

Danspace Project

Conversations Without Walls:

Ishmael Houston-Jones & Carol Mullins with Judy Hussie-Taylor

August 29, 2020

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Welcome to Danspace Project. I'm Judy Hussie-Taylor, the Executive Director and Chief Curator. And this is a reimagining of Danspace's Conversations Without Walls series which we initiated in real time over a decade ago. And now with the Covid-19 pandemic, we relaunched our conversations in digital space. In March we hosted a profound conversation on Slowness and what it means to gather by artists Okwui Okpokwasili, Simone Leigh, and writers and scholars Tina Campt, and Saidiya Hartman. This conversation was an extension of our Platform 2020 Utterances from the Chorus, a multi-week event co-curated by Okwui and myself this past February and March. Their conversation on Slowness is now available on our website's Journal. So please visit the site and also please just spend time with this really beautiful relevant presentation by Danspace commissioned artist devynn emory, whose experience as an New York City emergency room nurse has informed their singular *moving memorial meditations*, or *mmm*, so I encourage you to look at both of those videos on our website. So today, I'm joined by two friends. The award-winning choreographer, educator, and Danspace curator Ishmael Houston-Jones. Hi Ish.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Hello.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: And another old friend, award-winning lighting designer, Carol Mullins, who has lit productions at Danspace's venue at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery for more than 40 years, and I miss you both. I also want to mention that behind the scenes we have Yolanda Royster and Ben Akio Kimitichur behind the scenes wizards as we record our conversation today. And this will be a short conversation. We decided to focus on our archives and really just pick one piece that we all hold dear. And we invited Ish and Carol because of their long history with Danspace. It felt like a moment to reflect on the work that they've done at Danspace. And then also just talk a little bit about the groundbreaking series that Ishmael curated at 1982 entitled *Parallels*. Carol recently reminded me that it was one of several programs in the restored sanctuary after the infamous fire at St. Mark's Church, which some of you know, some of you might not know that St. Mark's has been our primary venue since 1974. We revisited this program in 2012 and realized what a treasure trove it was and really continues to be, so thank you Ish. It's a series that keeps on giving. And today we thought we would focus on one of your early pieces, *Relatives*. It came up spontaneously, actually, in the first conversation I had with Carol about, like, let's look at our archives, and she said *Relatives*, and then I had another

conversation recently, a few weeks ago now with Thomas Lax, who also brought it up quite unrelated to Carol and that he's going to write something about it, which will be available on our journal, on our website in the coming weeks, but um, yeah, *Relatives* you perform with your mother. We're going to talk about that in a minute. But the first question we all ask him these Zooms, which I think is important, is where are you riding out this beast? How are you doing? What's your life like right now?

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Right now I'm doing fine. I live in the East Village very close to St. Mark's Church and Danspace, so I'm in the neighborhood. And fortunately, I have -- I'm a member of a community garden, which is next to my apartment building. So I hang out there a lot. I just got finished teaching this semester at NYU and UArts in Philadelphia remotely. So that was a challenge, but one that worked out actually.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Mm. That's amazing. What about you, Carol? I know ice cream has been big in your life these days.

Carol Mullins: Well, I'm in Brooklyn, and from my kitchen window, I have a view that includes the Trade Center and a little bit of Lower Manhattan and it's sparkling away and it looks just wonderful and magical. And I can't go there because I don't want to take the subway. But it's there and I'm, I'm you know, I look and I wonder, but I guess nothing much is happening there. Ish is hanging out in his garden. Danspace is closed. Okay, I'm staying in Brooklyn. I live with my cat, her name is Star, and I talk to her quite a lot. My neighbors have taken pity on me and they arrive with groceries and occasionally full meals. Last night I was delivered a pork chop, red cabbage with apples, etc, on a tray right outside my door. I'm doing all right. Um, it's a little too quiet. And I would like to be going places. Yeah, but it's a nice it's a comfortable apartment. Sunny, big.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Yeah, I'm glad you're both doing well. I'm in Ditmas Park, Brooklyn. And it's fine. I mean, we have what we need. We have a little terrace. I watch the birds and see the tree tops. I look up at the sun three times a day. Don't go out a whole lot but ,starting to go out a little more. I -- this is a little bit beside the point but someone just sent me a clip of Graham Nash singing in the St. Mark's Western garden for CBS Sunday Morning. And he he was being interviewed by the CBS program, I guess it aired this past Sunday. So there is a way to do social distancing concerts maybe. And apparently he lives in the East Village. I didn't know that. He moved from Hawaii six years ago. So our neighbor Graham Nash is in our garden [laughs] this week. So yeah, so thinking of the Church, Carol, I'd love to start with you about the fire at St. Mark's in 1978. And then we'll jump to 1982 when Danspace was finally able to present performances in the refinished sanctuary, but it was a pretty traumatic fire and you brought it up because we were talking about this current moment like we're not in a space and we've been separated from the space and when will we get back in? And how, how emotional will that feel for us? So that's sort of what prompted me to ask you about the fire and that kind of crisis of that moment.

