Maya Stovall in Conversation with Biba Bell

A “radical ballerina,” PhD candidate in anthropology at Wayne State University, and fourth generation Detroiter, Maya Stovall re-imagines the politics and aesthetics of dance through the question of where it might land on/us site of the liquor store. Liquor Store Theater negotiates the right to the city while inserting discussions of race, privilege, and access into Detroit’s current trends of real estate speculation, modes of gentrification, and projects of place-making within its post-bankruptcy context. Her cho-reo-ethnographic project deflates, refracts, and resists the ethnographic gaze by blurring the roles of “participant,” “researcher,” and “performer,” unconventionally engages her own background in dance and performance to create a space where the stories of the city’s transformation might be gathered and given a greater voice and increased visibility. In her own and adjacent neighborhoods on Detroit’s eastside, the liquor store remains one of the primary hubs for meeting and greeting, for street-side and parking lot centered encounters. The backdrop of the liquor store creates a theatrical frame for Stovall’s sidewalk ballet, an often hand-painted façade whose focal point resides in the stories of its neighbors and whose horizon of possibility involves a certain kind of dancely sharing that can only happen with both feet that plant, pivot, and pause upon its cracked, concrete yet fertile ground. In our conversation, which will additionally lead to an in-depth piece on her work for the upcoming issue of Detroit Research, Stovall discusses her primary artistic and theoretical interlocutors, the topographical politics of “spatial taint,” the artist as activist, choreographies of ethnography, and a day in the life of Liquor Store Theater.

- Biba Bell

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Biba Bell: I’ve been looking at the Liquor Store Theater videos on your website and there are so many things that I want to talk about, but I also want this conversation to give me a sense of the sort of nuts and bolts, the overarching structures and thoughts that have been moving you, moving with you, and coming out of this process.

To start, watching you dance in front of the liquor stores in Detroit, there are two things going on: 1) You’re performing and 2) You’re doing an ethnographic project. You’re talking to people, bringing all these stories together, and positioning yourself in this complex terrain, that is, putting yourself in the position to be seen and looked at... as an object of the gaze, as it relates to a history of performance and specifically dance performance. You’re positioning and shifting that focus, redirecting it, mobilizing it out into the world, with the folks that have collected and do collect and cross and interact and mingle in this space in front of the liquor store. I definitely want to talk about this, and maybe the way to enter that question is for you to tell me about what brought you to this project. The series of videos begin in 2014, what are the steps that have led you here?

Maya Stovall: This idea of the gaze is critical to the project and it’s critical to what’s happening in Detroit right now. After being invisible for decades, Detroit now is the object of this global gaze in a variety of ways, and that’s the really big context. Then, getting back to this idea of the gaze in performance and performance studies and the same idea of the gaze and ethnography and the ethnographical gaze and how all of these discursive categories of the gaze intersect at Liquor Store Theater, is the idea of telling the story of Detroit’s transformation. Not in a way that privileges transformation in a positive or negative light but just the factual post-bankruptcy gentrification process. Using the paradigm of performance, from the quotidian to the formal theatrical, as a frame, is the idea, with a purpose towards changing or shifting or problematizing, challenging assumed categories of “researcher,” “performer,” “participant,” and “interviewee.” Ultimately, I want to talk to people. I want to learn the way that people... how historically marginalized
people show up and make spaces. How performance is deployed in urban spaces—the classification struggles in the field of power à la [Pierre] Bourdieu; the negotiation of the right to the city à la [Henri] Lefebvre and [David] Harvey; and through the lens of carnal sociology and practice theory à la [Loïc] Wacquant, and, I argue, [Katherine] Dunham in the 1930s and 40s before the term "practice theory" was coined. And, the social practice art concept à la Shannon Jackson. I guess I’m getting into the theoretical framework. This idea of practice theory and carnal sociology and ethnography... It’s like a little theater that provides the framework to the theater of post-bankruptcy, neoliberal Detroit.

So, that’s how the ethnographic gaze comes into play. Another element is notions of surveillance and appropriation. People have talked about the public space a lot recently. [David] Madden is one person who has written on it—this idea of surveillance as ending the ‘myth of the public space’ and how urban space is contested through this ongoing daily struggle. So, what I’m doing is I’m marrying different strands of theory into this intellectual underpinning, but it also becomes this crazy art project on the street, where I don’t know what’s going to happen from event to event!


