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Body Impossible:
Dynamics of Race, Sexuality, and Virtuosity in the Dance of Desmond Richardson

By

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in the

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Abstract

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This dissertation theorizes the dance career of Desmond Richardson through the related paradigms of race, gender, and sexuality in order to generate a socio-culturally nuanced understanding of the concept of virtuosity in performance. I have selected four distinct performance contexts of the 1990s through which to analyze Richardson's contribution to ballet and contemporary dance. Keeping questions of identity in the foreground, I interrogate both the racialized and gendered politics of concert dance companies and the role of versatility in Richardson's career. Central to this dissertation are both the discourse of virtuosity and the mechanics of the production of virtuosity as a mode or quality. Richardson's virtuosity is especially distinct in its harnessing of multiple dance styles and techniques. Despite his overall signature style, one that privileges hybridity over singularity, Richardson knowingly emphasizes certain techniques in certain settings in order to respond to the call of the work in question. Richardson's concert dance career began at Alvin Ailey, and in 1994 he both co-founded Complexions and began dancing with Ballett Frankfurt. It was three years later that he embarked on ABT and SFB's *Othello*.

The dissertation opens by questioning the relationship between the moving body and the photograph's supposed stillness. Through a reading of surface and stasis, it explores the status of labor as manifested in the particular photo-choreographic context of the Alvin Ailey poster. Placing dance studies into conversation with critical race studies and visual studies, I ask how skin, flesh, mutability, and labor coalesce to present or undermine a multicultural ideology. The chapter engages with Anne Anlin Cheng's concept of mutability, Vijay Prashad's discussion of AfroAsian identity and polyculturalism, Krista Thompson's notion of shine, and Elizabeth Grosz and Hortense Spillers' writing on flesh. The next chapter puts forward the concept of choreographic falsetto in analyzing the queer of color aesthetics of Complexions Contemporary Ballet. In locating the vernacular influences on ballet in Richardson and Dwight Rhoden's

hybrid style, the chapter comes into conversation with Roderick Ferguson on queer of color analysis, Bettina Brandl-Risi and Gabrielle Bradstetter on virtuosity, André Lepecki on stillness, and Brenda Dixon Gottschild and Thomas DeFrantz on Africanist aesthetics. In thinking the role of virtuosity in terms of gender transgression, this chapter posits that hyperkinetic corporeal performance appears to be both a space of license, on the one hand, and a space of shame, on the other. I claim that virtuosity operates at—and blurs—the border between popular and high art, defining the location of the virtuoso’s potential transgression. The third chapter engages with themes of visibility and authenticity in the blackface practices of American Ballet Theatre and San Francisco Ballet’s *Othello*. To reconcile the production’s use of blackface in the absence of Richardson in the title role, I turn to Linda Williams’ theorization of melodrama to demonstrate how blackface and virtuosity continually complicate the (in)visibility of blackness in *Othello*. The final chapter, on Ballett Frankfurt, explores how Richardson and choreographer William Forsythe’s combined modes of improvisation create a notable shift in their practices to a “black radical tradition.” I cite George Balanchine and Steve Paxton as influences on Forsythe. Richardson and Forsythe’s collaboration collapses racial and choreographic signifiers, lingering in the difficult space of illegibility. Through concerted practice, such illegibility functions as a refiguring of the relationship between subjectivity and blackness. I trace the way Frankfurt dancers describe an otherwise modernist aesthetic of difficulty as “fun,” ultimately positioning the body as the locale of choreographic and ontological agency. In doing so, I traverse the interval between what Forsythe calls a “[staging] of disappearance” and what Fred Moten refers to as the inevitably “improvisatory exteriority” of blackness.

INTRODUCTION

Desmond Richardson has been labeled “one of the great virtuoso dancers of his generation.”¹ Having danced in a range of performance contexts, from the companies of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ballett Frankfurt, and American Ballet Theater, to Hollywood films and Broadway musicals, to the tours of Michael Jackson and Madonna, Richardson holds a unique position as America’s most visible and admired African American concert dance artist.² An expert in styles as seemingly disparate as break dancing and ballet, Richardson has honed a virtuosity of versatility that has allowed him to traverse a cultural landscape ranging from the popular to the avant-garde. It is rare for a dancer to attain star status, a status he shares with a select group that includes Mikhail Baryshnikov and Sylvie Guillem. Like Baryshnikov and Guillem, Richardson now exerts a high degree of control of his own career, unafraid to venture into commercial settings from time to time. He has become a prototype for young conservatory dancers as well as audiences of *So You Think You Can Dance*, which he frequents as a guest artist. In this dissertation, I focus on Richardson’s concert dance career, specifically on his work with the companies of Alvin Ailey, Complexions Contemporary Dance, American Ballet Theater, San Francisco Ballet, and Ballett Frankfurt. While instances of strictly vernacular or commercial dance productions in Richardson’s career are omitted for the purposes of this dissertation, I do track a dialogic relationship between dominant (concert) dance techniques and vernacular/popular dance styles. Such a study provides an opportunity to extend the scope of dance studies and critical race studies to include thorough investigations of virtuosity and sexuality at the intersection of popular and concert dance cultures. Paradigms in question include Vijay Prashad’s work on AfroAsian identity, Roderick Ferguson’s queer of color critique, Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s Africanist aesthetics, and Fred Moten’s “black radical tradition.” Transcending boundaries of style, Richardson has attained a status of exception. Applying critical race studies to the various contexts of his performances highlights Richardson’s wide acceptance in the face of the exclusion of other dancers of color. We thus detect cultural practices of consumption in which virtuosity alone is insufficient; audiences require of the black male dancer the fulfillment of athletic ability, charisma, and muscularity that reads as heteronormative virility.

Richardson first experienced dance as a b-boy who practiced hip-hop cultural forms such as breakdancing, popping, and locking while growing up in New York City. He entered the High School of Music and Art as a music major when it was located in

¹ Jennifer Dunning, “DANCE REVIEW; The Many Aspects of Complexions,” *New York Times*, Aug. 1 1995. Richardson was born in 1969.

² Concert dance refers to dance that has historically occurred on proscenium stages, and in this context I refer to Richardson as a concert dance artist due to the fact that he has worked mainly with concert dance companies. Concert dance tends to refer to ballet and modern/contemporary/postmodern dance (and all these terms will be complicated in the dissertation), but it can refer to other forms (and stage or site-specific settings) as well. Typically, concert dance refers to dance performed for a seated audience (again, this too can be complicated).

the Broadway theater district, then became a dance major after the school merged with the School of Performing Arts in 1984 and became the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts in the Lincoln Center area.³ That LaGuardia High School is the site and image of the film (and musical) *Fame* could not be more anticipatory of Richardson’s career trajectory, which has taken him from Ailey and American Ballet Theater, to Broadway and film. In fact, the 2009 film revival of *Fame* cites Richardson’s company Complexions as the greatest contemporary dance company.⁴ Representative of what is colloquially referred to as an “uptown” (as opposed to “downtown”) dance aesthetic, the high school’s dance training methods share much in common with neighboring conservatories such as the School of American Ballet, Julliard, and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center, where Richardson would go on to train and dance professionally.⁵ Marking the precise meeting point of “high art” and commercial dance, these uptown dance conservatories train dancers for professional concert dance companies as well as for Broadway careers. They share a sense of excellence and competition based on technical mastery that ultimately demonstrates a certain skill set in ballet, modern dance, or jazz (as opposed to downtown dance’s supposed privileging of the pedestrian, the improvisational, or the conceptual). The training at Ailey is unique in its attention to black culture and diasporic forms. The Ailey School’s “uptown” training methods—which emphasize virtuosity as versatility—can prepare a dancer for a heterogeneous career.

From Africanist Aesthetics to Black Radical Performance

Throughout the dissertation I return to Gottschild’s concept of Africanist aesthetics in American dance in order to chart the ways Richardson encapsulates Africanism in certain contexts and exceeds the call of such aesthetics in others. Moreover, the more invested he becomes in experimental improvisation, alternative theoretical paradigms become more useful for analyzing Richardson’s contribution to contemporary

³ A future iteration of this project will include an investigation of race and Richardson’s work on Broadway, otherwise known as “The Great White Way.” Significantly, Richardson’s predecessors, including Alvin Ailey and Judith Jamison, found work on Broadway from time to time during their careers (which also centered on concert dance for the most part.)

⁴ As discussed in Chapter Two, such accolades from the lowbrow sector do not necessarily amount to valued praise.

⁵ The terms uptown and downtown dance will be complicated in the larger project, but they refer to dance training and performance that takes place either around Lincoln Center or in the Village in New York City. If uptown dance has historically embraced ballet and modern dance, downtown dance (the home of the influential Judson Dance Theater of the 1960s) privileges movement that draws from pedestrian activities—walking, standing, etc.—and often eschews choreography altogether, opting for improvisation. While both arenas have not historically been especially racially inclusive, I might begin to argue that uptown dance training indeed trains dancers for employment opportunities. Interestingly, those opportunities are often found either in “midtown” dance (a term I am using to describe Broadway shows near 42nd St.) or in commercial dance for TV, video, and film. Finally, there remains a question as to how far uptown an “uptown” dance school can be; more specifically, I ask the important question, is the Dance Theater of Harlem an example of “uptown” dance? Is its geographic locale in Harlem representative of (not only geographical but) aesthetic/cultural distancing?

dance. I find Gottschild's discussions of the Africanist embrace of "soul" and constant motion especially relevant to Complexions' choreographic aesthetic, one that refigures black spirituality and kineticism. Gottschild argues that Africanist aesthetics embrace the idea that "the universe is in a dynamic process-in-motion, not a static entity."⁶ Calling for a choreography that works against capitalism's speed and motion, André Lepecki writes, "Modernity creates its kinetic being based on a primary 'accumulation of subjectivity'....The intrusion of the still in choreography (the still-act) initiates a direct ontopolitical critique of modernity's relentless *kinetic interpellation* of the subject."⁷ Lepecki's influential argument, however, does not account for modernity's simultaneous limiting of movement of those whose agency is most compromised. If we adhere to the perspective that American capitalism is founded on slavery, then the assumption that restlessness and kineticism signal an accumulation of subjectivity associated with capitalistic drive is far from universal. For American dancers working in the African diaspora, highly kinetic choreography draws from traditions resistant to stasis, to capture. Thus, motion, too, can question "being," staging what Lepecki calls an "ontopolitical critique." Gottschild's formal interrogation of choreography reveals that particular movement styles informed by Africanist aesthetics embrace constant motion and speed, and that such movement is not necessarily demonstrative of a pro-capitalist project. Opposed to the Protestant ethic of efficiency put forth by Max Weber, Africanist aesthetics embrace forms of movement that do not necessarily contribute to maximum capitalist productivity.

In my engagement with Gottschild, I implicitly invoke Sianne Ngai's observation that African American identity is often equated with "animated" performance and that such affective "zeal" has become naturalized in the American imagination through "bodily signs." Ngai suggests that these signs are taken for "natural" or "authentic" qualities of African American existence. To some extent, Gottschild celebrates animatedness without acknowledging its potential to perpetuate stereotype. The danger in continually redeploying images of blackness *as* overcoming—moreover, as overcoming via physical-kinetic means such as dance—is that it allows for the perpetuation of what Ngai refers to as "race as a truth located...in the...highly visible body."⁸ Ngai writes,

It is the cultural representation of the African-American that most visibly harnesses the affective qualities of liveliness, effusiveness, spontaneity, and zeal to a disturbing racial epistemology, and makes these variants of 'animatedness' function as bodily (hence self-evident) signs of the raced subject's naturalness or authenticity.⁹

Nowhere is the racial epistemological logic of truth-as-bodily-animatedness more accentuated than in the particular dance contexts of the Ailey company; my exploration of Richardson's training in that world launches my chronicle of the racial politics of highly kinetic American choreography. Later, Richardson's work with Complexions begins to refigure movement aesthetics of animatedness by exaggerating the elements that

⁶ 11.

⁷ Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, 58.

⁸ 95.

⁹ 95.

Gottschild identifies as Africanist. For example, movement is sped up and performed in abundance, vernacular dance forms are inserted into ballet, and the work is executed with a “cool” façade. The superhuman quality of Complexions’ dancing complicates racial epistemological assumptions of “naturalness” or “authenticity” by introducing a futuristic movement aesthetic that can only be performed by a very select few. With Ballett Frankfurt, Richardson furthers his foray into experimental movement, as he is asked to improvise in very complex ways and to draw on a movement vocabulary informed by ballet, hip-hop, and contact improvisation, traditions influenced by European and African diasporic traditions. Thus, animatedness is rendered in hyper-kinetic form, exaggerated to the point of distortion and disorientation, for both dancer and viewer. As such, Richardson’s career traces a shift in the visual performance of bodily racial epistemology from stereotypical animatedness to its excessive overemphasis and deconstruction, ultimately working in and through the illegible space of the “break.”

Richardson arrives at such an engagement with the break through a prolonged investment in both classical and vernacular dance forms. While he practiced hip-hop and breaking in conjunction with ballet and modern dance during his youth, it was not until dancing with Complexions and Ballett Frankfurt that he brought together improvisational methods from vernacular dance and experimental postmodern dance, weaving both into classical ballet. Thus, the chapters on Complexions and Forsythe allude to W.E.B. DuBois’ belief that African American artists should have equal access to western civilization, and that such access comes together with vernacular culture to produce “double consciousness.” Paul Gilroy, after DuBois, theorizes the relationship between mastery and minoritarian culture. In his discussion of Du Bois in Germany, Gilroy interrogates the role of the vernacular in black culture, writing, “*The Souls of Black Folk*...sensitized blacks to the significance of the vernacular cultures that arose to mediate the enduring effects of terror. [Du Bois used] black music as a cipher for the ineffable, sublime, pre-discursive and anti-discursive elements in black expressive culture.”¹⁰ Gilroy also brings attention to “Du Bois’s desire to demonstrate the internal situation of blacks, firmly locked inside the modern world that their coerced labour had made possible. To this end, he carefully displayed a complete familiarity with the cultural legacy of western civilisation. He claimed access to it as a right for the race as a whole, and produced a text that demonstrated how he regarded this legacy as his own personal property.”¹¹ Gilroy is rearticulating how DuBois is part of a strategy within African American intellectual history in which this kind of display of complete familiarity is part of an overall formation of a “doubly conscious” racial subject. In mastering ballet technique while maintaining the “cipher” of vernacular dance styles, Richardson, too, participates in a cultural strategy of double consciousness. Thus, Richardson’s mastery of Classical ballet technique correlates with Du Bois’ mastery of western literary forms. Such mastery allows for mobility within—and expansion of—arts of the dominant class. Richardson’s innovation lies in his ability to lend ballet a break-informed impulse, to reconfigure its connective tissue from within. Hence, virtuosity emerges as not only mastery, but as the

¹⁰ Gilroy 119-120.

¹¹ 121.

supplementation of that mastery with a barely legible excess. In this case, that excess comes in the form of a dialogic coexistence of dominant and vernacular forms.

Virtuosity

Virtuosity provides the principal theoretical thread of the dissertation. Is virtuosity only recognized as such by an audience familiar with the cultural specificities of an artistic form? Certain cultural contexts produce unique gauges of ability, from the competent to the virtuosic. Or is virtuosity perceived as such because it seems to transcend—or exceed—a familiar cultural framework? Led by Gabriele Brandstetter at the Free University of Berlin, the *Kulturen des Performativen* working group defines *virtuosity* “as the potentially excessive enhancement of artistic practice” and the *virtuoso* “as a new artist type who, since the seventeenth century, has influenced not only artistic concepts but also the very notion of performance in various cultural, social, and political domains.”¹² Brandstetter and her colleagues Bettina Brandl-Risi and Lucia Ruprecht, among others, focus on the concept in terms of theatrical and embodied performance. Musicologist Susan Bernstein suggests,

In the modern European languages, the terms *virtuoso* and *virtuosity* date from the Italian cinquecento. At that time, the terms stressed the sense of ‘possessing virtue’ (from the Latin *virtus*)—force and valor—in art, science, or skill, including war. The second sense of ‘efficacy in producing particular effects,’ though itself not value laden, tends toward the disparaging tone of ‘mere’ skill that is less than art....The virtuoso is a sociohistorical figure that merges within the confines of a specific history of music, of the economics and politics of entertainment and spectacle, and of journalism.¹³

Bernstein distills how history has rendered the terms *virtuoso* and *virtuosity* celebratory in some settings and pejorative in others. Virtuosity’s fluctuating connotations reflect the way varying cultural contexts produce different systems of value and evaluation, and the convergence of these systems at the intersection of art and entertainment tends to cause terminological and ideological friction. Richardson’s performances are received with the range of connotations associated with virtuosity. Moreover, when performing with *Complexions*, he is seen as favorably virtuosic, with the capacity to redeem the company’s overall aesthetic, one repeatedly charged with flamboyance. As Bernstein observes, such

¹² <http://www.sfb-performativ.de/seiten/b12_vorhaben_engl.html>

¹³ Bernstein 11-12.

“Historical change in the dual evaluation of virtuosity, turning from cheerful mastery to deceptive mockery, can be seen in the short interval between Mozart (1756-91), the virtuoso universally hailed as genius and prodigy, and Paganini (1782-1840), the first really professional virtuoso, a technician made popular in part by rumors of possession by the devil evident in his uncanny mastery of his instrument.” Bernstein 12.

“Virtuosity both produces and exposes the mundane and material conditions of production—need, greed, egotism, and calculation—common to both the journalistic page and the virtuoso’s face. The figure of the journalist evokes an entire set of familiar nineteenth century concerns: political disillusionment, lack of commitment, pleasure and profit seeking, the alienation and isolation of the individual.” Bernstein 14.

designations are circulated most often in journalistic writing. As the locale for arts criticism, much journalism addresses dance in terms of success or failure, tropes that confer and complicate virtuosity but also show how marketing has infiltrated the profession of journalism.

