

FUSE

A BOMB
PODCAST

CHOREOGRAPHER & PERFORMANCE ARTIST

Miguel Gutierrez & Gabrielle Civil

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*Gabrielle Civil is a Black feminist performance artist, poet, and writer, from Detroit. She has premiered fifty original performance artworks around the world and is the author of two books, *Swallow the Fish* and *Experiments in Joy*. Her recent performances include *Jupiter* and *Wild Beauty**

*Miguel Gutierrez is a choreographer, musician, singer, and writer. His recent projects include the performance *This Bridge Called My Ass*, his Madonna cover band *SADONNA*; and *Are You For Sale?*, a podcast about the ethical entanglements in dance-making and philanthropy.*

Chantal McStay Welcome to FUSE: A BOMB podcast. Forty years ago, BOMB began as conversation between artists around a kitchen table in downtown New York. Today, FUSE brings you into the room to listen in on candid, unfiltered conversations about creative practice. Here's how it works. BOMB invites a distinguished artist to choose a guest from any creative discipline: an art crush, a close collaborator, or even a stranger they've admired from afar. And we bring them together. No host, no moderator, no interruptions, just two artists in conversation. For this episode, we asked choreographer Miguel Gutierrez, which artist he'd most like to speak with. Without hesitation, he selected performance artist and writer Gabrielle Civil.

Miguel Gutierrez It feels like I had your body in my, my, in my world or in my reality before, I guess, you were actually IRL. So it's just interesting to think about that, because I think that's— maybe it's also just something about people that you, that you like or that there's a familiarity or maybe we knew each other in a past life or something.

CM Miguel and Gabrielle discuss their paths to artistic success, the pressures of first generation exceptionalism, and the time Miguel memorized the choreography to *The Nutcracker* as a 10 year old. Gabrielle Civil is a Black feminist performance artist, poet, and writer from Detroit. She has premiered 50 original performance artworks around the world and is the author of two books, *Swallow the Fish* and *Experiments in Joy*. Her recent performances include *Jupiter* and *Wild Beauty*. Miguel Gutierrez is a choreographer, musician, singer, and writer. His recent projects include the performance "This Bridge Called my Ass," his Madonna cover band, SADONNA, and *Are You For Sale?*, a podcast about the ethical entanglements in dance-making and philanthropy.

MG Shall I go first? Or no, you go first.

Gabrielle Civil No, I need to go first, because I just have to tell you when you told me...so here I am, I'm like, Okay, I'm going to teach Miguel's "Does Abstraction Belong to White People" in my class, and I know how busy he is, but it would just be so rad if, you know, maybe he could come. And we could pay him five cents, but it would least be a heartfelt five cents or whatever. And then you were like, "Oh, yeah, sure I can come and by the way, I reached out to BOMB to see if you would want to talk on this podcast." I want you to know that like my heart like leapt out of my chest. That felt like such a dream come true, because I have loved your work so much. I cannot even express to you how much it has meant to me. And it was funny, because it all was really with that blurb. The first blurb for *Swallow the Fish* that my friend, my dear friend, [Miré Regulus] said to me, "You know, you should ask Miguel Gutierrez for a blurb." And I was like, "I love Miguel Gutierrez but why would he ever blurb my book? He doesn't know me." I mean, I was just like, "Are you out of your mind?" And she just said, "No, no, no, no, I really think that you should send an email and ask," and I just re-read that email that I sent to you. And it was truly

one of the most honest, but deeply earnest and astral things I have ever written to anyone, in the sense—and it really has to do, it's not my first impression with your work, but it's something about your work cracks open for me so much of the scene-iness or the kind of insider-ness of what I sometimes feel and experimental dance spaces. There's such warmth and heart, and I mean, earnestness is really a word I want to say, because I think it's what I have is just in the middle of everything the desire to tell a kind of truth and to bring a certain vulnerability. And I remember seeing *Age & Beauty, Part 3*, your work opens up a different kind of space from the center of the work and then that radiates out into who comes. So you have people who have been aficionados of postmodern, downtown, experimental dance and have been going to things forever, as well as people who have never seen any work, any live performance work, that isn't narrative or isn't sort of meant for sheer entertainment and so, I don't know, that's something that I think is really a part of what I love about what you do.

MG Wow, thank you so much for that. I feel very seen from that comment. I feel like the work feels really honored through your comment and you know, I think when I got that email from you about the blurb, I—I mean, I'm not like being asked every week to do a blurb, but I get asked to do things and like, you do start to kind of quickly notice this internal "yes" and "no" in yourself when you get these emails of like, "Yeah, no I don't want to do that." Sometimes there's like the, "No, but okay, I don't want to do that, but I'll do it because I should," you know, and then there are a few things that you get that you're like, "Yes!" And I think that was how I felt when I got that message. I was like, "Yes, this is not even a, there's no question here." And I kind of think that sort of describes, I feel like, my feeling about you in general. It's just like, you're just like, a "yes," in my mind. I guess, which just seems crazy to me. I feel like, I feel like I've known you for so long, or like, not even, I feel like I know the embodiment of you, you know, like, I feel like I understand the embodiment of who you are, and maybe that's because *Swallow the Fish* was so clear in that way. And as a kind of both record of your work, but also as a kind of affirmation and self-affirmation and self-definition of presence.