Biba: And I’m wondering about that because the choreographic material that you’re working with and placing is consistent—is that true? But then it’s nomadic in that you’re moving around to these different sites. Maybe you can tell me more about the different places you’ve been and how it works, exactly. How it’s being installed, in a sense, and what kind of strategy is that for you as it may relate to the precarity of the environment, which is literally very open. You’re out on the street. I’m thinking that it may feel vulnerable, as a woman, and how those interactions can occur, which I can speak more as well. Then, also, from a dancerly background and context, what brought you and your dance practice to this? Was there a movement or trajectory you had in terms of performing in public spaces that then brought you to the site in front of the liquor store, the liquor store as backdrop, the liquor store as center, as a kind of center or square or meeting place, the parking lot?

Maya: I think dance inherently, dance in a broad sense—encompassing everything from exploration of bodies in space up to dance technique—I think everything in the continuum, dance is a political act, a mobilization of the body for a purpose. Dance is inherently a political act. Over my years of studying and working with and learning from different people (Ariel Osterweis had a big influence on me) the fusion of dance as a political act with exploration of challenging/countering the body politic, contesting place and space through the body, and all of this came together in an obsession with putting performance and dance in public spaces to see what happens...To bring together the world of the private and the world of the public. As I did more and more dance in urban public spaces it fused with my interests in ideas of the rights to the city, ideas of fields of power, ideas of the whole story of a neighborhood, or the story of the city, and the ideas of the theater as the way of understanding quotidian life. All of this came together. And I think the choreography part is important.

One thing that I’ve had issues with is the role of the ethnographer as someone who is coming and taking, coming and extracting information from people, often people who are historically marginalized, and coming and taking information from them and leaving. So *Liquor Store Theater* is a performance ethnography (although that can be problematized in a lot of ways and there is definitely a realm of privilege in going and dancing in films in Detroit neighborhoods), but with *Liquor Store Theater* I want to bring something to the people rather than simply taking. That is why “carnal anthropology” (after Wacquant) makes sense to me practically and theoretically. In that I am asking them about their lives, asking them to be vulnerable and share their ideas and their experiences and I want to be vulnerable with them too. So people have tried to categorize *Liquor Store Theater* as sort of a dance activism project, which, really it’s not. It’s more in the realm of the theoretical and it’s also in the realm of telling the story of the city. But I do acknowledge that because I am a fourth generation Detroiters of African descent, there’s something inherently political that the project encourages and there’s something that happened there. But I view the project as more broad than a simple employment of dance towards a political goal. It’s asking big questions and it’s attempting to deploy the theater and deploy performance in a way that’s almost like a cognitive prompt.

Biba: Can you say more about that cognitive prompt? You mentioned it in terms of the audience, in terms of giving a point of reference or something to look at, something to participate in. Can you just say a little bit more about that?

Maya: In the first round of *Liquor Store Theater* events, which happened in the summer of 2014, I was asking a lot of questions about the neighborhood and the city. I thought, I want know more about the city and the neighborhood but really more about peoples’ performances of their everyday lives, and use that as a framework to tell a story of a neighborhood and the story of a city—from the micro-experiences that people share and the macro-structural forces. So, every performance is choreographed, to a certain degree. Even if it’s deliberately not choreographed that’s choreographed, and every ethnographic encounter is choreographed. So, working in this seam of
performance of ethnography in urban commons, it’s playing with this idea of the choreographed ethnic encounter and the choreographed performance. It’s playing in this seam/scene and attempting, through methodological technique, to deepen the experience, deepen the connection between the performers, the researcher, and the participants through this temporality of places and bodies that’s being navigated with the choreography as tool.

Maya Stovall, Liquor Store Theater, Vol. 1, no 2 (2014); video still: Eric Johnston / Martha Johnston

Bibi: Can you say a little bit more about the choreography both of the dance and the ethnographic encounter? What that is? What it looks like?

