood are embodied throughout the solo. Clive Barnes (1971) similarly examines these characteristics portrayed by Jamison during this section when she was moving to the groovy rhythm of “Right On, Be Free” in celebration of Black power and Black pride. On the website of National Museum and African American History and Culture defines the Black Power and Black Pride movement as emphasizing black self-reliance, self-determination, and securing their human rights by creating political and cultural organizations that serve their interests. This section of the music had an exceptionally upbeat tempo, uplifting the mood of the dance. Through Barnes’s statement I can fully sense the celebratory feeling portrayed by Jamison as she dances with an aesthetic of being at ease. Analysis by DeFrantz brings attention to Jamison’s sense of festivity when he states, “Her dance is infused by the joy of triumphant perseverance, through traveling hitch kicks, simple walking phrases, and surprising freezes timed to hard rhythmic breaks in the music” (2006, p. 184). I align with DeFrantz’s analysis when Jamison moves with a fluid weightless quality, mimicking a bird gliding through the sky. Jamison continues this carefree feeling as she begins to dance with her skirt in a playful way. She twirls the skirt with the outer layers as it swirls in a continuous circular motion slowly beginning to incorporate her head and spine, also moving freely. DeFrantz notes that as the solo ends, Jamison is “embellishing subtle variations in rhythmic accent with her hands, shoulders, and feet as the curtain falls” (2006, p. 184). For me, this final moment of the solo symbolizes the contributions, legacies, and voices of all Black women that persist through adverse and abject conditions, while seemingly finding beauty far beyond what society cares to recognize.

As a result of this analysis, I have understood the historical and theoretical foundation for understanding *Cry*. In the beginning section, I introduce Alvin Ailey: a notable modern dance pioneer, Ailey's *Cry* solo, Judith Jamison's successful dance career, and the historical background portrayed in *Cry*. In the second section I introduce multiple perspectives of *Cry* from the point of view of the first performer of the solo, my own perception through selected voices of Black feminist thinkers, and the reviews by dance scholars and critics. These interpretations include an analysis of the movement, costume, and lighting that builds a foundation of what experts have articulated about this solo. As a result of this analysis, as a choreographer this leads me toward seeking new answers to the question: what makes Ailey's *Cry* so impactful from the audience's perspective, and how can I build from this foundation to make work inspired by Ailey. In the next chapter, I will take these inquiries and explore how I might discover answers.

CHAPTER TWO

Research Methodology: Survey Design and Performance-Based Research

This chapter outlines the methods used to answer the following research question: What makes Ailey's *Cry* solo so impactful to contemporary audiences? To address my research question, I evaluated how audiences perceived the solo by providing the participants an archival video of the dance in conjunction with a survey tool. To interpret the outcomes, I considered the framework of reception theory to analyze the participant's responses. To further examine this question, I used these outcomes to implement a performance-based research method to generate a choreographic work that integrates the research findings. In support of these methodological frameworks, I engaged with the scholarship of dance researcher Leila Sussman and professor and dance scholar Halifu Osumare's work on Katherine Dunham's performance research.

Assessing Audience Perceptions through Survey

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's archivist Dominique Singer granted me access to Judith Jamison's 1972 *Cry* performance at the New York City Center. I used this version because there wasn't a full version of Judith Jamison's solo available on Youtube. I aim to present this footage to others to view online, to learn their perspectives on its effects and to gain insight into which elements they perceive as impactful. I propose to create a survey tool to analyze their responses to *Cry* to identify any common themes. The goal is to better understand the solo's overall impact. Through devising and administering my survey tool, my goal is to assess how and where there are similarities and divergences in their experiences and to triangulate these with what I articulated in Chapter 1.

Utilizing Survey Tools

Leila Sussman, a notable dance scholar in her “Dance Audiences: Answered and Unanswered Questions” (1998) article stated that modern dance has sought to be “avant-gardist art, constantly pushing at the boundaries of what dance might be” (p. 61). I understood Sussman’s statement as modern dance has separated from the traditional foundation of ballet dance with codified technique and set narratives. Essentially, the modern dance style is open to interpretations and often explores different themes. Sussman goes further and states that “modern dance choreographers often insist on the audience’s right to interpret the dance in any way that seems to be appropriate, implying that the work of the interpretation is the audience’s task” (1998, p. 61). Sussman explains how she utilized a survey to capture the perceptions of the audience about reactions to ballet and modern. She concludes that attracting a dance audience requires understanding their own value and relationship to dance. From the insights that Sussman obtained through surveys, she was able to more closely consider the opinions that the audience had between the genres of modern and ballet dance (1998, p. 60). My research incorporated audience’s perceptions and insights which provided me a range of interpretations to enter into performance-based research and inspired the creation of my new work.

Through my research process, the idea of audience perception highlighted in the previous paragraph will be understood through the framework of reception theory. Reception theory is defined by education researcher Mark Dziak (2021) as “a framework within communication studies that examines how audiences interpret and respond to various forms of media.” I will develop a questionnaire that will be administered to research subjects to evaluate the solo regarding their emotional and personal connections to the choreography and other elements that make up the stage performance. I will provide them with a private video link to a 1972 *Cry*

performance by Judith Jamison. I am curious about their insights which are influenced by the individual's own unique experiences (Dziak, 2021). As mentioned by Dziak (2021), "encoding is the process by which a communicator prepares a message to be transmitted and when the audience receives the message their task is to decode it." I am interested in the ways in which Reception theory suggests that audience interpretations are shaped by the processes of encoding and decoding (Dziak, 2021). Within this research study, Ailey encodes a theme of Black women empowerment through the movement, costume, music, and fabric prop in *Cry*. The audience then may decode the messages Ailey embedded into the solo, creating meaning for themselves by determining what resonates and why throughout the performance. I note that observing this solo by video rather than live also introduces a different viewing environment, which may also affect the survey audience's perception and interpretation. While observing *Cry* on screen asynchronously, it also allows participants to view in their own time, to pause, and potentially rewatch the performance. This *Cry* survey will be distributed through email in the form of a google form.

At this point, it is necessary to introduce the term "convenience sampling" into my survey methods. As defined by psychology researcher Julia Simkus (2023), a convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling method where data is collected from an easily accessible and available group of people. I utilize a convenience sampling method that targets family members, close friends, and family friends to ensure reliable participation to generate preliminary insights.