GC You do feel like my relative, though. I feel like you feel like my

cousin or like my art brother or something, I really feel like that. But there's also something related to work. And it has to do with how we are both playing with presentations of ourselves or experimenting with ways of being but also revealing a fair amount about who we are and exploring those aspects in the work so that there's a certain amount of autobiography even within the abstraction? I mean, would you agree with that?

MG Yeah, I think it's interesting what you—when you were talking before about, like, “Oh, there's this thing in the work that cracks open” or something, I feel like my work sometimes, for better or for worse, is still a kind of me at thirteen or me at twelve just like in front of my parents being like, “See me!” you know? It's like this very initial psychic wound moment of self-recognition in the face of those that will not recognize you who are allegedly the ones who care about you the most. And so this kind of like, whatever the appropriate psychological term for that would be, I feel like so much of my desire to make emerged out of the heat of that feeling, right? The sense of resistance, the sense of self determination, obviously queerness is in there, and just like desire, and maybe eros and the kind of proto-erotic, as well. So there's all these kinds of things that get woven into that. And so that, I think that's why the work has this kind of, even when it's not necessarily doing that, it still has this recurrence of the autobiographical or recurrence of the myth of myself as a figure. I think, what, what I, how I think of what I'm doing in the work is I think I go from that feeling, this kind of catalytic feeling, into then in some weird way making the self an object to discuss and to kind of poke at and question. And it's funny, because, you know, I've heard it many times from people saying, like, “Oh, your work is so honest,” or “It feels like you're really being truthful,” and I really hear that and I appreciate it, but I also feel like no, it's not entirely true. Like, it's also a construction for the function of that performance and what that performance is exploring and trying to explore, because I also really like lying. And I also really like the artifice of the construct of performance and theater and the just absolute absurdity of the contract of getting up in front of a bunch of people and making a bunch of weird shapes and moves that like nobody, there's like literally no reference for. That, that sort of frustration of coherence and the agreement to do that, I find that like, that's such a constructed notion, and I love that it's a

constructed notion, because in that, I can do all these different kinds of things, and I can kind of renegotiate the terms of that initial catalytic feeling of “Please see me.” Because once I have you in, then I can kind of fuck with you. And that’s just been a really interesting thing for me to do. But I’m curious to know how you think about it, about this autobiographical thing?

GC Well, I, first of all, I love what you just said in terms of artifice, because when I think about your work, that’s what’s extraordinary to me, that there can be something that seems accessible or autobiographical, but it isn’t literal, and that there’s a lot of artifice in that, in many ways, I think he was a formalist and that there are a lot of really interesting formal constructions or that things are very structured. And so there’s a play between the organic and the faceted or the constructed. And then to that extent, I think I also...I’m one of the most probably circumspect memoirists that you can find. I mean, I have a friend, my friend Jessica Martinez, and she, she said to me, “You know, Gabrielle, I read *Swallow the Fish*, and I enjoyed it, but do you think you could write a book where you actually say, “This is where I was, this was the job I had, this is who I was dating, this is what I did next.” And I thought, Wow, that would be amazing if I wrote a book like that, but I don’t think that’s my books. I mean, I think I’m interested in what you just talked about in terms of the impulse. Like, what is the impulse that’s moving me into the world? What is my own interiority? How does my interiority relate to exteriority and external projections of me, and kind of also the expectations that I have about how people are going to relate to me and then how that gets disrupted? That’s what performance is so excellent for, actually, because I might think that my body means X, Y, or Z in real space and time, but I might be surprised, actually, and I won’t know until I’m in the moment. You said something great to my class when you came this week where you said, you know, you don’t really—you can’t tell what the audience is actually feeling just from looking at them.

MG And it’s kind of dangerous to try. I remember reading a thing that Chrysa Parkinson, actually, who’s a dancer, wrote in the *Movement Research Journal* many, many years ago. She’s kind of dividing the act of being a performer into these different sorts of things, and one of the things she talks about, she’s like, “audience or the uncontrolla-

ble onslaught.” She calls the audience the uncontrollable onslaught. And I just remember feeling like, Yes, that is, that is the thing. And I think what you’re saying about, I don’t know how exactly you said it, but like, you may think that you are this thing, right? And I think this kind of tension between the subjective and the objective is so fascinating, also kind of heartbreaking in a certain kind of way, and also very liberating. So there’s, there’s multiple levels to it. I think an earlier work like *Retrospective Exhibitionist*, a show that I did in 2005, I was really contending with this moment in my life where I was like, Oh, this is the beginning of the turn. Like I’m 35, and this is when like the dancer and the dancer body, all this stuff starts to just kind of like shift, even though I think that was when I was actually starting to become interesting to myself.

[CLIP FROM *RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITIONIST*]

Hello. Please repeat after me. I am Miguel Gutierrez. Watch, please bear with me. Please watch. Please bear with me. Please watch. Please bear with me. Please watch. me please watch. Please, please, please, please, please watch. Please, please, please, please, please, please, please, please. Please, please, please, please, please, please. Please. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me.

