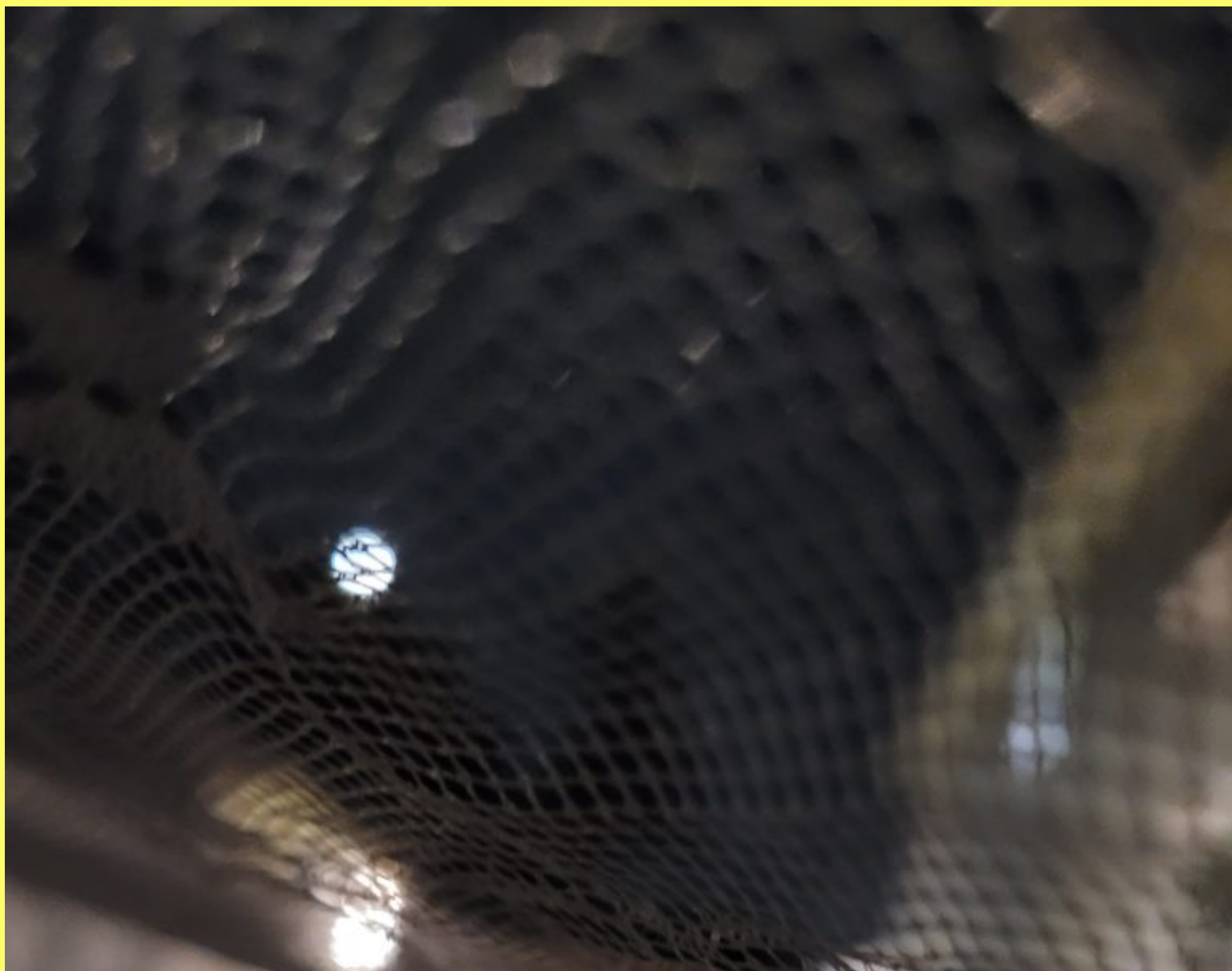




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a reflection on Try, a rehearsal by Maura Nguyen Donohue

August 4, 2021





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Courtesy of Maura Nguyen Donohue.

Maura Nguyen Donohue is the Writer-in-Residence for Platform 2021: *The Dream of the Audience*.

“a reflection on Try, a rehearsal” by Maura Nguyen Donohue reflects on *Try*, a new short film by **Ishmael Houston-Jones** with **Keith Hennessy**, **josé e. abad**, **Kevin O’Connor**, and **Snowflake Calvert** commissioned for Platform 2021: *The Dream of the Audience*.

Read and/or listen below.

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Danspace Project - a reflection on Try, A Rehearsal by Maura Nguyen Donohue

Try, a rehearsal

Ishmael Houston-Jones with **Keith Hennessy**, **josé e. abad**, **Kevin O'Connor**, and **Snowflake Calvert**.

May 3, 2021, Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, New York (*Mannahatta*) and Counterpulse, San Francisco (*Yelamu*)

Normal was not great for a lot of people, so I don't want to go back... but it's good to be with other people [1].

The film begins with Ishmael Houston-Jones leaning on a statue of Peter Stuyvesant, Dutch General of New Amsterdam, outside the St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, noting that Stuyvesant was the owner of, at least, 40 enslaved people. He reads from St. Mark's signage that names the people enslaved by the Dutch West Indies corporation, enslaved people who sought to escape, enslaved people who were manumitted, children and their mothers registered for gradual emancipation, and finally, people whose names we do not know yet. This act, by the church, towards reparations of its past community appeared somewhere between Reggie Wilson's 2018 Platform, *Dancing Platform Praying Grounds: Blackness, Churches, and Downtown Dance* and a public event that my Kin and Care Research Fellow group organized. I remember standing outside on a cold, rainy, winter's day and reading the sign with devynn emory, Angie Pittman, Judy Hussie-Taylor, Seta Morton, Jamie Shearn Coan and iele paloupis as we prepared for our February 2020 gathering. I remember having to look up the word manumitted and then having to look up, "what's the difference between manumission and emancipation." One is a personal act, the other is a governmental edict and neither – *let us be attentive* – is preaching the gospel of actual abolition.