My survey tool incorporates qualitative and quantitative questions, as a mixed-questionnaire that involved numerical ranking, closed questions, and open-ended questions for participants to answer (see Appendix A for survey questions). I will use

quantitative data to define a numeric value while qualitative data is to be used to measure participants' personal responses; these qualitative questions elicit responses that numbers cannot describe. For instance, to collect quantitative data I propose to ask participants to consider ranking emotional scales (See Appendix A, Question 4). For qualitative data, the open-ended questions about feelings and emotions are to enable subjects to show how much of an emotional connection they have to *Cry* (See Appendix A, Question 5). Professor Megan Stutesman in "Mechanisms for Affect Communication from Dance" (2023) mentions that "Therefore, a mixed methods framework is especially valuable to examine affect communication phenomenologically within dance: In the mixed methods framework, the qualitative and quantitative strands each add something different and valuable to our overall understanding. " Within my survey, numerical ranking ask participants to rank on a scale how much of an emotional connection they have to *Cry*. Closed questions include questions such as "did you feel a personal connection to the dance?" with answer choices of 'yes' or 'no'. Open-ended questions ask participants to explain what they believe is the strongest aspect of the solo. As highlighted by Sussman "...quantitative and qualitative studies of audiences are indispensable for dance scholars" (1998, p. 54). I agree with Sussman and Stutesman's statement because through a mixed methods survey, I quantitatively measured if *Cry* impacted the audience and then qualitatively analyzed what specific elements helped the participants create meaning.

Survey Procedures

Within this study, I aim to keep the questions out of view of participants so that these ideas did not affect their perception of the performance. As a researcher, my goal is to design the study to minimize bias. The respondents' responses will be collected automatically through the online platform. The survey begins with an initial set of closed questions about the audience's

prior exposure to Ailey's *Cry* solo and dance experience, to shed light on how more experienced subjects may possibly perceive the solo differently from those that do not have a direct dance affinity. Evaluating *Cry* with prior exposure to the solo could be shaped by memory of the live experience. I acknowledge that someone who has seen the performance before may have a different experience than someone who is seeing it for the first time.

It is possible that a person who had previously seen *Cry* may develop a deeper understanding of the solo by examining the dance for finer details versus overall impression. A viewer with prior dance experience could also be affected by their ability to analyze from a technical perspective versus the holistic emotional impact I am seeking to discern.

After the background questions section, the survey tool continues with the video link of *Cry*. In order to reduce observer-bias I set the footage to play before the questions are revealed. As defined by psychology researcher Julia Simkus, observer bias is “a type of experimenter bias that occurs when a researcher’s expectations, perspectives, opinions, or prejudices impact the results of an experiment” (2023). Simkus explains that observer bias can be caused by being aware of a specific purpose or hypothesis (2023). Further to the survey’s analysis, I will interpret the resonant ideas and incorporate these into my performance-based research.

Performance-Based Research

Dance scholar Halifu Osumare in “Dancing the Black Atlantic” (2010) describes Katherine Dunham as part of a few African American artists “determined to bring before the world evidence of the richness and strength of their Afro-American cultural heritage.” (p. 2) Osumare stated that “Dunham was the first to research Caribbean dances and their socio-cultural contexts. From her seminal mid-1930s fieldwork she recreated specific Afro Caribbean dances into creative ballets on western stages, thus creating a dynamic confluence between anthropology

and dance” (2010, p. 1). Osumare also mentions that “Dunham adapted this functionalist construct and developed her theory of ‘Form and Function’ in dance. In the Dunham dance technique, the student learns that the actual movements and body orientation of a particular dance directly relates to the function of that dance in the social sphere.” (2010, p. 4) An example of how Dunham incorporated “Form and Function” through her research was associating *yanvalu* dance to being prayerful and the sense of the sacred in an observer (2010, p. 4). The performance-based model developed by Katherine Dunham includes her “research to performance model” that transformed her fieldwork into choreography (2010, p. 4). My version of this model incorporates the voices of the survey participants as a part of my artistic vision. Through the incorporation of survey results and my own interpretation of *Cry*, I will develop a new work using a performance-based research method. My research method draws on Katherine Dunham’s theory of form and function to analyze the relationship between gestures and choreography within *Cry* and meanings. Through my survey tool, I ask participants their insights about any specific meanings or emotional connections from Ailey’s choreography. Osumare references Dunham’s adapted concept of “memory of differences”, originated from VeVe Clark, which consist of what informs the performance, embodying what has been recreated from research (2010, p. 7). In my research, “memory of difference” will consist of analyzing the audience’s different perceptions that will be generated from observing the *Cry* solo. By exploring these perspectives, I will identify common themes in the gestures survey participants found impactful in *Cry* and use them as choreographic inspiration in my own works.

In summary, I use the methodological frameworks of reception theory and performance-based research to explore my research question of what makes Ailey’s *Cry* solo so impactful. In my survey, I have shown how I propose to use reception theory as a method of

analyzing audience member's perceptions of *Cry*. These survey results are then to be integrated into my vision as a part of my performance-based research. Moving onto my choreographic process, I explain how I intend to incorporate the voices of the participants by using their questionnaire data. The following chapter will build on this methodology and outline the survey findings.

CHAPTER THREE

Survey Findings: Audience's Responses to Ailey's *Cry*

The purpose of my study is to evaluate “What makes Ailey’s *Cry* solo so impactful to contemporary audiences?” As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, I examine this first through my mixed-methods survey tool that analyzes individuals’ perceptions of the solo as they experience it on a historical video recording. In this chapter, I report on the survey findings especially highlighting those I incorporated into my choreographic process.

Participant Background

As explained in Chapter 2, a convenience sample uses the most accessible and available group of people (Simkus, 2023). A convenience sample of 19 participants were recruited through email, and 13 completed responses were received (68% response rate). Question 1 began by asking whether the participants had previously seen *Cry*. Eleven individuals (84.6%) had not, one person (7.7%) had seen the solo live, and another individual (7.7%) had seen the performance through video. Figure 1 shows a majority of the participants saw Ailey’s *Cry* solo for the first time as a result of participating in this research.

Have you seen Cry before?
13 responses

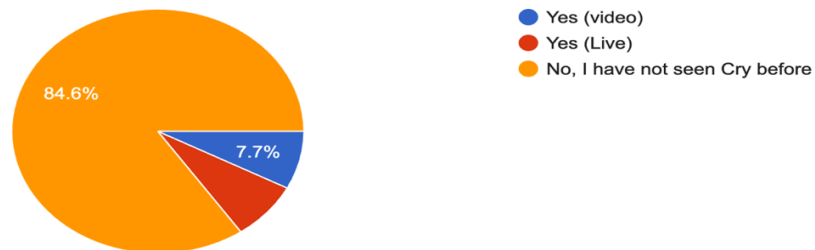


Figure 1: Participant's Prior Exposure to *Cry*

In order to provide further context to interpreting the survey responses, I asked a second related question to determine if the respondents had any dance experience. Eleven respondents (84.6%) reported that they were not dancers, and two people (15.4%) reported that they were dancers. Figure 2 outlines that most of the participants do not consider themselves as dancers. This result suggests that the responses will focus on overall impression of the solo rather than technical evaluations that a more informed dance viewer may be drawn toward.