MG One of the biggest things I was realizing and coming to terms with was just like the absolute cruelty of being in a profession where people are just gonna come and judge me from this tiny little experience they have of observing me and that no amount of sort of, like, I don’t know, ego, or even like bio of like, “Look at all the things I’ve done” is going to prevent the possibility of someone just being like, “Yeah, I don’t know. I don’t like his haircut.” You know? It’s like, kind of like, Tinder, Grindr, swipe left, swipe right, you know. It’s like, there’s a way in which any show you go see that’s kind of hanging in the balance always, this, like, are they gonna swipe right? Are they gonna swipe left? And cuz like, this is my life, you know? And I’ve done it too, you know, and I’ve done it to other people I go see where I’m like, Nah, not so into it. And I’m like, later, I’m like, God, that was frickin’ mean of me, you know? To put it all in that...I don’t know, what do you think about that?

GC I think it’s something that I talked to the students at CalArts

about. I mean, one thing I do love about teaching there is it's multidisciplinary, so I have dancers in the room, but also visual artists, musicians, theatre, writers, etc. And I mean, the dancers, especially the undergrad ones, that swipe left, swipe right is so brutal. And I can see that in some of their training that they've received before they arrived, and even in some of the training they might be getting at Ca-IArts, that they're told that that's part of what being a dancer is, having to withstand the brutality of relentless judgement and gaze, and that, in fact, the audience, the uncontrollable onslaught of the audience, begins even with your collaborator or with the choreographer. I mean, just that it's just this onslaught everywhere.

MG In the classroom.

GC In the class...Oh, let's not talk about like the dance class. Oh, "I am the worst one. I'm the darkest one. I'm the fattest one. I'm the one that can't follow the choreography." It made me so happy to hear Ishmael Houston-Jones say that he's not good at following choreography, or my friend, Martine Whitehead, who's a wonderful dancer, they were just like, "I can't do it." And that I was like, that makes me feel so much better, because if dancing is following other people's steps, then I can't do it. And it's wonderful for other people who can do it. And that's not all that dance is and certainly that's not what performance is. And although I do want to go flashback for you for one second, when you first said to your parents, like, "I want to take dance class," I want to understand like how did that go? I mean, were, were the Gutierrez family, did you come from dance aficionados?

MG Mmm no. [laughs] I mean, to put it mildly, I went to this school called the Vern Fowler School of Performing Arts in Woodbridge, New Jersey, and I went there...I started in the acrobatics classes or like, you know, tumbling classes, because you know, it was a tiny little studio so they didn't have apparati, and musical comedy classes, right. So I started there, and they put me into their yearly production of *The Nutcracker*, right, which is like a very common thing that all these frickin' dance schools do, a yearly Christmas production of *The Nutcracker*. And I was one of the like, you know, only three boys in the whole cast or something. And I got obsessed with the entire ballet, and I taught myself the entire thing. Like all the parts, all the choreography,

I was kinda like a Nomi Malone, like *Showgirls*, I don't know if you've seen *Showgirls*, but like Nomi Malone like learns just by watching. I had, I felt like I kind of had like a Nomi Malone vibe going on when I was a kid. And so I said I wanted to take ballet, and my parents were like, "We can't afford it." And then the director was like, well, we'll give him a scholarship. And then my parents were like, Shit.

GC They can't turn it down if it's a scholarship.

MG They were like, "Okay, what's the second line of attack?" But uh, yeah, so it wasn't, it wasn't a good moment in the household, because I think it was also, you know, I've always said, yeah, it was also a moment when I think it was kind of becoming clear to them that I was this little queer kid, right. And so this was another sort of manifestation of that. Of course, I didn't know that at the time, but—because you also dance! I have that amazing photograph of you in your ballerina outfit. I mean, I live—and then you do a whole piece where you talk about that, right?

GC That's right. And *Black Swans* is name of that piece, and people can see it online through *Dancing While Black* journal or in my book, *Experiments in Joy*. But it was also connected to...it's funny to talk about queerness as well, because there's something...I mean, the show where I was sort of channeling the ballerina was a show that was really inspired by Melvin Dixon's novel, *Vanishing Rooms*...Do you know that?

MG Gabby, I never know the books! You like, you read more books in a day than I could probably get to in a year. You're always like, "Well, you've read this right?" And I'm like, "No, I haven't!" And I always feel so guilty.

GC Well, books are—

MG I know they are mine, too, but they're really yours.

GC And I need to, I don't know, I was thinking about doing a performance artwork where I wasn't allowed to read for pleasure. And then I was just like, what's wrong with me?

MG [laughs] That's your like Marina Abramovich endurance piece.

GC Exactly! "I will suffer for my art."

MG "My durational work is I shall not read."

GC "I shall not read. Instead, I will go on Tinder, or whatever. I will do, I will, I will actually bring my libido into other people." Anyway, but it was interesting because I think that that there was something around gender and sexuality that was tied up into dance for me, but, and that maybe came later. And especially that was what I was working out through Vanishing Rooms and that piece, but what I think I talk about in Black Swans the essay is around how very early on, even though I didn't always have the language for it, I knew that I wanted to be an artist. I knew that I was an artist, but I didn't have any models for what that looked like or who that would be. So the only models that I saw of girls who were taken seriously as artists were these ballet girls. Those girls were serious. You know what I mean? And it was, it was like life or death. "Am I going to get the part?" You know what I mean? Like, I mean, can, "Am I going to get my turnout right?" You know, "Am I going to be thin enough? Will my buns stay in place?" or whatever it all was, and I would just read these books, read these books, read these books and and it was so confusing because none of them —

MG No Black girls.

