The Superfluid Curation of Darkness

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Interdisciplinary creative collaboration can feel like a utopic horizon, something artists reach toward when they come together. It is a risk; holding potential for both joy and heartbreak, and as vulnerable as reaching for someone's hand in the dark. The complexities of collaboration offer a provocative space to consider the politics of gathering and making together, and to experiment with new forms of relationships. As interdisciplinary collaboration moves beyond traditional parameters, sites, and configurations, artists push concepts of discipline to invoke the navigation of difference as the marker of interdisciplinarity. Here, interdisciplinarity feels practical, political, and dense, layering hopeful utopianism and destructive annihilation into collective visions of ways of being together.

In these shifting landscapes, I argue for curation as a strategy to facilitate collaboration across differences, understanding curation as a process-based practice and a mode of production in which the differences of artists and their works are sustained without having to resolve. This article builds upon the extensive genealogy of artists activating the practice of curation. This trajectory follows an attempted dismantling of the traditional curator role, first by challenging the curator as a figure of authority, and then by envisioning the curator as a creator. Many contemporary artists continue this dismantling by maintaining both curatorial and creation-based positions, and by bringing creation interests and impulses to the curatorial process to shape practices that are extensions of artistic work rather than bifurcations. These artists resist the privileging of a singular identity, stretching promiscuously across disciplines to create practices that honor the needs of the work, their communities, and themselves, and revealing the strength of layered and hyphenated identities. As I argue below, by employing curatorial processes in artistic collaborations, or collaborating curatorially, artists can complexify power structures, create structures of queer kinship that explode curation's traditional gatekeeping role, and facilitate the flow of interdisciplinarity.

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This article makes these provocations tangible through the creative practice of Sage Ni'Ja Whitson, Queer Trans/mogrifying multidisciplinary artist and futurist. My writing is rooted in conversations I conducted with Whitson as well as additional field and theoretical research. Whitson's award-winning art practice includes work at the intersection of theater, dance, music, visual art, science, and spirituality, which they describe as an engagement of "transdisciplinarity through a critical intersection of the sacred and conceptual in Black, Queer, and Transembodiedness, site, science, body and spirit" (Whitson 2019b).[1] This article focuses on the collaborative processes of *The Unarrival Experiments*, a series of interdisciplinary artworks currently in development.[2] Despite the absence of a conventional curatorial practice, Whitson consciously activates the curatorial as a sacred methodology of creation that supports ease in the impossible, builds layers of multiplicity and simultaneity within difference, resists institutional hegemony and power structures, and crafts open systems of queer kinship and care for communities, ancestors, and futures. Through my writing, I craft a case study that explores the politics of those with whom Whitson gathers; how and why they do so; the differences and impossibilities they are navigating; the curatorial act made possible by the collaboration; and how the curatorial role is activated throughout the process. While closely attending to Whitson's work, I do not attempt to exhaustively document or reveal. Rather, I borrow Whitson's advice on how to get to know dark matter, "You gotta be with it," and focus on accompanying (Whitson 2021b, 172). Through engagement with Whitson's practice, I argue for interdisciplinary performance creation as a curatorial act of collaborative kinship that produces what I describe as a "third space" of collectivity: an alternate institution of ambiguity, interdependent sovereignty, and superfluidity. Each curatorial act is informed by the frameworks of those engaged with it. In this case, Whitson's curatorial act for *The Unarrival Experiments* activates the sacred and is imbued with queer and Trans Black astrophysics. The result is a forward-facing methodology of how to move through the impossible together and envision new collective futures.

The Curatorial Act of Darkness

The Unarrival Experiments is an expansive and ongoing multiyear, multisite, inter- and transdisciplinary series. Its components include *The Illumination Catalogue*, a ceremony series and archive; *Unconcealment Ceremonies*, a performance inside and outside a dome|space|ship; *Adaptations & Dark Dives,* live adaptations of *Unconcealment Ceremonies* held at astronomical observatories; *Dark Matter Cyphers*, improvisations with scientists, artists, and thinkers in pitch-black spaces; *Trans Trappist The Extraterrestrial*, which argues for the presence of Black Trans people in space; a book; and lectures/performances. Whitson is the center from which all components emanate, and they engage an evolving group of artists, scientists, and thinkers based on each project's needs. In my conversations with Whitson, I realized that the series is more fluid than the concrete sections I just listed. During a presentation at Creative Capital, Whitson described *The Unarrival Experiments* as an "interdisciplinary performance installation housed within the development of new and integrated media, amplifying the dark in a mixed genre book of writing" (Whitson 2019b). Entwining every aspect of the work creates a form of seriality characterized by the accumulative interdependency of the sections. The components flow within, alongside, and through one another; creating a darkness that make differentiation impossible.

Within this style of creative process facilitation, Whitson performs as both curator and creator, sparking projects and collaborations as a form of surfaced research and sacred ceremony. The seriality of the project finds its roots in Whitson's engagement with Black spirituality, including Yorùbá cosmologies, the theatrical jazz aesthetic, and the concept of darkness (Whitson 2019b).[3] *The Unarrival Experiments* began with a reflection on Black premature death, which Whitson spoke about in a 2019 Creative Capital presentation:

> This work began with my great-grandmother Willie, a Black Indian root-worker from Wichita, Kansas. I learned of her from an aunt who died of cancer a few

years later, like my mother, her sister, before her. Like their mother, my grand-mother, before them. I looked on both sides of my blood to the missing bones and to the lines where names should be. Why were there no elders around me? As a Black GNC Transperson, witnessing the increasing murders of Black Transgender sisters and siblings of color, I wondered about my own ability of step-ping into eldership too soon. (Whitson 2019b)

Whitson describes trying to locate Willie through their spiritual practice, understanding Willie's absence as a refusal to arrive. Instead, Willie offers Whitson what M. Jacqui Alexander calls "trans-generational memory," a sacred memory and spiritual embodiment that manifests intelligibility within the perceived unknown (Alexander 2005, 14). Willie tells Whitson to look up, pointing them toward dark matter and the universe, 96 percent of which is black and unknown (Whitson 2019b). The universe is filled with dark energy that early astronomers could not explain but that Isaac Newton called God (Whitson 2019b). This energy was dismissed as a confusing void due to the racist analytical frameworks operating in science; however, it is actually a rich and wondrous darkness manifesting a cosmological refusal to arrive.[4] Following Willie's thread, Whitson began to ask where else unarrival exists (Whitson 2019b).