Maya: Yes. For the first year of the project a lot of the choreography has emerged from field notes, observations of my neighborhood. I live in this little disremembered, physically distressed neighborhood that’s about two miles east of downtown Detroit and worlds away economically. This neighborhood has been referred to by residents as little Beirut, little Afghanistan. It’s an incredibly distressed neighborhood and based on my experiences being out in the neighborhood, whether having a dance rehearsal in our parking lot or gardening in the garden across from our studio, the experience of inhabiting a space which feels physically and intellectually safe. But you’ve read the crime rates, you’ve read the statistics, you’ve seen the news articles about your neighborhood and you’ve heard your neighborhood is the second most dangerous neighborhood in America and yet you’re dancing and gardening in it! So, a lot of the movement comes from this scene of paradoxes of the experiences of living here. I would say about 70 percent of our neighbors are people who could be seen as transient individuals or people who are in this very fringe definition as far as classification in the economic realm would go. These are the people who presumably have watched out for us and have been in the area and have helped us garden and have helped us maintain a peaceful existence.

Bibi: They have been neighborly.

Maya: Yeah exactly, they’ve been neighborly. So, the choreography definitely taps into this set of experiences and the experience of living here.

Bibi: And what is a choreography for an ethnographic encounter like? What is the structure for that? Is it theoretical? Is it physical? Are there certain questions or prompts?

Maya: There’s definitely a theoretical grounding to all of this. It definitely has an intellectual genealogy, and is an advancement Wacquant’s carnal sociology, where I’m centering my work of dancing and innovating through this use of choreography in practice theory. It’s definitely theoretically informed but I think the way it upholds practically is the choreography itself, which then we can call a performance as it’s embodied by the dancers. It really acts as a cognitive prompt. There’s this odd impact that it has where people, after they stop watching the dance and they go in and buy their items from the store or they finish having their conversation and they come back and we’ve finished a series of two- or three-minute performances, we ask them “can we interview you?” People are like “Oh, ok. What’re you doing, some kind of art project on Detroit?” and they’re open, suddenly, because they’ve seen us perform, they’ve watched us, they’ve been observing us. So, when we come out and ask them there’s this totally different feel.

For instance, we’ve experimented and came to a store and tried to get b-roll first, and I was like, “Let me just see if people will talk to me before they’ve seen us dance.” The reaction is striking. The responses are “Oh, are you a journalist?” or “My cousin works for the city, I have no comment.” But when the role of performance is introduced, it’s like they’re participating in a dialogue almost, as opposed to being put on the spot. I guess I’m lucky because the project... it just works. And it wasn’t like it set out with “Oh, people won’t talk to me unless I dance.” It was just, “We’re going to go and dance because we want to experience and convene with this environment in an organic way, this little space, and talk to people.” It just so happens that somehow the performance or the choreography becomes this way to have this dialogue with people in a very different way.
Biba: Absolutely. You talked a little bit about the politics and relationship to this mode of dance activism, and I think about the politics of movement in a space. I still want to go back to, what is a typical Liquor Store performance from the beginning, just didactically. But I also want address this question of movement, of the pre-assigned conditions for movement in the liquor store, in front of the liquor store and in the parking lot on the street, because those are the videos I’ve seen. You’re occupying this outdoor space, you’re on the sidewalk, you’re in the parking lot, you’re on the street corner and I think about it in a couple different ways. I’ve done a bit of research and writing and also doing, dancing on the street, these types of actions, and how they really shift depending on the body doing it, the space, where it is, and the people surrounding, and what time of day, the kinds of actions, what it means to get from point A to point B. Because these are transient places, in a sense. It’s sort of like these are places we pass through. But also the kinds of surveillance and policing and the importance of passing through, the way that determines the movements that can take place in those spaces in the sense of “no loitering,” “no hanging around,” “no gathering,” this question of policing. We’re really in this moment now of engaging this issue, specifically, the kinds of police violence directed toward people of color, males on the street, and what it means to be occupying that space.