GC No Black girls! No fat girls! No girls with glasses...

MG Not, not a single one. Yeah, yeah yeah yeah.

GC Everybody seemed to have enough money to get all the tights and all the shoes, like money was never an issue. But it was interesting, too, because even though there was this compulsory heterosexuality, it was — they weren't a romance. Those books weren't romances. Like, it was all about the girl's romance with herself, with her own ambition and with what she wanted to do. And I related to that so deeply, especially coming of age as this Black girl in Detroit,

where it was like, if you get pregnant, you will lose...like, you will ruin your life. You must get a good education. School is...just, just the kind of messages that I received were so intense, and I went to college when I was 16 years old. And I just think the ideas that I had about the world—are probably still ideas I have, to be honest—but they were, it was so much about like arts and beauty and working really hard and showing your value, and that that would be maybe how someone would love you, even though I have very loving parents, but there was something there I think I arrived with that...and this is a very overachieving, you know, like, first generation, middle-class Black—

MG I was gonna say this is also deep first gen stuff, because I have a lot of this too.

GC But see, that's why I feel like there is a connection there. Because when I hear you talk, I, even though our backgrounds are so different, I feel like we are in both, like we both have some first generation stuff, but also we're in the same generation, like some of the references, you know, Patti LaBell's haircut, like the things that we know, you know what I mean, but that aren't as much in currency.

MG It's interesting, because I also take the, I think I mentioned this maybe the other day, where it's like that first gen exceptionalism stuff, and that, you know, I got to prove myself or, you know, in my case, or felt very, like, I will know English better than the English speakers, you know, kind of, kind of thing as, as a child of Colombian immigrants, and even though I remember when, because I remember when I was a kid learning in English class, like idiomatic expressions, and I remember not really knowing any of them, and thinking like, This is what, this is what I'm not learning, because I'm not from here, you know, or my parents aren't from here. And I remember thinking like, Oh, my God, I'm gonna be behind on idiomatic expressions on the test! Because it's like, this strange vernacular of a world around me or something. It's funny, because it's like, it creates a certain kind of drive, which is both life sustaining, but also, you know, exhausting, because of also what it's saying about a sense of worth, right, or the kind of labor that that is demanding upon you, to constantly affirm your sense of worth or place. And I think it's really only been very recently that I've come to understand how overarching that nar-

native has been in my life, in all these different kinds of spaces. Like, even when I did finally find queer spaces, they were predominantly white queer spaces. And so I was, you know, San Francisco, like kind of punk-inflected scene, which I was very kind of caught up in, but this feeling again of like, Can I be seen here? Can I bring all this dorkiness of myself and my, you know, whatever, into it? Can I speak Spanish? You know, like, just really basic things. And then, you know, whatever, institutional affiliations, and then like more sort of fancy art spaces, you know, feeling this kind of imposter syndrome in those places, and just thinking like, Wow, I don't have the right pants for this scene, I don't have the right haircut for it. And like, now I'm like, Well, I definitely don't have the right body for it anymore. You know, all these different kinds of ways in which you place these normative metrics on yourself. I don't know, that's just been...I've only recently come to really understand how much of that is sort of this almost generational and like, immigrant thing, just kind of expressing itself in these fucked up ways.

MG But I want to ask you something because I have like this, one of the things that I think is, you know, and it kind of is referred to and you're asking me if I read that book, and one of the things I love about you and that like intimidates me about you is just like the extraordinary, like, breadth of your intellectual curiosity. And I feel like you're in constant, active, conscious conversation with this incredible archive of references, like peers, but then also artistic ancestors, ancestors in multiple fields, you know, moving between the scholarly, or the purely scholarly to the purely artistic, but then between, you know, the literary to the performative. And I just, I think whenever I engage with you, and then whenever I think, you know, when I go through your books, I'm just like, This is a person who's just like talking to the world, like all the time, which I feel so I have aspects of that with myself as well, but I also feel like I'm an intensely self-absorbed, toughened, way too self-referential person. But I just want to hear hear you talk about that, and how that, if you identify with that articulation that I just made of you, and how that like, when did that start to happen for you? And how do you walk with that in your life?

GC I just want to chuckle because, you know, I'm social. That's the thing. [laughs] I'm social. And this pandemic moment has just been a

real trip, but actually moving to Los Angeles, which is street culture. I mean, I remember when I lived in Mexico City, I knew everybody who lived on my block, I knew the people that the taco—I mean, I just, I’m just social, just talk to everybody. I’m from Detroit and the talking to everybody began with talking to the people in books. Like the books, I talked to the books, and they talked to me, I talked to the characters and I talked to the writers. I talked to the dancers, I talked to the painters, I talked to the paintings. I just think my field of sociality is pretty is pretty expansive, I guess, I would say, and it makes me think of Tobin Siebers, who was actually my professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, although I was so shy. It was my first semester and I was in this Honors Comp Lit class, and there were all these seniors who were talking about Foucault and Japanese Modern—I didn’t even know what, I had no idea what the hell they were talking about and so I just shut up and listened. But as it turned out, he ended up becoming this—Tobin Siebers became a person, a leading person in disability theory. He writes about how a body is not just a physical body. A body can be a painting, or a building, or, I mean, that’s how I feel about books, and art, music, just that they’re, they’re these organisms, and they’re these vibrations and these frequencies, and then they’re also these artifacts of knowledge. So that’s like the general field in which I’m curious about everything. I want to know about everything, you know, but then when it comes into the specificity of the archive of Black women’s creative expression, I’m even more out of control, because I’m so haunted by so much work that has been marginalized, destroyed, ignored, forgotten—

[CLIP FROM “...HEWN AND FORGED...”]