Whitson describes the stakes of this inquiry: "I'm really struck by the unknowningness of [dark matter], and what it reveals about who we are in this time … that we would call something so vast, so grand and impactful *dark*, all because we can't see it, and it doesn't react to light.… What does that mean to me as a Black person in a Black body?" (Whitson 2021a).[5] Dark matter does not emit, reflect, or absorb light of any kind, modeling autonomy and a self-determination that willfully refuses.[6] Infinite such that it causes an incomprehension that mirrors our relationship to the sacred, and nourishing in how it quite literally holds galaxies together, dark matter is imbued with an opacity that offers, to quote Edouard Glissant, "subsistence within an irreducible singular-ity" (1997, 190). Like Willie, dark matter refuses arrival. *The Unarrival Experiments* takes up this inquiry, asking, "How do you see something you can't see? What if Blackness refused to arrive and exists in the unarrival?" (Whitson 2019b).

I understand unarrival as a resistance to knowability, a dissemblance of incompleteness, and an embrace of impermanence. Mirroring Whitson's guidance around how to engage with dark matter, unarrival is not a rejection of connection but rather an invitation to alternate forms of understand-ing and communion: "You gotta be with it" (Whitson 2021b, 172). Whitson's unarrival is informed by Trans- and Blackness. The former is defined by C. Riley Snorton as "a movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival, and 'blackness' signifies upon an enveloping environment and con-dition of possibility" (2017, 2). Whitson extends this, describing the darkness of unarrival as being on a spectrum and existing in motion before thought,[7] and naming its curatorial manifestation *superfluid*:[8]

I searched [for] … something fluid but not liquid, a Blackness with flow yet free from water scenarios that positions our conditions with drownings, murderous sub-merges or the ocean nightmare on our way to diaspora. The flow that honors trans-formation, the fluidity of the ocean floor, shifting of galactic space where Blackness births things. (Whitson 2019a)

Invoking superfluidity calls in spaciousness, a divine honoring, non-fixity, and transformation of legacies and place. When mobilized curatorially, superfluid transforms the work into artistic black holes: flowing with Blackness, requiring a different quality of interaction, and comfortable in the sacred unknown (Whitson 2021a).

In *The Unarrival Experiments*, superfluid collaboration manifests with a growing number of scien-tists, cultural theorists, producers, and artists who contribute to the making and presentation of the

work as researchers, designers, performers, creators, and more. This expansive series of creative collaborations crosses genres and practices, and offers a multiplicity of outputs. Whitson explains, "If I'm working on unarrival as a technology, then making a cumulating activity after a process is totally antithetical to the theory" (Whitson 2021a). I understand technology here as the application of knowledge, in this case unarrival, to achieve practical goals, which is the creation. When activated as technology, unarrival becomes a methodology that guides the creation of each element, translating the expansiveness of the creative inquiry into the accumulative seriality of the resulting work to link fluidity of process and fluidity of result. Whitson builds a loop between the creative questions, the collaborative process, and the resulting work in which each element is intertwined with and tailored to the values of the others. This practice acknowledges that the politics of the work cannot be differentiated from the politics of how it is made.

Reciprocity of process is also an embodied praxis that transforms; as Whitson states, "the work of the work is always working on us" (2021a). The work becomes practical through its inhabitation of those involved, requiring intimate relationship with the technologies of unarrival, dark matter, and superfluidity. Sacred energies, the technologies "surround, protect, push, strengthen, and bring a sense of purpose … they mediate a process of interdependence, of mutual beingness" (Alexander 2005, 301). Whitson pushes this further, noting that "the art alone doesn't do it all" (Whitson 2021a). The work makes requirements of those who engage with it, transforming and charging through its emergent materialization.

Superfluid seriality is the output of the methodological application of unarrival, resulting in nebulous works that seep, flow, and embody eternal opacity. Seriality is a broader trend in Whitson's work, in which one project ends up multiplying into several concurrent projects, due to an understanding on Whitson's part of the capacity of what each work can hold (Whitson 2021a). In this way, superfluid seriality becomes a way to operate in the face of limitation and the darkness of the unknown that exists both within the work and around it.

Creating serially allows Whitson to embrace the unknown of experimentation as a framework, activating curation's role as a "constellation of creative ideas," a concept utilized by artist and curator Paul O'Neill to describe the relational structure offered by curatorial practice (2016, 1). From a curatorial perspective, superfluid seriality is both an aesthetic and strategic choice that creates collectivity among the works themselves. Aesthetically, it offers various vessels to contain and highlight the expansiveness of what is being explored and a way to organize artistic ideas. It also attaches a sense of temporary arrival in which ideas can live as long as they need to, knowing they will eventually transition into something else. This allows each work to be one component rather than the full and final expression. For example, Whitson's individual writing practice led them to create *The Illumination Catalogue*, a piece honoring Transgender people in the sites where they were murdered, which went on to spark a digital archival project and future book project cataloguing the astrological charts and astronomical activity of their birthdays.[9]

In addition, superfluid seriality can evoke the fluidity, vastness, and impermanence of Transness; Whitson notes that superfluid seriality allows them to be more of themself as an artist within a single project than they have experienced previously (Whitson 2021a).[10] Here, seriality is a personal requirement that enables the fluidity of the work to meet the fluidity of identities of the individuals involved. This stretches the concrete capacities of the work, offering what Malik Gaines describes as a "way to act in excess of the permanent exclusion experienced in any one location" (2017, 22). From a logistical perspective, seriality is a mechanism that supports the transience of freelance workers, providing on and off ramps throughout the process so that collaborators can join and leave based on their needs.