Carol Mullins: Okay, well, I'm going to start a little before the fire, but I'll get through quickly.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Great.

Carol Mullins: Before Danspace was founded at St. Mark's, the parishioners removed some of the pews so they could worship in the round. There was already dancing in Washington Square Methodist, The Poetry Project, the Oral History project, and the Youth Preservation Project already existed as a part of St. Mark's. This photo here was taken in 1969. It's an electric mass. And you could see -- that it's full of the heavy plaques, that show of various religious symbols: a rather giant and extremely heavy cross. And it's darker. So it probably looked about like this when Danspace was founded. In 1974, the Danspace Project was founded with Larry Fagin as the first director. Could you change slides? This is the first Danspace production *The Natural History of the American Dancer*. Photo by Cosmos. There was a red linoleum floor, the heavy church plaques are there and the giant wood cross you can just see it behind her. Wendy Perron wrote about those early years. "Larry Fagin's distinctive taste and adventurousness made Danspace an aesthetic scout rather than a catch all for stray choreographers." Change slides. This photo is in June of 1978. It's Andy de Groat's *Get Wreck* photo by Lois Greenfield. By this time the rest of the pews had been removed. A new hardwood dance floor and plywood platform for seating had just been installed. There was a huge renovation project underway, nearly finished. The walls were still dark, the plaque still present. Larry reluctantly allowed rental booms and lights in the balcony among the piles of wooden pews. He was terrified of fire. Well, shortly after, here's the Times July 28, 1978, the day after the fire photos by Lloyd Moskowitz and Neal Boenzi. In an article by Robert McG. Thomas Jr. The Times and other papers described difficulties presented to the firefighters. There had been a chaotic delay before calling it in. The iron fence in the graveyard prevented the use of standard equipment. It all had to be portable. The beams made it a wood fire. Heavy chunks of slate kept falling down and the fire might collapse at any moment, so they had to work all from outside. It was important to save as many of the stained glass windows as possible. 9 of the 23 were destroyed. It had apparently started in a renovation accident with an acetylene torch. Remember we mentioned that everything was under renovation at that time when they put in the new floor and all of that. Well, this is the devastation. This is Steve Facey, the arts administrator, looking up through the rubble. You can see the organ at the back. That's kind of interesting, do look at the organ because that organ is going to be removed after this and it's going to really change how things are at St. Mark's. You can still see the plaques around the edge and the horror of it all. This is a view looking up at the sky through the charred beams, photo by H. Edelman. This is the ruined clockface. Photo by R. Aguila. Well, the Preservation Youth Project had been working on the church at the time of the fire and they had made the west garden, which won awards, and these are kids that were at risk. Some of them actually had been busted for stealing stuff from the church. Anyway, they were already organized so they were ready to immediately begin the restoration work. And they were learning the building craft from master craftsmen. And this photo is by Steve Facey. This is working on the altar. Also photo by Steve Facey. I have a feeling that the original altar did not have as many steps. It wasn't as high as this. So they're changing the interior somewhat. The church bell that had been installed in 1836 had cracked irreparably from the heat, and it now sits in the east yard right near the back entrance. You probably noticed it. It's to remind us of that fire and its destruction and the rebirth. Danspace's

Fall projects -- Fall season -- took place across the street of the Third Street Music School and then moved into the parish hall when it was ready. In 1980, Cynthia Hedstrom took over from Larry. Then finally at Easter 1982, Cynthia and Wendy Perron curated a grand reopening: the new beginning of Danspace in the sanctuary at St. Mark's church with two programs of Judson reconstructions. This photo is actually taken a good bit after '82 so there's already some signs of age, but in any case, you can feel it's rebirth, it's lightness. You can see two shades of white there's like a slightly warmer shade and a slightly cooler shade of white. The floor is glowing. The windows right at the time of the reconstructions, the stained glass windows upstairs were just plain glass. So it was even even lighter than this. This has a slight color diffusion from all the stained glass. Look at the foot of each of those columns. You see that little tiny detail there? We call them the Lotus. And they were not in the original ones. The original columns were plain right to the floor. And one of the kids in the Preservation Youth Project designed those. I don't know, it's beautiful. I always think of this when I see them.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: So interesting. Um, the Reverend Guthrie in the 19'teens and 1920s, who was a Rector at that time, he was the first to use lights during his services. So I saw a picture--I haven't been able to find it--of the columns that had actually different colored bulbs in the top of the column or pillar. Have you seen those before, Carol? Do you remember those images?