Are you a dancer?
13 responses

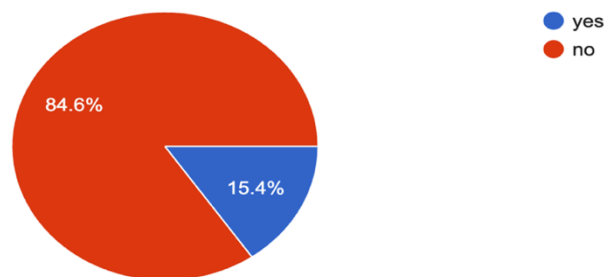


Figure 2: Participant's Dance Background

Survey Questions about Cry

Personal Connections

In this section, the audience was asked if they felt a personal connection to the dance. Eleven participants (84.6%) stated that they felt a personal connection, while two participants (15.4%) did not have a connection. In Figure 3 below, it outlines that the participants related the piece to their own life experiences or feelings, suggesting that the viewers connected to the work on a personal level.

Did you feel a personal connection to the dance?

13 responses

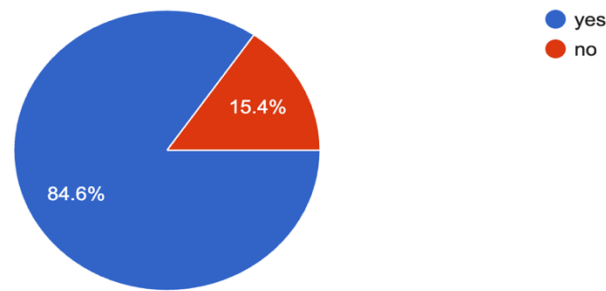


Figure 3: Audience's Personal Connection

Four participants explained the connection of becoming resilient through struggles or hard times, while one individual referenced racial injustice. Another person personally connected to “being empathetic towards struggles of a different time that still exists today”, while someone else highlighted their “own struggles as a young mother”. Another person brought up “the feeling of depression, oppression, and life adversity”, while another individual mentioned the “feeling of getting to the freedom stage of life” (refer to Appendix B, Question 9 for full responses).

Based on these responses, I understood that most of the audience reflected on their own lived experiences and personal challenges. This indicates that the participants connected to *Cry* on an individual and personal emotional level. In their responses, I observed a shared theme amongst the participants of resilience and overcoming adversity which the audience drew a connection between their own lives to the performance. The viewer's personal connection to *Cry* reflects kinesthetic empathy, explained by dance professor Vipavinee Artpradid as the “experience of a reliving or an epistemological placing of ourselves ‘inside’ another’s kinesthetic experience” (2023). This is supported by the audience internally connecting to the solo and carrying the emotional weight that’s within it by reflecting on their own lives. In my

choreography I wanted to explore personal connections through three solos so that the audience can connect deeply with the emotions behind the movement and be fully immersed in the performance.

Emotional Connection towards *Cry*

The participants were asked to numerically rank from a scale of one to ten their own internal connection to the piece. In the numerical ranking graph in Figure 4 below, 1 on the numerical scale represented no emotional connection, whereas 10 corresponded with a strong connection to the dance. The results to these questions were: One participant (7.7%) had selected 2 as their emotional connection, another person (7.7%) selected 4, one participant (7.7%) selected 5, two people (15.4%) selected 6, three people (23.1%) selected 7, and five participants (38.5%) selected 10.

How much of an emotional connection did you have to this dance?

13 responses

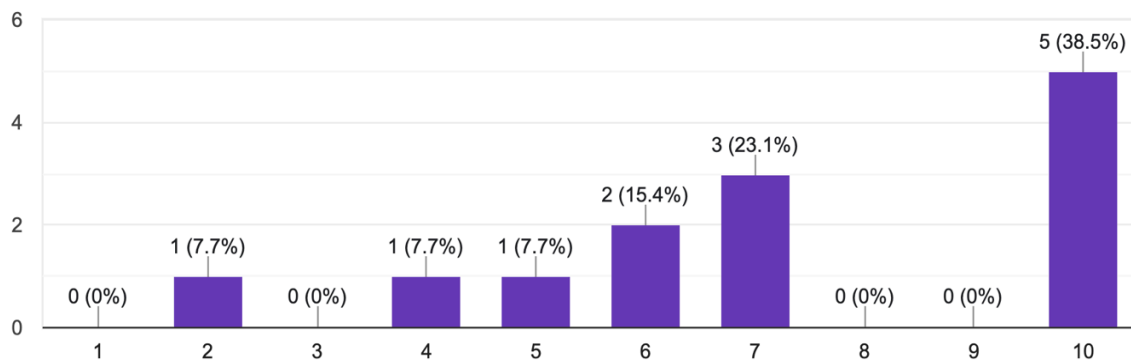


Figure 4: Audience's Emotional Connection to *Cry*

The graph is skewed to the right and the average rank amongst the audience is rank 7, which supports a strong connection towards *Cry*. This overwhelmingly high-ranking aligns with

the previous section, indicating that survey respondents personally connected to the solo, creating a deep emotional resonance with *Cry*.

In the survey, I asked “If you did have an emotional connection while watching *Cry* please explain how you felt?”. Five participants felt sad when watching *Cry*, while one individual felt a range extending from sadness to a mounting to a sense of happiness towards the end. One participant felt that “the beginning displayed sadness and struggle while the end showed strength”, and another participant only felt “the sensation of being free and strong”. A single participant also mentioned “feeling the pain and struggle that African American women faced”, while someone else said they “felt the solo represents feeling shackled then letting go but not necessarily free”. A participant noted they “felt serene while another person reported sensing a story from the solo but felt no particular emotion”. Lastly, one participant felt a deep connection from *Cry* (refer to Appendix B, Question 5 for full responses). This result showed that most of the audience had a range of strong feelings towards *Cry*. These feelings of sadness, pain, and struggle reported by the audience conveys to me that there is an emotional weight that *Cry* holds. In my choreographic work, I aimed to communicate emotions through expressive movement, with movement qualities and gestures symbolizing different emotions.