Curated seriality is also a political requirement, rising from the need to resist the whiteness of the institutional spaces where Whitson often works. In these spaces, Whitson takes on a curatorial role

that enables them to manifest their own unarrival as an act of resistance. These institutions often operate as white-dominated colonial structures of white supremacy. They manifest the gaze and container of white space through their operations, architecture, and values, which are all attempts to mold the work to fit whiteness. In this context, as theorist Sara Ahmed argues, whiteness becomes "the absent centre against which others appear only as deviants, or points of deviation" (2007, 157). In their processes, Whitson enacts sustained resistance of the white space, describing that labor as follows: "It takes work to be in a space that maybe on its face doesn't affirm the work, or the container might not, and to continue to push against that. And that's as much a part of what it means to show up . . . [as] a creative person" (Whitson 2019a). Whitson is referring to the various containers of the space, including the architecture, human resources, programmatic structure, and audience. This resistance pulls from Black vernacular forms that, to quote Robert G. O'Meally, are "fueled by . . . [an] impulse for survival by means of creating cultural forms that 'the white boys can't steal'" (1994, 244). Although I'm referring to the specificities of the institutional performance spaces, I acknowledge that these spaces are manifestations of larger systems. In that way, Whitson's resistance is both micro and macro attempts at, as Snorton says, "reviving and inventing strategies for inhabiting unlivable worlds" (2017, 7). The resistance of unarrival encircles and obscures through Whitson's creation of an alternate institution, a process I will outline shortly.

Curating Within the Wake

Whitson's invocation of Blackness and darkness exists at the intersection of the dark matter of astrophysics and the Blackness of the wake, made visible through Whitson's exploration of Black premature death and their own precarity as a Black Transgender person. *The wake* is a term from theorist Christina Sharpe, which she explains as "the conceptual frame of and for living blackness in the diaspora in the still unfolding aftermaths of Atlantic chattel slavery" (2016, 2). Whitson's work shifts the wake into the specificity of the Black Transgender experience, surfacing it in the familiar Black Transgender deaths that moved Whitson to create *The Illumination Catalogue*. Within this wake, unarrival takes on new stakes and meaning in the repetitions of loss that continues to vanish entire generations too soon, often in silence and without consequence.

Sharpe describes wakes as "processes; through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory . . . the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved, in water . . . wake means being awake and, also, consciousness" (2016, 21). *The Unarrival Experiments* moves through all aspects of the wake, infusing it with the sacred Black queer experience. *The Illumination Catalogue* is a notable example of this. In this ceremony project, Whitson honors and uplifts Black Transgender, Gender Nonconforming, and Intersex (TGNCI) lives and communities. For each performance, Whitson visits a site where a TGNCI person was murdered between 2018 and 2023 to conduct ritual work and to connect with local Black TGNCI communities. Whitson documents performances sonically and photographically, recording video solely to extract photographs. The documentation will be made public through an exhibition in 2025, as well as in an immersive 3D and 2D website that will launch in 2023. Photos are currently posted on the project's Instagram account.

Whitson records each murdered TGNCI person's chosen birthdate, tracking the astrological patterns when they were born. These fold into a collection of astrology charts and records of astronomical activity for the birth and rebirth dates of Black TGNCI people who are currently living. The charts will be analyzed and documented in a digital Black Trans Cosmic Map that explores how the lives and murders of Black TGNCI people are accounted for in the cosmos. Seeping beyond the metaphorical framework of the wake through its uplifting of Black TGNCI lives, *The Illumination Catalogue* asks: "How does the land and the cosmos respond to our traumatic deaths?" (The Unarrival Experiments, n.d.-b.). Beyond the performance rituals, Whitson holds story sharing circles with Black TGNCI people, whose birth and rebirth information will also exist in the Cosmic

Map. In these ceremonies and archive, unarrival takes on a sacred permanent impermanence, expanding the invitation to alternate forms of knowing into alternate forms of being. Although these sacred lives were cut short, *The Illumination Catalogue* tracks how they continue to exist in the dark matter that holds us and reminds that we are "not alone on any plane" (Whitson qtd in Venegoni, 2022).

The Illumination Catalogue is a microcosm of the wake: a process that Whitson moves through in reflection of the dead and that acknowledges their own proximity to those who are gone. Whitson's performance is private in the moment: a movement ritual that honors the person, the grief, any unknowns and lack of resolution, and their memory. The ritual creates a little pocket for the person who has passed and the cross temporal community that surrounds them, and places them gently in the unarrival. This may be the only visible recognition of passing and grief that they receive, as their names may be perceived as lost in the machineries of white supremacy. In these performances, Whitson's body, and the bodies of those they honor, become a disturbance within the geographic, social, and political communities where the performance takes place. This disturbance forces micro-reckonings, the repatriation of memory, and a disruption of the trajectory of silent, unacknowledged white supremacist violence. Whitson is filmed while conducting this ritual movement work, and we see them moving over train tracks, within parks, and beside hotels, among other sites. The star charts invite a looping back to dark matter, returning these vanished TGNCI lives to the cosmos and making visible the sacred scientific patterns that weave each together into an astral collaboration and lineage.

Curating in the wake is to put oneself in its precarity and to recognize one's own vulnerability and complicity within it. Professional distance and neutrality explode in the prioritization of singular lives, often forgotten, destroyed, or defamed. Curation's relational qualities take on new stakes here: to remember, to grieve, to disturb, and to bring to consciousness. Ultimately, Whitson's curatorial act becomes superfluid spiritual labor: seeping through mediums, gazes, temporalities, and relationships to facilitate a form of interdisciplinarity that honors the complexities of the inquiry, and drawing from the dark matter within which the wake emerges.