Then on the flip-side, there’s this really amazing text I love, by bell hooks, she starts off talking about the porch, she has this whole thing about the porch in relationship to the home, but also its presence and proximity to the street. This way in which it becomes a transposition of zones of the street and also of the home. But then she also straight up talks about the street, especially in relationship to being a female body, what it means to be placing yourself on this street, and the possibility for the kinds of propositions one might have to negotiate or endure, and then there’s this “move along, no loitering” scenario, from a very different point of view. And then also, for dance, to then shift those conditions, those pre-determined movements, the possibility for certain movements to happen, for dance to be a way to shift that, and turn it and derail it a little. You’re there, you’re standing there, you’re staying there, how much time do you spend there? Enough time so that these encounters can start to accumulate, so that they can happen multiple times. I guess that’s really coming at it—this question of occupying space, of mobilizing space, of dancing throughout—I’m really coming at it from three different angles.
has been rendered invisible by city practices. There are decaying structures, debris from all kinds of different forgotten buildings, schools, businesses. This area definitely is subject to the idea of spatial taint that Wacquant proposes. Liquor Store Theater is directly contesting the taint that I see as being imposed upon this neighborhood. This links up with the visual anthropology of particular neighborhoods and telling a broad visual anthropology of Detroit in its post-bankruptcy neoliberal gentrification process, where you walk two miles from Dan Gilbert’s urban distressed feet ‘Opportunity Detroit’ adorning all of these buildings purchased at rock-bottom prices. We have this neighborhood this full of bad structures. It’s largely forgotten by city officials, foundations, and funding strain but, yet, there is a neighborhood, there are people here. It exists. It’s contesting this territorial stigma.

This summer the project is going to continue and move to Midtown, which you know is a corporatized term that’s used to refer to the Cass Corridor and a constellation of other, smaller neighborhoods. But Midtown and Cocktown, which are areas right now where the right to the city is very much being contested, there’s a lot more capital investment that’s happening which is forcing some residents in rent-controlled buildings out of their areas. There’s relatively more investment from capitalist-type enterprises happening so looking at territorial stigma in its mirror image, which I argue is this idea of symbolic ownership through this narrative of whiteness, showing both flip sides of this through the project, or investigating both sides.

Biba: You’re starting that this summer?

Maya: Yeah. May 17th is the first video of the summer of this year of the project and it’s happening at the liquor store that is a really interesting theater, it’s already a theater in its own right. You go by there and you’ll see vendors, people gathering sitting on crates, holding court, everyday once the weather gets decent. So, May 17th is our first shoot of the year and discussion with people over at that store.

Maya Stovall, Liquor Store Theater, Vol. 1, no 2 (2014); video still: Eric Johnston / Martha Johnston

Biba: This is a good moment to tell me what that entails. What is a day in the life while you’re doing a shoot? How does it work? What’s the general time-frame and the course of events?

Maya: We meet up at my studio space [Finite Studies]. This includes the videographer, the dancers who are participating, and my husband Todd ["Quaint"]. He is a sculptor and an electronic music producer and makes a lot of the music for the Liquor Store Theater. So, we all meet up and generally we try to take one car, if we can all fit, over with our camera equipment and all of our stuff for the event. We try to get onsite in the early afternoon and we, the dancers along with the videographer, pick out where the best shot will be with the ability for people milling around to observe but without obstructing anybody’s walkway. We start marking; we start exploring the space. It has some kind of a ceremonial feel, when we start to do this, and then we start to talk to people and answer people’s questions. Liquor Store Theater’s videographer, Eric [Johnston], while we’re marking, gets b-roll and we’re just sort of quiet at this point getting a sense of the space. Then after maybe 30-45 minutes of that we plug in our audio and we do an actual performance. Our videographer is capturing our performance, and then, you know, people are generally gathering and observing and wondering what’s going on.

Biba: How long does a performance last?

Maya: The longest piece that we have set is about seven minutes. Typically we do at least four stagings of the full piece or pieces depending. In total I’d say we end up performing for about 30-40 minutes, as far as performing with the music on, with the videographer shooting. We’ll repeat. We’ll do several shots—he might shoot us over the shoulder, etc. The goal of this is to get as many people to see us as we can, so that we can have a dialogue with those individuals who may be interested in talking with us. The way that it will work is, say we’re doing a three minute piece, and then we’ve got people standing around, and then people say, “What’re you doing?” and we say, “Oh we’re doing a dance and performance project in Detroit. Would you talk to us?” At that point we shift the gaze the videographer is filming while I’m off camera interviewing individuals. That’s the format. Sometimes it’s interesting, sometimes we’ve had in the past a line of people who want to be interviewed and then at other times just one person will come and then other people will decline. There’s no set format that it takes... it’s based on the store and the vibe and everything, but overall the choreography is effective at starting a dialogue.