I actually liked not going to 4 shows a week.

As Ishmael gently bends in a hinted prostration on his way up the steps into the church, I carry forward the consciousness of potential gaps when spiritual ascension forgets its duty to humanity. Videographer, Alex Romania tracks Ishmael's entrance into the sanctuary and his arrival at a laptop, to find Keith



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For some of us the romance of togetherness has not been a romance.



The collaborative improvisation and its post-performance discussion with Miguel Gutierrez, ponders the absence of our opportunities to witness and to be witnessed in common space. What is possible as collaborative sharing after over a year's habituation to protective isolation? With the ritual of shared attending in proximity removed from our bodily experiences, the social binds of this distanced in-progress, highly improvisational process still felt well knit.

What have we learned? What will we remember? What is our dream of the audience.

I didn't know gay people hunted.

In the post-show, with Gutierrez, Ishmael mentions having never met Jose and Snowflake in person until well into the process. In this moment of re-turning-into-the-next, *Try* kept me asking what it means to reach across land, time, history and olfactory influences. The film shifts from full-screen and split-screen shots, bringing me into and back out of baseline immersive-ish-ness after the ask from Ishmael to begin the improv with a prompt for a movement exploration on "place." It jumps out of chronos directed time, skips decades and engages with "who are your people?" invitations. The work challenges geographical land structures while recognizing the Indigenous lands and the other-worlds of Zoom and internet localities.

I miss the after-show and pre-show and complaining about the work.

Here again, there is a constant presence of ghosts while creating new work, a clear continuance of Ishmael's 2016, *Lost and Found: Dance, New York, HIV/AIDS, Then and Now* Platform, co-curated with Will Rawls. I learned at Kristin Juarez and Lydia Bell's Platform 2021 *Conversations Without Walls: From the Platform archive: Eiko Otake & Ishmael Houston-Jones* that during his residency, Ish had asked Production Manager, Yolanda Royster to put out rows of chairs on the sanctuary risers, to evoke the absent, past, and passed audience members. This dream of an audience remembers previous plagues and decimated communities.

The last thing I saw was Okwui's ... there were no divisions between performers and audience [2].

After Kristin and Lydia's conversation, I now flow with a new pandemic image of dust gathering over Lydia's office desk, her artifacts, and objects. She transitioned out of her former position as Program Director & Associate Curator at Danspace amidst the pandemic and returned 6 months after her last



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this Zoom rehearsal relies on cloud storage that is grounded on the lands of the indigenous people of Turtle Island... these data farms require cheap energy and lots of water to keep the infrastructures cool...



- Kevin O'Connor

These time travels, this way I can return to something watched weeks ago, but only really lightly with-ed pokes at the possibility and problematics of anti-ephemeral modes of production. A quad shot of four boxes on screen pushes at perspective, providing multiplicities of single moments, opening simultaneity, *can we feel the way land is threaded together*. I keep reminding myself that I'm seeing two of the same things twice but my eyes tell me that I'm watching four different places...as if the camera angle is the creator of the entirety of a location and not the people nor the things in it. How you look at something tells you what to see.

land acknowledgment is a way of asking what happened and what is continuing to happen here.

- Kevin O'Connor

I see Ainsley shooting the collaborators at Counterpulse and the shot Ainsley is capturing at that exact moment. Making and made are malleable categories. Then we get three perspectives. I can only track the hard-wired connection because a piece of fabric demands that my brain organize itself into an understanding that is reductive in its ask to situate and explain against a challenge to exploitative resource demands of an internet-based collaboration. The world has exploded into quantum realities, but my little brain demands Newtonian physics.

Can we shift fast enough for the new world? Can we remember fast enough? So many voices, so many choices, so many threads.

Try and Try and Try again.

[1] All quotes by Ishmael Houston-Jones unless otherwise specified.

[2] *Sitting on a Man's Head*, Peter Born and Okwui Okpokwasili. Danspace Project, Platform 2020: Utterances From The Chorus.



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food as a member of Danspace Project's Kin and Care Research Group. Her "Whitelashing: White Fragility in the Ivory Tower" was part of Gibney Dance's inaugural volume of the journal *Imagining*, edited by Eva Yaa Asantewaa. She most recently wrote the Education Track Essay and Exercises in *Imagination* and served as a Keynote Panelist and Community Facilitator for DanceNYC 2021 Symposium. She has published academically in the *Reflection Contemporary Directions in Asian American Dance* and for the *Women and Performance Journal*. She has also written for *Culturebot*, *American Water Journal*, *Dance Magazine*, the *Dance Insider*, *MR's Performance Journal* and was guest editor for *Critical Correspondence's* "University Project." .

with La MaMa's Great Jones Repertory Company since 1997, she has toured the US, Europe and Asia. From 1995-2005 Maura Nguyen Donohue/[inmixedcompany](#) was commissioned and produced regularly in NYC and toured extensively across North America, Europe and Asia. As artistic advisor for Dance Theater Workshop's Mekong Project, Donohue curated and facilitated international exchange and residency programs for Asian diaspora artists in the US and Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. She continues to create and perform works in her "Tides Project" series, using reclaimed plastics and oceanic detritus to examine the legacies of bodies ecological and diasporic. She thanks the ancestors and the two incredible offspring for keeping the path clearly lit.

Tags: Ishmael Houston-Jones, Maura Nguyen Donohue, Platform 2021, The Dream of the Audience



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