The Impossibilities of Interdisciplinarity

Dark matter also informs Whitson's superfluid merging of disciplines, circles of people, and creative provocations, a process that matches the superfluidity of the work itself. The result is a morphing constellation of collaborations, processes, and creations that are propelled and transformed by the impossibilities and differences invoked by this merging. This form of disciplinarity is held within broader traditions of Black interdisciplinarity that, as Katherine McKittrick describes, exist "because thinking and writing and imagining across a range of texts, disciplines, histories, and genres unsettles dismal and insular racial logics" (2021, 5). Whitson situates these traditions within queer lineages, expanding interdisciplinarity's objectives to include liberation and sacred manifestation: "I am furiously, fiercely committed to a creative practice that is unabashed and uncompromising, that is a contribution to liberation, that is an unapologetic offering of all of the Black Queer magic I can manifest" (Whitson qtd. in Miller 2017). Through its activation, the queer superfluidity of Whitson's disciplinarity is a transgressive crossing. Here, I build upon Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore's definition of "'trans-' as a concept that encompasses 'categorical crossings, leakages, and slips of all sorts'" (qtd. in Snorton 2017, 8). Activating *trans* as movement, Whitson offers liberation from traditional disciplinary classifications, rigid artistic processes, transactional collaborative relationships, secular borders, and static pieces.

Whitson employs both internal and external interdisciplinarity. Internally, Whitson brings together "ancestral, cultural, and spiritual cosmologies . . . to the research process . . . [to] learn what a work means/offers" (Whitson qtd. in Miller 2017). A form of spiritual dark matter, this unconcealing

gathering offers access to knowledge that might otherwise have been lost in the wake and positions the work in the lineages and histories that hold it. Externally, they activate interdisciplinarity in the circles of collaborators they bring together in "workshop form, dialogue, [and] strategy/technology toward healing and freedom" (Whitson qtd. in Miller 2017). Finally, interdisciplinarity manifests in the format of the resulting work, including performances, books, conversations, social media, and astrological charts.

Whitson describes the fluidity of their interdisciplinarity as "pressing against seeming invisibilities in order to call them home like Queer, Transgender, Nonbinary, like bodies, like time, like music.... It's not about seeing at all" (Whitson 2019b). Within this form of interdisciplinarity, impossibilities hold the same role as the seeming invisibility of dark matter, pushing back on normativity by requiring a different form of knowing and learning in order to feel a way through. Interdisciplinarity becomes a tactile and sensual pressing together of differences, a release into the space in between normative markers, and a refusal to be considered impossible.

The impossibilities of the work include the superfluid creative scope, the material support required, technical needs, logistical realities, and political ambitions. For Whitson, these impossibilities are what propel it, as the questions the work asks are also impossible (Whitson 2021a). Building upon the linked fluidity of process and result, Whitson's interdisciplinarity shape-shifts for each element of *The Unarrival Experiments*, morphing in form and process depending on the needs and impossibilities of the work. Whitson's study of the theatrical jazz aesthetic with Sharon Bridgforth informs this approach. Bridgforth explains the practice as "an invitation for multiple forms, mediums, and aesthetics to come together to help tell the story" (qtd. in Royster 2013). Whitson elaborates:

> My process shifts in response to the calling of the material. My focus is mining as deeply as I can so that I am made available to what a project wants to become. I ask questions relentlessly (in many forms) so that eventually I am left with something unrecognizable, inspired, raw. (qtd. in Miller 2017)

Whitson's interdisciplinarity operates as a mode of seeking, inviting unconcealment and honoring the needs of the work itself through a liberatory relationship between the artist and the art. Here, I understand seeking as a practice of sacred curiosity, of sinking further and further into the dark matter.

One of Whitson's guiding desires is to create something new: a new piece as well as new ways of working, through a reciprocity of relationship with the work itself. Whitson describes this as follows: "I strive to be challenged by my work and to be required to discover new methodologies with which to manifest my ideas and inspirations in the process of making" (qtd. in Miller 2017). The request for newness originates from the work itself, positioning it as a site of superfluid transformation for process, artistic forms, collaborators, and futures. Sustained by the infinite capacities of dark matter, this transformation presses perceived impossibilities into possibilities.

I understand Whitson's perspective of interdisciplinarity as an act of pressing through theatrical jazz's practices of multiplicity and simultaneity, which bring together differences through layering and accumulation in what Bridgforth describes as a Black form of storytelling:

> I remember growing up ... during that time when the kids could be present ... I used to love just being in the room.... You have people dancing. People, laughing, crying. Stories are being told. Lies are being told. People are singing. All happening at the same time. That is how we tell stories. So I feel like what I'm doing is very black. And that is also very transgressive because this culture we live in is always

> trying to deny our existence, the validity of who we are and what we do. (Bridgforth
> qtd. in Royster 2013)

In this way, multiplicity and simultaneity become another facet of the resistance of unarrival, operationalized through the all-encompassing intensity of dark matter. For Whitson, multiplicity and simultaneity manifest in how they work, including engaging simultaneously in the multiple projects that are encompassed in *The Unarrival Experiments*. They also manifest in the number of collaborators they bring together and the queer kinship collectivity fostered. Finally, multiplicity and simultaneity manifest in the works themselves, which simultaneously hold multiple forms. The simultaneity and multiplicity of this interdisciplinarity are liberatory, allowing the work to hold multiple truths, be as expansive as the questions it asks, and create multiple avenues for access and engagement.

The Third Space as Portal

It takes a certain kind of space to hold all this: the curatorial act's cumulative seriality, the positioning within the wake, the liberatory impossibilities of interdisciplinarity, and the dark matter and energy seeping throughout the work. Within the institutional spaces where *The Unarrival Experiments* is developed and performed, protection from and resistance to the dominance of the space is often required. Through Whitson's curatorial act, these elements combine to create what I characterize as a third space. Here I build upon Homi Bhabha's *Third Space*, Jacques Rancière's *third thing*, and C. Riley Snorton's description of *transitivity*. Bhabha's Third Space is an ambivalent site where negotiation, and not sublimation, occurs, and where "we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves" (Bhabha 1988, 22). Rancière's third thing defers from the polarity of binary systems in favor of something that "in the logic of emancipation ... [is] alien to both ... whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them" (2009, 14). Snorton's transitivity evokes impermanence, "submerged forms of relationalities" and a "'collateral genealogy' in which encounters with the past necessarily contend with myriad forms of collateral damage ... and [are] lived in the present" (2017, 10).