Biba: There was one video where I think... I don’t think this is the liquor store on Gratiot and Mt. Elliott, or is that... because you are in one over there right? Maybe it’s the video before that.

Maya: There is one at Gratiot and Mt. Elliott and there is one at Gratiot and Chene.

Biba: Maybe it’s the one at Gratiot and Chene. There’s a man that you’ve spoken with who is in the video and he’s also dancing with you and it’s really incredible, that moment, to watch. I didn’t see it at performances so much, where people were joining in. It really shifted things, and I was wondering if this is something that happens. If there are these improvised moments that begin to occur.

Maya: That actually happens a lot, and it’s something that, for the first year my videographer Eric [Johnston] and I, we were not so attuned to capturing those moments. We had this idea that those were personal moments of interaction between the dancers and the people onsite, and that we didn’t need to lift up those moments because they were special moments that happened behind the scenes. But then, this year, digesting all that happened in the first year of the project we’re like, “Wait a minute! We have to capture and share these moments...” Of course, we asked people, “Hey is it okay if we include this part where you started free-styling or you know mimicking the dancers movements?” Of course we asked that question, but we realized that those moments are incredibly important to the project. So, yes, that happens more than is visible in the first five films and it’s something that we look forward to showing as it happens. It’s interesting on so many levels—through a theoretical lens, performance, site of urban commons as a negotiation and a becoming and a state of the city in flux. It’s just important on so many levels and bears more investigation.
Biba: It blurs your roles even more and your working methodologies, maybe less your role as a figure but the kind of methodologies that you’re using and activating. I think about that transition for you between performing and... I’ve just performed, I turn around and I start asking questions and interviewing... that shift, that transition, that moment is so strange. It’s weird enough just finishing a performance and then facing the audience and being like “Hey, nice to see you.” That shift of focus and being together. But it really is different ways of being together in a sense, and the way in which those interactions, that level of participation in the dancing itself... it’s really great.

Maya: One thing too is ideas of consumption and who gets to consume dance. When you look for instance at hip hop studies and why hip hop studies is suddenly considered this exciting site for all kinds of interventions, pedagogical and scholarly interventions and when you look at it it’s hard, I mean hip hop is a consumption and commodification of blackness and black bodies. We wonder why black studies, referring to the project that emerged in the sixties through civil rights movements, why black studies isn’t held up as this site of intervention in pedagogical and scholarly realms and why black studies being sort of usurped by hip hop studies and I think it gets back to this idea of consumption and consumption of elements of black culture that are being appropriated by the mainstream and used for their own devices and then homogenized as this sort of colorblind multicultural thing that really is ahistorical and apolitical and a-critical. I think what’s interesting also with the project and part of the goal of the project is “Who gets to consume dance” and “Who gets to consume this material?” It’s re-appropriating, and it’s this challenging of who should be consuming contemporary or experimental performances. We’re putting these performances on the street for whoever’s there in whatever neighborhood to consume them, to challenge these modes of consumption that privilege upper class, economic elite.

Biba: It seems to me also that you’re challenging consumption as a necessary response. Of course, performance is consumed and that element is always there, but also that in those shifts and those moments the consumption, that mode of engagement also recedes, in a sense. There is a participatory element—people are joining in, in some ways. It’s interesting because you’re surprising people, there’s a guerrilla element to it and I wonder if there can also sometimes be that response of discomfort or awkwardness, the desire to look the other way. I didn’t see that in the videos, but I’m just sort of talking from experience there.

Maya: Yeah, that is interesting. I think that’s part of the state of flux in a city that Andy Newman, my advisor, writes about in Landscape of Discontent. It’s the state of becoming, this ongoing state of transition, and I think that is part of it. It’s part of why this project is a window to tell a broader story of Detroit neighborhoods and the city. I think, yeah, people will look the other way and people will be disturbed or uninterested in it and that’s fine too. It’s a process of flux, and that happens with anything that’s happening on the street.

Biba: Right, yeah. This is great. We’ve covered so much territory that I just want to go through it with a fine-tooth comb and our conversation will continue in other platforms. But the last thing I want to ask is how has Liquor Store Theater, how has going out into the city in this capacity—performing, interacting, talking, interviewing, having these exchanges—how has it changed your relationship to dance? Has it affected your dancing?