Carol Mullins: No, I'd love to see the picture. I understand the columns at one point were heavy and square. I saw photographs. It was there. They were almost like this. Just a little plainer.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Yeah, I mean, in terms of lighting, he actually had different colored lights for different parts of the service. So there were amber and green. And when he would do his sermon, he had a lighting designer that would actually, you know, have cues and, and that organ was not original either. He brought that in. He had that commissioned for the balcony, so that they could have-- I mean basically they were performative services. He really believed in the arts as a way of worshipping. So it's interesting to just talk through that with you. And I was like, oh my gosh, they lit the services in the teens and 20s. That's amazing.

Carol Mullins: There used to be--well there probably still are these vigils that they would have which would be celebrating Christmas, Easter. And I used to light those. Also the Tenebrae service, which is the evening one. Right now I think they do it with a natural light fading on its own and some candles. But I used to light them with blue light and some candle lit light and it changed during the course of the services. But I love the idea of Guthrie for the regular mass having these different colors. The organ that you saw all ruined and was of course ripped out. And when it was ripped out, it revealed that there was a little rose window behind it. And that window was replaced. I mean, who knows what was there before. No one could see it behind the organ. The new one is beautiful. It has red, yellow, and gold, and orange like petals of a flower. And it lets in the most amazing afternoon light and slipping to one magical moment that happened with a show that was originally from that season, that 1982 season, in which Ishmael was also involved in. And it was redone in, I guess, was it 2016 when John Bernd's -- Lost [and Found]

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Right, 2016.

Carol Mullins: One day I came in for rehearsal and John Bernd had a little red chair, which appeared in all of his pieces. And the light from that rose window was magically hitting. It's a small window, and it was magically hitting that chair. And it was like the spirit of this man who done this wonderful work in 1982, and then other things, and then he died in 1988. It was like he was coming back to see what we were doing. Anyway, the window is magical for me.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Me too.

Carol Mullins: And it wouldn't have been there except for that fire. And I guess to me that means rebirth gives you an opportunity. You can get what you had, and you can get more than what you had.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: So great, Carol.

Carol Mullins: Also, the giant bell, which is now beside the door to the church, the back door to the church, was replaced. And there are four bells in the tower now, which we're all very familiar with. And they're subscribed to the arts, they're dedicated to the arts, which is wonderful that they decided to do that.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Great. That's so great. Thanks for pulling that together. I love all those images that you found. Incredible. And now, I think maybe I will turn to you Ish and talk about Parallels. So we're now at 1982. You've just moved from Philadelphia, and you're an usher at Danspace Project.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Actually I had been to St. Mark's before I moved to New York actually, in the 70s. Before the fire actually. Allen Ginsberg and Robert Lowell were doing a poetry reading and I used to come up to New York from Philly--it's not far. I used to come up and hang out and see things and I remember being there and think oh, this is so cool. I just I didn't even know there was dance there. I went there because of Ginsberg actually, to hear him read. And then the, you know, the fire happened before I moved here in the end of 1979-1980. That winter, I moved up here and I was an usher, volunteer usher, you know so I could go see shows for free. I wound up living right across the street actually. I think there's a bank there now. I was on the second floor. Second Avenue and 10th Street. So I used to hang, it was like literally in my backyard front yard. I would come over and sort of hang out and help Cynthia Hedstrom, who was the director then, and usher and do other little, you know, officey kinds of things as well. And so, there was a relationship and I had read an article in a weekly called Other Stages, I believe. It was more of a theatre weekly, but there was an interview with Bebe Miller talking about what is considered Black dance and what that image is, what is the image of Black dance. And there were people turns out like myself, like Bebe, like Blondell Cummings, who were working not in the sort of expected Black vernacular. So, I just sort of tossed that as an idea, maybe something I could work on at Danspace, a series. It was sort of a not fully formed idea and she said, Yeah, why don't you do it? Like literally. And I said okay. I had never organized