Gestural and Choreographic Interpretations

When participants indicated whether any gestures or movements helped convey meaning in the *Cry* dance, 12 respondents (92.3%) reported that specific gestures or movements convey meaning in *Cry*, while one person (7.7%) reported that gestures and movements did not contribute to the interpretation. Figure 5, shown below displays that most of the audience agreed that specific gestures and movements within *Cry* contribute to the meaning of the dance.

Does any specific gestures or movements convey meaning in this dance?

13 responses

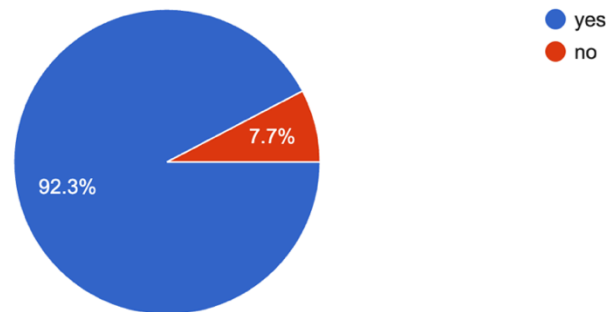


Figure 5: Gestural/ Choreographic Meanings

One individual said that “the variations of arms or extended fingers showed an extension of self, longing or grasping representing climbing out of something”, and an “exhalation/radiance”, while another person felt “the arm movements showed a sign of strength”. Another participant mentioned that “the weight quality of the movements in *Cry* represented the oppression that African Americans endured, self-determination, and a feeling of freedom”. Another viewpoint stated that they “interpreted a plea to God from the solo” while another person mentioned “feeling the quality of gracefulness” (refer to Appendix B, Question 7 for full responses).

From the audience’s perception, I concluded that these qualities of movement reflect a physical toll of struggle and restriction. Additionally, the incorporation of the upper limbs represented a theme of an embodied burden or tension within the body that Jamison is trying to overcome or release. My interpretation of the audience’s responses regarding the use of arms reveals that these movements helped tell the story that Jamison is communicating. The arm movements essentially embody the emotional qualities that the audience had previously reported. The strong feelings are communicated through the upper body and expressed physically showing

the array of emotions mentioned by the audience such as self-determination, resilience, struggle, and radiance. Investigating gestural language in my choreographic work is significant because it allows emotions and experiences to be expressed in a meaningful way through storytelling. The survey outcomes suggest that symbolic movement helps the audience understand the meaning behind choreography and interpret the choreographer's intended messages within the dance.

Strongest Aspect of *Cry*

When reflecting on the strongest aspect of Ailey's *Cry* solo, 8 participants felt that the strongest aspect of the solo was the movement or choreography, while 3 participants expressed that it was the "dancer's portrayal of emotions through the movement". One participant mentioned the "relationship between Jamison and the cloth as carrying significance through the piece." Lastly, another person said that "Jamison's stage presence was a notable factor towards the impact of the solo" (refer to Appendix B, Question 12 for full responses).

It is evident that most of the participants identified the movement or choreography to be the most compelling aspect of the dance. The audience mentioned how the choreography told a story and created an emotional journey through the portrayal of emotions observed in Jamison's performance. The movement in *Cry* is central to the impact of the piece from being the main mode of communicating meaning of the whole story, while the production elements are supporting layers within the narrative. Drawing from the audience's responses, I proposed to focus solely on choreography rather than incorporating a prop into my choreographic work.

Production Elements Interpretations

Answering this question, "if any of the production elements (costume, music, lighting) suggested a particular meaning to the audience" eleven participants (84.6%) reported that the production elements did contribute to meanings, and two participants (15.4%) said that they did

not suggest a meaning. As shown in Figure 6 below, it displays that most of the audience feels that the production elements (costume, music, lighting) in *Cry* were meaningful. This means that the participants viewed these symbolic elements through symbolism and contributed to shaping the meaning of *Cry* for them.

Do any of the production elements (costume, music, lighting) suggest particular meanings to you?
13 responses

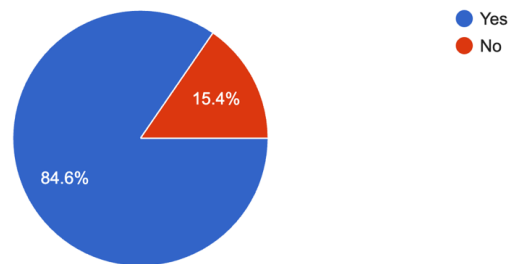


Figure 6: Production Element Meanings

In this question, 1 participant felt there was “a relationship between the music increasing in tempo, the lighting getting warmer, and the removal of the cloth as portraying the resilience of obstacles that Jamison overcame”. Similarly, another person said that the “lighting enhances movements of hardship and movements of joy”, while another participant felt “the lighting and music showed a somber feeling”. An alternative view from another participant was that the “movement of the dress and head wrap [cloth] represented the gracefulness of the dancer's movement,” while, another individual associated the cloth with the feeling of restraint. One participant even felt that “the cloth had multiple identities such as shifting from a cleaning rag to a crown.” Two participants mentioned that the dress resembled West African traditions, and one noted that “the wrapping of the scarf represented African heritage.” Another participant’s perception referenced Billie Holiday from *Cry*’s music and felt that “the song and dance were

intertwined,” while a related connection from another individual had the “feeling that the music was like spiritual hymns” (refer to Appendix B, Question 11 for full responses).

The result of this question gave me the confidence to approach using music as a core inspiration to build my choreography. I intend to incorporate music that supports the storytelling of the piece and helps communicate the narrative I want to convey to the audience. I will also research select songs with lyrics that support the portrayal of emotions and deepen the emotional engagement throughout the dance.

Overall, this chapter has outlined how my participants perceived Ailey’s *Cry* solo. From the findings of the survey, I conclude that the movements and the emotional connections within the solo heavily contribute to how the audience evaluated the performance. Added to these ideas, as inspiration for movement vocabulary, I will interlace my own analysis of *Cry* while utilizing the findings of the audience as inspiration for movement vocabulary for my choreography. The next chapter outlines the performance-based research framework combined with the survey findings, which is then my choreographic method. I will illuminate my choreographic process and the choices that I made for my artistic journey.

CHAPTER FOUR

Choreographic Process and Performance Development

Using my analysis and interpretation of survey results, this chapter explains how I created three solos that are inspired by Ailey's iconic solo *Cry*. Within this section, I describe my reasons for creating work, casting, choreographic process, and production elements such as costumes and music.

Casting Process

I intentionally cast all-Black women dancers to align with my central theme of Black women's empowerment. As inspired by Ailey's *Cry* solo, I created three solos that each represent one of the three themes I interpreted from the *Cry* performance. As an African American choreographer and dancer, I chose to include myself in the final solo to honor my own identity. Additionally, I chose two other emerging artists from the UCI dance department, Eilah Brooks and Nadine Cobourn, both of whose instincts I felt I could trust to portray my artistic visions.