Expanding upon these theories, I define the third space as an accumulative interdisciplinary space between differences in discipline, politics, ideology, identity, and temporality that is activated through proximity. Like Bhabha's Third Space, this is not an environment of synthesis: the third space is one of multiplicity. Similar to Rancière's third thing, the third space is alien to all involved and is fostered laterally through curatorial collaboration within these differences. Moving alongside Snorton's transitivity, the third space is unfixed, genealogical, and submerged.

Whitson's manifestation of the third space, which I characterize as institutional unarrival, is informed by black holes and the dark matter at the heart of *The Unarrival Experiments*.[11] Whitson conceptualizes dark matter as an "enigmatic force so powerful it counteracts the pull of gravity upon the universe, preventing it from collapsing upon itself" (Whitson 2019b). I argue that dark matter exerts this same counteracting force in Whitson's curatorial act, informing resistance to the white space and preventing the process and project from collapsing within its grasp. Submerged within this protection, Whitson's third space can become a space of gathering and nourishing sustained difference that honors and repairs collateral genealogies.

Black holes are detected by their effects on the portion of space where they are located (Hammonds 1994, 140). Physicists observe binary star systems, which contain two bodies that orbit around each other through mutual gravitation. The existence of a black hole is determined by a distortion in the shape and orbit of one of the stars or by the volume of energy that it is emitting, which is more than it would usually produce on its own (1994, 140). I understand this as an act of sacred kindship that presses into Alexander's characterization of the sacred, which "constitutes its presence ... by

provoking our attention. We see its effects, which enable us to know that it must be there. By perceiving what it does, we recognize its being and by what it does we learn what it is" (2005, 307). Similarly, Whitson's third space can be identified through a sensitivity to the energies and distortions created through its pressing of disciplines, politics, ideologies, identities, and temporalities. This sensitivity requires a high level of emotional and artistic availability from those engaging with it. Borrowing ambiguousness and unknowability from black holes, Whitson's third space offers protective unintelligibility to the external white gaze, obfuscating the details of creation.

In speaking with Whitson, I sense that any description of the work is ultimately insufficient. Part of this comes from the work being in development. However, I argue that this opacity is a curatorial choice that marks the labor of resistance of what Whitson expresses as the "literal owning of Blackness at the discard of Black people" in the art world. This form of protection is part of an extensive Black lineage that historian Darlene Clark Hine calls a "culture of dissemblance": "Only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary Black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own" (Hine 1989, 915). The stakes of this dissemblance are the ability to maintain the space of oneself and to avoid collapse.

Whitson identifies their role in the third space as committing to what the work, not the white container, requires. In Whitson's words, this includes "a personal commitment and reification to honor how I'm talking about the folx in the room, the bodies in the room ... regardless of who's there. So if it's an audience primarily of white folx or whomever, the work still requires my showing up for it. And that might seem like a trite thing but ... it takes work" (Whitson 2019a). This labor involves ensuring audiences learn and honor the work. For example, the hope of *The Illumination Catalogue* is that audiences will elevate the lives that have been lost. This is spiritual labor rooted in healing work, "a call to remember and remembering" (Alexander 2005, 316). Through this labor, Whitson replaces the curator by curating all the elements themself. This includes determining who is brought together and invoked, setting sacred intentions, the design of the process, the methods of interfacing with the spaces where the work is being done, the insertion of ritual in secular space, the format of the resulting work, and ensuring their communities are in the audience.

Whitson's labor results in the creation of a third space within the white institution where collaborators and audiences can, to build on McKittrick's analysis of opacity, "move in and out of clarity, without participating in a narrative economy that functions to objectify them" (2021, 8). I characterize this space as a new type of institution centered on the Blackness, Queerness, and Transness that is at the core of Whitson's work. It is held by dark matter's ungraspable depths, embraces unarrival through a superfluid spilling into new forms, tempts those who enter to experience alternate ways of knowing and being, and is imbued with sacred mystery. This curatorial act is a form of healing; in Whitson's words, "The future impacting the past, where the choices we make in journeys of disillusion and repair prepare the healing we are to step into" (Whitson 2019b). Permanent in its impermanence, healing includes affirmation from within the collaborative space and not from the external institution. Whitson describes this affirmation as a form of collaborative kinship that manifests as "divine communication that says 'yes, keep doing' ... when I invoke the term affirmation, I'm thinking about the collaborators on this plane that are in that same 'yes' conversation.... So that could be the composition of the circle, that could be making sure that there are more Black folx in the audiences, or that there are more Queer folx in the workshop ..." (Whitson 2019a).

Whitson's third space is superfluid and, in their words, "unavailable for capture because they are in and of themselves portals" (Whitson 2021a). Whitson is referring to scientific research and theorization of dark matter and dark energy as portals to a fifth dimension (2021a). As a portal, the third space exists within the white container and yet is open to something outside of its grasp. In our conversations, Whitson described this space as quantum and offering a sense of time beyond our current perceptions (2021a). I understand quantum as the space operating as a distilled unit of

pressed-together disciplines, differences, pasts, presents, and futures. As in quantum physics, it offers glimpses that transform our understanding of the materials of existence. It acts as a site of responsible innovation offering possibility beyond our understanding. Quantum physicists, notably researchers at the University of Maryland, are exploring concepts such as Klein tunneling, a quirk that allows particles to tunnel through barriers as if they are not there.[12] Similarly, the liberatory nature of Whitson's third space offers an opening to pierce through the white space, and to imagine the arrival point where the white space and Whitson's own institution might come together. Over the coming sections, I move into the internal mechanics of Whitson's third space, exploring their criteria of coexistence, the collectivity fostered, and their superfluid creative process.

Criteria of Coexistence: Gathering for Collectivizing

The primacy of relationality means that the ways in which Whitson and their collaborators work together, what I call their criteria of coexistence, are as considered as the performance materials they work on. These criteria are not a bureaucratic system, but rather what theorist Lauren Berlant calls an "infrastructure of association," defined as elements, or in this case people and beings, that move "towards each other to make new forms of approach from difference and distance" (2016, 401, 408). This infrastructure is an experience of creative and interpersonal proximity that does not assume prior belonging.

