Spring 2023

Sana Sana: Unlearning Generational Expectation Through Performance

Jalen R. Ash

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SANA SANA: UNLEARNING GENERATIONAL EXPECTATIONS THROUGH PERFORMANCE

by

JALEN ASH

(Under the Direction of Jeff Garland)

ABSTRACT

My work is an exploration of identity as a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Color) body traversing through the generational histories of my family and the struggle of cultural loss to our assimilation of Whiteness. Through the multi-faceted medium of performance, my work uses physical and mental spaces of self and technology to understand how the body functions as a screen. Our bodies house projections of generational expectations that have trickled down from the past into the present. These projections shape our own unique identities along with the personal experiences we gather as we move through the various spaces of our life. My performances dissect these spaces and the systemic bias that consumes them, helping me unlearn and put an end to my own performative acts that cater to Whiteness. This honesty can be seen throughout my most recent works which give me a space to heal and reconnect with my cultures in everyday life.

INDEX WORDS: Performance, Identity, BIPOC, Screens, Projections, Lens, Generational expectations, Experiences, Bias, Reconnection
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by

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B.A., Illinois College, 2020

M.F.A., Georgia Southern University, 2023

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
SANA SANA: UNLEARNING GENERATIONAL EXPECTATIONS THROUGH PERFORMANCE

by

JALEN ASH

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Electronic Version Approved:
May 2023
DEDICATION

This thesis dissertation is dedicated to my family, que sigamos creciendo y aprendiendo unos de otros.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members, faculty, friends, partner, and family for their continuous support and encouragement over these past few years, especially these past few months. I couldn’t have done it without all of you.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My work explores personal identity, systemic bias, and human connection. It challenges societal labels and allows the viewer to think about their own relationships and interactions with others around them. Being raised with Latine traditions immersed me in a multicultural environment that has heavily influenced my experiences in predominantly White spaces, and led me into performance art.

These performances confront the one-dimensional idea of the “other” and follow the traces of their identities that complete my own illusions of identity. Using body as an object, I explore the effects of others' verbal and nonverbal judgments placed on my physical self through movement and conversation. My performances are deeply rooted in my personal identity, allowing me to unpack and dismantle a generational bias of seeking community in the oppressor(s), of seeking community in White Spaces.

What is a White space? A White space is a space that is not meant for Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color (BIPOC). White spaces developed from deeply rooted systemic biases founded and shaped through the colonization and oppression of BIPOC bodies in this country. These spaces include neighborhoods, schools, universities, workplaces, and other public places. Existing and navigating through the discrimination, prejudice, and racism of these spaces has detrimentally impacted my life. The biases imposed on me through these spaces have shaped the foundation for how I view the world and others. These spaces and biases shape the visual, physical, and psychological (implicit) planes of the spaces within my work.
BIPOC bodies exist as a glitch, an agitation, in the physical and psychological planes of technology. Our bodies are screens that move fluidly across the layers of the digital world, continuously disrupting the canonized, cisgender, White spaces layered within the digital diaspora. They allow us to exist not in two different lives, but in a single multi-faceted intertwined self. This self rejects and challenges the ingrained reflexes and conditioned responses of the systems that shape our spaces. Self becomes an injection into the bodies who existed before, exist within, and will exist without us, leaving digital traces of identities as they go. My performances bridge these various planes and places of self that are embedded outside and within the material of the digital through capturing and projecting moments using screens.

I use various types of screens within my works to navigate the physical and mental spaces of my viewers. These screens range from the physical ones we interact with on a daily basis such as phone screens, computer screens, television screens, and cameras, to the temporal and time-based screens of projections. These screens set the barriers of my spaces through their physical and psychological planes of existence. The screens of our technology serve as the physical planes, their materiality and function are not questioned, they are solidified as an object to be viewed. The immaterial screens of projections serve as the psychological planes, the invisible planes. Our bodies are screens that house the projections of generational expectations filtered from the past into our present. Projections don’t take the space they exist in, they code switch or disrupt this space. They have a contradicting narrative of existing in space without taking up space. In society we exist in spaces that we don’t exist in materially through our screens and personal explorations of technologies.

These performances create spaces for people to give, take, and receive parts of themselves through basic human interactions. We don’t get to choose certain parts of our
identities, but the ones we collect from others speaks volumes. My work unpacks and visualizes
the idea of these connections and identities existing within our culture today through the
temporality of screens and the permanence of screens. Through the explorations of time and the
shared movements of generational bodies. My work binds the past to the present, continuously
moving forward, with generations on its back.
CHAPTER 2
PROCESS AND MATERIALS

Growing up in Oxnard, California, I existed in a multicultural household, and in a multicultural environment. I was surrounded by my mothers family and our Mexican roots. I learned culture through working hands in the kitchen, through the chisme that flowed from our mouths, and through the community of family. My dad's love for music and the arts filled our home and was carried through my siblings and I everywhere we went. My grandma Teresa, shared traditions of the Lakota tribe when she would visit, teaching us how to dance with the earth and learn from its heartbeat. My grandma Linda was the backbone of my mom's family and made sure her grandchildren were respectful and loved, only cursing in Spanish because we couldn't understand, even though we could. As a child I took these intertwined cultures with pride and seriousness, but had no real idea of the biases that surrounded the cultures I was a part of, or the identity crises that would come from feeling so disconnected from these cultures. Growing up in California gave me the privilege to exist around others that looked like me, and gave me the time to discover parts of myself I was unsure about. I remember the first time my ethnicity became apparent to me. I was in a second grade class with several friends and a few months into the school year the administration wanted to remove me and a few of my peers from the class because we were not fluent in Spanish, it wasn’t our first language. I don’t know why this decision was made, but remember being extremely upset about being kicked out of the class and wondering why I was being isolated from that space. We ended up staying in the class, but from there on out I was aware of the fact that something was missing from my life. When you’re seven years old surrounded by people you view as equals, it makes you feel like somethings wrong with you. As I moved on to middle school, and then high school, these differences
became increasingly apparent to me. It wasn’t just acknowledging my different ethnicities, but seeing how gender, class, socio-economic roles, personality traits, hardships, and everything in between affected who I was and how others saw me.