Central to the concept of virtuosity is the question of balance, literally and metaphorically: virtuosity seems to indicate a level of excess that risks upsetting what is deemed appropriate in certain cultural settings. Richardson seems to find a balance between danger and acceptability in his performances, transgressing the norm without entering a state of vulgarity or cultural rejection. Nevertheless, part of the discernment of excess in the work of *Complexions* is its incessant velocity, its aesthetic of speed. While Bernstein points to the technical instrument of the musical virtuoso, which becomes complicated by the dancing virtuoso, whose instrument is his body, not an external supplemental device. Choreographic speed and velocity find themselves in unexpected proximity to the concept of acceleration in journalism. As Bernstein explains,

[The] escalation of print means an increase in the number of information sources as well as a generalized information *acceleration*—an ever-rising ratio between distance and velocity. This acceleration characterizes both journalistic production and its consumption. The overwhelming quality of this acceleration is, of course, one of the most prominent characteristics of the virtuoso, whose technique often aims more at speed than at quality, mistaking speed for skill, difficulty for expression.¹⁴

Journalism both creates the conditions necessary for the possibility of virtuosity's cult and mirrors those characteristics that typify the virtuoso's performance, namely, speed and difficulty. Such acceleration comes with casualties; Bernstein warns that virtuosity's fetishization of acceleration can jeopardize artistry.¹⁵

Versatility

I have selected four distinct performance contexts through which to analyze Richardson's contribution to ballet and contemporary dance. In specifically choosing concert dance settings (omitting for this particular project Richardson's work on Broadway, in films, and with pop musicians), I bring attention to the range of content and reception of concert dance. Keeping questions of identity in the foreground, I interrogate both the racialized and gendered politics of concert dance companies and the role of versatility in Richardson's career. Richardson's virtuosity is especially distinct in its harnessing of multiple dance styles and techniques. His overall signature style privileges hybridity over singularity; at the same time, Richardson knowingly emphasizes certain techniques in certain settings in order to respond to the call of the work in question. While the first two chapters are arranged chronologically, the last two are arranged thematically. Richardson's concert dance career began at Alvin Ailey, and in 1994 he both co-founded *Complexions* and began dancing with Ballett Frankfurt. It was three

¹⁴ Bernstein 15.

¹⁵ This particular line of thought is similar to Anya Peterson Royce's distinction between artistry and virtuosity in the performing arts.

years later that he embarked on ABT and SFB's *Othello*. Even though *Othello* follows Complexions and Frankfurt chronologically, I choose to culminate with Richardson's work with William Forsythe, as Ballett Frankfurt provides him with a setting to exercise individual agency through the experimental dancing body. While *Othello* affords him a starring role, Ballett Frankfurt allows him to expand on his improvisational methods in ways that are generative both for Forsythe and for re-imagining blackness on the concert dance stage.

At just the moment Richardson began dancing with Ailey, the company had come to stand in for a national dance aesthetic, touring internationally as one of the most recognized companies in the world. AAADT had become one of the U.S.' main national cultural exports. Significantly, promotional posters relied on the virtuosity and masculinity exhibited by Richardson's image. The first chapter, "Choreography's Photographic Skin: The Labor of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's AfroAsian Imaginary," questions the relationship between the moving body and the photograph's supposed stasis. What is the status of "labor" as manifested in the particular photo-choreographic context of the Alvin Ailey poster? I focus on a poster image for AAADT's City Center season in New York City in 1989, depicting an airborne Richardson with dancer Elizabeth Roxas in choreographer Donald McKayle's 1959 *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder*, an abstract modern dance piece about a chain gang in the American South. Recent scholarship by Shannon Steen and Vijay Prashad has attended to AfroAsian culture, theater and/or performance, but less attention has been paid to AfroAsian dynamics in dance culture. Similarly, recent research in critical race studies by Tina Campt, Saidiya Hartman, and Krista Thompson has worked at the intersection of visual studies, especially photography. However, in its attention to the archival and the still image, visual race studies has yet to venture toward the question of the dancing body. Thus, I intervene by placing movement theory and socio-historical discourses from AfroAsian studies in conversation with visual race studies' preoccupation with the photographic. In doing so, I destabilize assumptions that modern dance (in its focus on the body's movements over a strict adherence to character) is "post-racial," on the one hand, and best theorized through concepts of kinesthesia and motion, on the other. I question the relationship between the visibility of skin and the commodified value of the black and Asian body. How does the photograph's interruption—or "capture"—of movement (paired with its representation of skin) perpetuate or complicate the notion of the laboring raced body? I suggest that this poster image fits into a history of the consumption of racialized bodies. By drawing on concepts of labor, surface, skin, and flesh, I examine the interplay between the photographic surface and the epidermal surface. Bringing together visual studies, religious studies, critical race theory, art history, and phenomenology, I draw from theories put forth by Anne Anlin Cheng, Krista Thompson, Hortense Spillers, Anthony Pinn, Merleau-Ponty, and Elizabeth Grosz. A reading of surface allows for a nuanced look at the relationship between skin and flesh, labor and form. If flesh is the muscularly active (or flaccidly passive) mediator between skin's surface and bone's structure, then to read photographic skin is to point to the dancing body's fleshly labor as that which moves surface into place. Ultimately, this

poster urges us to consider how the raced body labors in the service of a multicultural ideology.

The second chapter, entitled, “The Muse of Virtuosity: Complexions Contemporary Ballet and Choreographic Falsetto,” explores the concept of virtuosity in relationship to race, gender, and sexuality in dance. In 1994, Richardson and Dwight Rhoden founded Complexions. In an effort to move beyond the Ailey company’s over-rehearsed images of a certain type of blackness that adheres to heteronormativity and narratives of triumph, Richardson and Rhoden place their emphasis on heterogeneity, both in terms of the company’s racial make-up and its stylistic influences.¹⁶ Complexions is a diverse company of virtuosos with the ability to call upon excellent ballet technique as well as modern dance and breakdancing moves.¹⁷ Richardson and Rhoden modify the way labor functions in dance by exposing otherwise concealed transitions into and out of movements, distorting ballet and modern dance vocabularies. In creating tension between effort and ease, or flaw and flawlessness, Complexions both makes explicit and keeps hidden historical and contemporary Africanist aesthetics.

Brandi-Risi asserts, “Virtuosic performances can provoke skepticism towards a form of excellence that cannot be reliably objectified with the help of prevalent norms,” and I argue that, in terms of critical reception, such skepticism continually haunts Complexions, particularly due to certain critics’ lack of training in recognizing Africanist aesthetics and their integral relationship to contemporary ballet. Complexions’ particular virtuosic style often eludes critics, who find themselves resorting to a rhetoric of excess. Yet, in the eyes of such critics, Richardson almost always functions as the figure capable of momentarily redeeming the aesthetic, largely due to his embodiment of the related but unequivocal terms “virtuosity” and “charisma.”¹⁸ Rhoden, who choreographs most of

¹⁶ The type of virtuosity exemplified by Complexions is one in which the vernacular inserts itself into the vehicular. In *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari posit the notion of minor literature, in which minoritarian writing operates from within—not along the margins of—the dominant language, just as Kafka infused German with elements of Yiddish, Czech, and colloquialisms. I argue that a minor choreography is one in which dance forms such as vernacular hip-hop and hustling insert themselves into choreographic techniques dominant in concert theaters—namely ballet and modern/contemporary.

¹⁷ The technical brilliance and innovation of Complexions resituates recent discussions of the “human” that would place the incredible feats of Richardson in the category of the “post-human” or the “virtual.” If, in discourses of the human, “superhuman” (even “robotic”) skill tends to signal the prosthetic or the body-as-machine, Richardson’s ability begs the scholar to consider the role of technique and discipline in bringing together the body-as-organic and the artificiality of the machine. Is the highly trained dancing body its own prosthesis? Does attention to the artificial diminish the power of the human body? Is there an “unnatural” level of discipline in dance training? The *New York Times* has stated, “These [Complexions] dancers are like superheroes.”¹⁷ The *Kulturen des Performativen* working group uses the concept of virtuosity to reconcile human skill with questions of the mechanical: “One trope in particular...lends the virtuoso his specific fascination, namely the phantasm of the *machine*, which bestows upon the virtuoso the aura of the superhuman...a quality which allows the ‘spirit of the machine’ to appear as a figure of the virtuoso’s evidentiality” (185).

¹⁸ See Roach for “charisma,” a quality of performance that does not necessarily include or indicate virtuosity. “Charisma” is more closely related to what we might refer to colloquially as charm or stage

Complexions' work, calls Richardson his "muse," the "quintessential" bearer of the style.¹⁹ Thus, Richardson's own background of breakdancing, ballet, modern dance, and jazz techniques—combined with Rhoden's unexpected background in additional vernacular dance forms such as hand dancing (or "hustling")—defines the idiosyncratic, technically-demanding style of Complexions' choreography. Recent academic treatments of dance tend to dismiss highly kinetic choreography in the vein of Complexions either overtly or by way of avoidance. While Lepecki adheres to the school of thought that privileges stasis over motion, Gottschild's project notes the ways that Africanist aesthetics favor kinetic movement. By adopting an aesthetic that embraces movement that (however abstractly) "reflects" society, Complexions introduces the possibility that choreography is not always best analyzed according to its success or failure in performing "ontopolitical critique" through stasis.²⁰ Complexions recovers Africanist influences in American ballet both by inserting into its movement newer diasporic elements such as popping, voguing, and deep house club sensibilities, and by extending the work of choreographic predecessors such as Balanchine and Forsythe, who were knowingly and unknowingly working in the Africanist tradition. Complexions' refiguring of Africanist aesthetics resists a sense of diaspora that relies on narrative, preferring a mode closer to what Daphne Brooks calls "Afro-alienation."²¹ Moreover, the company's emphasis on velocity and technical precision allows movement itself to function as the main focus of the work, subsuming the question of narrative altogether.

Finally, this chapter, engages with Roderick Ferguson's notion of a "queer of color critique" in order to investigate the inextricability of gender, race, and class in cultural production. In doing so, I suggest that Richardson's virtuosity in Complexions is born of a queering of classical technique. I develop the term "choreographic falsetto" to indicate Richardson's practice of drawing from exaggerated movements typically reserved for women in order to perform queer black masculinity. In thinking the role of virtuosity in terms of gender transgression, virtuosity in corporeal/non-verbal performance appears to be both a space of license, on the one hand, and a space of hiding, on the other. In Richardson's performances, we detect a compulsive externalization—of technique, "expression," even mechanics—but also a simultaneous concealment of the mechanics of production. This dynamic of exposure and concealment epitomizes a dialectics of queer shame.

Embodied by Richardson, Complexions' brand of popularly informed and queerly refigured contemporary ballet virtuosity is now consumed and mimicked by the mainstream. For all their ballet technique and performances in internationally recognized

presence, whereas virtuosity has more to do with skill and excess, which I will discuss throughout the introduction and dissertation.

¹⁹ Interview with the author.

²⁰ Rhoden interview with the author. "Ontopolitical critique" is Lepecki's term, discussed in Chapter Two.

²¹ To leave certain elements open-ended and abstract allows for a more diverse conception of diaspora. In *Bodies in Dissent*, Brooks proposes non-realist performance, or "Afro-alienation," writing, "Rather than depending on conventional realist methods to convey the humanity and value of black subjectivity, Afro-alienation opens up a field where black cultural producers might perform narratives of black culture that resist the narrow constraints of realist representation" (6).

concert halls and opera houses, Complexions has never discriminated against popular dance formats, recognizing the complex history of dance, race, and competition from which many of the company's hybrid styles have emerged. Championed as the quintessential dancer, Richardson holds the unique position of eternal prototype, before, during, and after the fact of Complexions. No matter how diluted, culturally problematic, or misinformed the premise of *STYCD* might be, to see Richardson dancing a solo on a television screen during primetime is to recognize some kind of perfection of imperfection, some kind of excess, some kind of virtuosity. Most significantly, it reinforces my claim that virtuosity operates at—and blurs—the border between popular and high art, defining the location of the virtuoso's potential transgression.

Chapter Three, “Otherwise in Blackface: American Ballet Theatre and San Francisco Ballet’s *Othello*,” also engages with visibility and authenticity, here through the practice of blackface. Recent theorizations of blackface and minstrelsy have looked to instances in performance that eschew explicit applications of burnt cork while engaging in appropriative relationships with “blackness” that read to some as “inauthentic.” Susan Manning’s notion of “metaphorical minstrelsy” questions early modern dance practices, Daphne Brooks’ concept of “sonic blackface” traces influences of black music on singers such as Amy Winehouse, and Louis Chude-Sokei locates the complex politics of the work of Burt Williams. This chapter calls upon such recent discussions of blackface and minstrelsy to examine Richardson’s title role in ABT and SFB’s shared full-length production of *Othello* (1997). Continuing the historical practice of maintaining a relatively homogeneous (white) appearance, ABT and SFB rarely (if ever) hire black dancers. Richardson was called upon (from outside the ranks of the ABT or SFB) by choreographer Lar Lubovitch to star in *Othello*. Richardson’s temporary employment brings attention to the fact that these American ballet companies only tend to recognize an African American dancer when casting calls for a black character. Subsequent casts of *Othello* (when Richardson is not performing) are painted in blackface. The fact that Richardson is not painted in blackface when he performs *Othello* questions relationships between corporeality and blackness (especially in the absence of spoken text), classicism and the contemporary, technique and appropriation, and casting and authenticity. More specifically, if more troubling, is the possibility that Richardson is performing black-on-black minstrelsy in *Othello*. Paradoxically, what appears to the contemporary eye to be the most outlandish aspect of minstrelsy—namely, blacking up with burnt cork—is, according to Chude-Sokei, its most assimilationist, conservative aspect. Chude-Sokei reminds us that minstrelsy is a “constant erasure of the black subject through the hyperbolic presence of blackface.”²² This chapter looks at the way Lubovitch’s practice of storyboarding lends the production an episodic scene structure much like that of film. Thus, I invoke film scholar Linda Williams’ theorizations of melodrama and racial melodrama to demonstrate how blackface and virtuosity continually complicate the (in)visibility of blackness in *Othello*.

1994 was the year Richardson decided to leave Ailey and form Complexions. The

²² 36.

same year, Richardson left the U.S. to dance in Germany with William Forsythe's Ballett Frankfurt. Forsythe's unique relationship to blackness is manifested through the formal aspects of his choreographic movement, and emerges from his American sensibility within the German context of his company. Similarly, Ballett Frankfurt provides Richardson with a space in which he can abandon Ailey's reliance on heteronormative narrativity and concentrate on movement explorations in improvisation. Both artists are influenced by Africanist aesthetics, but Chapter Four, "Difficult Fun: The Racial Politics of Improvisation in William Forsythe's Ballett Frankfurt," explores how their combined modes of improvisation create a notable shift in their practices to a "black radical tradition." I cite George Balanchine and Steve Paxton as influences on Forsythe. Common practices in Ballet Frankfurt include contact improvisation and improvisational technologies developed by Forsythe, including the "alphabet" method. In addition to his expertise in ballet and modern dance, what Richardson brings into Forsythe's studio are experimentations with vernacular and popular dance improvisation. Important themes that emerge from an exploration of Richardson's work at Ballett Frankfurt include authenticity, collectivity, and agency. Authenticity is an oft-neglected issue haunting dance history. No matter how unspoken, central to the racialized sphere of concert dance are questions such as, what does it mean for white choreographers to use hip-hop music? What does it mean for black dancers to do ballet? Ultimately, Richardson and Forsythe's collaboration collapses racial and choreographic signifiers, lingering in the difficult space of illegibility. Through concerted practice, such illegibility functions as a refiguring of the relationship between subjectivity and blackness. I explore the concept of authenticity further by tracing the way Frankfurt dancers describe an otherwise difficult aesthetic as "fun," ultimately positioning the body as the locale of choreographic and ontological agency. In doing so, I traverse the interval between what Forsythe calls a "[staging] of disappearance" and what Moten refers to as the inevitably "improvisatory exteriority" of blackness.

Toward an Intimate Methodology

I employed a varied research methodology that included ethnography, performance/dance analysis, theoretical investigation, discursive analysis, and archival research. First of all, my ethnographic research consisted of studio visits, performances, and interviews with Richardson himself. Most of my research was conducted in New York City, where Complexions Contemporary Ballet is located. The company rehearsed and performed at Lincoln Center, the Joyce Theater, and various studios in the New York City area. Additionally, I conducted interviews with company co-director, Dwight Rhoden, ballet master Jae Man Joo, and dancers from various iterations of the company's fifteen-year history. Other ethnographic sites and/or interviewees included dancers from Ballett Frankfurt, Complexions, and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Performance/dance analysis included observing live, recorded, and televised performances. Much archival research was conducted at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. These archives gave me access to historical and contemporary performance videos, critical reviews, performance texts, photographs, and promotional posters.

Perhaps most central to my research was my empirical, embodied experiences training at the Ailey School for two years and dancing professionally with Complexions for two years under the unofficial mentorship of Richardson himself. Even—or especially—in 1994, the rhetoric of “fun” was central to Richardson’s experimental forays: one day after taking his (and Dwight Rhoden’s) class at Steps (dance studio) in New York, Richardson approached me and asked if I would be interested in “messing around” with him and Rhoden in the studio, that is, if I would want to join Complexions. At the time, play, fun, and experimentation were more important than pointe shoes, 501C3 non-profit status, or health insurance. Such embodied memories inform my dance research; even experiences from the past without intended scholarly use become important sites of knowledge for the dance scholar. Having entered such dance environments before ever versing myself in dance and performance theory (let alone anthropological, race, and cultural theory), I admittedly experienced conflicting thoughts and sentiments when returning to these events in my mind years later. Nevertheless, a distanced and reflective relationship to the embodied aspect of this excavation allows for complex readings that can account for self-contradictory impulses. In other words, to engage in embodied research as a knowing scholar seeking a certain research outcome can limit one’s experience to the cautious or the homogeneous. Yet, to gaze backward and ask, “Why *was* I being asked to move in that way with that person, with wet hair, in an androgynous leotard?” is to confront the discomfort of one’s own racialized and gendered subjectivity from a distanced temporal space. Such a practice inherently questions the myth of the objectivity of the researcher. Instead, the distance of time provides the necessary gap only ever feigned by the objectivity of the otherwise emotionally distant scholar. The embodied sensitivity needed for dance research requires not objectivity but intimacy. Although, inevitably any intimate dance experience is incomplete, haunted by the alienating breaks and limits inherent to the passing of time and the integration of cultures.

CHAPTER ONE

Choreography's Photographic Skin: The Labor of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's AfroAsian Imaginary



Elizabeth Roxas and Desmond Richardson in Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's production of *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder*, choreographed by Donald McKayle. Photograph by Jack Mitchell.