> Just because we are in the room together does not mean that we belong to the room or each other: belonging is a specific genre of affect, history, and political mediation that cannot be presumed and is, indeed, a relation whose evidence and terms are always being contested. (Berlant 2016, 394)

Proximity is far from a utopic space: it can be more unsafe than not, more controlled than not, and more politicized than not. Criteria of coexistence map layers and distances, naming how we can choose to fold together and the terms our intersections activate and contest, not as a form of control but as an environment of conscious care and responsibility.

I pick up this concept to explore whom Whitson collaborates with and why, and how they activate these kinships to create a third space.[13] In our conversations, Whitson described themself as a curator of experience, referring to the experience of the performance and the process through which it is made. To explain, Whitson referenced musician Butch Morris's term *conduction* as the bridge between facilitation and curation. Whitson depicted Morris's conductor as "someone who is drawing upon knowledge that is embodied . . . and having the energy to make things happen, to get collaborators spontaneously in step together. To conduct a room and to conduct an experience . . . curation is a form of that magic-making" (Whitson 2021a). The image of collaborators moving in step together is a key element in understanding Whitson's criteria of coexistence and the form of cooperative collectivity it offers. Cooperation can be a loaded word: for example, something parents ask their children to do in what is really a request for compliance and obedience. Artist Makini, a contemporary of Whitson's, unpacked cooperation further, describing it as "collective inception work" and a form of structural seduction (Makini 2021).[14] Listening to Makini and reflecting on Whitson's image of collaborators in step, I came to understand cooperation as a relational framework that makes nourishing collaboration possible, and as a mutually determined act with the structural integrity and reciprocity to hold both alignment and dissensus.

Whitson's criteria of coexistence result in what they call a "gathering for collectivizing," which they characterize as "all parts . . . moving together.. . . A good conductor has an enthusiastic 'yes' from all parts. It's not about the conductor, it's about the conduction" (Whitson 2021a). This form of collectivity highlights the labor and relations of those involved, which Whitson describes as "uplifting the action more transparently" (2021a). Like their interdisciplinarity, Whitson's collectivity is

rooted in the theatrical jazz aesthetic, which is itself a set of criteria of coexistence, a junction of historical Black radical traditions, and a "sustained connection [that] ... generate[s] community and collective responsibility" (Jones 2015, 24). This gestures to what is activated when we come together and who we become through gathering.

> Similarly, the collectivity of the theatrical jazz aesthetic is cumulative and incorporative: The power of the group is directly related to the distinctiveness of each member. It is an *egbé* based on the deep understanding that one must be present to fully live, must feel and tell the truth, must risk being accepted or included, must be absolutely one's self.[15] (Jones 2015, 25)

This collectivity requires that we know ourselves and one another so that we can stand firmly in our own powers. This awareness creates the ability to engage with other collaborators not from a place of explanation or defense, but from a deeper understanding of one another and the work being done (Jones 2015, 25).

Within both Yorùbá and theatrical jazz aesthetic traditions, the experience of difference and its corresponding requirement of collaboration and collectivity makes the community strong. This form of collectivity is superfluid: resisting the creation of a group identity that is perceived as a path to stagnation that works against the intangibility of what is being created (Whitson 2021a). In our conversations, Whitson reinforced superfluidity and unarrival here, pushing back against any formalization that might make the process immovable or about individuals rather than the work.

Beautifully complex structures of collectivity sustain interdisciplinary collaboration as the kinship it requires "needs form. Form—by which we mean principles of ordering that crisscross and interarticulate extant structures and their possible dismantling or reconfiguration—makes the symbolics and phenomenology of kinship move" (Bradway and Freeman 2022, 4). This collectivity, although imperfect, is a political act: it explodes the hegemonic ideal of a unified creative force in favor of relationships with the capacity for both dissensus and cooperation. Embracing each person's independence and individuality in this shared collaborative space allows collaborators to move through the impossibilities of interdisciplinary creation, including the contradictions, absurdity, and friction resulting from the untranslatability of artistic languages; unbridgeable geographic and socioeconomic differences; and negotiation to consensus that neutralizes creation. It asks those it entangles to acquire an ease in the impossible, or to borrow John Keats's term *negative capability*, a capacity "of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (1899, 277). Tolerance of impossibilities and the unknown and the dissensus they spark make possible a disorienting third space of personal and collective freedom, what Tina Campt calls "the endlessly generative space of the counterintuitive" (2017, 6). Being in this third space calls in other impossibilities: the unsayable, the unthinkable, the unimaginable, the unreal, and the irrecoverable.

In our interview, Whitson spoke about the "we" of creation and making visible the relations that make the work. This phrasing is inspired by filmmaker Marlon Riggs and his film *Tongues Untied* (1989) (Whitson 2021a). Much of Riggs's process to create the film centered in the collectivity of the AIDS activist work taking place at the time. Riggs viewed his collaborators as not just those in front of their camera, but also the circles of people whose cooperation facilitated all aspects of the work (Whitson 2021a). Whitson uplifts this collectivity: "This was a film made by many people ... this was not a single person bringing people together for what that single person wants to talk about, but what are we creating" (2021a). Whitson's "we," like that of Riggs, moves in queer temporalities to exist in interlocking circles, including present collaborators as well as ancestors.

In this way, Whitson's spiritual practice is rooted in Yorùbá traditions, which place great importance on the perpetuation of cultural systems and lineage. Traditionally, children are tasked with upholding the legacies of their families, and raising children is a communal responsibility. The

births of children indicate the incarnation of departed ancestors. It is believed that this reappearance is a demonstration of love by the ancestors, positioning arrival as an act of collateral genealogical care (Moloye 2019, 60). Therefore, one holds both a responsibility to one's ancestors to continue the family's work as well as the love and presence of the ancestors within oneself.

This ancestral relationship is an active one, offering the support and inspiration of a collaborative relationship, as can be seen in Whitson's search for their great-grandmother, the impetus for *The Unarrival Experiments*. On a panel in 2019, Whitson and Thomas DeFrantz spoke about the link between performance practice and spiritual practice. DeFrantz described finding their own creative voice when they stopped trying to contain all the people who were moving through them or attempting to make them do something (Whitson 2019a). This practice of letting people, including ancestors, move through you marks a form of cross temporal collectivity in which our bodies and selves become the space of encounter. Ancestral kinship powers the collaborative structures and strengthens its intervention, so the future vision conceived through collaboration reflects the hopes of a cross temporal community: those who have been, those here now, and those yet to be.