When I moved to Jacksonville, Illinois, for college, I was seventeen years old and had never been away from home. I experienced a huge culture shock, and started to hear comments from people that I had never gotten before. The population of Jacksonville was tiny compared to Oxnard, and the demographic was predominantly White. I was introduced to ignorance and naive curiosity surrounding my ethnicities at the speed of light, with the question, “What are you?” suffocating me along the way. One of my best friends thought that all Latine people smell extremely bad until they had met me and a few of my peers, simply because the Latine people that lived in a nearby town worked on hog farms for a living. They didn’t know any better at the time and learned quickly from experiences that the preconceived biases and stereotypes they were raised with were untrue and harmful to the people that they revolved around. This is only one of hundreds of comments I have encountered since moving to the midwest, and now living in Statesboro, Georgia. These exterior encounters heavily influenced and continue to influence the way I navigate and understand myself. Something that I’m still working through is feeling like the token student within a predominantly White education system. The Midwest and South are extremely heavy and grueling places to live as a person of color, and everyday is a battle of existing with and educating those who are harmful to me.

Something I have always been transparent about is the fact that I am not fluent in Spanish. My family has a lot of generational repression within themselves and not passing down their native language to the younger generations is a product of that repression and cultural assimilation to fit into the category of Whiteness. Not speaking Spanish has affected me
negatively in various ways. I have always felt othered and excluded from the Mexican (Latine) community because not speaking Spanish equals not being a “real” Mexican to many individuals. It does become very isolating when you feel like you understand your culture so well because you’ve been raised within it, but you can’t communicate with and are invalidated by those embedded in it. In our own ways, my siblings and I have had to work through these challenges by helping ourselves and our parents understand that our culture is not something to be ashamed of.

My performance work is centered around these cultural repressions and working through the personal relationships and interactions within my life. Because my work focuses on the dynamics of relationships, it considers the spaces and distances at which these connections take place. These major spaces include being a current resident of Georgia, being a graduate student at Georgia Southern University, being geographically distanced from my family in California, being persistently disconnected physically from my family in Mexico, and all of the smaller spaces I interact with in between such as my apartment, grocery stores, the gym, and so on. Because my work focuses on the dynamics of relationships, it also considers the titles, labels, and roles that define our positions to one another in today’s hierarchical society. These roles include being a peer, friend, sister, daughter, acquaintance, person of color, and all of the multi-faceted layers of my identity I carry with me everyday. I have always performed for others in the spaces they fit into, filling their expectations of selfhood instead of my own. My performances have helped me see and unpack these performed expectations whether they allow me a voice to challenge the white spaces and systems that I have always participated in, or allow me to begin unpacking and healing the generational displacements and cultural assimilations I store in my body from those who came before me. It is interesting to compare each performance
to one another and see how these ideas continuously connect and unravel through each unique experience.

In the piece, *Who We Are*, my performance is centered around language and how it affects our own interpretations of self. I gathered fragments of language to create an audio that played during the entire performance. This audio is a personal archive, a collection of opinions from myself and the things that others had voiced to me through verbal and body language over the span of one month. I documented the more prominent things that I was told or experienced, and then recorded videos of myself reciting and exhausting a single word from each statement by repeating it over and over until it was hard to make out. I found that these individual words simplified and framed others' expectations of me, and by using my voice to repeat their words, it allowed me to distance and redistribute my initial emotions in a more productive way than when I had encountered their words in the past. It also allowed me to visually unpack language and respond to their words through the performed movements of my body. This performance wasn’t to confront specific individuals, but to get my viewers to confront and acknowledge how their words can affect the people around them. An element I have found to be extremely important to my work is breaking the fourth wall.

By breaking the fourth wall, I break the invisible barrier between me as the performer and my viewers asvoyeurs. I often change the performance dynamic by looking my viewers in the eyes, acknowledging their presence, or by interacting with them in different ways. Within *Who We Are*, there is a moment in the audio where I use the word bystander. During this time within the performance I walked around and stood in front of each viewer one at a time, looking them in the eye as I shared a fleeting smile. This connection brought my viewers into the piece and put us onto the same playing field, they could no longer simply view me as an object but now as a
person, a reflection of themself. In the piece, *To Live In My Space*, I shared a similar moment with the audience members. This performance took place on the stage of an auditorium until I jumped down from the stage and stepped into my viewers space. Again, I walked around and stood in front of each viewer one at a time. This time I offered out my hand where they either placed their own, or fist bumped me, and I said the words, “Thank you for sharing my space.”

Unlike the performance, *Who We Are*, where I collected others’ words and created a digital archive of others' expectations, I chose to write a short speech where I highlighted the heartache and anger I continuously carry with me from feelings of cultural and geographical displacement in the spaces I move through. These expectations stemmed from the generational expectations I have for myself that have been curated since my childhood and my parents’ childhoods.

Another example of breaking the fourth wall is seen in the piece, *Performative Sculpture* (*Jalen Ash*), where I laid on the floor on my back with my legs straight up against the wall. For most of this piece I laid still like a statue, having my viewers answer guided questions about the
sculpture they were viewing. Eventually I rolled over and sat up with my legs straight out in front of me and my back against the wall. At this time most of the viewers had already taken a seat around me on the floor, and I slowly moved my head around, stopping and holding each individual's gaze for different amounts of time. The longest gaze I held was for approximately five minutes. In all of these performances through each subtle movement, I was able to engage my viewers in a more physical way than purely having them watching me. Human connection starts to establish itself and bring forth personal emotions that a viewer might not get from just watching each experience unfold. These present human emotions began to drive many of my performances and lead me to consider how a viewer can become a performer through their participation in my works. It also challenged me to think about the technology I use to document my performances and how cameras exist in my performance spaces like viewers.

We live in continuous spaces of cameras and projections, these technologies are simply extensions of ourselves. I see the technologies I use within my work as their own entities. The cameras are my viewers, they are a presence of their own self. They can stand alone and function on their own, or they can be collaborated with another viewer. When I set up my cameras, I always consider how I want my work to be captured. Sometimes I want the camera to be its...
mechanical, stagnant self, and self-adjust to what it is seeing through its own lens. I’ll give the camera legs, in other words a tripod, to sit upon and function at its own will. These videos come out very still, and direct, recording only what is within its sight. Other times it's important to see the human hand in control of the camera. Some works call for a home-video approach, where you can physically see the body shaking and unstable in its various moving lines of sight. The camera becomes a physically attached extension of the viewer's body and is read in a much different way than when it stands on its own.