anything like that before. So I began contacting people, some people I knew, mostly I didn't know, Gus Solomons.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: We can look at that image now of on the fire escape.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Sure. This is sort of like an image for sort of a PR image that he took. I don't know who the photographer was. There's the late Harry Whittaker Sheppard, Fred Holland, Christina Jones and a young Ralph Lemon and a young me on a fire escape of St. Mark's Church in the back in the garden. So I contacted these people, some of whom I knew. Fred, I knew Fred Holland, I knew from Philadelphia. We had worked together there. Blondell, I was a fan of her work with Meredith Monk and *Education of the Girl Child*. I really didn't know her but I contacted her. She told me that there was this new kid who had just moved in from Minneapolis named Ralph somebody and I said, Oh, okay, I'll you know, let's ask him. Bebe Miller, I contacted because of the article. I contacted other people who couldn't do it, Bill T. Jones, Sheryl Sutton were busy or out of town and couldn't be a part of it. Harry Sheppard, I sort of knew from around. He had worked with Andy de Groat.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Yeah. And I just want to note, just for the record, that later on, through the Suitcase Fund at Dance Theater Workshop, you toured to Europe and added Jawole Willa Jo Zollar to the program.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Right. That was in 1987. It was sponsored by the American Center in Paris, brought us to Paris and we went to The Place in London and a theater in Geneva, Switzerland. Right. Called the *Parallels in Black* tour actually.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Right. So, um, yeah. I love this photo so much and I remember when we revived the program in 2012 with, I think, almost 50 different artists and we tried to recreate that and Ian Douglas took a series of photographs on different days there were too many people or he couldn't show up in one day, trying to harken back to the 1982 image. So, really a generative, generative series.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: It was actually really good. It was very interesting because all of our works, the 8 of us that were on the 1982 series were really different from one another. There was Gus Solomons doing a sort of Cunninghamesque, very geometric. I was doing a formative piece with my mother about family history called *Relatives-- Part Two, Relatives* actually. Ralph Lemon was dancing in a green velvet skirt. And he had like about 100 apples on the sanctuary floor, each with one bite taken out of them.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: By his daughter, I think, Chelsea.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Bebe Miller was dancing to the woman singing live sort of Gregorian chants kind of sound. Fred Holland was working with a super 8 film. Yeah, it was just really, really different, different voices. And I think it really opened up people's perception of what Black

choreographers were making, like the breadth, the width, and breadth of what black choreographers were making. And that was sort of my thesis.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: So that kinda of brings us to the piece that we want to look at today, talk about a little bit is *Relatives* or, which has different names, I guess you were saying there's *Part II Relatives* at Danspace Project, but, um, we're seeing an image here of the performance with your mother. There are two versions. One is the version you performed and was documented at Danspace, which is now archived with the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. And then there was a few years later, a film version by the brilliant film director, Julie Dash, who's well known for her incredible film *Daughters of the Dust*, and also cinematography by Arthur Jafa. And I would love to talk about both of these versions, but can you just give us a background about about the piece and especially, yeah, just this sort of conceptual framework. What were you thinking of?

Ishmael Houston-Jones: I actually began- I think I really began it when I was still living in Philadelphia in the late 70s. I was really interested in my family's history and sort of Black migration in general from the south to the north. My parents were a part of that, that era, sort of the tail end of it actually. They had both been born in Mississippi, but I was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where they met and married. But I've been sort of- and I used to go to Mississippi every summer with my family just to visit. So there was this sort of difference. I was this northern kid, this northern Black kid. Suddenly every summer I'd be down in Mississippi where things were, in the 50s and 60s, were very different. And that's sort of like sort of shaped who I am in terms of family, also. But I was interested in that as a personal phenomenon for myself, but also as a global phenomenon, like migrations of families and migrations of people and how people get from one place to another and how that shapes their destiny. And but also it was very personal. I wanted to have a conversation with my mom about family. So the original piece, and sort of works in progress of it I had done. I had gone down to Pennsylvania and I had recorded her with a walkman, with a very cheap recorder, of her just talking about the family and how they migrated and how she came to be born in Mississippi, but lived most of her adult life in Pennsylvania. And when I decided to do this for the Parallels series in 1982, I realized that the recording was really crappy. It was like not good quality. It was, yeah. So, I was talking to her on the phone and I said, you know, I'm gonna have to come down to Pennsylvania and re-record you with a better recorder and she said, well I'm going to come up. It was literally her idea. She said, I'm going to come up and see your piece. Why don't I just do it live? Which is amazing because my mother was not a performer at all. She was a parole auditor for the Department of Health and Welfare for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. She was a numbers person. But you know, I was her son and she just volunteered and I said, that's kind of brilliant and scary. But she did it. And we reworked the piece a lot. One of the things I added is that I was telling-- the piece sort of opens with me talking about my family history and I have a question. And she's sitting in the audience, as just a normal audience member and I go over-- I decided I was going to go over and pick her up and carry her over my shoulder and continue the conversation and she agreed. I don't know what got into her that she agreed to do this stuff. The other thing about the live piece and we'll talk about it maybe when we talk about the video is that the opening of the piece starts off in the dark because I wanted to have more of a-- more of a sort of sensual