Maya: Wow, yeah, I think in a way it’s really work at a de-centering of “performer” as this heroic individual or this artist with a capital “A” and a re-centering of it insofar as in its context. It has made the meaning and just the temporality, the frailty of the moment, the precarity, so much more important than the particular performer. Ralph Lemon has said that where dance is landing now is the exploration of space, and so Liquor Store Theater is like mating Ralph Lemon and Wacquant and taking this exploration of space through a dance/performance lens. It really doesn’t even matter, so much, what the dancers do as long it’s from a place of genuine interaction and conversation with the audience. And I love technique, I love ballet, I love contemporary, I love modern, codified techniques, but I also think that this place where dance can land is so much more broad and powerful and experimental than the assertion of the importance of a particular artist with a capital “A.” What can I do to explore this, this place that we’re in from an existential lens and from a critical lens and all of these different ways? I think it changed my... well not changed, I come from a critical perspective, so I haven’t had a diametrical shift, but I’ve had a very concrete, on-the-ground experience of using a particular art form as a way to explore deep existential, theoretical phenomenon.
Biba: It gives me chills. I love it.

Maya: My god, I feel like I’m rambling.

Biba: No! When you talk about the fragility and the precarity of that moment of it unfolding… that is so real. And then I also, I think so much about dance, the sort of act of dancing taking place, landing in a place…how were you articulating it? Landing in a place, yeah?


Maya: Yeah, that’s really after Ralph Lemon. I heard him say those exact words in his 2013 residency that I participated in at Wayne State University. He was talking about “Where can dance land?” and “Where can it land for you?” and “Where can it land as an art form?” From a big perspective and where can it land for you, So, answering Ralph Lemon’s question, this is where it lands for me. This theme of exploring the very existential philosophical but still sociologically- and anthropologically-based question of how is performance deployed in a struggle for the right to the city. How is dance deployed in classification struggles, identification tensions, and urban marginality? And how is performance deployed in post-bankruptcy, gentrifying Detroit?

Biba: Yes, where it lands. You say it doesn’t really matter what the dancers actually do. I’m so curious about that moment because it also expresses this kind of opening up to where the dance is taking place, where it’s happening. I think that the political potential of dancing and choreography is also very much about this opening up of the where, where it lands but also this relationship to the where? That where is still a question to be mobilized and it can shift the where. This movement from these centers to this periphery to this liquor store parking lot to this question of mobility. That is the dancing, this seeking of the where...

Maya Stovall is a fourth generation Detroiter, radical ballerina, and Wayne State University Ph.D. student with research interests at intersections of performance; dance; race/ethnicity; gender; urban marginality & classification struggles; cities & urban spaces; and Detroit. Maya’s performance ethnography dissertation project, Liquor Store Theater, is a series of dance performances and conversations in the small public spaces surrounding party stores across Detroit. This first year of the project focused on McDougall-Hunt, where Maya lives and works in a former Comerica bank turned studio-loft along with Todd “Quaint” Stovall, husband and a street artist/music producer. Maya has shown dance film and/or live performance at MOCAD Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, N’Namdi Center for Contemporary Art, Sidewalk Festival, and the Midwest Regional Alternative Dance Festival, amongst others.

Biba Bell (b. 1976, Sebastopol) lives and works in Detroit and NYC. Bell’s performance work has been shown at Times Square Arts and the Clocktower Gallery NYC, Insel Hombroich Germany, Visual Art Center Austin, Detroit Institute of Art, The Garage for Contemporary Culture Moscow, The Kitchen NYC, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Human Resources Los Angeles, Centre Pompidou Paris, Henry Miller Library Big Sur, PaceWildenstein Gallery NYC, Jack Hanley Gallery NYC, Movement Research at Judson Memorial Church NYC, Roulette NYC, The Garage San Francisco, amongst others. Her current performance and video project is a three-part dance in a Mies van der Rohe apartment in Detroit (funded in part by The Knight Foundation) and she additionally performs with choreographer Maria Hassabi. Bell has a PhD in performance studies from New York University and is currently a guest professor in performance at the Hochschule für Künste in Bremen, Germany.

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