Whether together or apart, these technological selves have their own flaws, much like the natural wear and tear of the human body over time. In my performance piece, *The March of la Mariposa*, I worked my body physically through repeated movements over the span of fifteen minutes. The viewers could see and feel the physically exhausting routine of me as the performer as I continued to stamp my feet into the ground and swing my arms around over and over again. Through understanding the physicality of fatigue in relation to the wearing down of the human body, we can compare this fatigue to the breaking down of screens, and cameras over time; showing the breakdown and flaws of the body and technology as a body.

Technology only lasts for so long, and typically this life span depends on the care that is given to its technological body by its partner, the human hand. The more a camera is used, the more it begins to malfunction. A camera already has set increments of use, it has to be constantly recharged for it to work in the first place. Other breakdowns of a camera are seen through the errors that can occur during image and video capturing. The camera lens can become blurry in trying to self adjust to focus on its subject, or the screen may glitch like an old television where neon lines pop up across the screen and go blank for a second, or the video may stop recording at random times and you’re left with the fragment of an experience. There is also the problem of
cameras capturing darker skin tones poorly because of its long history of being developed for white bodies, over the years some adjustments have been made to the camera's settings to try and compensate for the racial bias built into the mechanisms of photography.

When discussing the camera as an extension of the human body, it is important to compare and contrast between the bias of the two. Does a camera have the same bias as a viewer? Simply put, no the camera does not have the same bias as us, but it has the same lens as us. A camera presents its information objectively whereas a viewer presents emotional information that translates the experience they are seeing/immersed in. A camera collects its data without judgment, for a BIPOC performance artist the camera is the optimal viewer, it’s the optimal companion. It doesn’t judge what it sees because the camera is always controlled by me as the artist, therefore its lens isn’t warped by biases because the camera is an extension of my lens, thus allowing the camera to expose my body as a fluid self. When you look at an image or replay a video, it simply shows you the unbiased truth of a set moment, or experience in time. The words capturing versus recording can be used to reflect these ideas. Capturing relates to the viewer's gaze, which involves the characteristics of human ego, emotions, and transcribing these biases into what they're seeing. Recording relates to the camera's gaze, which purely involves capturing information from an unbiased lens. Therefore, physically a camera can act as a viewer, but a viewer can never be as unbiased as a camera because we are direct products of the systems we take part in, systems that are rooted in inequality, racism, mistreatment, colonization (being labeled as the other), etc. The piece, *Rooted In*, highlights and exposes these larger ideas in a controlled and specific setting that is directly tied to my body as it exists within an institution, and how these judgements are carried through our bodies within the various uncontrolled exterior communities we move through.
For the performance, *Rooted In*, I used the photo studio in the Arts Building at Georgia Southern. During the first half of the performance I remained locked in the photo studio alone, playing music that could be heard from the outside by the viewers. For the remainder of the performance I interacted with the viewers, constructing a specific set of rules that would either allow or prohibit them to enter the photo studio one at a time and have their picture taken. During this time various moments and emotions were captured by three different cameras I had set up prior to the start of the performance. Two cameras were set up on tripods placed to face one another on opposing ends of the photo studio door and hallway. These cameras were stagnant and untouched the entire duration of the performance. The third camera was carried by one of the viewers, Stephen, and the performance was documented like a home video. He was given no prior instructions or restrictions, other than to record the performance in a way that felt natural to him. The two stagnant cameras were predominantly ignored by the viewers, but the handheld camera naturally drew a lot of performances out of people once they saw that they were being recorded. Things that were caught on tape involved individuals leaving the line when they realized they needed their IDs and didn’t have them; individuals leaving the performance to go grab their IDs and come back to participate; individuals dancing around to the music and having a good time; individuals showing various insecurities through their body language, jokes, self-deprecating jokes, comments made to others, etc.
Post performance, I watched the videos back on all three of the cameras and then edited and pieced them together to create a film where my viewers and I (the performer) all starred as performers. When I watched the videos of this performance I was uncomfortable with a lot of the comments that were made, especially ones that were purely tied to me being Mexican because they were inherently racist. These comments stemmed from my peers having previous knowledge and bias surrounding my identity and who they know and understand me to be. No one ever would have brought up the idea of Mexican food being in a photo studio, if they didn’t know that the body existing in that space was Mexican. Nobody would have commented on the song that was playing and say that it was the Spanish version of the song when it was clearly in English, if they weren’t thinking about me as that single part of my identity. It’s easy to label and think about others as a one-dimensional part of their identity, and this performance proved that. Even when the small group of individuals were talking about the singer Selena, they were all
clinging too and becoming defensive around the fact that she was a Mexican pop star, limiting her to a single flattened identity. I was frustrated with myself after this piece because I didn’t feel I successfully helped curate a conversation surrounding my viewers words, instead I helped to dismiss the anger I’ve carried my whole life when it comes to having to educate people about topics surrounding the mistreatment of bodies of color. This piece is extremely vital to my body of work because it’s when I realized how exhausted I was from helping others to continue making excuses for themselves. I have always performed for others in the spaces they fit into, filling their expectations of selfhood instead of my own.