The photograph above marks a breakout moment in Richardson's career and the trajectory of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT). Seen here at the young age of nineteen shortly after joining the company, Richardson personifies the Ailey aesthetic that emerged in the 1990s, one that he helped define. Only a rare selection of dancers highly trained in classical ballet and modern dance can attain the height and line of Richardson's leap. This image announces Richardson's greatness, his status as star-in-

the-making.²³ Based on a historical piece that, in turn, comments on the past, this poster is the meeting point of multiple historical moments, including the early twentieth century American exploitation of African American prisoners, mid-century American modern dance, and the futurity of virtuosic millennial contemporary dance aesthetics. Used as a poster image for the AAADT's City Center season in New York City in 1989, it depicts an airborne Richardson with dancer Elizabeth Roxas in choreographer Donald McKayle's *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder*. *Rainbow* is a modern dance piece about a chain gang in the American South. Originally choreographed for McKayle's own company in 1959, the piece was revived for the Ailey company in 1972 and 1980, remaining in the repertoire for many years. Richardson's rise, documented early in this poster, coincides with a particular moment in AAADT's history when the company was on its way to becoming the most successful dance company in the world, thus relying on the aesthetics of nationalistic "multiculturalism" to position itself as worthy of international export.

We often assume that analyses of dance should only address the moving body, the body in performance. However, much of our consumption of dance occurs on the level of the still image—the poster, the billboard, the photograph—images deployed as marketing tools with the specific purpose of attracting audiences and selling tickets. As dance scholar Mark Franko has written, "The glib or articulate texts and images disseminating dance in print media testify to the secondary circulation of embodied feeling."²⁴ "More than prosthesis" to live performance, the logic of the dance poster relies on viewers' affective responses to two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional performances.²⁵ Accompanying the visual and spatial senses,²⁶ the "embodied feeling" circulated by print media is suggested by the dance poster's unique ability to evoke corporeal movement, kinetic presentation and its transfer of "feeling."²⁷ To study a photograph of Richardson in detail is to understand how the cult of the virtuoso in a kinetic art form often relies upon stillness provided by the image. It is this stillness that makes the photograph available to repetition, to a kind of repeatability that captures movement as stasis for

²³ Already a company of virtuosos, Richardson stood out from the group from his first moments with AAADT. Having joined the company in 1987, the 1989 image marks Richardson's second season with the company, at age 19.

²⁴ *Labor* 12. "The burgeoning of dance writing and the rise of dance photography and graphics in the thirties indicate that theatrically produced dance was a knowledge-generating practice" (12).

²⁵ 12.

²⁶ Although it could be tempting to engage here with recent work in critical race studies/diaspora/photography on the "sonic" or "haptic" dimension of the visual (as in Saidiya Hartman and Tina Campt's seminar 2009), theorizations such as that of Fred Moten engage with either a) extremely violent images such as that of Emmett Till or b) work in the black radical tradition, and I would not place Ailey (or his posters) in either category. Laura Marks' theory of haptic visuality proposes the idea of "touch"—that a moving image can touch you and you it; however, I find that (especially in light of dancing bodies—photographed or live) "touch" then becomes metaphorical, and disrupts/confuses actual touch that occurs so often in dance. Moten's "sonic" also becomes metaphorical to some degree, and (furthermore) could be confusing in light of "actual" musical scores/sounds playing during dance performance.

²⁷ See Mark Franko's critique of John Martin's term, "metakinesis" and its irrational and nationalistic components (61).

public viewings. Through this process, stillness becomes stasis.²⁸ Richardson is often described in *immaterial* terms, hailed for his tremendous energy and charisma, and this photograph captures him in the height of a jump, in a climactic moment that mimics the affective force of his live performances. The impact of this image is found in the juxtaposition of photographic stillness and choreographic motion. By focusing this chapter on this poster image in particular (as opposed to multiple posters or dances), I distill a crucial moment in AAADT's history in which Richardson defines an emerging aesthetic of Africanist virtuosity. This attention toward stasis allows for an analysis of the movements—socio-cultural and historical—surrounding the dance itself, movements otherwise occluded by overdetermined emphases on choreography alone.

I find it useful to interrogate instances of stillness within an otherwise kinetic art form in order to see how an image itself moves and performs, and speaks to historical movement that produces its very possibility. It is important, however, to differentiate between the stillness of a photograph and the aesthetic of stillness dominating much contemporary dance. In fact, in the context of the AAADT, photographic stillness only perpetuates an otherwise extremely kinetic aesthetic that privileges motion over stasis. Not only is such kinetic movement evoked through the dance photograph's otherwise static medium, but the photograph also highlights for audiences the criteria with which to determine excellence in AAADT's repertoire. That Richardson hovers at the height of a jump with muscular joy and nonchalance educates us in virtuosity's signifiers, if not its resulting emotional affect.

The last promotional image chosen by Alvin Ailey before his untimely death in December of the same year, this photograph by Jack Mitchell differs greatly from current Ailey poster images, which are in color, feature glistening skin, and are devoid of any reference to the Asian body. In what follows, I examine the interplay between the photographic surface and the epidermal surface, drawing on Marxist and choreographic concepts of labor, the surface quality of sweat, and the distinction between flesh and skin. Situated under an overarching investigation of the visual economy of race in American multiculturalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this chapter questions how the dual deployment of black and Asian dancing bodies in AAADT operates in a circuitry of aesthetic consumption. Throughout, I interrogate the relationship between the body in motion and the photograph's supposed stasis in the public context of the photo-choreographic poster. By way of skin and surface, I arrive at dance studies' preoccupation with phenomenology to better understand the heretofore under-analyzed role of race and visibility in phenomenology, particular surrounding discourse of "flesh." If flesh is the muscularly active (or flaccidly passive) mediator between skin's surface and bone's structure, to read choreography's photographic skin is to point to the dancing body's fleshy labor as that which moves surface into place. Occurring at the level of flesh and manifested visually as perspiration on the skin, the Ailey dancer's labor operates in the

²⁸ By stillness I refer to the state of the material photograph (that the photograph itself cannot move, that it must be moved); by stasis I refer to that which is inherent to movement/dance, thus contained in and by the photograph.

service of a nationalistic, racialized aesthetic ideology, far from phenomenology's evocations of a universally embodied mode of experience.

“Liberalism of the Skin”²⁹

This image's rendering of AfroAsian kinship satisfied the Ailey company's 1989 trope of “diversity,” delineating a moment when the company begins to champion the type of virtuosity exhibited by Roxas and Richardson. This poster sold the idea of multicultural unity by relying on over-rehearsed notions of the flirtatious Asian woman (with hair flying every which way and a flexed hand reaching for Richardson's groin)³⁰ and the hyper-hetero-masculine black man. The stereotypical Asian female and black male bodies put forth in this image urge the viewer to consume a kind of multicultural heteronormativity that, ultimately, allows for the reification of discriminatory and delimiting systems. The West has a vexed relationship with the black body, both championing and degrading the “Other” in visual economies of stage, screen, and print. In the performing arts and entertainment, from blackface minstrelsy to the commercial hip-hop industry, the black body has, in the American imagination, come to stand in for effortless exuberance, on the one hand, and effortful “soul” on the other.³¹ The body of the “Other” (especially that of the black body) has become a platform for America to exercise its dualistic consumptive habit of commodity fetishism and racial fetishism.³² A system of body-as-commodity, slavery is the unspoken foundation of American capitalism. In Karl Marx's formulation of the commodity, human labor is abstracted and concealed. Though the nation's dominant mode is to repress its violent history, the image of the black body laboring has been naturalized—visible to the degree that it is overexposed, therefore rendered invisible.

Vijay Prashad discusses multiculturalism's static compliance with the rhetoric of skin. He writes, “Liberalism of the skin, which we generically know as multiculturalism, refuses to accept that biology is destiny, but it smuggles in culture to do much the same thing...to create and delimit social groups”³³ In using this image, the Ailey company capitulates to the logic of multiculturalism, one that promotes differentiation and delimitation as opposed to what Prashad refers to as *polyculturalism's* antiracist project. As opposed to “liberalism of the skin,” Prashad explains,

defiant skins come under the sign of the *polycultural*, a provisional concept grounded in antiracism rather than in diversity. Polyculturalism, unlike multiculturalism, assumes that people live coherent lives that are made up of a host of lineages....[It] is a ferocious engagement with the political world of culture, a painful embrace of the skin and all its contradictions.”³⁴

²⁹ Prashad.

³⁰ This gesture evokes the over-rehearsed stereotype of the black male phallus and American representations of the threat of (and fascination with) the black penis and/as sexuality.

³¹ See dance scholar Gottschild on “soul.”

³² See Anne Cheng on racial fetishism in Baker article.

³³ xi.

³⁴ My emphasis xi-xii.

Anne Anlin Cheng offers a reading of skin and surface that lends Prashad's political discussion of polyculturalism's "defiant skins" an aesthetic dimension. Cheng's work exemplifies recent debates lying at the intersection of critical race studies, visual studies, and studies of the senses.³⁵ Cheng suggests that surface performs, and she examines the way skin participates in such performance. Her study of skin focuses on modernist fetishism as it relates to the photography and film of Josephine Baker. She writes, "There is a predicament of embodiment and visibility that fetishistic and democratic recognition share. And it is the crisis of visibility, rather than the allocation of visibility, that constitutes one of the most profound challenges for American democratic recognition and civil imagination."³⁶ Cheng suggests that civil rights efforts to render visible otherwise "invisible" African American subjectivity have been operating superficially at the level of the visible (skin), and this allocation of visibility is both static and differentiating. Instead, she urges us to reconsider our ways of seeing and sensing to account for critical *visuality*, as a practice of engaging with surfaces in motion that may exceed the immediately *visible*.

Labor and Racial Fetishism

Labor is the spectral presence driving *Rainbow*: the piece calls upon the labor of dancers to evoke the labor of the chain gang. Chain gangs were comprised of prisoners who were compelled to perform labor for very little compensation if any at all. Lyrics to the main spiritual in *Rainbow* are, "I've got a rainbow, huh / Tied all around my shoulder, huh / I'm goin' home, huh / My Lord, I'm goin' home."³⁷ McKayle explains, "Rainbow was the prison slang for the tool used to break rock for road beds."³⁸ Thus, the piece's title, *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder* at once connotes the sense of an ethereal utopic beyond ("I'm goin' home")—or heaven as "home"—and the actual tool used on the chain gang. Like McKayle's choreography and that of much of the AAADT repertory, spirituals epitomize an African American aesthetic of overcoming in the midst of laborious conditions. "*Tol' My Captain*," writes McKayle of a song in *Rainbow*, is

a chain-gang song from the prisons of the American South, a song of men who must do forced labor, breaking rock in the hot sun under the watchful eye of an overseer leaning on his rifle....The songs from the southern chain gangs were unique. They were an accompaniment to heavy physical work and their uneven musical structure paralleled the rise and fall of the pickaxes swung by the men as they sang.³⁹

³⁵ Thompson 2009.

³⁶ 68.

³⁷ McKayle 115.

³⁸ Ibid.

"Their varied musings were personified in the dream figure of a woman, a composite of all their longings, all their fantasies, alluring, tender, nurturing, and always just out of reach" (115). "Mary, now my wife, entered...as if emerging from a dream....She tries to heal the scars of injustice" (McKayle 116). "The men must return to their labor" (McKayle 115).

³⁹ 114.

The loss of the sonic dimension of the photographic image is especially palpable in dance photography.⁴⁰ Without actual music playing, however, dance photography invites a focus on visual and corporeal aspects of the image. Of importance in this poster of *Rainbow* is the relationship between the theme of labor in the piece and relative lack of labor exhibited in the image, and how such labors are revealed or concealed on the racialized surfaces of skin and photograph. I call the coalescence of these two surfaces (corporeal skin and photographic surface) “photographic skin.”

Having premiered in 1959, *Rainbow*'s inception marks the precise historical moment that Franko locates as the onset of the “formalist perspective” in American modern dance and ballet.⁴¹ He argues, “By the 1960s, with the ascendancy of Merce Cunningham and George Balanchine as preeminent choreographers in modern dance and ballet, the critical precedent for formalism was established. Following on the repressive atmosphere of fifties America, this formalist perspective encouraged forgetfulness of the relation between dance and labor.”⁴² Thus, *Rainbow* was created just along the cusp of fifties era exposure of labor in dance and the 1960s formalist approach, which dispensed with explicit aestheticization of the relationship between dance and labor. In his effortless technical bravura, Richardson epitomizes the physicality of formalism. However, in the context of AAADT's repertoire (which calls for narrative and emotional expression), Richardson's formalist abilities are paired with modernist expressionism (as called for in Graham, Ailey, and McKayle's choreography). After Hannah Arendt, Franko distinguishes between work and labor such that “*Work* is conventionally thought of as a productive activity, whereas *labor* is the force that accomplishes it...Labor, in Arendt's terms, is more like dance than work: it is an action, a process.”⁴³ Thus, when I refer to “labor” I refer to dance as process—*dancing*, not to be mistaken for “work.” In concealing dance's labor by putting forth a sweat-free image of effortlessness, this photograph reifies racial and sexual fetishism of black male and Asian female bodies, inviting a racialized and sexualized gaze that celebrates difference in the precarious realm of the “multicultural,” a realm that undermines antiracist projects by operating under the guise of liberal acceptance. In its aestheticization of manual labor, *Rainbow* begins to depart from modern dance practices of the 1930s in which (as Franko explains), “dance contributed to political struggle” and was connected to the “labor force.”⁴⁴ *Rainbow* refers not to the 1930s labor movements forming Franko's discussion; it is meant to recall a historical struggle that predates the 1930s. While *Rainbow* is not devoid of political relevance, it is not a piece meant to incite direct political action. Through choreography with formalist and modernist influences, the piece performs historical

⁴⁰ While Moten refers to the “scream” in images of racial violence such as that of Emmett Till, I refer here more to actual pieces of music that accompany certain dance pieces. Nevertheless, the songs are inevitably layered over history's “screams” and more abstractly sonic elements.

⁴¹ 8.

⁴² 8.

⁴³ 2, my emphasis. Franko's project “explores how work in the 1930s was configured by dance, and how dancers performed cultural work. The performance of work constituted a new direction in American theatrical culture between 1929 and 1941” (1).

⁴⁴ 2.

memory. As evidenced in the song's lyrics, *Rainbow* lends the idea of labor a spiritual dimension of the possibility of release from the strife of oppression. The diasporic tradition of singing spirituals during or about labor suggests that, unlike the relative optimism of 1930s labor movements, the history of African American labor is such that there is often no possibility for justice or alleviation in the physical realm. Song and dance connected to the spiritual dimension offer the only potential for release. To this end, the Ailey company has maintained a commitment to further depicting the spiritually liberating dimension of song and dance in the African diaspora.

Thomas DeFrantz extends the idea of labor⁴⁵ in *Rainbow* to include pleasure, by writing, "The brawny black men who 'play' laborers in *Rainbow*...revise conceptions of 'work' through their presence on opera house stages. These men may look like laborers, but are, in fact, artists; the pleasure their bodies in motion provide for them and us is the labor of their trade."⁴⁶ While the exhilaration of performing onstage may indeed grant a dancer momentary pleasure, this pleasure may in fact hinder the performer's ability to objectively ascertain the degree to which she is complicit in a visual economy of exploitation, no matter how subtle or naturalized. As such, the professional dancer traverses a fine line between commodity and tactical agent, embodying neither completely.

The AAADT's increased emphasis on the exhibition of technical mastery and flawless dancing at the moment this poster's photograph was taken tended toward an aesthetic of effortlessness, of concealing the labor required to execute such high-flying leaps and extensions. The Ailey formula of freedom afforded by (concealed) labor parallels the logic behind much technical dance training, such as that found at the Ailey School, where students learn classical ballet, modern techniques such as Graham and Horton, and diasporic techniques such as Dunham.⁴⁷ Importantly if less often chronicled, there is a photographic impulse behind much dance training. It is not uncommon to hear a ballet or modern dance instructor utter, "I should be able to take a photograph at the height of your jump and find you in the perfect position." Having trained at the Ailey School, the idea of photographic capture inevitably informed Richardson's dancing, especially during performance and photo sessions. As such, the poster becomes one of several goals and outputs (if not "products" in Marx's sense of that which creates surplus) of dance performance. Richardson's pose personifies the photographic compulsion of capture—the trope of "release" granted by technique—motivating much technical dance training. And *Rainbow* itself proposes the idea of freedom from and through labor. The idea that one could be photographed at any moment while dancing adds a dimension of self-consciousness that extends and exceeds the logic of the studio mirror. Whereas the studio mirror is a tool for self-reflexive correction, the photograph is both a static threat and a potential channel toward fame.

⁴⁵ DeFrantz uses the word "work" (not labor), but within this context, he seems to mean something closely aligned with what Franko calls "labor" and refers to "laborers" in *Rainbow*.

⁴⁶ 36.

⁴⁷ These techniques refer to those of Martha Graham, Lester Horton, and Katherine Dunham, respectively.

In *Rainbow*, Richardson and Roxas are called upon to embody similar virtuosic extremes—their high-kicking legs, technical precision, and emotional extroversion draw from ballet, Graham, and Horton techniques. Roxas was a ballet dancer in the Philippines before dancing with the AAADT. Thus, while her early training was less steeped in modern dance than that of Richardson, it was similarly haunted by the photographic. The company has not had any Asian dancers in its ranks for several years, and at the time of this poster, Roxas was among two. During the 1970s and 80s, when Ailey himself was alive, the company appeared headed toward a more nuanced exploration of polycultural dynamics of race.⁴⁸ In fact, this 1989 poster represents a moment during Roxas’ tenure with Ailey in which the company could have done much to explore representations of AfroAsian solidarity. Instead, since the mid-1990s, the company’s productions have focused more exclusively on mainstream representations of blackness.⁴⁹ The Ailey company exhibits a mastery of western and diasporic forms that inherently dispels historical stereotypes of the black dancer as “primitive” or one-dimensional (and contemporary stereotypes of the black dancer as engaged in a never-ending hip-hop battle). However, it risks objectifying its dancers, making them available for sexually and racially fetishistic consumption. If, in American dance, the Asian female body is called upon to conjure the “exotic,” the sexual, and the precise, the black male body has been depended upon to exhibit what DeFrantz calls a “hypermasculine stance.”⁵⁰ DeFrantz writes, “The sexualized ‘black buck’ and ‘Jezebel’ imagery that Ailey and his dancers inhabited, largely by their presence as muscular men and glamorous women on public stages, satisfied racialized desire even as it encouraged it.”⁵¹ In fact, Roxas’ role was originally played by Mary Hinkson in 1959 (Richardson’s by McKayle himself). While casting Roxas (as opposed to an African American woman more similar in appearance to Hinkson) could be interpreted as a generous acknowledgement of her dancing abilities before race, the choice also treads on the popular American habit of casting Asian women to stand in for general ambiguity (or worse, an empty vessel). That Roxas is not meant to be racially specific in her tripartite role as mother/spirit/lover leaves space open for her fetishization.