So many of my brilliant friends are struggling. Some are still waiting for their first books to be picked up. Some who had first or second books, say they might never have another one. Because they feel that the world is not set up in a way to support them in doing what is required to make that happen. The unwritten shadow book, my friend, is not a failure of the writer. Kevin Young makes clear in his essay, in the case of African American literature, that the forces of oppression are often to blame. While so often we’re told, You know what, you just have to be strong enough. It’s you. Even if the whole world is against you, even if white supremacy is against you, even if misogyny is against you, even if the criminal justice system is against you, even if

the bus system is against you, it's up to you. You, you alone have to make it happen. You have to believe in yourself, you have to get up at 4:30 in the morning, you have to stay up until 4:30 at night, and if you, if you, if you individually by yourself don't pull yourself up and make it happen, well then, that's your loss. Because so many people have managed to do that. So if you, if you can't manage to do that, well then something is wrong with you. That is the message, at least, that I feel that I have heard in the world. What I would like to say, to you, this evening, my friends, is that it is not you. It is not you. And in fact, it is not your loss. The unwritten book is a loss for all of us.

GC I want to build this library of—this treasury that isn't just mine, but somehow can be open to everyone or shed light on the library that already exists and bring work back into conversation or consciousness that people are talking about. Like I think about the work of Alexis de Veaux. So extraordinary. And I'm like, Why is not everyone talking about Alexis De Veaux? Or I just read this thing about Maya Angelou's films, do you know that she made movies? And that she was like a television producer? I mean, it's like, I want to tell everybody about all this because I think it's so miraculous that it exists. I love my blood family. I love my blood mother and my blood grandmothers, but then I think like, Maya Angelou is also my mother. I claim those people so intensely, and I want—maybe this is my desire, like, I want them to claim me, I want them to see me as like their daughter, and sometimes that works. And sometimes that doesn't. I know sometimes there's some, some writers that are like, "You are too intense, Black girl, get away from me." I'm just like, "I know, I can't help it!" But yeah, I think I love lineage.

MG Yeah, that makes so much sense. I mean, I really feel like that's the thing about you. I feel like you're always recuperating the presence of the work of others, like in real time. Even in your performance, you're like, "Can we like, can we like acknowledge so and so right now?" you know, or like, you know, just this thing of like, bringing them into the room. And I really, I just love that because it feels very discursive, as you said, like, you're having a conversation, you're speaking back to this thing, which I've totally...I think I do that in like a really weird secret, like, full of feeling, sometimes professional resentment kind of way. I want to be good. I want to be good. Is it

good? I don't know. Can it be good? Okay, let me compare it to that thing. Okay. No, it's not good. You know? Or it's just, it's this whole other like, gross kind of thing that I don't know, probably from being raised as a cis dude.

GC And sometimes you have to be ready to handle the scale. I mean, I'm about to do a performance on Zoom—that's what we're doing now—and I'm kind of thankful that I'm gonna just do it in my studio, and it's small. I haven't done a live performance now...I was supposed to do something in— I was supposed to do something. I couldn't do it because of the pandemic, so time passed, and now I'm doing something after having not done it for a long time. And I'm a little scared, thinking, like, Do I know how to do it anymore? What am I going to do? I do think, for me, to sometimes not go for the big scale when you're not grounded enough in the work and what it is you're trying to do, you can really get tripped up. And so that's been—so I was very lucky to, you know, come of age as an artist in the upper Midwest when no one was looking at what I was doing. I was able to just do stuff in my house and in my closet and with my friends and not have pressure and not know what I was doing and start to—and still not sure always that I know what I was, what I'm doing, and it's okay, because I haven't made the decision to try to get so big, so fast in terms of live art action, and just keep growing and thinking, especially because writing is such a big part of what I do. Often writing about what happened helps me understand, to move to the next thing. So that's a part of the process. I mean to the idea of virtuosity, I think of Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, who's one of my mentors, who wrote *Theatrical Jazz* and for her, one of the elements of theatrical jazz is virtuosity. Virtuosity is the bravery to be yourself. And it has to do with the ambition and originality of your own kind of gesture, your own knowing, your own possibility, and I want to be excellent at that.

MG That sounds incredible.

GC You know what I mean? Like Charles Mingus says, "The genius is the one who is himself." I just, I want that. So I want that. I feel ambitious, but it's, and I mean, you know, it's nice to get a big grant, that's great. But I feel like what I really, I want to be really, really, really good writer. And I would really, if I could get there, like to be able to

make live performance that kind of, that makes people feel what your performances make me feel, for example, like I'm not alone. There's, there can be beauty, and that that beauty can be, can have pain and can have wit, and can have failures, and can be absurd, or I might not understand every reference, but who cares? Because we're together. That, for me, is the kind of work that I want to make, even if at times the work is alienating, and I'm awful to the audience. There's still something in it that I want them to know, like, but we're here together. Like I'm a toddler now. But we're here.