feeling to the piece, that it wasn't just this dance piece. So, there's this whole section called "Dancing in the Dark" and I'm calling out "Here mothy, mothy. Here mothy, mothy." I'm not going to sing it now. It was singing it then. "Dinner time moth." And I was scattering-- I had a bucket of mothballs, which we probably could never get away with today. And I was scattering mothballs, so the audience would have this sort of sound and smell experience of the piece before they saw the piece. Because I had been thinking about sort of mothballs as things that are preserved. It's sort of has this sort of evocative thing to me, a sensorial thing about like memory and things that have been packed away. So I wanted the audience to have this smell of moth balls and the sound of me singing and then I do a stamping dance in the dark, but as well, and then the lights come up and the piece continues. That whole section got cut out of the video and --I'm just saying-- just because Julie decided that that wouldn't work on video. But yeah, it was really -- it worked. It was-- you know, it's become sort of a sort of like an iconic, signature piece of mine. It entailed a lot of like performative aspects, as well as the dance itself and I did dance in the piece as well. I always sort of forget to mention that there was dancing in the piece.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Carol, you were there. You were lighting the show right? Running the soundboard?

Carol Mullins: I was lighting the show. When he when he talks about the beginning in the dark, to me it means things like the change of time or a sense of time, that how you feel about-- it's very different in the dark. It seems-- it seemed a very long time in the dark to me. I remember you know like-- but the singing was pretty amazing and it was both seductive, like he was trying to you know "here mothy, mothy din din" like coming in. But of course mothballs kill moths. I mean, it's luring them into something that's not going to be so great. And yet the piece is rather tender. Oh, it's also it's very funny when he finally-- when he brings his mother in, it's kind of the fireman's carry. It's not any sweet little in his arms thing. I mean, she's thrown over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, and then he very delicately puts her down. It's quite a contrast that moment, that moment, maybe he walks in with her. There she is. Occasionally saying "Now don't drop me." and you know, you kind of worry. And then he's so careful as he puts her into place at her little table with her eggs and things like that. So, the piece had all kinds of different feelings about it. I mean, we all have relatives and ancestors that we invoke in different ways. I mean, at one point don't you actually say the names of a lot of your relatives?

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Oh yeah. When the lights eventually come up-- it was a long time in the dark, actually.

Carol Mullins: Oh, it was a very long time.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: I was on the altar spinning. And I'm calling out the names of all the ancestors, the first names of all the ancestors I know. It goes back to my great-great grandparents on my mother's side, and some on my father's side, but this calling them out as a mantra as I'm turning and spinning. But I think that was influenced by Andy de Groat actually. In terms of the East Village and what people were doing at the time. There was a lot of spinning pieces I remember at that time.

Carol Mullins: Yes, Andy was very big on spinning. Not only did I hear your ancestors, but I also heard my own.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Wow.

Carol Mullins: I mean, I heard an echo of my own-- the names of my family going back in my mind as you were doing that. Perhaps because, I mean, I saw it several times because I worked on it. Perhaps I had more time to change as it went along, but it was evoking all of our ancestors to me.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Before we go on to the Julie Dash [film], I just want to ask you to talk about that end cue, the way that a piece ended at the church.

Carol Mullins: Oh, talk about a sense of timing.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Oh, yeah Carol. Why don't we talk about that?

Carol Mullins: Oh, yes. Well, it's actually-- every now and then choreographers or people will say things to me like "Change it when it feels right." And I don't quite remember how Ishmael described the ending, but it indicates--

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Well in the ending I'm jumping away from my mother. She's calling me by my given name, Chuck, which is my nickname for Charles. And she's calling me and I'm jumping away from her. The idea is that I was jumping, trying to get away or at the door. And I think I told you this "Let me jump for a while." I don't remember the words.