This understanding of self led to many of my new performances today such as *Mancha De Plátano*. My performances shifted and the dynamic between viewer and performer became more controlled and direct. Instead of trying to make everyone my audience and make work that focused on their own self-awareness, I decided to create an uncomfortable vulnerability through
their viewing experience by sharing what I feel to be the closest thing to my known self. Instead of performing as an other, I performed for myself. I did this performance with another person, Yaschira Camacho, and together we cared for one another. Mancha De Plátano was a response to generational displacement, and generational trauma. A connection to childhood, and a performance for family. A desire for healing mine and my families cultural assimilations through stained remembered movements, for not only the women in my family, but for us as a family as a whole. This is why along with the voices of my sisters and my mom, you also hear my brother's voice in the audio projected throughout my studio space. To show these ideas of healing and care taking, Yaschira washed bright red box dye out of my hair while sitting on fake vinyl bathroom tile in the comfort of my own studio space. She rinsed my hair gently, over and over in a basin of water until the bleeding color began to dilute. As she rinsed my hair the voices of my mom, siblings, and self flooded the room with a saying in Spanish that goes like this, “Sana sana, colita de rana, si no sanas hoy sanarás mañana. Sana sana, colita de rana, dame un besito para hoy y mañana.” This is something you would say to a child or person when they get hurt as you soothe their injury, they are nostalgic words of healing. After rinsing my hair, she brushed and braided it and then switched positions with me so that I could brush and braid her hair in return. As the performance came to an end, we sat there with our legs crossed and my head resting on her shoulder, silence echoing through the small room. The viewers left at their own pace, there was no clear signal as to when they should leave and no definite ending to the performance until everyone had exited the room. My hands remained stained with the red hair dye for the rest of the week and my nails held the color for months.
Mancha De Plátano means the Stain of the Plantain, while this saying is significant to different sections of the Latine community, its meaning can be understood universally — no matter where you go, you will always be connected to your homeland, to your roots, and to your culture. It’s a metaphor said with pride and celebration for where you come from. Through the staining of our hands, and the generational memories of movement through braiding, this piece allowed for a personal journey of healing from the projections of generational expectations through the present that can never be healed in the past, giving a voice and connection between me and the generations of my family. This performance didn’t need the viewer to participate and interact with it, instead it needed the viewer to watch, listen, and begin to understand how I exist and not how they interpret my existence. To create an environment where the viewers would remain solely viewers, I added elements to the space that influenced the way they interacted within it.
First, the physical space I chose to do the performance in was my studio, which is a smaller space. The room is a tight square and not made to fit more than a handful of people comfortably. This was important to create an intimate space for me as the performer and an uncomfortable space for the viewers. There were also no seats for them to sit on, so they had to stand for the entirety of the performance. Next, I laid out a decorated vinyl floor that covered about a third of the overall space and acted as a stage, a physical screen, between performer and viewer. The most important element in the space was the camera that I set up directly in the middle of where the viewers stood, disrupting and causing them to figure out how to navigate their space in the room so as to not disturb it. Thus, the camera acted as a physical barrier, solidifying its space and documenting mine.
Figure 7. Ash, Jalen and Camacho Martir, Yaschira “Mancha De Plátano” Performance 2022
CHAPTER 3
PERFORMANCE AND EXPERIENCE

Performance work considers the performer, the viewer, the space, and their experiences. These experiences affect the way the performer and viewer see one another, depending on their own personal biases. Human beings have a fluid identity, a fluid self. Everyone has their own lived experiences, and their own realities that can never fully be understood from one’s own personal perspective. This self is what makes performance work complex, it doesn’t have a fixed identity because its main medium is people. A performance can not occur without the performer, whether or not they’re there physically or traces of them are seen throughout the rendering of the performance space. A performance can exist without a viewer, but then what is the intentionality of the piece? In my work, the viewer is equally as important as the performer. My performances are a tool to form various connections within the communities I exist in, to activate self-reflection and self-awareness in both myself as the performer and my viewers. These self acknowledgments are activated in several different ways such as breaking the fourth wall by interacting with viewers during a piece, or curating a space that challenges them physically or mentally. Every single component of my performance works are intentional and connect to the conceptual ideation behind the piece through the space and materials I choose.

Take my performance piece, *Who We Are*, for example. You walk in the front double doors of a mid-sized gallery where an already existing art exhibition is displayed on the walls through posters and mounted television screens. You are automatically drawn to the center of the room where a white fabric screen is hanging down from the ceiling. Two pieces of fabric meet in the middle to create this screen, and the fabric almost touches the ground but still hovers about a foot above. There is a white rectangle projected onto the white fabric screen, and you’re doing
your best to avoid the projector that sits on the floor at the front of the room next to you, the viewer. A performer enters the projectors space in front of the screen and faces the audience with her eyes closed. The performer is wearing all black with her split-dyed hair tied back into a low slick ponytail. The performer stands with her bare feet planted shoulder width apart and begins swaying side to side, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. A minute or so passes and a face that resembles the performer appears on the body of the performer and the screen behind her. The room becomes filled with the projected face talking in the video and the performer is broken out of her trance. She begins interacting with the screen and the projected video, staring, touching, and dancing around and within the white fabric screen(s). Continuous visual conversations begin between the performer and the projected video, the performer and the white fabric screen, and the performer and the viewers.

*Who We Are* is a self-reflection of my own identity and the identities that others had assigned to me through their commentary and body language during the month of April (2021). Identity is fluid, and we project fixed identities onto one another every day. This piece was created to hold myself and others accountable and bring awareness to how our verbal and physical language affect one another constantly. The space and movements of this performance play into these conceptual ideas. The performance took place in a gallery, in a White cube, in a sterile space meant for viewing and containing “art.” The gallery has its own pervasive history, and is something typically considered to be a White space. This Whiteness sets the tone for the piece, and is easy to overlook as a viewer. The space itself already alludes to the struggle of my existence as a person of color existing in an Eurocentric culture. This space has biases that shape the foundation for the way we think about and view others, because of the history embedded within it. The white fabric screen and white projection play off of the white cube, thus creating
various physical and psychological planes within the performance space. The screen and projection centered themselves in the middle of the room, dominating the space until my body shifted to take center stage. When the projected video of myself appeared within the screen, the space became charged with conversation between my own fluid body and the documented fixed body captured within the boundaries of the screen. My fixed self became more and more visually distorted the more my fluid self physically interacted with the screen. From there on out, the movements and interactions of my fluid body in response to the words of my fixed body overtook the space. Every movement was specific in relation to the words being said.

The audio playing was a personal archive, a collection of opinions from myself and those around me. I documented the more prominent things that I was told or experienced, and then recorded videos of myself reciting and exhausting a single word from each statement by repeating it over and over until it was hard to make out.
Here are some examples of the audio;

“Today I told them that people think that I’m ditzy and bubbly and a pretty face when I meet them. He said, that’s a sign of confidence. They said I’m confident. I’m confident, confident, confident, confident…”

“Today he looked at me, and then he laughed. I’m not wearing any makeup today. Today I’m funny. Today I’m ugly. Ugly. Funny. Ugly, funny, ugly, funny, ugly, funny…”

“Today she commented on my post and said, beauty has taken over you in every aspect of your being. I’m every aspect of my being. My being, my being, my being, my being…”

My performances take place within the communities that I reside in, that means most of my viewers are colleagues, peers, and friends. Most of the words in the audio came from these individuals and others that I surround myself with through social media and talking with my friends and family over the phone. In this way, my viewers have already become a part of the performance through the spatial planes of geographical existence, and day to day language.