MG That makes me think of two different things I wanted to ask you that came out of your books, and one of them is from your as of yet unpublished book, so I don't know, am I allowed to refer to it?

GC Yeah, everybody come, come, *The Déjà Vu*, two two two two.

MG One of them is in *Swallow the Fish*, "Art of all kinds is not just the practice of making, it's the practice of being in the world a certain way. It's a certain susceptibility, and it's also sacrifice. The offering up of everything with only a few strings attached, the reader, the witness, the lover all have to pay attention, have to bear it with you and give it time. But even after that, they may not take you, may not love you or even like you. It's only the giving of the making that's evidence of being alive." So that's, like, I want a tattoo of that, first of all, because I was like, Yep, could have, I could have written that myself. But I didn't. But it's so frickin' gorgeous. And then the other thing is quite different. In your new book you have this essay about Don't You Feel It Too, this dance practice that Marcus Young got going, right, that you participated in, and you have this little moment where you're talking about in 2017, "Don't You Feel It Too aligns itself with art activism and healing, a recent postcard for the practice declares that it is, quote, "Participatory public dance for social healing and inner life liberation," end quote, and in discussions of the practice, we often talk about personal transformation, and social change. I relish these discussions, but I sometimes worry about the art part falling away." So two very different things. But I—The reason they, I'm, I'm kind of well, one, I want to make sure I get to both of them, because they really are important to me. But I don't know, I don't want to necessarily say it's a, it's a polarity that's being expressed there. But there's something to

me interesting about the admission that they may not even like you kind of rubbing up against this question of I don't want this art part to fall away. But also kind of an acknowledgement of the social justice or the social practice component of an art thing. I don't know, how do you hear, like, in putting, hearing those things next to each other, do they, what kind of resonance they have for you? Or what do you want to say about that?

GC So it's really amazing to hear them next to one another, because I hadn't thought about them together exactly, except that I think about them together all the time. I believe in, and I try to live the idea, of the artist as being susceptible to the world in a certain way. And that certain way cannot be predetermined or, or kind of prescribed. It can't just be about the social location that you were born into or the social location that you're happening to circulate in. Those things matter, deeply, [child shouts] but there's something else more intangible...Do you hear this child?

MG I do hear the child. I'm not disturbed by them.

GC My mother would not have allowed me to scream like that, but that's okay, because...Anyway, there's something about the susceptibility of being in the world a certain way, and about what it is for me to be an artist is deeply about identity locations and deeply about what my belief in art as social change, but it's also related to the kind of intangible weirdness that is me. And that is not something that is always legible, or that is not always something that will be likable. And it's important, I think, if we're talking about dance for change, to recognize that maybe, maybe it'll be a change that we don't want or maybe—there's got to be like, the art part for me is about the part that we can't control. The part that exceeds or goes beyond our expectations. The part that's messy. I mean, I've been doing—in this new book, *The Déjà Vu*, there's the stuff about the work on Wanda Coleman, who is an LA Black woman poet, who was the LA, unofficial LA Poet Laureate, and who was brilliant and amazing, and messy, just really, really, really, really messy. And so it's hard, because the people that might want to lift her up, as, you know, an elder or a foremother of Black women's literature, maybe don't like some of the things that she's saying, or some of the language that she's using. And I feel like

that makes her even more important to me in some ways, because what is the spillage? What is the freedom? I mean, I think what is it, then, to not know for sure what the work is going to be? To me, that's also the art part. Maybe you're reaching for a certain vision, or you're trying to say the world should be a certain way. But that doesn't mean that the art is going to look like it says that exactly. If it goes in that direction, something gets lost that's actually maybe the secret sauce for the transformation that you're trying to get to. And this is something I think Marcus Young, who founded Don't You Feel It Too, is totally understanding of and is interested in kind of embarrassment in public spaces and is interested in the idea that maybe liberation doesn't look the way that you think it does, especially in punk.

MG I'm so with what you're saying. I'm just curious, because it's something I'm grappling with. What does responsibility or accountability or these kinds of buzzwords of the moment factor into that spillage or factor into that messiness? I mean, I guess what you're, you know, you're citing Wanda Coleman, as an example of someone who maybe isn't concerning herself with those particular words. I don't know. I mean, I don't know how she would describe it. I think so much of this push towards socially conscious work or the act of naming of it as if it's, as if it's been not that up until now, which, whatever, that's all other bone to pick. I fear a kind of juridical limitation put onto the role of art in that process that it can't be constrained under in that construction.

GC Yes, and as do I.

MG I had an image of you like having your mouth open, like, "I cannot believe he just said that, that horrible person."