Choreographic Intention and Process

My choreographic intention is to honor the legacy of Alvin Ailey and create a series of works that highlight the meaningful themes that are present within the piece. My thesis explores the impact that this solo had on other individuals. Through the survey tool, I gained new insight into *Cry*. Further to this, the analysis of the solo through my own indices and that of other scholarly voices are also threaded together in my creative process.

As preparation for the choreographic process, the dancers were given a video link to *Cry*. Each dancer had their own designated rehearsal time. I chose to make separate solos for each dancer. During the first rehearsal, we began with a discussion of the work and their reflections. Additionally, to provide context for my research, I explained my thesis topic and discussed the

survey methodology administered to gather interpretations of the *Cry* solo. I also explained that the survey findings would contribute to my choreographic method.

Ailey's *Cry* includes three sound scores in the three separate sections. In my analysis, I further interpreted the dance through Black feminist ideologies, through which I identified three distinct themes. I incorporated the frameworks of Maya Angelou, bell hooks, and Deborah K. King to illuminate the themes of: one— emotional hardship; two— hope and foreseeing future change; and three— resilience.

The survey findings inform the choreographic process through my interpretation of the data, which are used as a choreographic method. Each common theme analyzed from the survey is used as a starting point to create a series of gestures or movements that are implemented throughout each of the three solos. *Weathered* is the overarching title of my choreographic work, while each of the three solos are individually titled to distinguish their own separate themes: “Invisible Pain”, “Unwritten Promises”, and “Reclaiming the Crown.” The title *Weathered* evokes the concept of resilience and withstanding hardships, a central theme implying that a person is shaped by what they go through.

The music that I chose for this choreographic work features Black women artists who reflect experiences described in the literature and interpretations of Ailey's *Cry* that complement the conceptual themes of each solo. The three solos are set to songs including “Still I Rise” by Yolanda Adams, “A Change is Gonna Come” by Aretha Franklin, and “Feeling Good” by Nina Simone.

The costumes for each solo are similar in design but differentiated by color. All solos had the same white colored tight fitted top with different colored loose linen pants. I selected pants to accommodate the demands of extensive floorwork, various ranges of motion, and the

performer's comfort. The colors that I chose to incorporate for the solos are blue, pink, and white which also align with each solo's theme. In the "Invisible Pain" solo, this dancer has baby blue colored bottoms representing the sadness and struggle feelings. The shade of pink is used for the "Unwritten Promises" solo because I associate the blush pink color with the symbol of hope. "Reclaiming the Crown" features white colored pants as inspired by the costume worn in *Cry* and for representing new beginnings.

Solo 1: "Invisible Pain"

"Still I Rise" is the musical score for the first solo which explores emotional hardships⁶. "Still I Rise" is performed by Yolanda Adams but written and produced by Percy Bady. This song was selected because of its theme of overcoming adversity. In the chorus, Yolanda Adams exemplifies resilience by stating:

yet still I rise
never to give up
never to give in
against all odds

These lyrics reinforce the central theme of emotional hardships and align with the message of Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" poem. Adams is expressing how she is asserting her inner strength, refusing to give up despite challenges and ongoing oppression. Additionally, the singer's use of vocal riffs and intensity adds an element of deep emotional resonance to the performance.

This solo's title "Invisible Pain" acknowledges the silencing that Black women encountered during the Feminism movement. Black women not only experienced racism but also

⁶ "Invisible Pain" solo footage
<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/z995qyx89yvfjx6gqkq9e/Invisible-pain.mov?rlkey=hymhipbww1s6501p85a9hrv6k&st=rekmcy1p&dl=0>

sexism, which was not a shared experience amongst others. The emotionally driven tone that I felt from the first section of *Cry* influenced my choreographic choices. I reference movement from *Cry* such as specifically the double fist gesture that Jamison intensely throws in an upward direction, variations of arm movements, and Jamison's quality of heaviness. I intentionally included movements that demonstrate trying to rise above hard times faced in life. The first soloist, Eilah embodies gestures that lengthen through their limbs, demonstrating the emotional drive, incorporating jumps that represented breaking out of the struggles, and movements that show a longing or grasping gesture that expresses the struggle felt from *Cry*. From the questionnaire results, I implement the notable gestures reported by the participants of heavy weight gestures and variation of the arms, as mentioned before, which communicates trying to climb beyond the agony of oppression. The use of arms was an important gesture within this solo because the survey respondents were able to generate meaning from it. I utilize the quality of tension and resistance through the arm gestures to demonstrate a feeling of struggle.

Solo 2: "Unwritten Promises"

The second solo is set to "A Change is Gonna Come" sung by Aretha Franklin⁷. This song performed by Franklin emphasizes the concept of holding onto hope that future change will come eventually. Cooke's lyrics of "he said it's been a long time coming, but I know my change is gonna come" demonstrates the belief that change will occur. This song was originally written by Sam Cooke and was adopted as an anthem by the Civil Rights Movement (Songwriters Hall

⁷ "Unwritten Promises" solo footage

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/rj6bm0q9dn7jcjbvr38z9/Unwritten-promises.mov?rlkey=hu1bur5vuid03jys129wn8mai&st=h6fa0gxc&dl=0>

of Fame, n.d)⁸. I chose this song to pay tribute to Black women, highlighting the struggle and anticipation that they experienced during the Black feminist era.

This solo, performed by Nadine Cobourn, incorporates the ideas of Black feminist bell hooks, who valued hope and change within the movement that she wanted to share amongst others. This piece is titled “Unwritten Promises” which connects to the notion that Black women were promised a better future within the feminism movement, but gender solidarity did not erase racism within these revolutionary spaces (hooks, 1984). My artistic vision for this solo is to convey the determination and possibility of positively reshaping futures for Black women. As inspired by *Cry*, I incorporate the presence of Jamison throughout the solo, by including elements such as a lifted chin, pronounced chest, and an upward gaze in my choreographic work. I associate the elevated focus and reaching gesture with looking forward to change. In the survey, participants brought attention to *Cry*’s effective use of expressive arm gestures, indicating that these movements represented grasping toward something or a determined reach.