There was a period towards the end of my performance where I went up to each of my viewers individually, stood face to face with them, and then smiled. At this time the projection of my fixed self and its audio disappeared from the screen, allowing me to engage with my viewers in an uncomfortable and tense silence as my body, my fluid self, became the main screen of focus.

Acknowledging my viewers one on one was important because it brought them into the piece physically. They were no longer just a gaze, or a bystander to myself and my words, they became a part of the performance when confronted with the performer. After making my way around to each individual, I retook center stage and dismantled my space.
The performer stood in front of the white fabric screen and began to pull bobby pins out of her hair. She threw them onto the gallery floor one by one, and then proceeded to take her hair down. Turning to face the screen, she pulled back the left fabric curtain and wrapped the end of it around her left arm. She then pulled back the right fabric curtain and wrapped the end of it around her right arm. She pulled both sheets down as she walked backwards until they fell from the ceiling and sank to the floor. Lifting both curtains onto her shoulders, the performer walked towards the back of the room exiting out the side door as the curtains dragged behind her like wings, leaving the other performers in silence.
By removing the performer and the screen from the space as a unit, the viewers became detached from the performer's fluid and fixed self. They became detached from the performer's burden of carrying around the fixed judgements placed on her body as an everyday person and were left with themselves, their thoughts, and one another in the white cube. An important part of my performances are to challenge the viewer and the way they approach and leave the piece. Performance differs from traditional modes of Art in that it fully engulfs the individual lives of the performer and viewer — every angle, every bias, every experience of that person becomes an element of the piece because it's a present experience directly attached to their body and the performer's body. Real life can’t be separated from a performance because performance art confronts real life. In, *Reading Art as Confrontation*, Denise Ferreira da Silva states;

The time and situation in which the performance takes place — a singular performance, *any* singular performance, which is *the* singular performance that I have in mind — does something that is beyond and that cannot be comprehended by the conceptual tools and analytical moves associated with the “postcolonial” as a scholarly practice. This is due to the fact that something happens, and becomes part of the performance as it happens, which the artist herself could not have anticipated and directed. This occurrence is contingent upon everything that is then/there: the audience, the artists, the technical staff backstage, the curators, the stage, the lighting, the seats, the space between the stage and
the first row of seats, the in-room temperature, the outside temperature, what each one of us has for breakfast, how easy or difficult it was to get to the venue… it involves everything; it is about everything because it is about how each one of us then and there reacted or responded to the key descriptor of the performance: “making visible without making public.” This is the turn of critique when it comes out of books into the world, in this case the art world, corrupting the form in the process. (Ferreira da Silva)

Making visible without making public is what separates performance art from other modes of making, as Ferreira da Silva continues;

None of that distancing is available to the postcolonial performance artist. All of it is (to be in) the performance itself. It is neither enough nor is it necessary that members of the audience have read Said, Spivak, or Bhabha (or Derrida, or Foucault, or Kristeva) before coming to the presentation. Making visible without making public, I learned while watching (I should say witnessing) Eid-Sabbagh’s performance, when rendered in the aesthetic form, operates at the level of feelings, both physical and emotional. This practice elicits reactions, tears, laughs, nervous coughs, deadly silences… The art of making visible without public corrupts the neat web of conceptual methodology that the postcolonial critic learns during academic training. It turns presentation into a confrontation. It is the move that renders one exposed in the moment of exposure because by breaking the polite/police rules of engagement, it also renders the rule-breaker unprotected by them…. Beyond postcolonial critique as an intellectual exercise, the art of confrontation is an anticolonial intervention precisely because it turns the space between the performer and the audience into the trenches. By staging a confrontation, it forges an aesthetic experience that recalls and exposes art’s own performance of the violence that is modern thought, precisely because of the in/difference between the stage and the museum exhibition sites. (Ferreira da Silva)

By understanding that performance art is not solely grounded in performativity, yet instead in present raw emotions, this mode of making relies on the relationship and confrontation between the duality of performer and spectator, performer and viewer, performer and participant, performer and performer, etc. Performance art sets the stage for generating conversations surrounding the “violence of modern thought” while simultaneously acknowledging the past vicious histories of stolen land and stolen bodies through the colonization this nation is founded on and continues to function on. Our bodies carry these weights.
CHAPTER 4
BODY AND SPACE

Body is the main component within my work, physically and conceptually. Our bodies carry us through the layered spaces of our existence, housing experiences, memories, trauma, etc. Our bodies determine the way society assumes and digests us. As Legacy Russell states, “We use “body” to give material form to an idea that has no form, an assemblage that is abstract. The concept of a body houses within its social, political, and cultural discourses, which change based on where the body is situated and how it is read.” (Russell) Materially, our bodies are collages of the layers that create a single multi-faceted intertwined self, put into action through movement. Bodies are not a linear material, but social constructions of linear time force themselves onto the body. When a body doesn’t fit into these constructed expectations, it becomes the abject—the body that is not a body—unreal, illegible, unrecognizable to the state.” (Kristeva) Building off of Kristeva’s notion of the abject, Jaclyn Pryor voices, “Those whose life experiences neatly fit into a socially constructed notion of time get recognized, while those that cannot be made to fit, because they require a different understanding of time or history to make sense, are rendered invisible.” (Pryor) When you boil these concepts down, they stem from the history of “othering” bodies that don’t fit within the strict parameters of Whiteness. Within her book, Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto, Legacy Russell writes:

When considering identity and the language often used to speak of it (e.g., “the mainstream” and those “at the margins”), it comes at little surprise that under white patriarchy, bodies—selves—that cannot be defined with clarity by the “primary gaze,” are pushed from the center. There, a Black queer femme body is flattened, essentialized as singular in dimension, given little room to occupy and even less territory to explore. As flat shadowy figures standing at the margins, we are stripped of the right to feel, to transform, to express a range of self.

The history of this sort of flattening or “othering” is one that has deep roots within a painful narrative of race, gender and sexuality in America, but also remains consistent
across a world history of war. Where imperialism has touched, where colonialism continues, the force of flattening can be found. If one can render another body faceless and unrecognizable, if one can pin another as subhuman, it becomes easier for one group to establish a position of supremacy over another. (Russell)

These ideas set the framework for the use of body within my work. My performances confront the idea of the other, pushing away its notion of flattening to expose the multi-faceted self. In my piece, *The March of la Mariposa*, my body dominates the performance space through my movements and the repetitive sound of marching.