Whitson's collaborators also include incarnate people: artists, thinkers, scientists, funders, and audience members. Whitson curates all relationships, making each one a deliberate choice for engagement. The Dark Matter Cypher component of *The Unarrival Experiments* exemplifies the forms of interdisciplinary relationships they are fostering. The Cypher consists of scientists, cultural theorists, producers, researchers, activists, and artists convened by Whitson. A criterion of coexistence from the early days of hip-hop, cyphers are usually a group of rappers, generally standing in a circle, who exchange freestyle verses for competition, practice, or entertainment. In this case, the Dark Matter Cypher meets regularly to draw upon the work of forebears from Black experimental and creative traditions and to improvise together, without expectation of an output.

I argue that Whitson's reference to the "we" of creation also sits alongside José Muñoz's definition:

> The "we" speaks to a "we" that is "not yet conscious," the future society that is being invoked and addressed at the same moment. The "we" is not content to describe who the collective is but more nearly describes what the collective and the larger social order could be, what it should be. (2009, 20)

Drawing from Muñoz, I extend Whitson's "we" to encompass future society, representing a superfluidity of time and relation. Here, I return to Makini's description of cooperation as "collective inception work," positioning this circle of collaborators as the future society fostered through Whitson's criteria of coexistence and the modes of relation through which each circle arrives in step together (Makini 2021).

Superfluid Creation

Dark matter and dark energy seep through the inside of Whitson's creative process, requiring spaces that think differently about production and productivity (Whitson 2021a). Over the course of this section, I ease through the layers of *The Unarrival Experiments*' superfluid creative process, identifying the dark matter–infused curatorial strategies that Whitson weaves together inside the work.

Whitson's practice is to have a team of collaborators accompany them throughout the full process. However, it became clear that the expansiveness of this work required a different means of production. The enormous volume of work, expansiveness of expertise, and length of commitment means that Whitson's only accompaniments through the full series are a select circle of dramaturgs and advisors who speak to and across the pieces. Superfluidity is embraced for all other collaborative relationships. For example, given that the Dark Matter Cypher primarily includes people who

are not artists, Whitson designed what they describe as a "shorter, spontaneous" development process that requires a significantly reduced time commitment and is booked, on average, three months out (Whitson 2021a). Whitson also curates the invitations each Cypher member receives, including the type of contribution requested, time commitment, and the method and framing of the ask (2021a).

Each component of *The Unarrival Experiments* holds what Whitson describes as a "no-nonsense care politic," which involves determining how each collaborator can be best supported (2021a). This is critical, given the experimental nature of the work and the leap of faith asked of the collaborators, who may be working in an artistic setting for the first time. Whitson facilitates the no-nonsense care politic through a range of strategies that address multiple aspects of each person involved. Curatorial precision is used to assign roles that ensure a good match based on skill set, availability, and interest; to make sure people are well fed; and to send care boxes for virtual work so that there are tangible materials shared between everyone. At each step, Whitson asks: "How is this being done in a way that centers Blackness, Queerness, Transness?" with the rationale that "the stakes are always in the room for me, and that allows the Spirit to do its work" (Whitson 2021a). A no-nonsense care-full politic ensures the safe and responsible engagement of all involved.[16]

Through these technologies, Whitson crafts a superfluid collaborative space. Whitson prepares to enter a collaborative process by submerging themself into their research. When they enter the creation space with collaborators, they are filled with information (Whitson 2021a). Whitson describes this process as

> all-encompassing, it takes place inside of and outside of the studio, it is a spiritual engagement that requires a great deal of my waking hours, and when I am most engaged, my dream space as well. I write, read, dream voraciously. I pour over music and media, search for the political and spiritual threads, principles, histories, mythologies through which the work is grounded. (qtd. in Miller 2017)

Superfluidity extends into the curation of the collaborative room, bringing together a group of individuals with diverse "virtuosities, intelligences and abilities" who are not afraid to be generous collaborators, by which Whitson means available to take risks and be vulnerable (Whitson 2021a).

To support the intersection and availability of their collaborators, Whitson curates the gathering space, arriving early to set up the room, bringing medicines including essential oils, plants to burn, and waters. In situations where that is not possible, including virtual gatherings and conferences, Whitson incorporates this preparation into the presentation. As people gather in the space, Whitson checks in with everyone, surfacing what each person is bringing into the room. Although Whitson brings a plan, this incoming knowledge of what is presently in the room dictates what will be done, requiring all to work from a superfluid place. This is a reciprocal fluidity, which Whitson characterizes as being "really precise about the food I'm using to feed the process so I can be really open and available to what gets cooked" (Whitson 2021a). Whitson actively models this fluidity, sharing this process transparently as a "necessary technology" and confirming that everyone in the room is open to it (2021a). Through each action, Whitson works to dismantle the idea that interpersonal care and creative work are secondary to the exigencies and deadlines of linear time.

Whitson characterizes creative superfluidity as a jazz concept, which I understand through the lens of improvisation. Building upon Fred Moten's definition of improvisation as a "condition of possibility," I see Whitson repositioning it as a mode of creative production and relation that requires sensitivity and responsiveness to the artists' environment to create the possibility of something ephemeral, interdependent, and new (2007, 229). Improvisation offers a space that breaks disciplinary rules as it responds to them, producing an experience of freedom. With Whitson,

improvisation takes on an additional set of stakes. In conversation with Whitson, Thomas DeFrantz spoke about how "Black life is improvisation … tomorrow is not promised" (Whitson 2019a). Within this context, which recalls Sharpe's concept of the wake, improvisation takes on a political urgency, demanding that those involved engage deeply in the present moment and be in step as a form of nurturing and solidarity in the face of the unknown tomorrow. In this way, improvisation becomes a mode of relation within the space of the unknown and a way to move through it together, what Whitson expresses as "wild experimentation in pitch black spaces" (Whitson 2019b). Whitson conceptualizes improvisation as "asking us to think and rethink and reframe," using what is not working to propel the work and invoking future societies through the collectivizing (Whitson 2019a). By resisting fixity, Whitson's improvisatory process positions the unknown of dark matter as a site with the superfluidity needed to imagine new futures, honor what has passed, and move through the present together.

