Choreographer Camille A. Brown and her namesake company, Camille A. Brown & Dancers, use dance theatre to explore culture, race, and identity in today’s urban America. Brown’s ongoing performance “Trilogy” grapples with internal and external perceptions that Americans have based on identity, and the right and need we all have to claim space in society. **What does it mean for a person of color to be manipulated by another power, what does it mean for a person to claim their own power, and how do communities and individuals claim power accessing both ancestral and contemporary vocabulary?** By melding these questions and concepts together, the trilogy highlights the resilience and creative genius of African Americans.

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The first piece in the series, *Mr. TOL E RAncE* (2012), examines Black stereotypes in the media, both past and present harkening back to the the vaudevillian era of minstrelsy.
(a form of theater before vaudeville, where white performers would paint their faces up in Blackface and mimic Black people on the plantation) and the birth of such stereotypes of Black people as dimwitted, lazy, slow, and happy and Slaves depicted as being “happy,” comfortable, and at ease on the plantation. Since stereotypes came from a place of humor, I wanted to highlight the fact that regardless of the circumstances that black actors had to go through, they were still able to be brilliant and magnificent, and flip the script against the oppression or the stereotypes that were being placed on them. Black actors were literally and figuratively wearing a mask, both while performing in blackface, and in society to survive.

Research is a critical part of my process. I came across a book by Mel Watkins called *On the Real Side*, which uses the lens of humor to talk about “inside” and “outside” perception of black entertainers through time. That is what *Tolerance* was about. As an artist, I was starting to see the fabric of this social game and just how much racism and sexism were (and still are) very much alive in the arts and in the world around us. This work was very much birthed from a personal feeling of restriction. I wanted to look to the past to inform my future.

I was also reminded of a quote from W. E. B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, “One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* was also an influence.

Filmed in 2000, it follows a frustrated Black film executive who tries to expose the persistent racism of the industry through creating a controversial blackface minstrel show in order to get fired. Instead, he inadvertently creates a hit. The film was criticized at the time for bringing up stereotypes that some claimed had long since been overcome, but it now seems frighteningly relevant. It draws connections between contemporary instances of racial bias and the tropes of the past and underscores the continuing legacy of minstrelsy, speaking to, for instance, the persistent characterization of unarmed Black men killed by police as “thugs” or burdens on society.

—Ashley Clark, *The Guardian*
Another reference that influenced me was the experience of comedian Dave Chappelle and his struggle navigating the 21st century “minstrel” quandary. Though early in his career Chappelle felt like people were laughing with him, as his popularity grew, he began to feel as though the (increasingly white) audience was laughing at the wrong elements of the jokes. Even worse, in doing so they were manipulating the meaning of what he was trying to portray, creating the effect of solidifying, not undermining the stereotypes. He made the decision to walk away from it at that time — the money, the fame, everything.

These examples led me to ask the question: as an artist, what are the choices I’m making? When do I feel like I’m “shuffling” instead of dancing?

To get to the bottom of this question, I started looking at the rise of reality shows and the depictions of Black people. For me, these shows constituted a kind of modern day minstrelsy Spike Lee was referencing in *Bamboozled*.

In *Tolerance*, the use of clips from television shows through various eras illustrate the examples of how the stereotypical image of black people is created, molded and perpetuated through time solidifying it as a cultural norm. Whether through catchphrases or gestures actors like Gary Colman (*Diff’rent Strokes*, “What you talkin’ about Willis?”), Jimmy Walker (*Good Times*, “Dynomite”), and even Chapelle Show—though their work was celebrated and penetrated the lexicon, becoming iconic—what happens when the stereotypes rule over your life and that’s all people see? What happens when you want to take off the “mask”?
There are two solos in *Tolerance* I created that deal with the complexities of W.E.B. DuBois’ “double consciousness” and the struggle of the mask. The dancers physicalize the internal struggle of having to put on on a demoralizing facade, in a confrontation with themselves. We witness the dancers in solos physically contemplating the question: Is it possible to live without the mask of stereotypes, will I ever be able to be my authentic self at all times without judgment or repercussion? I see pain in our struggle, but I also see joy. It’s a personal story. It’s a Black story. It’s a human story. It’s a celebration of the perseverance of the black performer.

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My second work in the trilogy, *BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play* (2015), was birthed from *Mr. TOL E. RANCE*. While touring the work, I got a lot of questions from Black women and girls asking if I was going to create a work that focused mainly on Black female stereotypes. At the time I was working on a musical *The Fortress of Solitude*, in which the protagonist is transported back to his childhood—the innocence and discovery of growing up. There were two characters that were black girls whom I created an entrance for. It was a short double Dutch routine, but sparked a fire inside of me. That’s when it clicked! I wanted to talk about childhood play and what that means to Black girls.

I wanted to create a work that showed all sides of “us,” the beauty, the brilliance, the intelligence, and, yes, the sass. I wanted to literally SHOW what “Black Girl Magic” is because it’s more than a hashtag. I was feeling frustrated and exhausted by Black female stereotypes because I deal with it every day, such as the trope of the angry black female or the trope of the strong Black female. Where are the dimensions? *BG:LP* is about us remembering who we were before being told you had a big nose, big eyes, and big lips, and whether you should wear a weave or natural hair.
What is interesting is that for the process, I had to learn how to play again. It took me awhile to get back to that childhood place, after all, I have been an adult now longer than I was a child! For the opening of the work I embody a child, so it was crucial that I reconnect to my inner little girl because I wanted the work to show the evolution from childhood innocence to adolescence to maturity.