![Figure 11. Ash, Jalen “The March of La Mariposa” Performance 2022](image)

Step by step my feet pound into the ground while a projection of 2 Dimensional paper dolls cascades over me and the linear line of sight I move through — absorbing and reflecting the imagery during different moments of my movements. The projection of paper dolls onto my body represents the flattening of my body as an “other,” and my movements progress from playing into these projections to then rejecting and capturing them for what they are, others
expectations of myself. The physical projection of the video onto my body and the gallery walls is important because it disrupts and adapts to its environment simultaneously. This performance took place during the day allowing very little imagery to be seen in broad daylight, thus the flattened dolls were veiled by the White walls and space. However, as the daylight faded the projection adapted to the space and began to make itself known by cascading over and bouncing off my body and the walls. Physically the actual projector is the only thing that takes up space, but the temporality of its presence challenges my body and the cameras placed within the space that act as placeholders for my past self. In the gallery I placed one camera, standing at my height, diagonally across from the projector on opposing corners of the room. Then, I placed two more cameras across from one another so that a diamond formation was created between them and the opposing camera and projector. These two cameras were placed at a child’s height, low to the ground, with speakers directly underneath them. The audio that played as I performed for the linear planes were home videos from my childhood. The voices of my parents, older sister, and I, echoed off the confined gallery walls bringing my past into the present as I learned to engage with the ideas and memories of my childhood self in a playful way. The audio, as well as each camera and the projector represent the past fixed screens of myself, sitting and recording my present self. As the projection of paper dolls becomes more and more clear, the fixed expectations of others become apparent on my moving BIPOC body.
The plane of my skirt followed my body as its movements transform from being combative to confident — from performing others' expectations as it sits upon my hips, to displaying the complex layers of myself as I pull it from my body and hold it as a screen in front of my body capturing the projection of paper dolls within its boundaries. This performance acknowledges my past self while understanding that my present self still houses my childhood and the experiences that I am seeking to work through, understand better, and grow from in my new planes of existence. This performance is a *Time Slip*, a term coined by Jaclyn I, Pryor:

Time slips are moments in live performance in which normative conceptions of time fail, or fall away, and the spectator or artist experiences an alternative, or queer, temporality. In this regard, a time slip reveals a previously unseen aspect of either the past, present, or future (while complicating the presumably linear relationship among and between each) — with an eye toward hidden histories, buried traumas, unclaimed experiences, invisible structures, and previously unimaginable futures…. memory slips; ghosts linger; specters appear; trauma repeats—with a difference—and past, present, and future are given permission to touch one another. (3,9)

As a time-based medium, performance is uniquely situated to produce “time consciousness, even historical consciousness,” making audiences feel, see, hear, and
sense the passage of time and the production of history—and to glimpse how we might live our lives in relation to them differently, queerly, and unapologetically. (Pryor)

Time slips break the body from the restrictions of linear time, allowing for a moment of clarity between body, self, and experiences. Body as *glitch* goes hand in hand with these ideas of time slips, but instead of acknowledging performance as an opening to an alternative reality, *glitch* looks directly to the othered body (BIPOC) as a disruptor to the canonical white cisgender heteronormative, thus posing a threat to these existing boundaries of reality today. As Legacy Russell states:

A *glitch* is an error, a mistake, a failure to function…. Within *glitch* feminism, *glitch* is celebrated as a vehicle of refusal, a strategy of nonperformance. This *glitch* aims to make abstract again that which has been forced into an uncomfortable and ill-defined material: the body.

The *glitch* is a passage through which the body traverses toward liberation, a tear in the fabric of the digital.

*Glitch* is thus an active word, one that implies movement and change from the outset; this movement triggers error. (Russell)

These ideas lead to my piece, *The Closest Thing I’ve Felt To Queer Time*, a piece in which my goal was to create an experience for my viewers that complicated their linear relationships to myself as performer and my performances. Through foregrounding the spaces of myself in my previous performances, I decided to pull a part out of every piece to curate a space that overlaps the past, present, and what’s to come. There is no single narrative in this piece, instead memories and experiences overlap themselves through objects and sound to disrupt the stillness of White space. This performance took place in the same gallery as my first performance piece, *Who We Are*, on the same day, May 5, a year later. The repetition of spaces is very important within my works because I create and perform within the parameters of an institution, specifically a predominantly White institution. According to statistics pulled from the US Department of
Education National Center for Education Statistics, students at Georgia Southern are primarily White and the percentages are as follows; 62% White, 26% Black, 5% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 2% two or more races, and 1% International. Understanding and acknowledging that there is a severe lack of diversity in the institution that I attend is important because as I’ve previously discussed it affects the way that others see me and my identity. It also causes me to constantly make conscious decisions surrounding the way I present myself and interact with others around me because as a person of color I don’t have the privilege of the default. I am always aware of potential prejudices and racial profiling that occurs on a day to day basis. However, through understanding my spaces and explorations of my performances, I have found that my work does cater to the White audience. It’s easy to say that I am the glitch, my body a tear in the physical and psychological planes of Whiteness, but to strictly say this is performative as someone who constantly talks about wanting to reconnect and make work that defies a White audience. It wasn’t until recently that I became fully aware and have begun to challenge this Whiteness within my work.

In the piece, *i exist in a White Man’s Imagination*, I explored the years of built in cultural displacement and generational trauma for the women in my family who have been physically and mentally mutilated by seeking community in their oppressor. There is a certain pain, violence, and dehumanizing of self that goes into trying to fit into the patriarchy, especially as a person of color who seeks relationships outside of their own culture. This piece allowed me to realize that existing to fit into an inherently racist and violent system will never heal the traumas that have been passed down and exist within us. I used my body as a disruption, as the abject, to voice the tension I feel and have felt in past relationships with White individuals and with the stories of Whiteness that are embedded within my family, within my DNA. This was the first piece that I
felt was truly not for a White audience and I attribute a large part of this to not allowing the fourth wall to be broken within my work through audience interactions. Instead I installed my piece in the main stairwell of the Arts Building during the day to challenge the way individuals moved through the space with the projection of my body acting as a physical, yet temporary barrier.