Carol Mullins: Not too specific about it.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: "When you're not interested anymore." That's what you told me, Ish. You said something about "Bring the lights down when you're not interested anymore." I thought that's what you said.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: That sounds like something I would say then.

Carol Mullins: Yes. Well, I was interested. I thought it looked great. I had no idea that I was killing him by making keep jumping. I mean it was a very vigorous jump for a very long time. Anyway, it was a wonderful ending. I'm so sorry, Ish.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: I survived.

Carol Mullins: Because at the beginning the time for me stretched in one way and at the end it stretched and it shrunk in another way. It seemed like nothing to me. I mean, I wasn't jumping. I was just going "Oh, this looks so good."

Ishmael Houston-Jones: That was really amazing because I remember-- I can remember the feeling, "When is she going to turn the lights out? I can't jump anymore."

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Well, this might be a nice moment to segue into the Julie Dash version. I don't know if you want to set it up first, Ishmael.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: There was a series on PBS called *Alive from Off Center* and it later began-- it was called *Alive TV*, in which they would pair filmmakers with choreographers to do eight minute pieces with a set sizable, but reasonable budgets. And somehow the Director, Film Director, Julie Dash, I guess they had approached her first, and she approached me about doing a film video treatment of *Relatives* to use both film and video in the work. And I had not heard of her. We had a meeting. I loved her. She was great. She was very warm. She had very good ideas about how to capture the piece. The original piece is about, I would say, about 12 to 16 minutes. I can't remember exactly. And it needed to be cut down to 8. We cut out the dark and the mothballs. But yeah, and she's suggested locations. I suggested locations. It was a really good collaboration. It was really great working with her.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Should we take a look?

Ishmael Houston-Jones: We should take a look.

[*Relatives* video begins]

[**Ishmael Houston-Jones:** Mariah, Miles, Laura, Matthew, Martha, Albert, Mariah, Miles, Alice, Laura, [names continue to overlap] [voice in the distance] ...Understand... I'm not sure if... The life vest was my idea. So I do... I worry about prettiness or I don't know I can spend years to-- to I don't know... She'd never seen a camera before. That's what I think. Alice Trussell set the fingers on her left hand stretched out long, tenuous, touching her husband Albert's knee. I think she'd never seen a camera before. Albert Houston sat next to his wife, Alice Trussell. A big brimmed hat on his left knee, his walking stick stuck through. Their children stood behind them. Glass eye, a big camera looking directly at her. Photo. Dye. I think she'd never seen a camera before. Allison Albert lived down there. I live up here. How did I get here? Lutheran Perlin had three children, three daughters. They had five children, three daughters. One daughter gave me a copy of this photo. She stands there.

Pauline Jones: Are you going to drop me?

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Oh.

Pauline Jones: I told I had gained weight. That you shouldn't try this trick again.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: This is my mom. Hi.

Pauline Jones: Hi.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: I'm not gonna drop you.

Pauline Jones: Okay, but I told you I had--

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Okay, down you go. 1-2-3.

Pauline Jones: Well. That wasn't so easy.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Okay, just sit in the chair and there are eggs over there. There's dye here and give me a couple of minutes. Okay?

Pauline Jones: Okay. A couple of minutes for what?

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Oh, I don't know. I just thought I would start dancing and you could start talking now.

Pauline Jones: Okay. Ishmael wanted to know how he got up here from there. It was very simple. I got here. I am an incurable romantic and I believe that somewhere on this planet earth we meet our soulmate. I was born in the Red Hills of Mississippi. A couple of years later his father was born in the Mississippi Delta some 200 miles away. But we were not to meet until 24 years later, 1000 miles from Mississippi in a bathroom in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Yes, in the bathroom. And as a result of that meeting, Ishmael Houston-Jones got here. However, at that point in time, he was Charles Houston-Jones. Charles, for his paternal grandfather, and Houston, for my maiden name. I was the last Houston and I was reluctant to give up the name. And long before Alex Haley went out in search of his roots, I was determined that my child would know his roots and his ancestors. We have to be careful when we start looking at our family tree though we might find Morphe and outlaws sprouting from the same root sometimes. But the one time-- the reason we have these eggs here, I took him down. He had never been to the farm before. And once he saw that the eggs came from the barn, instead of the supermarket, he wouldn't eat them anymore. Then came Easter and he ate the Easter eggs. And I got the bright idea if he would eat Easter eggs, maybe he would eat any colored eggs. I tried it and sure enough, he wasn't as smart as he thought he was. It worked. He's been eating eggs ever since. Do you remember that?