According to Cheng, racial fetishism employs a mode of partial recognition similar to the concealment of labor that Marx identifies with commodity fetishism. Sharing Prashad’s concern with identity politics’ easy embrace of diversity, Cheng writes,

Racial fetishism...continues to inform contemporary American racial dynamics in various ways, from egregious racial stereotyping in legal and popular commodity cultures to the different though equally troubling effects of identity politics, in which an affirmative political or social identity

⁴⁸ There is an Ailey company photograph from the 1970s that displays an explicitly racially heterogeneous company.

⁴⁹ With the exception of Donald Byrd, and perhaps Ulyses Dove.

⁵⁰ 37.

⁵¹ Ibid.

often seems to reassert the stereotype it was meant to rectify in the first place.⁵²

This poster brings to mind Cheng's latter conception of the racial fetish as that which inadvertently engages in stereotyping by affirming social identity. By deploying this poster image for promotional use in 1989, what was the company that calls itself one of the "most acclaimed international ambassadors of American culture"⁵³ envisioning as—and for—the nation? What does it mean that, as the Ailey company gained notoriety and exposure, it leaned increasingly on an exclusively black company (erasing from its ranks Asian dancers)? As one of the most virtuosic dancers of our time, Richardson's dancing exceeds stereotypical expectations of race because of his versatility, his mutability of style. However, this poster captures Richardson and Roxas in a system of racialized "meanings" that compulsively tries to situate them within a liberal project of multiculturalism. Roxas is called upon in this poster to perform the liberal affirmative work of "diversity."⁵⁴

In *Rainbow*, "Desmond Richardson [is] the youth who recalls his sweetheart and mother."⁵⁵ As the dream character, Roxas evokes multiple personas throughout the piece, including a love interest, a mother figure to Richardson's character, and what McKayle calls a "symbol of freedom for the imprisoned men."⁵⁶ Roxas' character "was at once free...then a rooted being," and this double sense of rootedness and freedom is indeed mimicked in her pose in the poster image.⁵⁷ The pairing of Richardson and Roxas paints the Ailey company as a utopia of AfroAsian kinship when, in fact, the Asian female's body in the actual piece (let alone the company ranks) is meant to operate as a dream figure, as a spectre that almost lies beyond the possibility of objectification, whether epidermal or fleshy. Roxas flings her body into an ecstatic stance of abandon, signaling upwards to Richardson, sending him into an airborne leap, as though Roxas herself has engendered his sense of freedom. While a function of non-traditional casting, Roxas is called upon to transfer the model minority myth onto Richardson: her body acts as a magic wand of ability. As such, this image emphasizes a shallow multicultural concept of diversity opposed to reflecting AfroAsian solidarity. Despite *Rainbow 'round my Shoulder's* preoccupation with labor, this poster presents a troubling notion of the "model minority's" efficiency—a sweatless façade of labor's output, an invitation for Afro to *become* Asian. Not sure I fully agree—or that there isn't some kind of reciprocal invitation, but that is not a reason to change your argument

⁵² 38.

⁵³ AAADC website.

⁵⁴ As an antidote to such liberal logic found in both the socio-economic and scholarly realms of the 1990s, and contemporary neoliberal culturalism, Prashad explains, "AfroAsian work tries hard to cultivate the epistemological and historical archive of *solidarity*. The memory of the interactions, now being erased by neoliberal culturalism, has to be unearthed. This will allow us to better analyze the way in which ethnicities are mobilized by power to rub against each other" (Steen xxi, my emphasis).

⁵⁵ Kisselgoff.

⁵⁶ 115. Cheng's discussion of mutability refers mainly to formal mutability, but is there a relationship to character, as in mutability of character or personality *within* a single piece?

⁵⁷ McKayle 115.

Roxas playfully tosses up her long mane of hair, smiling toward Richardson. While this image might seem haphazard, even frenzied in its connotation of a wild mane, hair is in fact subjected to a similar sense of discipline as legs or feet at the Ailey School. In company performances, throughout the repertoire, anytime a dancer's hair is not in a tight bun, she is expected to toss it with aplomb. As a student at the Ailey School, during a rehearsal period for a dance choreographed by company member Andre Tyson—a contemporary of Richardson—I was subjected-rephrased to a hair-tossing workshop. Because the piece in question called for the deliberate motion of hair in conjunction with arcing head and neck movements, Tyson wanted to make sure our hair—as much as our arms and legs—satisfied the rhythmical demands of the piece, arriving to its destination on the proper count and not a beat later. Indeed, Roxas was responsible for conducting this very hair-tossing session, as she had become the expert in this regard. At the time, as was also the case with most of the other Asian women training at Ailey, my hair was almost waist-length, in keeping with the Roxas aesthetic. To possess extreme flexibility, honed technique, and long hair was to satisfy the expectations for the Asian female dancer in the Ailey repertoire. If Asian female flexibility is one stereotype, the inflexibility of the black male body is another. Yet, in the AAADT in the years surrounding 1990, Richardson's flexibility and control were exploited to the same degree as that of the two female Asian dancers, Roxas and Dana Hash.

Flesh

The virtuosity indicated by this image of Richardson and Roxas is born of fleshly labor. To initiate its analysis via the question of skin and surface is to point to the way the AAADT generates interest through the attraction of an image. By following with a discussion of flesh, I wish to further develop my investigation of the racialized body in dance, a body that exceeds its photographic capture. Moreover, the photograph-as-poster presents us with a fetishizable object of one of dance's most fetishized "positions," the split-legged leap, evoking the type of image to which the dancer's imagination compulsively returns. In other words, if phenomenology seeks to register and render experience through the sensorial, in space and time, the phenomenological experience of many a dancer working toward a choreographic goal is inevitably informed by images of dance icons such as Richardson. Moreover, how might Richardson and Roxas' own phenomenological experiences of dancing affirm or depart from the racial fetishism generated by this multicultural image?

At its most reductive level, skin is the body's outer membrane, that which encases flesh. As Elizabeth Grosz (after Maurice Merleau-Ponty) reminds us, flesh is not entirely internal. She writes,

Flesh is...being's most elementary level. Flesh is being's reversibility, its capacity to fold in on itself, a dual orientation inward and outward....Flesh is reflexivity, that fundamental gap or dehiscence of being that Merleau-Ponty illustrates with a favorite example, the 'double sensation,' an

example that clearly illustrates the various gradations between subjectivity and objectivity.⁵⁸

Grosz emphasizes certain aspects of flesh that could be especially pertinent to interrogations of racial subjectivity, namely its dual qualities of inwardness and outwardness, and subjectivity and objectivity. Indicated by skin and supported by bones, flesh is not wholly internal. Therefore, as a mediator between bodies and the world, flesh plays a pivotal role in sensory understandings of the external, and is all too personified by the dancing body, at once experiencing its own kinesthesia and projecting it outward toward an audience. Furthermore, it could be said that Merleau-Ponty's "double sensation" is what allows for experience itself. Although Merleau-Ponty does not extend his argument to the question of race, one could argue that "double sensation" is the pre-conceptual (or phenomenological) formulation of Du Bois' "double consciousness" or Fanon's psychoanalytical interpolation ("Look, a negro!"). Blackness and racial subjectivity are always predicated on such duality—or on an abject indiscernibility between subjectivity and objectivity.

Flesh's relationship to surface enters into Cheng's discussion of the Josephine Baker film *Princesse Tam Tam* with the following statement: "The metaphor of bare skin thus comes to stand in for the materiality of exposed flesh."⁵⁹ Cheng states that Baker's "nakedness never stands alone." Even in its relative matte quality (lit but not shiny), Richardson's bare skin "never stands alone," adorned—and comprised—by its own outlining of musculature and its tracing of an action. In this sense, both sweat—and its lack—can function as skin's adornment. One of Cheng's most provocative arguments marks the erosion of the distinction between Baker's skin and its ornamental costume and surface quality. In its sheen and gloss, Baker's skin is at once her own and extraneous; it is its own supplement. Cheng writes, "The distinction between the organic and the synthetic blurs in such a way as to render Baker's skin itself costume, prop, and surrogate....Is the fabric or animal skin on which she leans extraneous ornamentation or ontological companion?...[This] effect...has to do with what Bill Brown calls the indeterminate 'ontology of modern objects,' the inability to fully separate the animate from the inanimate."⁶⁰ That Baker's breasts are often exposed, while meant to titillate at the crossroads of racial and sexual fetishism, can be partially attributed to cultural (French) context, one at once comfortable with exposed skin and with colonial exploitation. Whereas the skin-meets-flesh of Baker's breasts present us with a muscularly inactive bodily attribute, Richardson's exposed musculature in the *Rainbow* photograph similarly indicates the place where skin gives way to flesh while introducing the possibility of actively engaged flesh (muscle). While sweat is indeed absent from the image, effacing labor in one sense, that Richardson's muscles are clearly engaged in the photograph points to the active—fleshy—mobilization of his own skin. Thus, bodily technique, muscular execution, and virtuosity become sites of agency (albeit complicated ones) for the dancer. Cheng refers to skin in motion as a "mobile outline." She writes, "The only

⁵⁸ *Volatile Bodies* 100.

⁵⁹ 60.

⁶⁰ 60.

authentic thing we can locate in [Baker's] performance is the virtuosity of movement—a virtuosity that does not allow Baker to transcend racial, gender, or national differences, but that, counterintuitively, precisely reveals those distinctions to be built on transferable disembodiment and disarticulation.”⁶¹ “Baker’s supposedly African and primitive choreographic diction,” Cheng continues, “is in fact a collage of various styles....[The] scene of discrimination is thus...a scene of stylistic *indiscrimination*.”⁶² It is often stylistic indiscrimination—rather than skin color—that serves as a racial marker. According to Cheng, “racial legibility has less to do with the visibility of skin color than with the visibility of style”—style can “out” someone.⁶³ That ontology can be structured through a mutability of form—that the dancing body can, paradoxically, establish its being through the donning and shedding of multiple styles—is a radical notion that contests both discriminatory racial readings of surface as color as well as racial studies that attempt to combat such exclusionary tactics by narrating a figure’s singular subjectivity based on surface. The relationship between flesh and skin in dance can be further complicated by noting the role of rehearsal in generating a sense of “muscle memory” in which movement that was at once laborious becomes “second nature,” naturalized in the body of the performer.

What Grosz and Merleau-Ponty omit from their discussions of flesh is the racial. While Hortense Spillers agrees with Merleau-Ponty in stating that “flesh...is that zero degree of social conceptualization,” she offers an explanation that accounts for racial violence as injury to the flesh. Spillers writes,

I would make a distinction...between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies...out of West African communities in concert with the African “middleman,” we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the *flesh*, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of the “flesh” as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or “escaped” overboard.⁶⁴

For Spillers, exploitation of the black body occurs at the level of flesh. Taking the dancing black body into account, it would seem that labor occurs in the domain of the exploitable—that corporeal beauty is created at the very locus of the body (flesh) that is injured in racial violence. What the Ailey company continually rehearses is the re-suturing of what Spillers refers to as the African American body’s historically “seared, divided, [ripped-apart]” flesh. Such consistent disciplining of the flesh for choreographic purposes imbues the raced body with a degree of agency. In a multi-temporal piece such

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² 65.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Spillers 67.

as *Rainbow*, which takes as its subject matter historical labor abuses and continues to be performed today, the contemporary dancer negotiates yesterday's trauma with the high technical demands of today's Ailey aesthetic. In buttressing the Ailey company's overarching aesthetic of spiritual transcendence, Richardson's appearance in this poster image undermines the power of his live performances to "transfer feeling" by (in Spillers' terms) continually liberating otherwise captive flesh.

"No Sweat"

Central to the concealment of labor in this photograph is the absence of *sweat*. As already noted Conspicuously absent from this image, perspiration is that abject surface substance that announces exertion, the necessary fluid a dancer must experience when effort works in the service of effortlessness. The lack of perspiration and message of freedom in this image mirrors the Ailey company's view of technique as that which enables an ease of movement. I prefer the term "sweat" to "perspiration," as sweat's varied colloquial usages are in fact more descriptive of dance's labor: to say, "I'm sweating" in rehearsal is to say, "I'm working hard"; to "sweat it" is to worry; and, finally, to say you are "sweating someone" is to admit that you are attracted to them. Thus, no substance more fully encapsulates the coalescence of the logics of protestant labor, capitalist anxiety, and sexual fetishism.⁶⁵

Art historian Krista Thompson's discussion of "shine" speaks to the aesthetic confluence of commodity fetishism and racial fetishism at the level of skin and surface. Thompson traces shiny skin (as that which refracts light) to slaves being greased before auctions, and concludes that shine is central to commodity capitalism's logic in which the shinier the object, the easier the sell. According to Thompson, this logic culminates with hip-hop culture's embrace of "bling," and Thompson cites Kehinde Wiley's contemporary portraits as a critical example of epidermal bling, or "shine." Only squeaky clean shine (as in a new diamond) is acceptable in this realm. The shine of sweat is of a different order, that of religion, possession, athleticism, and performance. Sweat is the stuff of the live, rarely championed in photographic images unless linked to commodities selling weight loss or athletic replenishment (think Gatorade or Nike). The element of distance introduced in live concert dance settings further complicates the issue of sweat, as it is often difficult to see sweat from the audience; thus, sweat's relationship to visibility informs its status (or lack of) as an abject or taboo-ridden fluid. Contemporary Ailey posters, which avoid sweat, adhere more to the logic of "shine," of bling, as they render dancers' skin shiny but never sweaty. If, in the early twentieth century, African Americans struggled to attain visibility, Thomson suggests that our current cultural moment renders the black body "hyper-visible." Most provocatively, she asks, "How might the hyper-visibility of bling be another instance of the disappearance of the black subject, a new form of emblazoned invisibility?"⁶⁶ Sinewy contemporary Ailey poster dancers, paradoxically, achieve "shine" without the material adornment of "bling's" diamonds or

⁶⁵ Haunting this entire chapter is the phrase "no sweat," meant to communicate effortlessness, which the Ailey company—especially Richardson—continually embodies.

⁶⁶ 2009.

cars. Instead, oil and light coalesce to create skin's consumable surface.⁶⁷ By paying comparative attention to surface qualities of the Ailey company's earlier posters featuring matte skin and later posters featuring shiny skin, I suggest that what Thompson calls "shine" coats the body in a preparatory state, readying it for labor or sale, and that sweat evidences labor during or after exertion. If shine is skin's pre-labor surface quality, then sweat signals its post-labor condition. Central to this investigation of images is a kinesthetic imagination that allows for a consideration of the choreographic body in spatio-temporal terms, as that which interacts with—and in—the photograph before, after, and during capture.

It is also important to consider the poster of *Rainbow* within its multiple spatio-temporal contexts of staging and circulation. In other words, the image cannot stand in for a live viewing experience of the piece in its entirety; nor can its appearance on buildings and buses with accompanying advertising text be ignored. First of all, as Richardson states, "All photos for the Ailey Company are done in the studio. At that time we had to make it as though we were in performance."⁶⁸ Thus, in the photographic studio (which, in this case, is also a dance studio, as evidenced by the tape securing the Marley floor) Ailey himself directed the scene and chose the moment to capture for the image's marketing purposes. If in a performance of *Rainbow*, the dancer must perform as if in a narrative of bondage and freedom, in the confines of the photographer's studio, the dancer is asked to perform "as though in performance," adopting a larger-than-life expression of overcoming or effervescence. Thus, if a similar image of *Rainbow* were photographed during performance (as opposed to in a studio environment), we might see skin coated in sweat. As choreographer McKayle states, in performances of *Rainbow*, there was "sweat running down their faces."⁶⁹ DeFrantz writes, "*Rainbow* is known as one of the sweatiest dances...because of its demands on the men."⁷⁰ When skin is coated in sweat, the religious, the capitalistic, and the aesthetic coincide. A dancer's sweat conjures both the Protestant work ethic and the black Christian celebration of sweat as what Anthony Pinn calls "a sign of intense contact between the divine and the human in spirit possession and in spreading the word of God."⁷¹ "Sweat marks the body as a biochemical reality meant for labor," explains Pinn, "or...as a sign of Black bodies seeking to press against such boundaries"⁷² In this arid poster, we get neither laborious bio-chemical reality, nor its resistance. Instead, AAADT's is a message of effortless transcendence.

Ultimately, this image urges us to think about how American dance can put forth more responsible images of AfroAsian solidarity without resorting to literal casting, didactic narrative, or the effacement of labor at the level of surface. To expose the labor

⁶⁷ Whereas in posters such as that of the 2005 film *Rize*, the sheen of sweat is used to sexualize and sell the problematically utopian idea of dancing one's way out of the "hood," or as a substitute for black-on-black gang violence, this poster of Richardson and Roxas has a classically matte sculptural quality, celebrating the muscular without exposing supposedly abject bodily fluids.

⁶⁸ Interview with the author, Nov., 2009.

⁶⁹ 120.

⁷⁰ Discussion with author (email).

⁷¹ 21.

⁷² *Ibid.*

concealed by this image is to acknowledge shared experiences of exploitation, largely effaced by mainstream American performance. Nevertheless, Richardson generates his fame by laboring in the service of the AAADT, dancing in and through an aesthetic of African American overcoming. Images such as this *Rainbow* poster mark a moment in history when black men in concert dance could point to—but not exceed—an accepted level of athletic heterosexual expressivity. It is only through establishing a reputation for invested artistry and rousing virtuosity at the AAADT that Richardson gained the recognition needed to form his own company. Let us move on to consider how renderings of choreography's photographic skin work to encourage or undermine antiracist approaches to dance. The type of racial fetishism made available by Richardson's virtuosity in this poster is precisely that which he works to subvert by co-founding Complexions Contemporary Ballet.