Again I love research, and I spoke to cultural anthropologist Aimee Cox about my thoughts and she pointed me an essay from Kyra Gaunt’s book, The Games Black Girls Play. This book presents the act of “play” as being a catalyst for creative identity and expression that, “Through the practical activities of musical play, girls actually inhabit ‘in-body formulas’ (Drewal 1992) and construct their consciousness of themselves as black and female members of a subculture, in contradistinction to the traditions and privileges of the dominant culture, relative to race and gender (among other factors).”

Play, and how we play, was the key. Indeed, games like Double Dutch, Red light-Green light, Marco Polo, and hand clapping games were all buried in my DNA and BLACK GIRL unearthed them. Working on this work from this vantage point was difficult because there aren’t enough common media narratives that showcased Black girls being just that: girls. I needed to find them. Questions began racing through my mind: Who was
I before the world defined me? What are the unspoken languages within Black girl culture that are multidimensional and have been appropriated and compartmentalized by others? What are the dimensions of Black girl joy that cannot be boxed into a smile or a grimace, but demonstrated in a head tilt, lip smack, hand gesture, and more?

In American society, the bodies of black children are accelerated to maturity. Increasing black children are treated as “adults” in the judicial system and in the media. Black boys are afforded no leniency in courts, and the female body is hypersexualized. Girls are looked at as women, and boys as men. This practice has been normalized. I wanted to show who Black girls were, which are simply, just GIRLS.

I wanted Black girls to dance with each other so I made it a point to have three duets in the piece. It was important because most of the pop culture and media narrative is that Black girls fight and that Black girls don’t know how to resolve things. With BLACK GIRL, I wanted to make it clear that the work is for Black girls everywhere, yet overall I wanted to show that black girls are girls, we are human, and though the production might be culturally specific, everyone can relate to it, every child plays…the commonality is humanity.
I was very specific about the production’s aesthetic content. From the music, sets, lights and costumes everything was important in BLACK GIRL in terms of how I wanted Black girls to be seen. From my hoop earrings to the chalk on the wall—that was all intentional in my work. I wanted to depict the spectrum of diversity that exists within black culture—just as it does in white culture…we are not monolithic. So I wanted the music to be an amalgamation of all musical genres, to represent the real multi-dimensional tastes of Black girls. Yes, I do love Nina Simone, but I also love Radiohead and so many other artists from diverse musical genres. I didn’t want to hit anybody over the head with it, but I told my stylist Mayte Natalio that I wanted the costumes to be natural and real, as if we could simply walk off stage and into the street.

BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play showcases and elevates the rhythms and gestures of childhood play, highlights the musical complexity and composition, and claims them as art. It shows the power of sisterhood and the fact that, as we mature, Black girls still play. It is remembering, conjuring, honoring, and healing. It’s a Black girl’s story through her gaze. This work is a gift to myself and Black girls everywhere. It is a sense of place, a sense of identity, a sense of community.
ink celebrates the rituals, gestural vocabulary, and traditions that remain ingrained within the lineage of the African Diaspora and reclaims African-American narratives by showcasing their authenticity. The work examines the culture of Black life that is often appropriated, rewritten, or silenced.

Using the rhythms and sounds of traditional African and handmade instruments as its center, the work travels through time with elements of Blues, Hip-Hop, Jazz, and Swing. The movement is an amalgamation of African-American social dance, African, Tap, Jazz, Modern, and Hip-Hop.

As I began to develop ink, I had this idea of the dancers representing superheroes. I could figure out why I had the urge to play with this idea until I read Question Bridge: Black Males in America. One of the men interviewed said, “I see Black people as comic book
heroes because they always keep rising.” That was it! It is about showing that in our basic survival, and natural attributes we have superhuman powers. Powers to shift, overcome, transform, and persevere within an often hostile environment.

The seven sections of ink represent super powers of spirituality, history and heritage, the celebration of the Black body, Black love, brotherhood, exhaustion, and community.

It’s about using the power of the past and present to propel us into the future.

I lift up real life super heroes of the past — Harriet Tubman, James Baldwin, Kathrine Dunham and so many others. They held as much as they gave. They paved the way for us to fly and “be fly”. In flight we see the legacy of black people in America. Let’s carry on.

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*ink* will premiere at The Kennedy Center on December 2, 2017.
Award Winning Broadway and Concert Dance Choreographer, Camille A. Brown is a Guggenheim Fellowship recipient (2016), four-time Princess Grace Award winner (2006-2016), Jacob’s Pillow Dance Award recipient (2016), USA Jay Franke & David Herro Fellow (2015), TED Fellow (2015), Doris Duke Artist Award recipient (2015), and Lucille Lortel “Outstanding Choreographer” Award nominee (Fortress of Solitude, 2015). Her company, Camille A. Brown & Dancers (CABD), received a Bessie Award (2014) for Outstanding Production for Mr. TOL E. RAnCE and a Bessie Award nomination (2016) for Outstanding Production for BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play. Ms. Brown’s choreography has been commissioned by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Philadanco!, Complexions, and Urban Bush Women, among others. Her theater credits include Broadway’s A Streetcar Named Desire, The Winter’s Tale, Fortress of Solitude, Stagger Lee, Cabin in the Sky, tick, tick...BOOM!, and BELLA: An American Tall Tale, among others. Ms. Brown’s TED-Ed talk, A Visual History of Social Dance in 25 Moves, was chosen as one of the most notable talks of 2016 by TED Curator, Chris Anderson, and has over 11 million views on Facebook and counting. She is currently choreographing the upcoming Broadway revival of Once on This Island and CABD’s final trilogy work ink.