Superfluid / Super Black

Toward the end of one of our conversations, Whitson recounted touring an astrophysicist's lab as part of their research. They met a scientist who, after hearing about Whitson's work with dark matter and black holes, said "That's great! You could do anything because we don't know anything about it" (Whitson 2021a). Whitson commented, "We can't see it, we can't touch it, probably in our time we might not … but can it be made sense of in these artistic gestures? Maybe" (2021a). Whitson points toward the role of artistic work in making sense of the impossibilities that exist outside of the discipline, a reminder of the potential interdisciplinary artistic engagement holds for impact beyond the creative field.

The sense of impossibility—an unarrival—exists throughout *The Unarrival Experiments* and the processes and structures creating it. It is an incompleteness: a history that can never be fully accounted for, an artistic reckoning that refuses an ending, a slippery path to healing, and an alternate institution under constant pressure from the systems around it. Within these conditions, Whitson's structures of kinship, their superfluidity, and their curatorial act's third space allow us to move through the impossible and engage in collective inception work together. Whitson described curation to me as "to invite, to collaborate, to have a responsibility" (Whitson 2021a). Whitson's methodology of assembly points to the politics of designing a future. Who gets to imagine and have a future? What do we owe one another? Who is allowed to determine our collective future? These questions are critical now, as artists' practices respond to the evolving needs of interdisciplinary performance, the tectonic (and not-so-tectonic) shifts in arts institutions, and patterns of multihyphenated labor. Artists like Whitson demand sustainable futures for themselves, their art forms, and their communities by wresting power back from the institutions that so often decide the future of artists and art forms. Whitson persistently returns, assembling each element in *The Unarrival Experiments*, layering and re-layering openings of possibility and responsibility, and inviting us to come together again.

Notes

1. Whitson subsequently rephrased this, stating that this intersection "ignore[s] disciplinarity" (The Unarrival Experiments, n.d.-a.). The layering, interchanging, and evolving of Whitson's choice of disciplinary vocabulary visibilizes their ongoing engagement with form and process. The slipperiness stretches each term and troubles how viewers understand words that are often buzzwords. Ultimately, it reveals Whitson's disciplinary relationship as rooted in movement: each word choice represents a decision to move between, across, into, or away. To honor this relationality and further Whitson's stretching of terms, I use *interdisciplinarity* in this article. In Latin, *inter* means *between*; in addition to being a marker of relationality, it speaks to transition and impermanence. In this choice, I seek to honor Whitson's movement and engagement with unarrival, and to stretch the terms even further.

2. In *The Unarrival Experiments*, Whitson engages *unarrival* as concept and praxis, resulting in a work that continues to evolve as I write alongside it. I follow Whitson in my writing, speaking to the project's current manifestation, and acknowledging the impossibility of completeness.

3. For further reading about Yorùbá cosmologies and theatrical jazz, see Jones (2015).

4. For research about dark matter that is grounded in Black and queer feminist lineages, see the writing of theoretical physicist Dr. Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, notably her book *The Disordered Cosmos: A Journey into Dark Matter, Spacetime, and Dreams Deferred* (2021).

5. In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, C. Riley Snorton traces the history of the intersections of Blackness and transness and examines the racialization of gender. Snorton's inquiry moves alongside Whitson's reflection, visibilizing the history that underpins their question by asking: "What does it mean to have a body that has been made into a grammar for whole worlds of meaning?" (2017, 11).

6. My use of *willfullness* is informed by Sara Ahmed's *Willfull Subjects* (2014), which positions willfulness as a political and queer methodology aimed at transforming the status quo.

7. Whitson's references for *unarrival* include Martin Heidegger's *On Time and Being* (1972).

8. Whitson also uses *superfluid* as a name for dark matter, dark energy, themself, and other Black Transgender, Gender Nonconforming, and Intersex people, and the "liquidity of Blackness" and gender (Whitson 2021b 178).

9. Another example is *Oba Qween Baba King Baba* (2019), co-commissioned by Danspace Project and Abrons Arts Center, and described by Whitson as the piece they had to make to understand *The Unarrival Experiments*.

10. I think of Whitson's statement: "It isn't that the dark opens and ends. It upends" (Whitson 2021b, 177).

11. For further reading about black holes and their relationship to creativity, see Michele Wallace's essay "Variations on Negation" in her book *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (1990) in which she argues that Black creativity (particularly Black women's creativity) remains invisible and incomprehensible to mainstream culture, and a metaphorical black hole. Wallace's writing reinforces Whitson's practice as it outlines how black holes represent the "dense accumulation, without explanation or inventory" and the incommensurability of Black creativity (224). Wallace offers scientific discoveries from the time of her writing that revealed black holes as portals to other dimensions, information utilized in movements, including Afrofuturism. Her writing about incommensurability and the resistance to allowing Black people to contribute to mainstream classification systems points to the stakes of Whitson's refusal to remain static and legible in disciplinary vocabulary.

12. For more information on Klein tunneling, see Lee et al. (2019).

13. I acknowledge the complexities of kinship; as Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman state, "kinship operates as a key site of dispossession, exploitation, and struggle for racialized and minoritized social groups" (2022, 17). I use the term to underline the stakes of Whitson's collaborative structures, with dark matter and superfluidity adapting the framework.

14. I reference artists, including Makini, to honor Whitson's deep engagement with artists who share their interest in alternate world making and the kinship offered by these relationships.

15. *Egbé* is a Yorùbá concept referring to a group of people joined toward a common goal. For more information about *egbé*, see part 1 of Jones (2015).

16. My use of *care-full* is informed by SA Smythe's writing, including the essay "Can I Get a Witness?" *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 11, no. 1 (2022): 85–107.

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