CHAPTER TWO

The Muse of Virtuosity: Complexions Contemporary Ballet and Choreographic Falsetto



Desmond Richardson in Dwight Rhoden's *Moonlight*.
Photo by Sharon Bradford.

Co-Founders of Complexions Contemporary Ballet,⁷³ Desmond Richardson and Dwight Rhoden both danced with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) from 1987-1994. With Richardson as his muse,⁷⁴ choreographer Rhoden created an explicitly heterogeneous platform for contemporary dance that sought to diverge from the AAADT's dominant aesthetic, which privileges heteronormative black masculinity and narratives of triumph. Richardson's improvisational style—one that combines ballet and modern dance from the “high art” concert dance realm with black vernacular forms such as popping and voguing—has greatly influenced the movement style defining Complexions' choreography. Since its inception, reception of Complexions has been defined by extremes: the recent remake of the film *Fame* (2009) cites Complexions as “the

⁷³ From this point forward, I will refer to Complexions Contemporary Ballet as “Complexions.”

⁷⁴ As the muse who often upstages the choreographer, Richardson's presence interrupts—and complicates—what dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster refers to as ballet's traditional presentation of the female ballerina as the main object of the dominant male gaze.

best dance company in the world,” while *Time Out New York* places them on their “Worst of 2009” list.⁷⁵ Over the past decade and a half, the *New York Times* has repeatedly lambasted Complexions’ choreography while reserving just enough breath to hail Richardson as “the saving grace of this company.”⁷⁶ What is it that lends Richardson the power to consistently redeem Complexions’ otherwise offensive aesthetic? And what kinds of choreographic practices have led Complexions from occupying a position of avant-garde experimentation in the 1990s to a space of mainstream appreciation after 2000? Critical reception of Complexions would benefit from an understanding of culturally specific formal hybridity in contemporary American choreography.

I develop an analysis of Complexions’ aesthetic that advances the goals of what Roderick Ferguson calls a queer of color analysis. I arrive at such an analysis by engaging with Thomas DeFrantz’s discussion of “versioning” and Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s concept of Africanist aesthetics—especially “soul”—in order to question André Lepecki’s claim that the capitalist imperative to stay in motion can (and should) only be counteracted through an aesthetics of stasis (as opposed to speed). This chapter introduces versioning, soul, and velocity to the study of *virtuosity* in performance, employing a queer of color analysis that arrives at my term “choreographic falsetto” to both further the understanding of virtuosity’s ambivalence and to complicate assumptions that virtuosity is necessarily a triumph of the mechanical over the soulful. Thus far, studies of virtuosity have yet to include African diasporic cultural influences and the co-constitutive socio-cultural paradigms of race, gender, sexuality, religion, and class. The impulse behind a privileging of stasis can be found in (1960s Judson Dance Theater’s) Yvonne Rainer’s “No Manifesto,” in which she famously proclaims, “No to virtuosity!” and carries through to contemporary choreographers such as Jerome Bel and subsequent theorizations such as those of Lepecki. Instead of reinforcing performance studies’ recently pervasive tendency to associate self-conscious meta-commentary with the slow and static, I provide a space in which we can consider the ways in which race and African diasporic practices can also engage in meta-commentary (dance about dance, virtuosity about virtuosity) via motion as well as stasis.

Two of the most important characteristics of virtuosity are velocity and versatility. A study of virtuosity in the context of Complexions makes evident the relationship between ability, hybridity, and perceptions of excess in contemporary performance, especially that which eschews the supposed boundary between art and entertainment. I argue that Richardson’s dancing embodies a *virtuosity of versatility*—exceptional execution and stylistic hybridity, both of which bring about discursive challenges for critics. I propose culturally contextualized deployments of the term virtuosity in order to counter

⁷⁵ Allison Burnett, *Fame*, film, directed by Kevin Tancharoen, Beverly Hills: Lakeshore Entertainment, 2009. Gia Kourlas, “Best (and worst) dance,” *Time Out New York*, Issue 744.745, Dec 31, 2009-Jan 13, 2010.

⁷⁶ Sulcas, “Muscular Charm.” Richardson has been referred to as “a welcome blessing” by Kourlas. Gia Kourlas, “Supple Limbs in a Sea of Energy,” *New York Times*, November 22, 2009. He has also been called “a dancer of magnificent stature, power and effortless charisma who makes Mr. Rhoden’s busy choreography look legible and even interesting.” Linda Williams’ discussion of “racial legibility” (in *Playing the Race Card*) resonates with the conspicuous use of the term “legible” in this review. Sulcas, “Muscular Charm,” *New York Times*, 2008.

assumptions of its universality, and suggest an analytic approach that accounts both for the term's entanglement with a history of the cult of the individual as well as its association with affect.

Defining virtuosity is a curious practice of assessment. The virtuosic artist refuses to be placed into the realm of the vulgar, the offensive, or the transgressive. The fine balancing act of remaining just slightly imbalanced—an excess that is never offensive, an affect that does not transgress—defines the precariousness of virtuosity. Class-based perspectives maintain virtuosity's instability, as the virtuosic is applauded when seen to further high art, but chastised when deployed in popular or lowbrow settings.⁷⁷ Nice The layers of racial and socio-cultural references at play in pieces by Complexions compels a reconsideration of the definition of virtuosity provided by the Kulturen des Performativen working group based at the Freie University in Berlin. They understand the *virtuoso* “as a new artist type who, since the seventeenth century, has influenced not only artistic concepts but also the very notion of performance in various cultural, social, and political domains,” and define *virtuosity* “as the potentially excessive enhancement of artistic practice,”⁷⁸ suggesting a distinction between artistry and virtuosity that recalls Anthropologist Anya Peterson Royce's study. Royce argues that virtuosity is a “necessary part of any aesthetic system” and that the “aesthetic of dance is composed of two parts: virtuosity and artistry,” artistry referring to fulfillment of the work at hand and virtuosity referring to a barely graspable excess that cannot be accounted for within the work alone. Nevertheless, in addition to generating a productive use of the term “virtuosity” for dance studies, I look specifically at American performing arts journalism and scholarship to see how the actual term (and not cross-culturally comparable concepts) arises in arts discourse.⁷⁹

Consider the following passage from a *New York Times* review of Complexions by Claudia la Rocco, who writes,

The extent to which Mr. Rhoden packs—and overpacks—phrases, cultivates warp-speed delivery and hyperextends every possible hip jut and arabesque is, thank goodness, something special to Complexions. The eye is so overwhelmed that long before this overlong program concludes...all you can do is stare blearily at the stage, praying that each whiplash

⁷⁷ To give you an idea of how Complexions' audiences are painted (by the New York Times) as uneducated, consider the following excerpt from a performance review: The work “never adds up to anything much, but it's pleasant enough to watch and, like everything else on this program, well danced. For Complexions' cheering audience, that is apparently enough.” Roslyn Sulcas, “A Program of Muscular Charm Guaranteed to Energize the Crowd,” *New York Times*, November 19, 2008. Also, in *Modern Dance, Negro Dance* Susan Manning discusses race and audiences.

⁷⁸ < http://www.sfb-performativ.de/seiten/b12_vorhaben_engl.html >

Later in this chapter I enter a discussion of artistry versus virtuosity.

⁷⁹By dance criticism, I refer to dance journalism, and by dance scholarship, I refer to academic research and writing on dance.

I limit my focus to live staged concert dancing in order to discuss virtuosic moments within their original choreographic contexts (as opposed to—and in some cases predating—decontextualized clips).

partnering sequence or gratuitous split will be the last.⁸⁰

La Rocco's resistance to Complexions reflects a widespread ambivalence to the very concept of virtuosity in the latter half of the twentieth century. As a concept more at home in the master-driven period of individual genius that defines high modernism, the notion of virtuosity appears undesirable to many contemporary artists and critics. In its unabashed embrace of presentational hyperkineticism,⁸¹ has Complexions overstepped that unspoken line of acceptability that defines virtuosity's precariousness?

La Rocco's overwhelmed response to Complexions' abundance of movement mirrors Bettina Brandl-Risi's assertion that virtuosic performances can "provoke skepticism towards a form of excellence that cannot be reliably objectified with the help of prevalent norms."⁸² A member the Kulturen des Performativen, Brandl-Risi offers the concept of "spectatorial virtuosity," a mode of reception that "oscillates between expertise and enthusiasm."⁸³ Within Brandl-Risi's frame, La Rocco does not exhibit spectatorial virtuosity; however, the Complexions enthusiast recognizing the type of skill involved in creating the movement could be said to be engaging in spectatorial virtuosity. Brandl-Risi goes on to explain, "Virtuosity demands and generates evaluative practices that are based on excessive reactions. In this respect, virtuosity stands in contrast to...aesthetics that refer to the solid quasi-concreteness of the artwork or creative process as evidence for achievement."⁸⁴ Because it inevitably insinuates affective excess, virtuosity cannot easily satisfy established critical vocabularies, especially those that privilege the integrity of the composition. Furthermore, as dance cultures coalesce and intermingle, it becomes increasingly important to create discourse *around* virtuosity, highlighting the term's own exclusions while paying heed to culturally specific contexts of production.

Hybrid Versioning

Taking his cue from Mikhail Bakhtin, Ferguson resists canonizing heterogeneity, opting instead to discuss "material heterogeneity" in order to "expose the gender and sexual diversity within racial formations."⁸⁵ In other words, according to Ferguson, "Queer of color analysis has to debunk the idea that race, class, gender, and sexuality are discrete formations insulated from one another."⁸⁶ Inquiries into arts practices such as

⁸⁰ La Rocco, "Ballet and African Steps."

⁸¹ I develop the term hyperkinetic later in this chapter to indicate choreography that embraces highly kinetic, technically-demanding movement, that which could be said to lie in opposition to much of contemporary performance's preoccupation with slowness, stillness, and duration.

⁸² Bettina Brandl-Risi, Kulturen des Performativen website, <http://www.sfb-performativ.de/seiten/b12_vorhaben_engl.html>. One issue that speaks more to composition, however, is the question of the choreographer's virtuosity. As a composer of movement, the choreographer is held to different standards than the performer. Rhoden's is a choreography that parallels the virtuosic performer's excess. Knowingly, he chooses not to edit his pieces down to a length acceptable to Europeanist taste.

⁸³ "Virtuoso's Stage," Kulturen des Performativen website.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward of Queer of Color Critique*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, 21.

⁸⁶ Ibid 4.

that of Complexions satisfy what Ferguson calls “inquir[ies] into the nonnormative components of racial formations,” thus challenging “restrictions of normative epistemes” and moving “beyond identity politics.”⁸⁷ I employ the phrase “queer of color *performance*” in the chapter’s title to denote a dual sense of performance as staged dance performance as well as the performance of everyday life. While Richardson and Rhoden live with a certain level of comfort in their sexuality, they do not deliberately announce a queer identity in their dance.⁸⁸ Thus, their choreography is haunted by queer shame [hmm, that’s a big statement, that doesn’t follow clearly from a Thus—make more complicated], manifested both via thematic content that can be read as a deliberate performance of shame and through the avoidance or repression of such content altogether. Although Richardson and Rhoden are committed to assembling a heterogeneous ensemble, queerness rests mainly in the formal aspects of Complexions’ choreography: movement, stylistic influence, and execution. Rhoden states, “I think I’m making a statement of ‘love is love is love’ through the *movement*.”⁸⁹

The inclusivity suggested by Rhoden’s declaration of “love is love is love” is one of gender acceptance but also one of stylistic acceptance. Just as Rhoden and Richardson welcome dancers of various backgrounds and appearances, they embrace multiple dance styles in a way lends the African American practice of “versioning” a sense of postmodern citationality. By developing the concept of versioning, dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz offers a theorization of heterogeneity that allows for a queer of color analysis that moves beyond canonized identity categories. He extends Gottschild’s delineation of Africanist dance culture by introducing “versioning [as] the generational reworking of aesthetic ideals,” or a

strategy of African American performance. At once postmodern and as ancient as the hills, versioning is a way to tell an old tale new or to launch

⁸⁷ Ibid, 29.

⁸⁸ There are so many nuanced dimensions to a dancer/choreographer’s experiences or “identity”: while the dance world is very queer-friendly on many levels, one does not exist in a single community or social sphere (one can experience relative acceptance in one sphere while experiencing prejudice in another setting).

⁸⁹ Rhoden, interview with author, 2010.

Dancing with Complexions was one of my first professional dance company jobs in New York. At the time, the company operated as a pick-up company, reassembling when other companies were off-season. I can recall the stir caused by the company’s first few performances, which gathered dancers from companies as diverse as the AAADT, Ballett Frankfurt, Philadanco, Dance Theater of Harlem, and American Ballet Theater, and presented a community of virtuosos who rejected narrative in favor of an abundance of kinetically charged movement that felt futuristic, transgressive. Having initially trained at San Francisco Ballet, I found myself more suited to modern dance, continuing at Martha Graham and then as a scholarship student at Alvin Ailey. After two years, it became clear that the Ailey training company, in the words of one of my teachers there, “didn’t need another Asian girl.” Thus, I sought dance employment outside the Ailey establishment. Complexions was accepting of unconventional (dance) body types, more interested in movement style and creativity of approach.⁸⁹ Reflecting on the company’s early years, Rhoden tells me, referring both to body type and race, “You’re a misfit. You had so much facility, but you might not have had the perfect body for a ballet company. We love the curves.”⁸⁹ As a dancer, Complexions felt to me like the creative home I had never imagined, comprised of a multi-racial sensibility, a heterogeneous dance palette, and dictated by a demanding, idiosyncratic style that boldly disobeyed the ballet of my youth while simultaneously paying heed to its discipline, rigor, and lines.

a musty proverb into the contemporary moment. Born of transplanted modes of African orature, it has given rise to decades of popular music styles and dances, from ragtime to hip-hop, from the cakewalk, a nineteenth-century parody of European ballroom processions, to the running man, a subtle satire of celluloid superheroes.⁹⁰

That African American performance has always commented on its past is a concept that reveals Complexions' multi-faceted influences, embodied by Richardson, expert in styles as disparate as breakdancing and ballet. Complexions' versioning is postmodern in that its citational mode is abstract and non-narrative, as opposed to literary or spoken. Inserting popping or voguing into choreography otherwise dominated by ballet and modern dance movements is an example of postmodern versioning. In Complexions, the concert dance forms of ballet and modern dance absorb and (re-)present glimpses of diasporic dance forms such as popping and voguing, repetitive typically encountered in underground or popular settings (from the club to the music video). Rhoden's work method is such that the dancer is asked, on the one hand, to mathematically insert, reorder, and distort movement on the spot, and to lose herself in the sensation of extreme physicality, on the other (a sensation born of a kinesthetic alchemy of muscular exactitude and emotional intensity)—precision that inhabits extremes. For his attention to the phenomenological aspect of dancing—how it feels to dance at the limits of one's technique and expression, Rhoden is often called “a dancer's choreographer.”

Choreographic Falsetto

In his influential study “Black Masculinity and the Sexual Politics of Race,” Kobena Mercer focuses on artists who linger in “the messy and murky realm of ambivalence, in which black male subjectivity becomes the site upon which a contest of competing psychic and social forces is played out.”⁹¹ Due to his ability to project both strength and vulnerability, Richardson is often called upon to embody such competing forces, which are further extended onto the ensemble in Complexions' work. His capacity to communicate such ambivalence is afforded by his virtuosity of versatility.

Solo, choreographed by Rhoden in 1998, is danced to an echoey a cappella Prince song of the same name. Richardson wears a militaristic Roman flap skirt, evoking gender ambiguity, much like the choreography itself, in which Richardson is in muscular command of his grand movements, while allowing a fluid sinew to introduce emotional vulnerability. Prince's song lyrics are a play on words, and “solo” alternately reads “so low” in the lyrics' text, just as “no one” alternately reads “no. 1,” echoing notions of the virtuoso as, at once, abject and championed. *Solo*'s calculated lyrics were co-written by playwright David Henry Hwang, known for his interest in issues of race, gender, and identity.⁹² In *Solo*, Richardson is at once confident and vulnerable, autonomous and

⁹⁰ Thomas DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 82.

⁹¹ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 164.

⁹² David Henry Hwang, “Solo,” *Come*, Prince, 1994. Lyrics:
So low, the curb looks like a skyscraper

subjected, visible and invisible. The virtuoso who possesses the “It” quality often exists on the periphery of social acceptability. Joseph Roach claims there is “often a social apartness [of] those who possess [It].”⁹³ “*Solo* is about anonymity,” Rhoden says, “someone who is grappling with himself and acceptance of who and what he is.”⁹⁴ Mirroring the paradoxical nature of the concept of the virtuoso, here one of the least anonymous performers executes an abstract tale of anonymity. Emotional vulnerability is translated through a choreographic palette executed with tremendous skill. Moreover, *Solo* presents the tension between the identity of the performer and the content of the performance, which recalls the Kulturen des Performativen working group’s observation that virtuosity makes it difficult to distinguish between performer and performance. To stage Richardson in a solo is to stage the question of virtuosity itself, a concept most at home in the context of solo performance. Thus, if current avant-garde dance following in the tradition of The Judson Dance Theater claims to be dance about dance, *Solo* stages virtuosity about virtuosity (as a manifestation of ability, abjection, and queerness). The difference between these two reflexive modes—Bel’s dance about dance, and Rhoden’s virtuosity about virtuosity, however, is that Rhoden’s “claim” is implicit, not buttressed by the discursive outlets upon which Bel’s aesthetic hinges. In interviews, Rhoden is more likely to express an appreciation for dance and a celebration of Richardson, as opposed to an analysis or rationale of his own work.

Solo reveals the tension between sexuality and spirituality central to Complexions’ aesthetic. Like Prince’s yearning falsetto singing, I find in Richardson’s dancing to exemplify what I call a “choreographic falsetto,” a deliberate use of otherwise feminine-identified movements in the service of a queer masculinist aesthetic. Interesting “The ambivalence which characterizes judgment of the virtuoso,” writes Brandstetter, “is

So high, the stars are under me
 So quiet, I can hear the blood rushing through my veins
 So low, I feel like I'm going insane
 The angels, they watch in wonder
 When U made love 2 me
 Through the rain and the thunder
 U cried in ecstasy
 And U were so kind
 I felt sorry 4 all creation
 Because at the time, no 1 was lucky
 no 1 was lucky, no 1 was lucky as me
 And now U're gone and I just wanna be still
 So silent, I'll just let my senses sleep
 It's gonna be so hard 2 hear my voice
 If I ever learn once more 2 speak
 I'm so lost, no 1 can find me
 And I've been looking 4 so long
 But now I'm done
 I'm so low, solo, my name is No 1

⁹³ Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 11.