GC No, no, no, I was nodding. I mean, at what Eduardo C. Corral was just at CalArts last night, and we hosted an amazing event with him. And he said, "Language is a beast that cannot be tamed. It's not always going to say what you want it to say. If you're the poet sitting down to write and you think you're writing about one thing, it might go in another direction." So the question is, is your effort going to be all about trying to rein it in to make it fit the thing that you think it should say? Or are you just going to try to hang on as best you can

and ride it to where it's actually going? And then discover something? That's one thought I have. I mean, the thing about responsibility is a huge one. I think it is important to consider how we can be responsible to and for our communities. I think responsibilities may be even a better word for me than accountability, which can often feel like that now we're in a tribunal in some big circle where we're all trying to process the way...I mean, like, I both am really appreciative of, for example, restorative justice circles, and so I don't want to sound disparaging of that. I feel like what are our responsibilities? And how can we try to really meet them in ways that are joyful, right? I mean, the thing with Wanda Coleman, she got in trouble. She said the wrong thing about Maya Angelou and the Eso Won bookstore, which is a fantastic bookstore in Los Angeles, banned her for life. I mean, she got kicked out of African American literary circles. So what I get scared of...it's not even, I get scared of like doing the wrong and then getting kicked out.

MG Getting cancelled?

GC No, but I mean, because ultimately, in terms of disposability politics, who ultimately really does get cancelled, you know? Is it going to be some rich Hollywood person, really? I mean, maybe we have one or two examples of that, but at the end of the day, it feels like we turn on each other. And at the end of the day, I want to be in community with people, but I also want to tell the truth, or I also want to be able to be weird, or I also want to not fit the mold. So that to me is a huge big tension, and art is a space then that's smack dab in the middle of that because that becomes the field or the space where intersections of self and community intersections of past lineages and traditions and future possibilities all come together. And it's our job to try to make things, be things, offer things that give insight and possibilities into what could be. But there's also the social pressure, like maybe you're grounded enough in your various communities that you have, that you feel you can take risks. And certainly at times, I mean, certainly I'm, I'm trying to take risks, I'm trying to be vulnerable, but I have noticed in recent years that I'm more careful in some ways, because there is a sense that if you say the wrong thing, or even if you're saying the right thing, but people read it wrong, that you could be in trouble, and you could get kicked out. And so, and my heart is

too, is too sensitive. I feel like I don't have enough grounding. I don't have enough support, probably in my personal life, really, because I'm living so far away from my family. We're in the pandemic, et cetera, et cetera. But even with that said, I think in *The Déjà Vu* I try to still go there and be honest.

MG Oh, absolutely, I mean, I feel like you do that when even, when you're addressing these like schools in your talks. You're kind of using that as a "Let's all come to"...not a "come to Jesus" moment, per se, but a come to honesty moment.

MG Because you work as an educator, and you have worked so diligently as an educator, how does that practice inform kind of what we just talked about? Because I think I'm always in this, you know, question with myself of like, you know, how is institution supporting? How is institution delimiting? How is institution suppressing? Like, those are like my, like constant balls that are juggling in the air that I'm like, trying to tool and understand. And so I'm curious to hear what you think about that, in terms of being an educator, how that supports the practice, how that, how that frustrates the practice. Like, is there any difference? I guess, maybe specifically to kind of what you just brought up?

GC Yeah, that's an excellent question also because that has changed over time. This is my 20th year as a college professor. I mean, because I started so young. And when I really think about what it was like to teach in the year 2000, before 9/11 even happened, or in graduate school, when I was teaching—I was a TA for Women's Studies at NYU, yeah, at NYU. And then I taught my own class of African American literature at Rutgers Newark. I was so hardcore. I didn't even know that you were supposed to give students a break to go to the bathroom. I was just, "Class is three hours long, we need to look at this Richar Wright text." I was, I was, I was out of my mind, because I was so happy. I was like, Finally, I get to be in the room, and we get to talk about these things. So to me, teaching was this true space of professing what I believed in, and it was a space of sociality and bringing to life all of these people and ideas and books. And it was especially exciting for me when I was able to be with first generation students and students of color and other kinds of marginalized

students who did, who hadn't thought of themselves necessarily as scholars or thinkers. And then we would get into it. And all of a sudden, they were like, "Well, what about this? What about that?" And we would have, we'd be like, Okay, we're going to break down this Coco Fusco text, or we're going to do this thing. I mean, and it was so fun, and I loved it, and I still love that. I still love to teach. However, I will say, the kind of transformative teaching that I love to do within the neoliberal kind of institutions, the way that corporatization has changed the academy, I feel such loss and such grief over the ways that assessment protocols and bureaucracies of various kinds and financial considerations and middle managers, I mean, those things have really impacted for me what was always problematic in its values. I mean, I don't want to try to talk about the academy as if, you know, it was some incredibly, radically progressive place the whole time because clearly it was not. But I will say in my own family and in my own life, it was a place where incredible transformations happened. When I think about what happened for me in college, what happened for me in graduate school, what I learned, that was powerful, and then feeling like I moved directly from that into a situation where I was helping to foster that for other people. A part of what my job has been, has been to really attempt to shield the students from some of the worst kind of egregious aspects of the institution or help them through those things and also help them access the incredible resources that are there, especially through things like the library, or just through other faculty members, the human beings around to really encourage them. Like, talk to these people who have this knowledge, work with people who have this knowledge. I mean, right now, I feel lucky to be in an institution where creativity is very valued, but I also think being a professor of color right now is extremely challenging, because students have a lot of needs, and the institution doesn't have systems in place to manage those needs. And so they're coming to you. And that's always been true, but right now, it is even more true, it's even more acute. We're in a really intense situation, have been for some time, but I mean, you know, pandemic realities, post-George Floyd, all these things have heightened it. And now I'm 20 years into it, and I'm tired. And I also feel like, students don't always in this generation want you to tell them the truth. Sometimes they just want to be right? And then the institution doesn't necessarily have your back. And so then I've had situations where—and this