Solo 3: “Reclaiming the Crown”

The final solo is performed to “Feeling Good” sung by Nina Simone and written by Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse⁹. This song symbolizes the reclaiming of strength and agency that Black women embraced during the Black Feminism Era. Through Simone’s vocal delivery, she embodies confidence and power as she sings: “it’s a new dawn, it’s a new day / it’s a new life for me / and I’m feeling good” (Simone, 1965, 1:05) . In a Blackstar Seen article, culture critic and memoirist Aisha Harris also describes Nina Simone’s as portraying the feelings

⁸ This source is a blog. See Songwriters Hall of Fame. (n.d.). <https://www.songhall.org/profiles/a-change-is-gonna-come#:~:text=%E2%80%9CA%20Change%20Is%20Gonna%20Come%E2%80%9D%20was%20written%20by%20Sam%20Cooke,single%20in%20December%20of%201964.>

⁹ “Reclaiming the Crown” solo footage <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/q0y68xel8jl43cyann652/Reclaiming-the-Crown.mov?rlkey=w14pjldn86pxylqfqg2zwa2yt&st=8wiefv25&dl=0>

of resilience and inner strength. Harris states “With ‘Feeling Good,’ she sings of a renewed sense of purpose—of *a new day, a new dawn, a new life*—perfect for mapping onto a character who’s just turned a promising corner in their self-actualization.” Harris’s analysis supports my selection of this song as the feeling of confidence and strength aligns with the theme I intended to communicate through this solo.

This final solo, performed by me, highlights Black women’s strength and power that persisted through the hardships faced within their lived experiences. Inspired by the ideas expressed by Black feminist thinker Deborah K. King, I focus on her concept of self-determination. Within the Black feminist movement, Black women centered their own realities and asserted agency over their own narratives (King, 1988). This section is titled “Reclaiming the Crown” in support of these ideas expressed by King. From *Cry*’s final section, I utilize the liberating qualities that are observed in Jamison’s movements. My creative approach was to embody a feeling of expansion and a quality of freedom through my whole body. The solo advances to incorporate the feeling of a celebration including movements such as jumps, turns, and virtuosic tricks. These dynamic movements create an illusion of defying gravity, capturing a burst of adrenaline into the performance. From the survey data, I integrated notions of gracefulness and radiance. These qualities support the exploration of expansion, fluidity, and projection that are also applied to my choreographic practice.

Choreographic Reflection

In conclusion, this chapter has presented my movement development and how I incorporated research data as a choreographic method. Each decision that I made through my artistic journey was intentional and served a purpose such as the dancers I chose, music I selected, and costuming- design and color. I learned through this process the power of clarity and

intention required in order to communicate meaning to the audience. Through embodied storytelling, I wanted to communicate to the audience my personal narrative of my research journey.

This work did however come into reality with real-life challenges, despite having definite plans and inspirational material to work with. Perfectionism significantly hindered my choreographic process by causing self-doubt. Educator Sanna Norbin-Bates and Sofia Kuyler (as cited in Frost et. al, 1990), mentions “Classic descriptions of perfectionism as include setting very high and exacting standards, and various forms of concern or doubt regarding actions and achievements” (2020, p. 212). I became my own critic, constantly feeling like my work was not good enough. I constantly reminded myself that my choreography is based on my own perception. Another aspect I would further explore is breaking out of my habitual movement patterns. At times I felt the solos had similar movement qualities, and I would like to create a greater contrast between them. Additionally, dividing my focus between the three sections also negatively impacted my choreographic process. Time between rehearsals was very compressed and there was not much time for reflection. Simultaneously creating three solos at the same time made me feel overwhelmed at times. By prioritizing the other two solos, I invested fully in these separate creative processes before revisiting my own section at a later stage. Although I faced challenges that disrupted my choreographic process, the outcome was successful. The goal of this project was to address my research question of what makes *Cry* so impactful in the 21st century and this work was part of my realization that great choreography requires massive focus. In the concluding chapter I will summate my research journey, summarizing key findings across the entire process.

CHAPTER FIVE

Summations and Conclusion

In this research, I have explored Ailey's *Cry* to understand the ways in which it maintains its significance. I have analyzed the work of the original soloist Judith Jamison, reviews of performances by dance critics and scholars, explored the works of select Black feminists, and shared the video of the solo with a group of participants with a survey to understand more about how they perceived it. My summation of these results inspired the creation of my work *Weathered*. I created these solos to see if I could create a similar impact as Ailey's *Cry*.

Personal Reflection on Inquiry and Insights

My research process revealed that gestures (mainly in the upper body and arms) helped create meaning within each of the *Cry* sections. As indicated by my survey results, the audience resonated with the gestures from *Cry* by connecting them to how the movement made them feel; the participants made references to their own lived experiences.

The survey research tool has proven to be effective in gathering insights on an audience's perceptions of *Cry*. Through the mixed-methods approach, I was able to identify the unique responses of the audience and capture any patterns within the data. Drawing from the survey results, it is clear that the survey respondents shared their perspective of *Cry* which was shaped by their own personal experiences. This supports the multiple perspectives that people can derive from one single dance work. However, my limitations within this research process consisted of a small sample size and utilizing a convenience sample. In the future, I would expand on my survey size and include a more diverse range of participants to ensure that my findings remain reliable. My current study consisted of a majority of non-dancers and in the future, I would add an equal number of those who consider themselves dancers to get another perspective on this

research topic. Utilizing a random sample is also another aspect to incorporate for a future study. Including people from varied backgrounds can be explored through different age groups, genders, race, and ethnicities. Additionally, adding an element of interviews would help strengthen my findings and provide explanations that are easily translated verbally. This method would allow participants to verbally communicate and explain a perspective that may be difficult to translate into written form.

Additionally, my survey essentially gave me a new way to pursue choreography. My choreographic process consisted of incorporating the voices of the participants and how they perceived *Cry*. Given more time, I would further investigate how the three solos could evolve into a trio at the end of the performance, emphasizing the intersections and shared qualities of the themes each represented. However, despite areas I would continue to develop, I am satisfied with the overall outcome of the work.

Overall, my research journey shaped my development as an artist and an educator. As an artist, I was introduced to a new choreographic method of performance-based research. I utilized survey data as a means to pinpoint movement vocabulary that helped create my solo in three-parts. Additionally, I explored how to incorporate different voices within my own artistic vision to convey a specific message to the audience.

As an educator, I gained insight on the audience's perception of Ailey's *Cry* which deepened my own understanding and that of the literature. It showed me how movement can be deployed as a powerful tool for contemporary storytelling. I see ever more deeply how through gestural language as a voice allows performers to embody deep emotions and cultural narratives. It is clear that Ailey's *Cry* creates a space for the audience to resonate and view the work through the lens of their own experiences. Ultimately, through exploring Alvin Ailey's *Cry* solo, it

informed me how dance serves as a powerful medium of storytelling and how lived experiences can be communicated through gestural and emotional expression.