⁹⁴ Manuel Mendoza, “Complexions Contemporary Ballet, which opens TITAS’ annual dance series, is devoted to multiculturalism,” *Dallas Morning News*, October 29, 2009.

related to [the] inability to choose...between the ethos of the interpreter and the artificiality of the ‘performance.’ This dilemma first finds expression in critiques of the castrato’s voice—the virtuoso voice.”⁹⁵ It is perhaps no accident that the dilemma of the virtuoso (as one who lends his interpretation a degree of excess) finds its historical foundation in the qualitative—and certainly gendered—ambivalence exhibited by the castrato. Similar to the castrato’s embrace of the high end of the tonal spectrum (albeit via biological refashioning), the falsetto too lingers in high notes typically reserved for the female voice. Both the castrato and the falsetto singer complicate an easy division between the organic and the artificial, the “male” and the “female.”

Like sung falsetto, Richardson’s dancing betrays an “organic” movement quality (and one that is readily associated with popularly-circulated black masculine body), on the one hand, and a sense of artifice, on the other. We are at once confronted with “human” and “machine,” as the technical aspect of execution is left exposed when Richardson performs such demanding—and typically feminine—feats. Queerness is thus located in Richardson’s superhuman qualities. Nevertheless, it is not merely the mechanical that lends Richardson’s dancing its superhuman quality: the mechanical/technical functions in the service of spiritually and other-worldly yearning. As Gabriele Brandstetter states, “The virtuoso is a *revenant* of a different notion of art and technology; he is a magician whose actions appear to contravene the boundaries of the physically possible while at the same time concealing from delighted audiences the nature of his transgression.”⁹⁶ In this case, Richardson’s “transgressions,” the technically achieved yet affectively extraordinary qualities of his performance—those that exceed the call of the work—both conjure affective excess and conceal the mechanical details supporting his movement.

Virtuosity (as both a category and a quality of performance) has always held both celebratory and pejorative connotations, championed in certain settings and not others.⁹⁷ “In fact, since the performances of the legendary nineteenth-century theatrical and musical virtuosi,” explains Brandstetter, “the majority of criticism...has been pejorative, so that the term ‘virtuoso’ became, to a certain extent, the polar opposite of the ‘true artist.’”⁹⁸ Brandstetter explains that the pejorative notion of virtuosity is linked to assumptions that the virtuoso’s performance is “soullessly mechanical.”⁹⁹ To bring in a

⁹⁵ Brandstetter, “The Virtuoso’s Stage,” 181.

⁹⁶ *Ibid* 178.

⁹⁷ In the OED definition of “virtuosity”: “1.a. Manly qualities or character. *Obs.*—1...2. The pursuits, interests, or temperament, characteristic of a virtuoso; interests or taste in the fine arts, esp. of a fastidious, finical, dilettante or trifling nature....b. *spec.* Excessive attention to technique, or to the production of special effects, in vocal or instrumental music (also *transf.* in art or literature).” Also of note is “virtuoso’s” connotations of a) collection and accumulation (see 1700 example) and b) suspicion (see 1921 example); “virtuosity” is often used in conjunction with the word “performance” to connote cunning or convincing of a suspicious/falsifying nature, and the connotation of collection and excess suggests that virtuosity usually refers to doing too much, as opposed to restraint (this, of course, could be culturally specific to Western contexts, but the word itself has Western origins—even if, as Anya Peterson Royce states, such a concept can be approximated in numerous cultures). “Virtuosity” has also been used to connote effeminacy (17th century). *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

⁹⁸ Brandstetter, “The Virtuoso’s Stage,” 179.

⁹⁹ *Ibid* 179.

discussion of African American performance is to complicate such easy associations between the “soulless” and the “mechanical,” especially when taking into consideration virtuosity that works in the service of an aesthetics of “soul” in the Africanist tradition. Richardson’s virtuosity first emerged in the Ailey company within a repertory dedicated to the exhibition of “soul.” At Ailey, virtuosity is an approximation of (not a distancing from) soul, and *Complexions*, though entering into the question of black spirituality more abstractly and critically, extends this aesthetic pairing of virtuosity and soul.

Gottschild’s discussion of “soul” in Africanist performance lends the study of virtuosity in America a much-needed reconsideration of the relationship between the mechanical and the spiritual.

Soul represents that attribute of the body/mind that mediates *between* flesh and spirit. It is manifested in the *feel* of a performance. It has a sensual, visceral connotation of connectedness with the earth (and the earth-centered religions that distinguish West and Central African cultures) and, concomitantly, a reaching for the spirit.¹⁰⁰

In *Solo*, Richardson self-flagellates and stretches for something beyond himself, demonstrated by high-reaching arms and soaring leaps. He thus embodies Gottschild’s “soul,” reaching for the spiritual while still situated within the realm of the earthly. Much of *Complexions*’ work draws from religious themes only to present a lone figure in tension with the exaltation of the group. Rhoden and Richardson avoid presenting a definitive stance toward sexuality in such pieces, opting instead to leave the tension between sexuality and religion unresolved. Although he claims not to follow any faith, Rhoden tells me that he attended Catholic school, and has always been interested in the concept of “devotion.”¹⁰¹ Important to Rhoden is the “contradiction of religion plus sensuality,” and he has “an appreciation for counterpoints, opposites, and contrast.”¹⁰²

Solo encapsulates the crux of *Complexions*’ work, its location at the intersection of sexuality and religion, race and identity, virtuosity and versatility, individual and collective. Paradoxically, the most vulnerable movements in the solo, namely the rippling upper body undulations and the face reverberating between two hands, actually disclose the most normative of black masculinist vernacular influences in *Complexions*’ work, specifically the influence of breakdancing’s popping and locking. The influence of Richardson’s individual movement style permeates Rhoden’s choreography. In *Solo*, the placement of popping-influenced movement between soaring balletic leaps and powerful leg extensions transforms movements typical of masculine posturing in hip-hop dance into a subtle exploration of queer experience.

Flaw is a piece choreographed by Rhoden in 2005. Like *Solo*, *Flaw* questions the status of the individual. *Complexions*’ queer aesthetic is informed by a hybrid palette. The pause-and-go interruption of inserting pops into ballet technique mirrors an articulation of subjectivity as that which is always already fragmented. In *Flaw*, *Complexions* dancers Clifford Williams is the central yet ostracized figure, both

¹⁰⁰ Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 223.

¹⁰¹ Rhoden, interview with author, 2010.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

applauded and competitively challenged by the group, which encircles him, moving from the perimeters of the stage into the center, and back again. Such circular formation and a dynamic of individual versus collective mirrors the culture of vernacular dances that have influenced Rhoden. After the culmination of Williams' solo section of deliberately distorted penchés (in which the leg extends to the back beyond a 180-degree line and the hip inverts in a deconstructive treatment of ballet), sinewy torso movements, and effortlessly produced turns, the group responds with arm movements that resemble voguing's fashion pose-derived gestural practice.¹⁰³ In fact, the influence of voguing on Rhoden's contemporary ballet style and the appearance of increased intricacy and precision in recent voguing styles that emphasize arm movements illustrates the implicit exchange between high art/concert techniques such as ballet and underground styles. While not entirely enamored with his work, dance critic Jennifer Dunning is one of the few who recognizes the play between high and low (concert and popular) dance forms in Rhoden's work: "Mr. Rhoden was most persuasive when he reveled in the considerable artistry that may be found at the 'low' end of the range."¹⁰⁴ To see a voguer such as Javier Ninja (the 2009 House Dance International champion) in competition is to begin to ascertain the influence of voguing on the group's arm gestures in *Flaw*.¹⁰⁵ Ninja indulges extremes, performing hyperextended arm whacks that seem to pull his shoulders out of socket, dancing through poses in rapid succession. Rhoden explicitly combines ballet *por de bras* (upper body and arm movements) with voguing, which originated in queer ballroom culture, enjoyed a bit of pop cultural appropriation in the 1990s, and still exists as a competitive underground dance style.¹⁰⁶ In performing intricate arm gestures

¹⁰³ Scholar and Detroit house member Marlon Bailey explains Ballroom thusly:

"Ballroom culture, sometimes called 'house culture,' is a clandestine community consisting of African American and...Latino/a GLBTQ people. Since its beginnings in Harlem, New York, more than 50 years ago, ballroom culture has expanded rapidly to every major city in the United States" (Arnold and Bailey 174). "Ballroom consists of two primary features: flamboyant competitive balls and the anchoring family-like structures, called houses, which mount these performance events. Houses in Ballroom culture are led by 'mothers' (mostly men, but sometimes women or male-to-female transgender people) and 'fathers' (men or female-to-male transgender people), who, regardless of age, undertake a labor of care and love for/with other members of the Ballroom community" (Bailey 1-2). Held in spaces that range from nightclubs to abandoned warehouses, balls consist of runway drag performances in which voguing enacts and exaggerates through dance the gestures found in fashion magazines. Battles consist of both voguing and walking the runway. According to Bailey, "There are three primary aesthetic criteria by which the performance are judged: 1) each performer has to include the five elements of vogue in their performance; 2) each element has to be performed within the rhythm established by the music, the commentator's chant, and the audience; and 3) performers must distinguish themselves by demonstrating intensity (with a physical crescendo at precise moments) exhibiting skills that are exceptional, and adding a special touch that reflects the performer's personality. Typically, the performer who exemplifies these attributes in the most effective fashion wins the trophy and/or the prize and the respect of the Ballroom community" (Bailey 103).

¹⁰⁴ Jennifer Dunning, "Reveling in the Artistry Found at the 'Low' End of Art," *New York Times*, January 7, 2002.

¹⁰⁵ In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz suggests that voguing lies at the border between gesture and dance.

¹⁰⁶ Voguing has been experiencing something of a Renaissance in certain cultural contexts, as seen in NYC museums, streets, and music concerts. I elaborate on this phenomenon in a forthcoming article on voguing in the museum context.

together, Rhoden's knowing ensemble operates as a micro-culture, navigating its limits of collectivity and individuality, precision and its interruption. According to Sarita Allen (who danced in the AAADT with Rhoden and Richardson and was a resident artist of Complexions for many years), "In *Flaw*, [Rhoden] wants the dancers to do it perfectly - but not quite. He wants them to allow for small imperfections that the audience might not notice but could sense, could feel."¹⁰⁷ Intentional "imperfections" are sensed but not registered on an intellectual level, reinforcing the tension in the work between queer shame and the celebration of hybridity.¹⁰⁸ If, in *Solo*, the audience is met with Richardson's singular body, *Flaw* places the experience of the soloist in relation to the group. Ultimately, Clifford's choreographic falsetto, his brilliant execution of typically feminine hyper-extensions paired with masculinist athleticism and bravado, displays how Richardson's particular virtuosity is both commented on through Rhoden's choreography and how subsequent Complexions dancers have collectively adopted the style.

Velocity and Stasis

In addition to a demanding hybrid movement style, central to Complexions' virtuosic aesthetic is its velocity. Without cultural exposure to certain strains in the choreography, the work of Complexions can upset a palette that tends towards aesthetics of stillness dominating much performance discourse. La Rocco's negative portrayal of Complexions' performance is not unique to dance journalism.¹⁰⁹ Much dance scholarship dismisses highly kinetic choreography in the vein of Complexions either overtly or by way of avoidance. Those who are able to cite the diasporic elements of such choreography tend to be overly celebratory. Nevertheless, unlike critics, scholars have yet to pay direct attention to Complexions. The range of scholarly reception I point to is best characterized by Lepecki, on one end of the spectrum, and Gottschild, on the other. While Lepecki tends toward (and even defines) a position in performance studies that privileges stasis over motion, Gottschild's project brings attention to Africanist influences in American concert dance that privilege motion over stasis. Europeanist scholarship with

¹⁰⁷ Kathryn Shattuck, "After the Breakup, Still Choreographic Partners," *New York Times*, May 3, 2005.

¹⁰⁸ Rhoden explains, "Desmond and I have finally put together this technique of our own, which is a merge of a classical barre that starts with plies and tendus and ends in grand allegro but it's about moving the torso off-center and then also using the hips and the ribcage. You do everything straight first (at the barre), and after you do it once straight...you add ribcage....The reference point is, from on-center to off-center, with the assistance of the barre. Then when we get to center, [we] move a little quicker, because [we have] moved "off" a lot more, and...we may do an adagio that has a little bit of both in it: on, with the body off...recovery, motion, momentum (which no one teaches)....It's about using the down to get to the out, and being able to ace the virtuosic moment. It's not being placed and stiff; it's about the motion people are following, following the pathway to the moment...whether it's an extension or a suspension releve).... As performers, we want to do what the director gives us. [My book project] is about what to pay attention to, how to be successful in a process, and it doesn't mean that you get the step and do the four pirouettes he asks for. It just means that you're able to capture the moment. It's almost like a new way of looking at techniques of performance, and what it takes...first of all, to get it, and then once you've gotten it, how do you make it good?" Rhoden, interview with author, 2010.

¹⁰⁹ By dance "journalism" I refer to criticism in newspapers and related media; by dance "scholarship," I refer to academic research on dance.

a partiality to a politics of stillness can limit potential engagement with African American aesthetic practices.

The discourse of analysis created by Gottschild accounts for diasporic influences of highly kinetic choreography. Centering on dance in the U.S.—more than on transnational circulations of movement style—Gotschild argues that Africanist aesthetics embrace the idea that “the universe is in a dynamic process-in-motion, not a static entity.”¹¹⁰ Opposed to the Protestant ethic of efficiency, Africanist aesthetics embrace movement, even if it does not contribute to—or represent—maximum capitalist productivity.¹¹¹ The politics behind Gottschild’s discussion of speed in Africanist aesthetics are such that, while, historically, black performers’ sense of speed may have had much to do with “traditional West African [religion and sacred principles]...brought to the New World in the Middle Passage,” all Americans are inherently implicated in Africanist culture: it is, “not a choice,” states Gottschild, “but an imperative that comes to us through the culture.”¹¹²

Calling for a choreography that works against capitalism’s speed and motion, Lepecki writes, “Modernity creates its kinetic being based on a primary ‘accumulation of subjectivity’....The intrusion of the still in choreography (the still-act) initiates a direct ontopolitical critique of modernity’s relentless *kinetic interpellation* of the subject.”¹¹³ Lepecki is informed by German scholar Peter Sloterdijk, who examines automobiles and traffic in his study of modern movement. In such contexts, regardless of the speed of the vehicle, the human body is virtually still. For Sloterdijk, speed can only be thought of as the dominant mode of late capitalism in the context of the body’s very stasis. Analysis of the dancing body requires a different type of attention to motion and agency, as the contemporary dancer is, to a large degree, in control of her movements. The dancer’s technique is her machine.

Bel epitomizes what Lepecki calls “choreography’s slower ontology.” In pieces such as *Jerome Bel* (1995), performers stand onstage in the nude for long periods of time; in *The Show Must Go On* (2001), Bel pairs mass-mediated pop songs and musical show tunes with self-consciously anti-choreographic dance, bringing attention to popular entertainment’s failed attempts to represent political movements.¹¹⁴ Lepecki writes,

¹¹⁰ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 11.

¹¹¹ An argument could be made for an aesthetic corollary to economist Joseph Schumpeter’s concept of “creative destruction” (and a compulsion toward the new in hyper-kinetic choreography). How might diasporic choreography not associated with the avant-garde represent a preoccupation with the new that differs from that of the avant-garde?

¹¹² Gottschild, *Digging*, 5.

¹¹³ André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the politics of movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 58. Furthermore, the issue of Lepecki’s discussion of slow/still choreography’s ontopolitical potential is rigorously addressed in my chapter on William Forsythe’s Ballet Frankfurt, as Forsythe is an American choreographer working in Europe who employs hyperkinetic (as opposed to slow/still) choreography in order to critique capitalism’s ontology in a way that satisfies Lepecki’s formula through different means.

¹¹⁴ In an essay entitled, “Flesh Failures...or, the deprived number as the musical’s all song and no dance anomaly,” I write about Bel’s *The Show Must Go On* as a series of (what I call) “deprived numbers,” as in the Broadway musical number without dance (song-and-dance is reduced to song).

“Bel...deploys stillness and slowness to propose how movement is not only a question of kinetics but also one of intensities, of generating an intensive field of microperceptions.”¹¹⁵ By “microperceptions,” Lepecki’s observation resonates with Brandl-Risi’s discussion of the “spectatorial” and difficulties associated more with reception than performance. Furthermore, when paired with “intensities,” “microperceptions,” by indicating the impression of minute, barely perceptible movements, point to the internal, that movement could be occurring within the body, unavailable to audience perception in its entirety. If we think of Complexions’ hyperkinetic aesthetic in terms of something I will provisionally term “hyperperceptions,” we find that, like stasis, (kinetic) abundance can also constitute “intensities” that skew audience perception. Requiring spectatorial virtuosity not developed enough, “hyperperception” wholly externalizes the otherwise internal movements or energetics of the microperceived. Ultimately, hyperkinetic choreography such as that of Complexions can also challenge the viewer in generative ways (and my chapter on William Forsythe’s Ballett Frankfurt further explores such an aesthetics of difficulty). Rhoden’s work brings to light the paradoxical invisibilizing effect of the black body’s hyper-visibility, echoing Krista Thompson’s provocation, “How might the hyper-visibility of bling be another instance of the disappearance of the black subject, a new form of emblazoned invisibility?”¹¹⁶ We might venture to think of Rhoden’s choreography as an experimentation with bling’s (otherwise visual) kinesthetic counterpoint, commoditized visual excess aestheticized in motion. Lepecki’s “intensities,” then, shift from the performer to the viewer’s perception.