has felt new to me, where I haven't felt as able to just be honest. And I don't care for that. So I feel like, Okay. I've had to resort to different kinds of strategies with students to say like, Okay, what are you seeking from me right now? I'm just curious, what do you want to know, what kind of support do you want? Whereas in the past, I might really have wanted to say, I might have been sharper on some of my, my observations, but I mean, sometimes I think the students, they arrive and they feel—some of them more so because of social media and the internet—that they already know, they've already worked out everything, and the ways of being are set. And everything that came before is wrong. I don't know. It's probably just the same generational shift, and now I'm just in the middle of it. But, institutionally, there's greater anxiety on the part of institutions about what their role is. And there's less public confidence in the United States about especially institutions of higher education for good and bad reasons. It's much more precarious

MG I mean, it's interesting that you feel that over the course of your teaching career, it's shifted. I feel like I've, like the role of the guest artist is kind of to be the like, the lucky asshole who like comes into town, you know, and messes everything up, and then just like, runs away, you know? So that's a very privileged position sometimes. Although right now I'm in this kind of life shift where I'm, I'm sort of craving the stability that, that a job-job could provide. But I have a lot of fear of it. I have to be honest, like a lot of fear of it. And I mean, I don't have a, I don't have a fear of students in the sense of like, I love teaching. Like I love, love, love teaching, and I like sharing stuff with—and I feel like it's my job to share stuff, like, I feel like as soon as I know something, then the next step is just to give it to someone else, right? That doesn't weird me out, but just the structure of the system. And again, I'm caught up in the sense of like, trying to preserve the lawlessness of being an artist, or the aspects of it, the lawless aspects of it that feel like are still good to maintain, right? Because a lot of damage has been done under the banner of lawlessness, I know that, but I fear, you know, it's just like, I don't know, it's like, I spent the whole, I feel like I spent my entire 20s trying to undo all the like, repressive mechanisms of my childhood. And now it's like, I don't want to necessarily acculturate myself to the repressive mechanism of the institution. You know, like, really, that's the, that's the trajectory?

GC But you know what, though, I actually—maybe this is the thing I want to say about institutions. I have a dream of an art school. I have a dream of like creating an art school, one that would be completely unaccredited. One that would be an art school kind of without walls in that people that I know who are amazing can teach in it, and that we can build something else. And I think such a utopian vision that I feel like there has been some reason why I have been in all these different schools and learning these different things. And it's because I feel I've been able to see what has worked and what hasn't. And I think tuition, for example, that doesn't work that well. There's a whole bunch of stuff we could try to just do really, really differently. And so that's a dream that I have. I mean, I have a dream of being in Detroit and having like a live-work building and being able to have a community art bank, and then do performance art with people of all walks of life, and really get into it. And the other thing that I want to feel like I'd like to institutionalize...because I didn't go to art school, I became a performance artists in going to see performances and then making them on my own and kind of reverse engineering, which you did with *The Nutcracker*, right. But what I noticed is that the audience, there weren't a lot of opportunities for audience members to talk about what they thought worked or didn't work, or talk about what they saw, or start to build a kind of community knowledge or consensus about the work that was being generated so that that work could push and expand out in different ways. And even when I think about Thomas Hirschhorn in the Gramsci Monument project or other kinds of projects where artists have just created pop-up art schools. I'm interested in that because I think so much work that was made in Minneapolis like in the 2000s and do-it-yourself artists basis was awesome. It really honestly was, but there was no forum to talk about it or to build from that and to think about how you could take the experience of seeing it and moving into another work. That's the kind of institutionalization that I'm actually interested in.

MG I tried doing that with this program I do called *LANDING*, which is a program I started in 2016 through Gibney, which is a non-academic, non-evaluative, sort of peer-to-peer networking, mentoring program and hopefully we'll exist again, but like, that's been an interesting model to kind of do an educational model that exists outside

of the university and to see what can happen in that space. And it's, it is really interesting, it's a lot of emotional labor I will say. Like the one thing that I think is afforded to you sometimes in the university even though you still have to do emotional labor is like just the boundaries are kind of a little bit more clear. And, but like when you you know, when you open Hippy University, then it's like you're dealing with hippie feelings. It's just like, Oh, shit. Like, once I open up the door to like heart as a form of knowledge, then it's then you're fucked. Because then it's like now everybody wants to just give you heart all day, all night. And you're like, No, I can't take all this on.

MG Well, my dear, my friend, my inspiration, Gabby, Gabrielle, just thank you so much for agreeing to talk with me. And I just feel really lucky to be in conversation with you in all the different kinds of ways that we're being in conversation with each other. And I'm so happy we're getting to share time on the planet.

GC Feeling is so mutual. It's been so much fun to talk to you today. We have to do it again.

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