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APPENDIX A

Survey Questionnaire: Analyzing *Cry*

This survey was distributed to a convenience sample of 19 individuals through email to analyze how they perceived Alvin Ailey's *Cry* solo. Participants were asked to record any emotions, connections, and references that may arise while watching the solo.

Participant Disclaimer

You are being asked to participate in this research study of "Analyzing Audience's Interpretation of *Cry*". The responses you provide will be used solely for my personal reflective practice as an a part of my research inquiry into Alvin Ailey's choreography. They will not be shared with any third parties. No identifying information (Name, Email or IP address) will be collected. All data will be stored on a password protected device and deleted after the reflective analysis is completed.

Participation is voluntary. You may choose to skip a question. You may refuse to participate or discontinue your involvement at any time. If you decide to withdraw from this study, you should contact me (Logantj@uci.edu)

I agree to the terms listed above...

___ I agree

Section 1: Background Questions

1. Have you seen *Cry* before?

- Yes (video)
- Yes (live)

- No, I have not seen Cry before

2. Are you a dancer?

- Yes
- No

Section 2: Cry Video Link

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/rir79q5o0uvk2gsgj5l3n/1972-Cry-from-Dance-Collection-Gala.mp4?rlkey=jp5yn1o5o85crvkvjhrqqiicc&st=fucbmc8a&dl=0>

Section 3: Questions about Cry

3. How would you describe your thoughts or feelings about the performance?

Response: _____

4. How much of an emotional connection did you have to this dance?

No Connection 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strong Connection

5. If you did have an emotional connection while watching Cry, please explain how you felt?

Response: _____

6. Does any specific gestures or movements convey meaning in this dance?

- Yes
- No

7. If yes, which specific gestures or movements and what meanings can you generate from them? (Suggestion: you can add time stamps if you would like)

Response: _____

8. Did you feel a personal connection to the dance?

- Yes
- No

9. If you felt a personal connection, did it make reference to something you have experienced in your personal life?

Response: _____

10. Do any of the production elements (costume, music, lighting) suggest particular meaning to you?

- Yes
- No

11. If any of the production elements (costume, music, lighting) suggested particular meaning to you, can you describe what it conveyed?

Response: _____

12. What do you think is the strongest aspect of the solo and can you state why?

Response: _____

13. Are there any other distinguishing features in the performance that linger after watching the whole performance?

Response: _____

APPENDIX B

Analyzing *Cry* Survey: Open-ended Responses

This appendix contains the responses to the open-ended survey questions collected from the participants. Responses will be organized by survey question order and reported verbatim to preserve the original responses written.

Section 3: Questions about *Cry*

3. How would you describe your thoughts or feelings about the performance?

Participant 1: It's portraying sad feelings as if she is struggling through life and then it gradually becomes more upbeat where she is able to persevere through it all

Participant 2: Outstanding performance. Great depiction of African American women ... from constant struggle to self determination, to freedom of the mind and soul.

Participant 3: It's a very moving and powerful piece

Participant 4: I felt like the performance brought about the same feelings I would get watching or reading stories about Jim Crow Era Black America. Given the time when this piece was filmed, it stands to reason that Alvin Ailey was brought up around that era and translated his upbringing into his work.

Participant 5: It was complete, told a full story. The music helped her showcase the different emotions.

Participant 6: Intense, multiplicitous, changing, evolving.

Participant 7: I thought more of the talent of the dancer than a feeling or emotion. The dancer clearly illustrated defeat as she dragged herself on the floor at times during the first section. As she moved to her next phase she was in fight mode - movements were stronger with purpose. Lastly, the dancer strutted at times that showed victory.

Participant 8: Beautiful

Participant 9: My thoughts about the performance is that the dancer connected with the audience, physically and emotionally. The dancer exhibited a raw and elegant technique.

Participant 10: I felt the dancer was telling a story in each part through the use of their choreography. I felt this dancer was experiencing struggle or something detrimental to them. I felt personal emotions of sadness, seriousness, and confluence.

Participant 11: In this performance, I could feel every emotion the dancer was trying to convey. The struggle was evident through the heavy, burdened movements that expressed grief. In contrast, the final part of the performance conveyed a sense of joy and rejoicing.

Participant 12: It was beautiful but evoked emotions of sadness.

Participant 13: Great performance! I feel despair, sadness, and triumph were interpreted beautifully through her movements.

5. If you did have an emotional connection while watching Cry, please explain how you felt?

Participant 1: It made me feel sad for the woman dancing at first but then more happy towards the end.

Participant 2: I felt the pain of struggle many African American women have and continue to endure throughout our history to present (i.e. Over 300,000 AA women losing employment due to an oppressive federal government regime's hatred, although being the most educated demographic in the U.S.)

Participant 3: Somewhat sad

Participant 4: Melancholy I think is the best word to use. Sadness as well as empathy. Regret.

Participant 5: Shackled then letting go can be liberating.. but not necessarily free.

Participant 6: This dance was so visceral -- all three stages. I felt at first this deep connection, fluidity, reverence. Then, in the second part this agony and aching. And in the third, this effervescence and determination, an almost contrary aliveness.

Participant 7: Unfortunately, I did not have any particular emotion. I did feel like she was telling a story in her dance.

Participant 8: The dance was serene

Participant 9: I felt free, strong, graceful and encouraged to let my emotions just take control.

Participant 10: I felt sad, but also feelings of seriousness and confluence.

Participant 11: When the performance begins, I could feel the sadness and defeat expressed by the dancer. The struggle, hardship, and sense of exhaustion are apparent throughout the first twelve minutes of the piece. Around the twelve-minute mark, the tone shifts—an upbeat tempo emerges, and the strength in her movement conveys a sense of pride and joy as she dances.

Participant 12: I felt tearful

Participant 13: To me, this dance represented, despite, sadness and triumph. In life, I have experienced all of this and that is where the connection lies.

7. If yes, which specific gestures or movements and what meanings can you generate from them? (Suggestion: you can add time stamps if you would like)

Participant 1: She takes out the scarf prop as if she feels free and not tied down and she dances more up high and carefree to show the switch in emotions.

Participant 2: All of the gestures and movements were intentional. You could feel the weight of oppression of African American women in the beginning of the performance. The middle part of the performance appeared to demonstrate self-determination and resilience of African American women. The last part of the performance appeared to demonstrate the powerful way freedom can be achieved once shackles and weights (i.e. lies) are released from the mind.

Participant 3: A plea to God

Participant 4: 2:30 - 3:40. I interpreted the movements to depict struggle and suffering to grace and splendor back to more struggling as if to say "keep your head high in the dark times", and I felt this repeated a few times over the course of the dance

Participant 5: Movements are more restricted with the cloth.