I draped a long white sheet over the stairwell that fell all the way to the floor and acted as a veil for the video of my body. The video was projected onto the sheet and the sun from the windows pushed the imagery behind the sheet sinking my body into the background, being absorbed by the White space. The space and disruption of space was so important to me because it
commanded a presence, a presence that wasn't shocking, that wasn't screaming, but that made you stop and acknowledge it when moving throughout your day. The video depicted me free bleeding, only capturing my body from the chin down, and was my way of commanding presence through the video, and presence through the space once projected. The thick black yarn sewn into the white sheet stood out drastically, creating tension between the words and my body, simultaneously bleeding together. Sound also played a big role in adding intimacy into the piece, the sounds of the cicadas were most important to me because they are a constant in my life. They represent a geographical marker hinting on how my life is drastically different in the South than it is back home. Much like the performance I discussed earlier, Mancha De Plátano, this piece did not ask the viewer to participate and interact with it, instead it needed the viewer to watch, listen, and begin to understand how I exist and not how they interpret my existence.

I talk a lot about wanting to connect to the past generations of my family and this inspired me to really start looking back at my parents and their childhood to see where a lot of the disconnect happened between the older generations, to their generation, to my generation. With these ideas in mind, I started to think about what connected my childhood and the way I was raised compared to my parents' own childhoods. I had a conversation with my mom over the phone and I asked her what one of the most prominent childhood memories she had with her parents. She told me stories about how they would always go to the flea market on weekends with their ollas to get Menudo, how they would drive around in my grandpa’s truck looking at all of the giant rich houses, and how they would sit on the front porch of their house eating sunflower seeds and crunchy cheetos while drinking Pepsi, just sitting together enjoying one another's presence. I remember my dad telling me stories of how he would also drive around with his parents when he was younger and they would look at the big beautiful houses, and I
have my own memories as a child of driving around with my parents and my siblings eating snacks in the car listening to music and looking at all of the big beautiful houses. My mom grew up in Southern California, and my dad grew up in Utah, eventually after his parents divorced he went back and forth between Utah and Northern California. I found it so interesting how geographically and culturally different my parents were, yet they still shared similarities between specific experiences in their past that carried into their present, and because of this I created the piece, *Pepsi Talks: a continuous childhood for mis padres*. For this piece I had my dad drive around the houses we would visit as a child and my sister took a recording of these houses. I then used this recording and projected it onto the side of a house here in Statesboro.

*Figure 14. Ash, Jalen “Pepsi Talks: a continuous childhood for mis padres” Performance, Video Installation 2022*
The video installation took place at night when the sun was completely down and the projection was clear and vivid. Next to the front door of the house I had a table set up with the snacks that my mom and my grandparents used to eat, and on the lawn across from this table sat another table filled with the drinks and snacks that me, my siblings, and my parents would eat on our drives. The food on the tables were arranged in a specific pattern, the drinks were lined up in a straight line and represented each person in my family. The back row of drinks on either table represented the role of the parents, and the front row represented the children. I wanted to bring together three generations of my family into one space. The projector sat on the table that was on the lawn signifying the present moment through the new recording and by projecting it onto the house, specifically onto the front porch, I was trying to bridge the generational gaps of time. The tables went unnoticed for most of the piece, and I felt that there was something missing from them. After reflecting on the piece, I decided to scrap the entire video and to focus on building a singular table that holds the different generations of my family together in one specific space by creating an ofrenda. Ofrenda’s are typically made to remember and honor the loved ones who have passed, but to bridge the generations of my family I'm including the members who have passed as well as the ones who are currently living. I settled on creating an ofrenda because I realized that this piece was really about my longing for my grandparents and my parents to have a childhood where they could be kids without the external and internal pressures they went through as children and young adults. By creating a space full of familial memories, I feel like I can provide a stable community and comfort for my family to be a part of that is solely for us.
CHAPTER 5
EXHIBITION: SANA SANA

My exhibition, *SANA SANA*, featured documentations and residual artifacts from my performance and installation based works, including a live performance on the opening day of the show. The layout of the show was built off of my earlier works that catered to a White audience. I wanted to include my earlier performances in the exhibition in a way that wouldn’t allow for them to take up space in my life anymore, but instead to represent the expectations I had placed on myself to fit into this category of Whiteness. The solution I came up with to depict these initial twelve performances was to use masking tape to create outlines of the residual artifacts on the gallery floor from these performances. Conceptually, I see the tape as the “othering” and “flattening” of BIPOC bodies. The tape exists on the floor, on the ground plane that we all touch, but it acknowledges and reduces these earlier performances into a mere documentation that has no commanding presence within the gallery space. I flattened these performances that were filled with others expectations and stereotypes that they had projected onto me and curated the space to provide a healing environment for myself. I used white tape for eleven of the twelve pieces and thick red tape for the piece, *Privilege Walk*. I used red tape for this piece because I was charting a bar graph that I wanted to contrast from the other flattened pieces. The colors white and red were also important to this space because they are a part of the fire colors that represent giving life and good medicine within Native American communities, specifically connecting to my dads side of the family and the traditions from my grandma and the Lakota people. The full array of colors that make up fire are white, red, orange, and yellow which were also used to surround myself in the space. I wanted to use the fire colors in my exhibition to converse with my family and pay my respects to their past and present memories by
practicing the tradition of beading that has been passed down through generations of my family. What I found to be interesting about the tape, is that it altered the way people moved through the space. Most people made a conscious effort to maneuver around it and not step on it, thus challenging them to adapt to the space.

Figure 15. Ash, Jalen “SANA SANA Exhibition” Installation Photo 1 2023

While these twelve performances were documented with tape, the remaining five used the physical residual artifacts from the spaces of each performance and were placed strategically over and around the tape within the gallery. These five performances maintained their physicality because I finally began implementing what I was saying into what I was producing. These pieces
were for me to reconnect and understand myself without trying to educate and make excuses for others around me. These five pieces were, *i exist in a White Man’s imagination, Mancha De Plátano, Pepsi Talks: a continuous childhood for mis padres, The March of La Mariposa, and Sana Sana*.