Furthermore, it is important to reassess Lepecki’s argument through a consideration of modernity’s simultaneous limiting of movement for those whose agency is most compromised. In other words, the legacy of slavery in the U.S. is such that choreographic qualities like restlessness and kineticism have their aesthetic foundations in diasporic dance traditions as well as in the trope of escape. For American dancers working in the African diaspora, highly kinetic choreography draws from traditions developed to resist stasis or capture. Thus, aesthetics of velocity also have the potential to stage what Lepecki calls an “ontopolitical critique.” In recent discussions,¹¹⁷ Bel has called himself an artist whose “work is not danced but...is about dance.”¹¹⁸ Can Complexions’ hyperkinetic, technically demanding movement also be “about dance?” The title of Lepecki’s book *Exhausting Dance* refers to the idea of stepping beyond dance’s habitual compulsion to move, to look beyond what is typically thought of as “dance.” However, for Complexions to linger in the type of movement that actually *exhausts* the performer is

¹¹⁵ Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, 57. “Microperception” relates to Lucia Ruprecht’s discussion of micro-movements and virtuosity, explored in my Forsythe chapter. Also, in her 2004 cross-cultural analysis of virtuosity in the performing arts, anthropologist Anya Peterson Royce studies stillness and silence in non-Western performance, upsetting the idea that such qualities are unique to the contemporary European stage. Her premise is that all performance cultures adhere to some notion of virtuosity specific to their own set of tastes and modes of recognition. *Anthropology of the Performing Arts: Artistry, Virtuosity, and Interpretation in a Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New York: Altamira Press, 2004).

¹¹⁶ November, 2009, Columbia University. I expand on this discussion of Thompson in Chapter One.

¹¹⁷ In the press and at UC Berkeley on March 4, 2009.

¹¹⁸ Jerome Bel, *In Dance*, March 2009.

to extend and revise the Africanist embrace of motion found in the AAADT's trope of overcoming adversity. When *Complexions* stages movement so kinetic and technically demanding that it continually tests the limits of exhaustion, the work comments on the labor through which virtuosic concert dance is produced. Whereas Lepecki calls for the exhaustion of narrative, kinetic dance (epitomized by AAADT or ABT), Rhoden abstracts and exaggerates formal aspects of such choreography, adding to an already accumulative aesthetic. Jerome Bel's stillness represents a reaction in a minimalist vein; Rhoden's hyperkineticism represents a reaction in maximalist extreme. Both are different ways of provoking the viewer to reflect "about" the structure and function of dance; both are conducting a meta-critique about the form that they are simultaneously enacting. Paradoxically, in a refusal to stage such challenging ensemble choreography, contemporary dance artists advocating for an aesthetics of stasis can end up capitulating to the very type of high capitalist obsession with the individual that it eschews. If, as dance critic Roslyn Sulcas says, *Complexions*' works "are hyperkinetic, flashy exhibitions of physical prowess that mostly scream one thing: 'Look at me up here with my fabulous body doing fabulous things!'" then what of Jerome Bel's nude body, penis out, facing the audience?¹¹⁹ Bel, though by different (unaccompanied and unadorned) means also screams, "Look at me!" By simply presenting the body as an object in the vein of Yvonne Rainer's Judson aesthetics, Bel calls attention to the theatricality of the performing body's presence in relationship to the audience. If Sulcas suggests that *Complexions* dancers invite a relationship of attraction, Bel, after Rainer, invites the viewer to pay heed to her own habits of viewership. Comprised by an entire ensemble of performers all supposedly begging their audience to "Look at [my] fabulous body doing fabulous things," a group piece such as *Mercy* places multiplied demands on the viewer. The viewer is unable to grasp the entirety of activity onstage, cutting back and forth between watching individual dancers and group passages. Thus, the work dictates an act of viewing that is both one of attraction (as in, "Look at me!") and one of ontology (as in, "Look at me in relationship to yourself, and take note of our coexisting subjectivities").

As Ferguson has suggested, a queer of color analysis interrogates the "nonnormative components of racial formations," and it is precisely by examining the nonnormative—queer and raced, and queerly raced—components of *choreographic* formations that I am able to propose an alternative to the assumption that an "ontopolitical critique" of/in capitalism necessarily functions through slowness. As Robert Reid-Pharr has stated, "There is no normal blackness, no normal masculinity to which the black subject, American or otherwise, might refer."¹²⁰ As a term that inevitably points to that which exceeds the normal and the normative, virtuosity lingers in ambivalence. Even though the ambivalence surrounding virtuosity generates a kind of excess that is already affectively queer, to situate the term in the context of queer of color dance exposes culturally biased judgments of virtuosic performance while providing the opportunity to generate effective ways of distilling culturally-specific formal elements of choreography and its execution. By contributing to—and exceeding the demands of—

¹¹⁹ Sulcas, "Program of Muscular Charm."

¹²⁰ Robert Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man: Essays* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 103.

Rhoden's choreography, Richardson is a virtuoso in every regard, and ultimately disrupts the term's historical compulsion to discursively separate the mechanical from the spiritual. To recognize Complexions' practice of versioning alongside Richardson's soulful embodiment of choreographic falsetto is to provide an inclusive context for subsequent discussions of virtuosity in contemporary performance.

CHAPTER THREE

Otherwise in Blackface: American Ballet Theatre and San Francisco Ballet's *Othello*

[*Othello*] is pure melodrama. There is not a touch of character in it that goes below the skin.
—George Bernard Shaw, 1897

Lar Lubovitch choreographed American Ballet Theatre and San Francisco Ballet's co-production of *Othello* in 1997, the year Desmond Richardson returned from Ballett Frankfurt in Germany.¹²¹ Noting an absence of black male dancers in ABT (where the production was created), Lubovitch requested Richardson from outside the ranks of the company for the title role.¹²² When Richardson was not dancing the role of Othello, alternate casts were painted in bronze face and body makeup. Richardson's presence—and absence—in the role of Othello compels a consideration of the haunted and heretofore unexamined relationship between blackface, virtuosity, and racial melodrama in ballet. That Lubovitch's creative methodologies borrow from American film and European opera lends his production a unique sense of melodrama, on the one hand, and an archaic treatment of race, on the other. By focusing my attention on Lubovitch's decidedly American production of *Othello*, I interrogate the function of the non-speaking, dancing body in the context of blackface and melodramatic ballet. It is important to note that Lubovitch's style brings together ballet and modern dance, creating a type of "contemporary ballet" within companies (ABT and SFB) that consider themselves "Classical ballet" companies.¹²³ Here *Othello* is theorized through virtuosity and melodrama's shared relationships to temporality, excess, and virtue. As such, blackface, as it interfaces with—and compulsively tries to recover—Richardson's distinct virtuosity, becomes the site upon which racial melodrama takes place on and off the balletic stage.

Central to my discussion of Lubovitch's *Othello* is the idea that, in Richardson's absence, surrogate casts are painted in blackface to supplement an attempt to affectively recover Richardson's virtuosity. In doing so, stylistic approximation becomes conflated with incomplete racial mimesis. The ballet dancer tries to embody the modern dancer's technique; the white man plays black. And in the process, modern dance becomes equated with the racial Other. ABT artistic director McKenzie and Lubovitch's decision to hire Richardson for the production also serves as a glaring reminder of the history—and continued practice—of exclusionary hiring practices in ballet, where ability is correlated with race. In the words of Richardson,

¹²¹ As is customary in the dance world, I will refer to American Ballet Theatre and San Francisco Ballet as ABT and SFB, respectively. Also, Richardson continued to co-direct and dance with Complexions during his time working with ABT and SFB.

¹²² Lubovitch's production of *Othello* was initially created on ABT in 1996-1997; it was subsequently set on SFB.

¹²³ Nevertheless, I would not equate Lubovitch's style of "contemporary ballet" with that of William Forsythe, who is more intentionally deconstructive and postdramatic in his aesthetic. Nor would I equate it with that of Complexions, despite some similarities.

My involvement with ABT [and SFB] probably reinforced the idea that non-white dancers do and can be leads in story ballets and can hold the stage through artistry, technique, and...thought-provoking performances. For me it was not a conscious decision, yet I believe my involvement [shows]...that someone of color can carry a three-act ballet....I did not realize that I was the first principal dancer of color since the inception of ABT, but I gladly wear that title if it draws inspiration to others.¹²⁴

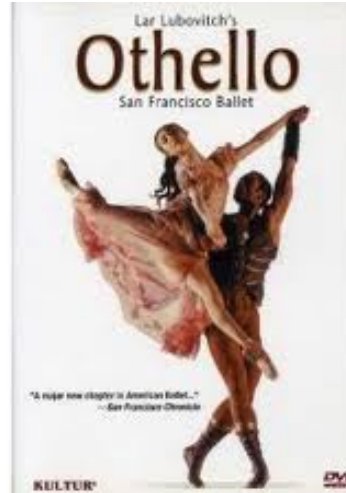
Richardson's reaction to his casting betrays an awareness of his contribution to American dance history, yet reveals the fact that his decision to take on the role was motivated by factors other than the political. Such a perspective allows him to inadvertently dismiss the troubling aspects of the production. On the one hand, Richardson is hired to accommodate the fact that black dancers of his (caliber exist but are not hired by classical ballet companies; on the other hand, to hire Richardson to carry a full-length ballet is to announce an inclusionary impulse, no matter how belated. Traditionally racially prejudiced hiring practices in ballet have much to do with the desire for the appearance of homogeneous casting, but also with the assumption that black dancers lack the degree of technique and ability found among white ballet dancers.¹²⁵ Attempts at the already impossible category of technical authenticity are subsequently grafted onto the racial appearance of characters in narrative ballets that call for the ethnic "Other": the conundrum of white dancers having to play non-white roles is incompletely resolved through the use of makeup, costuming, musical motifs, even exoticist choreographic allusions. As such, blackface functions as one of several intertwined elements in the attempt to embody the Other.

Lubovitch's *Othello* is steeped in melodrama, both in the story's plot and the racial melodrama of Richardson's casting in (and subsequent absence from) the role. In creating the production, Lubovitch drew from the filmic practice of storyboarding. To account for the melodrama internal and external to Lubovitch's *Othello*, I apply Linda Williams' study of melodrama in film and racial melodrama in televised media. While film and television rely on text and speech, I take into consideration the absence of vocalization in ballet's blackface practices, which rely heavily on choreography, visuality, musicality, and the body in lieu of the voice. After describing the way leitmotif arises in Lubovitch's choreography as a tool to indicate ethnic otherness in plot, I go on to survey recent discussions of blackface and minstrelsy in dance history by Susan Manning and Juliet McMains. I evaluate the relevance of Manning's concept of "metaphorical minstrelsy" in early American modern dance and McMains' discussion of "brownface" in current competitive ballroom culture to Lubovitch's *Othello*. Because modern dance and ballroom dance engage with the racial Other differently than ballet, I then turn to references to the body in recent studies of blackface by Eric Lott and Louis Chude-Sokei to gauge commonalities between ballet casting and traditional blackface practices. Finally, I engage with Chude-Sokei's theorization of Bert Williams' blackface to determine the value of

¹²⁴ Interview with the author.

¹²⁵ Certainly, the socio-cultural and economic makeup of the board of directors of a ballet company (responsible for funding much of the company's budget) is often reflected in racially-biased hiring practices.

framing Richardson's performance of Othello as an instantiation of "black-on-black minstrelsy."



Left: *Othello* at ABT, 1997. Sandra Brown, Desmond Richardson. Right: Richardson and Yuan Yuan Tan in SFB's shared production of *Othello*. Photo by Weiferd Watts

The Moor's Balletic Past

In comparison to theater, film, and opera, the history of concert dance productions of *Othello* is limited. As a story originating in sixteenth-century Italy, blacking up in *Othello* has become accepted practice in theater and opera, and is less common in the history of ballet. In the early twentieth century, we find blacking up in ballets such as Mikhail Fokine's 1911 *Petrushka* with music by Igor Stravinsky, starring Vaslav Nijinsky. Restaged most recently by the Joffrey Ballet, the Moor in *Petrushka* continues to be played in blackface. The practice of blacking up is often seen as central to Othello's ambivalent character, and this ambivalence is reflected in the hybridity of ballet and modern dance techniques used in many productions. In ballet contexts, productions of the tale have been the occasion for modern and contemporary ballet choreographers to introduce modern dance to the classical story ballet format.¹²⁶ Previous choreographers of *Othello* have included Jacques d'Amboise, who created a production for the New York City Ballet in 1967, and John Butler, who made a twenty-minute trio to Dvořák for the La Scala Ballet in 1976. Ex-NYCB dancer Jean -Pierre Bonnefous choreographed a full-length version for the Louisville Ballet in 1981. After retiring from NYCB, Bonnefous had been "taking classes at the Martha Graham School, and originally thought he might perform *Othello* modern-dance style: 'I thought I might do it barefoot, like Laurence Olivier in his wonderful movie version. Olivier said at the time that he needed to feel the floor for the role. Isn't that a typical modern dance remark?'"¹²⁷ In 1985, John Neumeier, known for infusing ballet with modern dance, choreographed a version to the genre-crossing sacred music of Arvo Pärt (and others) for the company he directs, the Hamburg Ballet. The last version of the ballet performed by ABT was by Mexican modern dance

¹²⁶ Even in 1911, *Petrushka* is also a ballet that departs from classicism.

¹²⁷ <<http://www.nytimes.com/1981/02/15/arts/a-full-length-othello-by-bonnefous.html>>

choreographer José Limón, who set his well-known 1949 quartet *Moor's Pavane* on the company.¹²⁸ Unlike Lubovitch's version, Limón's was never danced in blackface. Most recently in 2009, Dwight Rhoden (the co-director of Complexions Contemporary Ballet) choreographed a contemporary ballet version of *Othello* for the North Carolina Dance Theatre, with music composed by David Rozenblatt.¹²⁹ Rhoden's version eschewed blackface and employed a racially diverse cast.

While common in opera, the model of the co-produced evening-length work has occurred in ballet only more recently. Lubovitch had previously staged several of his shorter ballets on ABT, and ABT and SFB's shared *Othello* came about when McKenzie approached Lubovitch to create a proposal for a new work. It was Lubovitch's idea to embark on a version of *Othello*, and McKenzie appreciated the "tale of envy" and the way, through "tone, color [and specificity]," Lubovitch built a heightened level of "suspense."¹³⁰ Because the production called for an original evening-length musical score, costumes, and sets, McKenzie sought the financial and artistic partnership of San Francisco Ballet, directed by Helgi Tommason, who had danced with Lubovitch in Harkness Ballet in the 1960s.

According to Lubovitch, his initial impulse was to choreograph a full-length ballet, which led him to explore *Othello* "because, of all the classical stories, it was the one that could be done best in pictures."¹³¹ Based on the original Giovanni Battista Giraldi¹³² version of the Othello story (*Un Capitano Moro*) published in Venice in 1566, Shakespeare adapted the text into the play *Othello, the Moor of Venice* around 1602). Lubovitch was compelled more by "the psychology of [the] story, not so much by the precise series of events."¹³³ The tension between authenticity and intentional imprecision permeates the production: as a Moor, Othello is meant to evoke the Other without adhering to a specified racial appearance, Lubovitch's favors "pictures" to a "precise series of events," and the set designer chooses to allude to the exotic as opposed to pinpointing an exact locale. Designed by George Tsybin, the set evokes large slabs and broken fragments of glass, serving as French doors, hanging scrims, or transparent glacier-like furniture. Lubovitch's interest in a pictorial depiction of *Othello* resulted in storyboarding, as the ballet was sketched in a manner borrowed from film: "This was...idea-driven as opposed to music-driven," explains Lubovitch, "I wrote out a score...storyboarding. I wrote the whole dance out like a movie, and I described the music and length."¹³⁴ Richardson states, "Working with [Lubovitch] on this project was very much like working on a film

¹²⁸ In fact, the *Moor's Pavane* was the "first professional dance" piece Lubovitch ever saw. <http://www.ballet.co.uk/magazines/yr_07/jun07/rs_rev_abt2_0507.htm>

¹²⁹ He explains, "My version of *Othello* is loosely based on the music industry....The story of *Othello* is the same, but I wanted it to be modern. I think people will be able to relate to the story because it could be ripped from the headlines of today." <<http://www.ncdance.org/NewsOthello.asp>>

¹³⁰ Kevin McKenzie (with Lar Lubovith and Wes Chapman), "American Ballet Theatre, a Shakespeare festival" [videorecording], Works and process at the Guggenheim, Jan 29, 2007. [NYPL.]

¹³¹ Lubovitch, *ibid.*

¹³² Also known as Cintio.

¹³³ Lubovitch.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

project—the conception, the communication of his ideas, the costumes, the sets and overall staging.”¹³⁵

Melodrama

The aspects of Lubovitch’s production borrowed from film—namely, storyboarding, episodic scenes, a cinematic score by film composer Elliot B. Goldenthal, and an emphasis on bodily action—further augment the inherently melodramatic aspects of the Othello story. Of importance here is the pairing of virtuosity and characterization, as other instantiations of Richardson’s virtuosity appear in contexts that call for an abstract aesthetic, as opposed to one in which Richardson is asked to play a theatrical role. In other words, historically speaking, the virtuoso soloist in music and dance tends to perform as him or her “self,” as opposed to satisfying the demands of a character. The fact that Richardson must play a role in Othello affords further opportunity to theorize the ballet in terms of melodrama, a term that emerges in theater and film studies in the context of conventions such as character and plot. According to Williams, who builds upon Peter Brooks’ seminal text on melodrama, the five main features of melodrama can be described thusly^{WC}:

1. “Home: Melodrama begins, and wants to end, in a ‘space of innocence.’”
2. “Melodrama focuses on victim-heroes and on recognizing their virtue. Recognition of virtue orchestrates the moral legibility that is key to melodrama’s function.”
3. “Melodrama’s recognition of virtue involves a dialectic of pathos and action—a give and take of ‘too late’ and ‘in the nick of time.’”
4. “Melodrama borrows from realism but realism serves the melodrama of pathos and action.”
5. “The final key feature of melodrama is the presentation of characters who embody primary psychic roles organized in Manichean conflicts between good and evil.”¹³⁶

Following Williams, I will extend my argument to considerations of race and the convergence of moral and racial legibility. In the meantime, it is important to point to Williams’ third criterion, framing melodrama’s temporality, in which she states, “Melodrama’s recognition of virtue involves a dialectic of pathos and action—a give and take of ‘too late’ and ‘in the nick of time.’” The central elements of Othello’s plot rest on this structure of recognition; it is “too late” that Othello recognizes the virtue of his wife (Desdemona) and the deceitful acts of Iago. By adapting the tale into the structure of a three-act ballet heightens *Othello*’s melodrama by relying more on the action of the body than narrative plot.