Participant 6: What stuck with me was the variations of reaching out with the arms, extended fingers. In the first portion this felt like an extension of self into something greater. Live waves returning to the ocean. In the second portion, this felt like a longing, a grasping toward, a determined reaching -- how one might climb out of an impossibly deep well. In the third portion, it felt like an exaltation and exhalation, a radiance -- like sun beams of flames.

Participant 7: During the beginning she used the long scarf to clean/mop the floor. This represented hard times - mopping a floor on your hands and knees. This was what poor black women did to put food on the table - she did whatever it took. I'm sure there were times she cried when she was just so tired of the struggle.

Participant 8: Gracefulness

Participant 9: I love the arms and hand movements. The strength in which the hands and arms exhilarated from the body going above the head, straight down , to the sides, wavy arm, head and hand motion portraying I'am a strong person and free from any struggle that I have experience.

Participant 10: At about the three-minute mark, the dancer takes her white drape, dancing with it and eventually wrapping it around herself as it weighs her down. This moment resonated deeply with me, as I have felt the same sense of heaviness many times as a young mother.

9. If you felt a personal connection, did it make reference to something you have experienced in your personal life?

Participant 1: I felt that I have had many struggles through life and it was difficult, but I eventually built my resilience to push through to where I am today.

Participant 2: Yes. It is critical to get to the "freedom" stage of life as soon as possible, which I believe was depicted in the last part of performance. Once African Americans release the lies that have been told, embrace and adopt self love ... there will be nothing to stop progress.

Participant 3: Hard times; racial injustice

Participant 4: Not something I've felt personally but again more so empathy towards struggles of a different time that still exist today in a different form

Participant 5: Depression and oppression

Participant 6: Life can be full of ups and downs. One day you are in "it" and feel defeated next you have to do some self talk and even get on your knees to pray for strength. As you gain your strength you are able to see the other side, you are stronger because of "it" and can encourage others.

Participant 7: Yes I felt a personal connection and it reminded me of a personal struggle.

Participant 8: Yes, I felt the dancer experienced too many things going wrong at once in life and I've been there.

Participant 9: It definitely brought back all the struggles I encountered as a young mother.

Participant 10: No

Participant 11: yes

11. If any of the production elements (costume, music, lighting) suggested particular meaning to you, can you describe what it conveyed?

Participant 1: I think the music got more upbeat, the lighting got warmer, and she wore less clothes as time went on to show the resilience of all the obstacles she overcame in the world.

Participant 2: The white dress was a perfect way to stand out. Reminds me of how many African Americans, particularly women, would wear white to church and/or mosque ... especially every first weekend of the month. The wearing of white is rooted in African traditions and is an important element African Americans were able to retain through enslavement/forced migration.

Participant 3: The wrapping of the head suggests African heritage

Participant 4: The music definitely invoked a Billie Holiday "Strange Fruit" kind of vibe for me. It also made me wonder if I would still feel connected to the dance if no music was playing, then I realized that dance and music are intertwined. To separate one from the other will be like trying to separate the sun from day and the moon from night.

Participant 5: She placed the long, white cloth was a prop maybe symbolizing restraint. The flowy dress moved along more freely without the cloth.

Participant 6: it's a very simple piece. The white costume makes me think of Caribbean and West African Orisha traditions (Yemeya, Oxun/Oshun). But also the weight of it translates differently for per depending on the movement. So, in the first part it feels like waves crashing, and in the second it translates like shackles. In the third, the costume becomes alive, vivacious.

Participant 7: That long scarf was used as a cleaning rag to clean the floor then to a crown on the dancer's head. We don't stay the same - if we stay in the fight we will wear a crown.

Participant 8: The music reminded me of spiritual hymns my Grandmother used to sing.

Participant 9: The lighting and music choice in each segment fit perfectly with each part of their dance. Each displayed somber and "the perfect storm."

Participant 10: The lighting plays a strong role in enhancing both the moments of hardship and the moments of joy.

Participant 11: The movement of the flowing dress and head wrap added to the grace of the dancers movements

12. What do you think is the strongest aspect of the solo and can you state why?

Participant 1: The change in the movement of the dance is the strongest aspect as it looked like she built more confidence.

Participant 2: The strongest aspect of the performance was the choreography and the dancer.

Having one person tell the story of many was brilliant. There were no distractions ... your entire attention is given to the power of the dance. I have seen Cry performed many times; however, the dancer (Judith Jamison I believe) viewed in this production is absolutely incredible ... the performance was flawless!

Participant 3: N/A

Participant 4: I think the movements of the dancer, be they sharp and wrought with pain or soft and filled with grace, combined with the sharp tense sound of the piano really drove home the emotion.

Participant 5: During the last song where it seemed as if she was finally liberated, she danced side by side with the white cloth. Something she didnt do with the other two songs. As if she was confronting the cloth.

Participant 6: I think the strongest aspect is the fullness of the dancer's body movements -- the nuance of timing and tension, weight or lightness in her movements.

Participant 7: Her strut. This represented her keeping the course. Her back is straight, head up and her eyes focused ahead, the future. She did it - made it through.

Participant 8: The movements

Participant 9: The strongest aspect of the solo to me is the movement. The dance solo detailed a story that connected personally.

Participant 10: The choreography, because it spoke to the person watching the performance. The choreography is what made the show in my opinion. Without it, there wouldn't be one.

Participant 11: The dancer powerfully conveys grief, struggle, and joy through her movements, while the lighting and music enhance the emotional journey.

Participant 12: The strongest aspect of this solo is how the dancer can translate powerful emotions through dance and maintain control and grace during a lengthy performance.

Participant 13: The strongest aspect is the dancers ability to interpret powerful emotions through her movements.

13. Are there any other distinguishing features in the performance that linger after watching the whole performance?

Participant 1: There's a lot of emotions displayed with all the dance movements throughout the entire performance whether the emotions were low or high.

Participant 2: It is a reminder of how one person can command the attention of multitudes, if you are telling a story worth seeing.

Participant 3: No

Participant 4: More than anything the music and the feelings and history I associate with that sort of jazz tones really linger and help the dance leave more of an impression on me

Participant 5: When she wrapped the cloth around her head

Participant 6: The scarf. I'm trying to figure out the symbolism of the white scarf but can't quite sort it out past the first part.

Participant 7: Yes the grace and strength of the dance was superb

Participant 8: The gracefulness of the dance.

Participant 9: Just the way the dancer was moving. As an individual that doesn't watch dance, I've never seen someone move the way they did. Their dancing was constructed in a way that moved the audience.