The first piece, *i exist in a White Man’s imagination*, was draped over the doorway that connected the two separate gallery spaces together. Originally, this sheet was hung in a stairwell and forced people to interact with it and I wanted to be able to create this same setting within the gallery. As people moved between the two spaces, they entered behind the sheet and the shadows of their bodies absorbed into the white material, becoming flattened and veiled by the piece itself.
The second piece, *Mancha De Plátano*, was set up on the floor towards the back wall of the gallery. On the wall framed by two doors, a documentation video of the five physical pieces played on a continuous loop. This video spliced together the full original five performances, switching back and forth between the spaces of each one creating a layered non-linear experience. It was important to install this piece on the floor of the gallery in a more private area to recreate the intimate space of my personal studio where this performance originally took place. The stained clothes and towel that I wore lay on the bench where Yashcira sat washing my hair during the performance.
Figure 17. Ash, Jalen and Camacho Martir, Yaschira “Mancha De Plátano” Installation Photo 3

2023
The third piece, *Pepsi Talks: a continuous childhood for mis padres*, took the form of an ofrenda to celebrate and honor my family. Each tall candle represented one of my family members. The two lit candles on the ofrenda were for my grandma Linda and my grandpa Pancho, to honor their memories and spirits because they have passed on. The four tea candles lit and placed on each corner of the table represent the north, south, east, and west. These candles act as guides for the spirits to help light and guide their way back to the present, living world.

![Figure 18. Ash, Jalen “Pepsi Talks: a continuous childhood for mis padres” Installation Photo 4 2023.](image)

Along with the candles, photographs and cempasuchil flowers filled the ofrenda. The photographs of my grandparents were laminated, preserved as residual artifacts of their lives and
their impact on my life. The photographs of the rest of my family and myself remained untouched, yet to be preserved until the day we pass on.

The fourth piece, *The March of La Mariposa*, was set up at the very front of the gallery. Two tripods sat facing one another at different heights as they sat during the performance for this piece. On the taller tripod the skirt I wore that turned into a screen hung from its neck, and the heels I wore sat at its foot acknowledging the shorter tripod. During the original performance I danced and moved between the tripods and wanted the viewers of this piece to engage with this
plane upon entering the gallery, thus it was important for me to frame the entrance with this piece.

Figure 20. Ash, Jalen “The March of La Mariposa” Installation Photo 6 2023.

The fifth and final physical piece was a live performance on the opening day of my show, this piece is called, Sana Sana. Sana Sana was an all day performance, running from 9am until 6pm, and it took place on March 2, 2023. The prior four pieces I discussed surrounded the final performance that took place in the center of the gallery.
On the floor, I placed a braided cord composed of the fire colors creating a circle for my body to sit in. Within the circle there were various beading supplies including personal belongings such as my water bottle, shoes, blanket, bag, etc. The doors to the gallery opened at 9am and from that point in time up until the evening I sat and beaded myself earrings until they were completely finished. Many visitors came through the space during my performance and watched me bead. There were several components to the layout of the gallery and the act of beading that contributed to this performance, every small detail mattered.
First, I wanted the performance to be centered in the gallery and adjacent to the residual artifacts of my past pieces to create conversations between myself within the space. It was important for me to sit on the floor and connect with the ground plane that all of my previous works existed on. By sitting on the floor I shrunk the gallery space and it became personal and solely connected to me as people wandered through. I had headphones in the entire duration of the performance, choosing to not interact with any of the individuals who passed through my space. As I sat in the circle beading I faced the ofrenda filled with my family and our memories. I watched the candles of my grandparents dance as the flames flickered, and watched them project the shadows of themselves and the rest of my family onto the wall. The candlelight as a projection fascinated me when thinking about the way I talked about projections early on, through the body and through the projected lens of others. I found that the candle functioned the most successfully as a projection as it stood alone because it fully controls itself and becomes
present, whereas when I reflect on experiences and expectations of others those are almost always dealing with the past. The candlelight was present with my body in the space as we projected onto one another, and the presence of my family became more and more apparent as the candles died down and began to settle into their space that I created for them.

I projected the videos of my performances behind me onto the back wall so that when you entered into the gallery space the first thing you noticed was my body under a spotlight in the center of the room and then the movement of the video playing adjacent to me. It was important that the viewer visually saw my presence and the video simultaneously, connecting me to the space they now were a part of. The only light I had in the gallery was the candles on the ofrenda and a singular spotlight on the braided circle where I sat. I wanted to bring attention to the action that was taking place while allowing the subtle light to cascade over the rest of the works, creating a strong yet intimate environment. The darkness allowed for the tape and residual artifacts to belong to the space, forcing the viewers to get up close and personal with the works if
they wanted to further explore them. Like the tape on the floor, the lighting and braided circle caused people to be more aware of how they progressed through the space.

Along with the characteristics of the space, the performance itself was very significant and important to me. Beading is a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation from both my parents' sides of the family. The act of beading is sacred and holds so many stories and histories within its movements. I initially came up with the idea for this performance because I've been focused on reconnection and making conscious decisions to implement the parts of my family histories that I feel have been lost or disregarded over time, and beading is something that me and my siblings have begun to practice more and more. The center stones I used for my earrings were gifted to me from my grandma Teresa. These circular and polished stones are made from jade. Jade is said to be a protector of generations, both living and dead, and I felt these were the best choice for the centers of the earrings. The color beads that surround the jade are the fire colors, like the tape and braided circle used within the space. The pattern of the earrings also mimic the braided circle I sat within during the performance,
acknowledging the space they were created in and the movements of those who passed through. It was important for me to create a piece that celebrates my presence and my family, so that I could wear them with pride and their memories during the day of my thesis defense.

Figure 25. Ash, Jalen “Sana Sana” 2023

This performance was purely for myself. As I sat in the center of the gallery I watched my body disrupt the space that I once forced myself to assimilate to. I watched my fingers sew the generations of my family into myself as they sat by my side, as I learned to exist in the disruption instead of conforming to the boxes that have been set out for me.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

Our bodies are screens that house the projections of generational expectations filtered from the past into our present. Through understanding who I am and where I come from I have been able to explore generational connections through my performances, the screen of my body, and the lens of those who came before me. These performances have allowed me to unpack and dismantle the generational bias of seeking community in the oppressor(s) because I no longer create work that places Whiteness at its center.

Performance isn’t linear. Reconnection isn’t linear. And so, I leave you with this,

Sana sana, colita de rana
Si no sanas hoy
Sanarás mañana

Sana sana, colita de rana
Dame un besito para hoy y mañana
REFERENCES