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Well, no.

Pauline Jones: Well, good. There are a lot of things you don't remember. Some would be best if I didn't remember them, like the time you got lost in the store. I told him one thing. If he got lost to go back to where we started from. And this way I would come back there. Well, he remembered to go back to where we started from, but I didn't. This little boy was too little for me to see him in the aisles of the supermarket, so I was running up and down the aisles looking for him. Then finally, I thought we should go back to where we started from, and I went back there and there stood this pitiful looking child. And I looked at him and I said to him, "Little boy, are

you lost?" And he said, "My mommy lost me." And he looked inside the bag. He got very angry with me. He got angry a lot of times, but then he got over that too.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: How much time do I have?

Pauline Jones: Oh, not very much. What are you gonna do in this time?

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Oh, I don't know. Give me another minute or so.

Pauline Jones: Okay. Oh dance your little heart out while you doing this.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Okay.

Pauline Jones: When do you want me to call you?

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Whenever I'm finished.

Pauline Jones: I'll call you before you finish because it always takes you a while to get finished. It takes you a while to wind down. So, is it time? Okay. Chuck! Chuck! Chuck! Chuck! Chuck! Chuck! Chuck! Chuck! Chuck! Chuckie!]

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Wow. That was really beautiful. I've been watching it a lot lately. I still-- I still find it quite compelling and interesting. That end is so haunting. I would love you to talk about something you mentioned last time we talked, was about-- I don't know you said there was like more tension in the live version at the end. It might have been because Carol didn't bring the lights down and you were exhausted. It sounds like you were interested in the tension, the tension between you and your mother.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Yeah, I think that final image, the sanctuary was set up where the audience was facing the altar. And I was jumping at that door at the side of the altar sort of trying to get out and trying to get away. And that-- I mean, that felt like part of it, that I was both interested in this sort of family history and how I've been shaped by it, but also how to escape it. And that was sort of what was going through my head and it's interesting that Carol brought up about the or you did actually about the mothballs, that you're calling the mothballs. But they're also going to kill them with moths, like calling them for dinner with something that will kill them. It had all these layers of meaning for me. I mean, my mother and I had a really good relationship, but it was also problematic, and there was that tension and I thought Julie-- I thought she softened the edge a little bit. I'm not sure if that's true. That's sort of my feeling of sort of the colors, sort of the gold filters, the gold light, sort of, I thought it warmed it more than having sort of the white moth balls on the floor.

Carol Mullins: You would ask for fairly white light too for the lighting for the show. It wasn't very colorful.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Right, but it was yeah.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: What are we looking at here?

Ishmael Houston-Jones: This is Lorna Simpson, the visual artist, was a sort of on set photographer for the production of the video film. So it's just me. The first part of the-- well there's a part by the ocean which Julie added of me walking along the beach but then the house was actually my cousin's house in Hollis, Queens in New York. When Julie and I were talking, we were talking about where we could shoot it. And I said, it would be really interesting this house and it's my cousin's house and it looked like a country house. It looked like it could be in Mississippi, where it had that sort of like edge, that sort of edge to it. So, that first part was shot there. Then, the second part was shot-- it was actually a sort of garage in the West Village. Sort of like-- sort of the barn idea was in Julie's mind. So, yeah.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: I mean, the cinematography was by Arthur Jafa, who is of course an extraordinary artist and has been making incredible installations and pieces recently. I wonder how much his aesthetic or sensibility came in--

Ishmael Houston-Jones: I think it was a lot. At the time, he and Julie Dash were married at the time, so they were very much collaborators on the project. And I think all in all, I don't know if Julie and I ever met, although I think it was always with the three of us actually. Yeah, so his aesthetic was definitely very much a part of it.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Do we have a second image we can look at? I think there's another one.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Or the portrait.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: I was going to ask you about the life jacket, actually, especially when you're talking about the, you know, seducing the moths to come to mothballs or this tension and anger. Was that symbolic or was it just--

Ishmael Houston-Jones: It was actually really funny. The title of the piece in 1982 was *Part II Relatives* because I was working on a trilogy that never got finished. I did the first part which was called *Susquehanna*, which was about-- it started also with me spinning, but sort of spinning out the names of rivers I'd lived near or been in. I grew up near the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania. So, the life jacket was going to carry through to all of those-- all three pieces. The third part, which I literally cannot remember what the third part was going to be of the trilogy, but *Relatives* was the center part. *Susquehanna* only got performed once at Performance Space 122 one evening. So, the life jacket was a carryover from that, but it was supposed to be-- it was a through line for all of these. Paula Court took this. This appeared in the book by Susan Leigh Foster, which was about the choreographer Richard Bull, and about dances that described themselves and it's about-- she interviewed me and several other people about improvisation.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Carol, did you have anything that stood out to you about the film that you wanted to bring our attention to?

Carol Mullins: Well, I'm glad he talked about the house. That was very interesting to me that anything up here could evoke Mississippi or was it was it yellow? Was the little house yellow?

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Yeah.

Carol Mullins: So it had a color and a feeling of, I don't know, the earth to me, a bit. Also, the very scene taking place in the garage, when you talk about tension. There was certainly plenty of tension in that building. I mean the light in the dark with sort of slices of light and the environment is kind of harsh too. So, even though the other parts of it had softened color, that part certainly felt tense to me.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Before, when we were talking before, you asked me about the egg dying and what--

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Yeah, I was just thinking about that.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: What that was about and I was thinking about that because I needed when I decided that my mother that-- when my mother volunteered herself to be live in the piece, I knew I needed something. Literally, she was not a performer at all. And I needed something for her to opt to do that if I wanted her to talk. And she improvises her text. I basically tell her to tell the story of our family and how they move, but she can say whatever she wants and she did on many occasions. And she times me with a watch. And so I was thinking about generations and generative things. So, I decided, well maybe I can have her dying eggs and the dye was always red in the piece. And it's sort of this Greek Easter theme of bright red eggs. And I thought it also sort of echoed the look of the mothballs on the wooden floor. These sort of round white things. It was sort of like, it was sort of like, it was one of those really quick, intuitive decisions. And so when she did the video, we did several takes of her talking. And she told that story and that's the one that Julie selected. And I said to her, I said, "You know, I don't really remember that about the colored eggs, that you dyed them so that I would eat Easter eggs. I would eat Easter eggs." She said, "Oh, I just made that up." And I said, "What?" And she said, "I needed to know why I was doing that. So I thought it sounded interesting, so I just said it." Which I think it's kind of amazing that she just sort of improvised this-- completely improvised this lie about my life.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: That's amazing.

Ishmael Houston-Jones: A piece that's supposed to be about authenticity.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: Right. And also that you end up as an improviser and maybe you learned that from someone. Maybe there was a lot of improvisation going on in your household. I love that story and she is an amazing storyteller and has such a presence and completely, you know,

that directness like there's no, there's no fuss about her. I think it's just a wonderful, wonderful piece. So, I guess you know, if you have any last thoughts, either of you, it's probably time to bring our wonderful conversation to a close.

Carol Mullins: I do have one question that I wanted to ask him at the time and perhaps relying too much on his mother who was improvising, but she did say in one of her stories, she said, "So my Chucky went away. I don't remember to where and came back an Ishmael." Where did you go?

Ishmael Houston-Jones: Israel. I lived in Israel for a year. So, yeah that's when the name change happened. And yeah. And my cousins still call me Chuck.

Judy Hussie-Taylor: That's great. Well, thank you both for bringing this work back to us today and sharing your memories of St. Mark's Church and Danspace Project and *Parallels* and *Relatives*. It's just been wonderful to be with you. I miss you both very much. Yeah. And I'm excited to announce that our next Conversations Without Walls will be between two extraordinary artists Eiko Otake and Joan Jonas. So, please stay tuned for updates about when we will be showing that conversation in the near future. And now I'd like to introduce our Assistant Curator of Public Engagement, Seta Morton, who will tell us about Danspace's website and online journal. So thank you all. Bye.

Carol Mullins: Bye, thank you.

[Outro]

Seta Morton: Thank you for joining us for this Conversations Without Walls. The Conversations Without Walls 2020 digital series will be broadcasted on YouTube Live for one time only viewing parties. Don't worry if you don't catch us there, the conversations are all pre-recorded and will be posted ultimately on the Danspace Project website, in our online Journal and Issue 11: *trembling archive*. Our Journal issues accumulate over time with new material added regularly. Apart from this series, you will find video, audio, and written work by Danspace Project artists, curators, and writers. Please also check out Issues 1 through 10, to find work that centers the Danspace Project past Platforms, seasons, experiments. The online Journal is really a place to get more insight into some of the internal conversations, research, and work that goes behind our more mainstage, public-facing programs. So, check out the online Journal and we look forward to having you at the next Conversation Without Walls.