While formally structured as a tragedy, the original Othello tale has also been described as proto-melodrama due to its European origins and predating of American melodrama’s emergence on the nineteenth century stage. Three aspects of Lubovitch’s

¹³⁵ Desmond Richardson, email interview with the author, October, 2010.

¹³⁶ Ibid 28-40.

production situate his *Othello* within what Williams calls the “melodramatic mode.”¹³⁷ First of all, by hiring Richardson, an itinerant star whose offstage persona lends a dimension of “drama” to staged performance, Lubovitch borrows a system of (co)production from opera that relies on the circulation and fetishizing of fame. Secondly, the use of filmic storyboarding techniques melodramatically emphasize action over narrative or text. Finally, the use of the dancing body itself as the embodiment and motivator of action, such that action is the most emphasized element of the production, encapsulates melodrama’s requisite “dialectic of pathos and *action*.”¹³⁸ That Lubovitch’s *Othello* is danced (not spoken) and described in storyboarded “pictures,” is essential to its melodrama. According to Williams, “[Peter] Brooks’s central thesis is that the quest for a hidden moral legibility is crucial to all melodrama....The theatrical function of melodrama’s big sensation scenes was to be able to put forth a moral truth in gesture and picture that could not be fully spoken in words.”¹³⁹ Surprisingly, to support his commitment to dance’s unique capacity as an art of emotion, Lubovitch borrows structuring frameworks from opera and film. “I wanted to make it a dance,” explains Lubovitch; “a dance is not a play. A dance is best served by capturing a synthesis of emotional conditions. I wanted to capture the story in a non-narrative way so that a great deal of dancing took place.”¹⁴⁰ Heightened emotion is a critical element of melodrama, and in Lubovitch’s dance, movement itself takes the place of spoken text. As such, the body, even more so than the face, becomes the important site of racialized attention. Thus, the way the blackened body figures into melodramatic dancing invites a choreographic reading of melodrama. In the case of Richardson—and the body-painted counterpoints in his absence—blackface and virtuosity contribute to the above-mentioned conditions necessary for melodrama to emerge in this balletic context.

Central to my analysis of Richardson and the blackened body in *Othello* is how virtuosity intersects with—and, to a certain extent, parallels—melodrama. After Williams’ discussion of the “melodramatic mode,” I suggest that virtuosity, too, is best thought of as a “mode” as opposed to a genre. However, whereas Williams claims that melodrama has “been the dominant form of popular moving-picture narrative, whether on the nineteenth-century stage, in twentieth-century films or...in contemporary media events,” virtuosity is a mode that operates not at the center of popular performance, but defines the boundary *between* popular and high art, particularly in dance.¹⁴¹ Therefore, in his

¹³⁷ I believe the melodramatic *mode* can exist within tragedy.

¹³⁸ Williams 28-40, my emphasis.

¹³⁹ Ibid 18. “Brooks interestingly shows, in fact, that the rise of melodrama was linked to the ban on speech in unlicensed French theaters, which originally turned to pantomime as a more powerful and direct form of communication....Music, gesture, pantomime, and, I would add, most forms of sustained physical action are the elements of these sensational effects most familiar to us today in film, television, and musical theater.”

¹⁴⁰ Lubovitch.

¹⁴¹ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, 23. “It is time, then, to make a bolder claim: not that melodrama is a submerged, or embedded, tendency, or genre, within classical realism, but that it has more often itself been the dominant form of popular moving-picture narrative, whether on the nineteenth-

harnessing of filmic techniques of storyboarding (which have resulted in an episodic scene structure, common to much American film), Lubovitch has paired the genre from which American melodrama flourished (film) with the mode (virtuosity) at the center of the crux of the question of taste in American dance and performance.

Choreographing Leitmotif

Here I offer an analysis of choreographic tropes and leitmotifs in order to set the ground for a reading of Lubovitch's *Othello* that accounts for melodrama, racial legibility, and the blackened body. Lubovitch's arcing movement in *Othello*'s pas de deux carries action (in the service of plot) to the forefront, and this emphasis on action contributes to the work's melodramatic mode. For example, in *Othello* and Desdemona's first duet, Othello lifts Desdemona's entire body in an upward arc, onto his shoulder, around to the back, circling downward again. Their love and commitment to each other tend to be symbolized with the circular, and when such curvilinear flow is interrupted, we are to believe that trust has been broken. When Iago has convinced Othello that Desdemona has betrayed him, Othello breaks the circular flow of a subsequent duet with Desdemona by throwing her to ground or pushing her aside. Finally, toward the end of the ballet, when Desdemona is begging for Othello's trust, she creates a closed circle with her arms, and tries to envelope Othello, who escapes her embrace out of spite. The trope of white scarf acts as a supplement to the circular movement, and we trace the drama of the tale through the location of the scarf, which was originally given to Desdemona by Othello. As Iago moves the scarf from character to character, suspense builds. In the end, Othello kills Desdemona with the very scarf. That Lubovitch calls upon undulating, curvilinear movement to communicate emotion continues to foreground action.

Calling for "very little pantomime," it was important for Lubovitch to rely on the "language of dance" instead of the more literal story-telling gestures of pantomime.¹⁴² Richardson suggests that choreography—not psyche—allows him (Richardson) to further access his character in *Othello*: "To get to the dramatic narrative of the role it was imperative for me to allow it to come through the choreography; never did I want to impose myself on it."¹⁴³ Richardson's privileging of movement over acting technique resonates with Lubovitch's insistence on the importance of "the language of dance" over pantomime.¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, now Lubovitch indulges to a great degree in the use of what

century stage, in twentieth-century films or, as we shall explore in the last chapter of this book, in contemporary media events. The emotional content and vivid style regarded as excess, in other words, much more often constitutes the mainstream even as it continues to be perceived as excess. And most important in this mainstream are the entertainment needs of a modern, rationalist, democratic, capitalist, industrial, and now post-industrial society seeking moral legibility under new conditions of moral ambiguity. In other words, the ongoing loss of moral certainty has been compensated for by increasingly sensational, commodified productions of pathos and action." Williams 23.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Desmond Richardson, email interview with the author, October, 2010.

¹⁴⁴ I should note that I do not believe dance is a "language" in the strict sense of the term, as dance does not communicate or point to subjects in the same way as a signifying system of language. I only wish to

we could call movement-based leitmotifs, or short thematic movement phrases or gestures repeated during points in the ballet when one is to be reminded of a certain dramatic theme.¹⁴⁵ For example, the *por de bras* (arm movements) of Richardson's opening crouching sequence gets repeated throughout to indicate Othello's psychic strife, the melodramatic trope of "too late." A gestural style that is repeated in leitmotif fashion is that of the corps de ballet, which engages in numerous unison group sections and divertissements (often to entertain Othello and Desdemona, of an upper class) comprised of folksy flex-footed legwork and two-dimensional geometric arm movements that might otherwise seem to strive toward a general notion of the "ethnic." Lubovitch has discussed his interest in the tarantella in Othello, that he wanted to include a once-forbidden dance that had been subjected to legal bans. For the *Moor's Pavane*, "Limon chose the court dance called the Pavane." The tarantella is a "southern Italian dance in 6/8-time, which gets faster and faster and whose speed and frenzy purportedly cured a tarantula spider's poisonous bite."¹⁴⁶ Lubovitch uses the tarantella for Bianca and villagers associated with her character. Just as a jazzy saxophone enters Goldenthal's cinematic score as a leitmotif for sultry villagers or a sense of psychic strife, the tarantella is employed as a general indicator of sexual excess. These leitmotifs tread dangerously toward shallow stereotypical uses of minoritarian sounds and movement to suggest the "ethnic," the "sexual," or danger.¹⁴⁷ In light of Lubovitch and Goldenthal's leitmotifs, it is no great surprise that a production comfortable with irresponsible uses of tarantella and saxophone would go on to make use of blackface makeup. Contagion thus permeates the piece via culturally insensitive uses of music (tarantella) to portray sexuality as well as the appropriation of blackface to indicate ethnicity.

Having danced in Lubovitch's works at the AAADT, Richardson explains that he was honored to accept an invitation to star in *Othello*, as he had always been "drawn to [Lubovitch's] movement."¹⁴⁸ The style of movement in question, while informed by ballet, is decidedly contemporary in its circularity, weighted stance, and seemingly unending fluidity. In fact, the ballet opens with Richardson crouched over in a ball, emerging with arm movements that alternate between circular and straight, symmetrical and asymmetrical, dramatically framing his face as if to indicate psychic tension. This arm and torso pattern becomes a leitmotif of sorts throughout the piece to signal pain, confusion, and waning trust. Richardson's movement style, born of a mastery and

emphasize Lubovitch's privileging of dance and choreography that does not use gesture or pantomime in a way that is recognizable and signifying in the same way as, say sign language.

¹⁴⁵ Adorno cites Wagner's repeated use of leitmotif in opera as a weakness of ego, and Nietzsche sees it as an appeal to the masses. Both correlate leitmotif with virtuosity, a category that makes them wary.

¹⁴⁶ Rachel Strauss, "American Ballet Theatre: *Othello*," Ballet.co.uk. May, 2007.
<http://www.ballet.co.uk/magazines/yr_07/jun07/rs_rev_abt2_0507.htm>.

¹⁴⁷ Exemplifying his later work, *The Case of Wagner* serves as a platform for Nietzsche to express his disdain for what he sees as performance—specifically Wagnerian opera—generated for the masses. If we think of mainstream film, the genre most influential to Lubovitch's production, as the potential endpoint to Nietzsche's logic, it would not be amiss to assume that Nietzsche would interpret ABT/SFB's *Othello* as diluted for conservative (if not mainstream) consumption.

¹⁴⁸ Richardson, interview with the author.

rigorous hybridizing of classical ballet, modern dance techniques, and individual approach, is in keeping with Lubovitch's choreography.¹⁴⁹ Both artists have been trained to the highest degree in ballet and modern dance, but have worked predominantly in contemporary dance settings.¹⁵⁰ Richardson states, "Othello was an ideal role for me (having danced non-narrative roles at Ballett Frankfurt and Complexions Contemporary Ballet), and allowed me to explore that side of me that loves to tell a story through dance (in fact it is where I feel I soar)."¹⁵¹

Othello's Racial Melodrama

Richardson's career trajectory as a modern and contemporary dancer makes certain critics wary of his ballet classicism. Such wariness is misguided, as Richardson's versatility is in fact more suitable to Lubovitch's contemporary ballet style, a style challenging for ABT dancers trained solely in classical ballet.¹⁵² Despite his widely recognized skill, Richardson finds himself in tension with certain accepted racial hierarchies. This tension bears an uncanny resemblance to the character of Othello himself, a moor who ascends military ranks in a society dominated by whites. Because Richardson had not spent time on the roster of a classical ballet company, critics have sometimes found it difficult to trust his ability in a leading role with a major ballet company, despite his serious training in classical ballet. Allan Ulrich writes,

[Lubovitch] created Othello for Desmond Richardson, who trained as a modern dancer and who will perform in the telecast. Even with an experienced ballerino in the role (Cyril Pierre), the opportunities for profound exchanges between the protagonist and Desdemona are limited

¹⁴⁹ In Chapter Two, I go into detail about the vernacular influences in Richardson's movement style (which include breakdancing, popping and locking).

¹⁵⁰ Elsewhere in the dissertation I engage with the discursive histories of the terms "modern," "postmodern," and "contemporary," and for the purposes of this chapter I use "modern dance" to denote techniques that emerged during the first half of the twentieth century (including those of Martha Graham, Jose Limon, Katherine Dunham, Lester Horton, and the like) and "contemporary dance" to refer to contemporary (in the sense of recent or current) concert dance that draws mainly from the individual style of the choreographer in question. For example, even though Lubovitch has trained in ballet and modern dance, I call his choreography "contemporary" due to the fact that he is still alive and working, but also because he exceeds the demands of classical or neo-classical ballet yet remains in a realm that emerges from ballet and modern without delving into, for example, decidedly vernacular or regional dance forms (such as breakdancing, flamenco or bharatanatyam). While I would be comfortable calling some "postmodern" dance "contemporary," such a discussion is only peripherally relevant to this chapter. See Ramsey Burt's book on the Judson Dance Theater.

¹⁵¹ Richardson, interview with author. "I have also taken this approach with my Broadway endeavors, as it is similar in nature—having to understand the ins and outs of a character and deliver an honest performance to the audience so that they are fully invested in the character and story." Richardson, interview with author.

¹⁵² There is an interview of interview of Mel Tomlinson, the African American dancer who worked with New York City Ballet some years ago, but received his early training in modern techniques such as Limon, and discusses the role of Othello as well as related issues of race, casting, and technique.

because they do not dance in the same language.¹⁵³

Ulrich's ill-informed assumption that Richardson's modern dance training eclipses his ballet training even contaminates his perception of other dancers in the title role. Anxieties about competence and dance techniques serve as placeholders for managing larger anxieties about excess and race. Revealed in Ulrich's anxious reaction is a nervous correlation between race and inability. He doubly interpellates Richardson as modern dancer and black man. By conflating these already binding identities, Ulrich generates a certain kind of racialized anxiety that permeates his view of the demands of the role itself, as if the role has been essentially "dumbed down" to accommodate Richardson and his alternates. Such bias is demonstrative of a history of dance criticism that has all too easily equated race with style, more specifically with inability use twice suggests this word is important and needs explication, especially since you don't mean it to be disability, and such confluences reek of archaic biological arguments.¹⁵⁴ Certainly all the performers in *Othello* are dancing in a uniform style, the contemporary ballet idiom called for by Lubovitch. Finally, Ulrich has mistaken Lubovitch's style for classical (as opposed to contemporary) ballet.¹⁵⁵

That Richardson undergoes racially-biased criticism while working in the service of an already racially melodramatic ballet places Lubovitch's *Othello* squarely in the realm of what Williams calls racial melodrama. Having recently emerged from the media frenzy that was the 1995 O.J. Simpson trial, the 1997 public was well-poised (though perhaps too exhausted) to engage with a story featuring the racial melodrama of a black man murdering his white wife. Williams extends her discussion of melodrama in film to the racial melodrama of events in the media. Referring to the racial melodrama of "playing the race card," Williams writes,

The melodramatic playings of the race card will be best understood, then, as a story cycle brought to life by a circulating set of transmuted icons and melos pointing sometimes to the virtue of racially beset victims and sometimes to the villainy of racially motivated villains.¹⁵⁶

While Williams points to the real-life drama that was the Simpson trial, we could consider any production of *Othello* as implicated in the logic of playing the race card, as the title character's actions will inevitably be read according to visual cues provided by performances themselves as well as racially-charged current events defining any given cultural moment. Moreover, in his mistrust of Richardson's integrity to ballet technique,

¹⁵³ Allan Ulrich, "Lubovitch's 'Othello' a tragedy in more ways than one," SFGate.com (*San Francisco Chronicle*), Feb 28, 2002, <http://articles.sfgate.com/2002-02-28/entertainment/17531133_1_iago-othello-and-desdemona-antony-tudor>.

¹⁵⁴ While Ulrich's opinion may be common, it is not universal, as other critics (such as those mentioned in Chapter Two virtuosity) hail Richardson for being one of the greatest virtuosos to grace the stage.

¹⁵⁵ Ironically, the type of movement that Richardson is known for in *Complexions* and *Ballett Frankfurt*—sharp and fragmented, but also liquid, hyper-flexible, and gender-ambiguous—is given to the role of Iago, not Othello. The only time Richardson approximates such sinewy movement is during a heartbroken solo in which he portrays a sense of betrayal after assuming that Desdemona has been adulterous. He jumps and falls to the floor in rapid succession, and shows angst through terse, contracting movements.

¹⁵⁶ Williams 6.

Ulrich creates a villain out of Richardson, playing into what Williams identifies as racial melodrama's "circulating set of transmuted icons and melos."¹⁵⁷

The way that Richardson's personhood intersects with the unique conditions of his performance in *Othello* resonates with Gabriele Brandstetter's observation of the virtuoso's conflation of pathos and ethos:

The credibility of the speaker's performance—beyond its use of staging and argumentation—was ultimately conveyed via his person: the pathos of the performance was added to by the ethos of his person, his status, his honour—his *virtus*.¹⁵⁸

In this case, we alter Brandstetter's remarks to account for the "credibility of the [*dancer's*] performance," and take into consideration Richardson's individuality and public persona alongside his performance and characterization. Richardson's relative filmic, celebrity status has the potential to ease in the viewers' imagination the severity of the fact that alternate casts perform the role in bronze makeup, in blackface. In other words, due to the proliferation of posters, the PBS telecast as well as its subsequent DVD sale, the ABT/SFB role of *Othello* is equated with Richardson—a black man—and ensuing casts are thought to work in the service of the larger production, ever dominated by Richardson's presence. Perhaps most surprising is Richardson's own outlook on his blackfaced counterparts:

Dancers playing the title role...painted in bronzed makeup did not disturb me as much as one would think simply because the role is indicative of a Moor of African descent, and seeing that American Ballet Theatre did not have any other Principal male dancers of color beside myself and Jose Carreño, it was necessary to draw a distinction between the characters. I did not consider this blackface, as blackface performances had a very real and negative connotation toward African Americans. *Othello* being the title role and the character being of royalty would be an honor for any performer to play. I do know that the other dancers playing the role felt slightly uncomfortable...but quickly let it go to envelop the role....I believe [Lubovitch's] interpretation of *Othello* on ABT was a progressive move.¹⁵⁹

Because he does not detect blatant racism in Lubovitch's production, Richardson is able to accept it in positive terms. While he chooses to view the ballet as an opportunity to explore a character-driven role (or does so as a form of disavowal), his acceptance of the practice of blackface in *Othello* reminds us of the importance of his presence on ABT and SFB's historically homogeneous stages. And, in the trajectory of African American performance, it is of utmost importance that Richardson has enjoyed so much success and recognition in all arenas of dance. He has a great deal more agency and control over his career than most professional dancers. Nevertheless, we find him negating the possibility of *Othello's* blackface practice (one that he frames negatively), and this negation

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Brandstetter, "Virtuoso's Stage," 181.

¹⁵⁹ Richardson., interview with the author.

inadvertently betrays a compulsion to protect one of the few starring roles available to black ballet dancers.

Facing the Surrogate

Numerous studies have squabbled over interpretations of the Moor's appearance; some have claimed the importance of place and faith over race; all have bickered over the exact tone of his complexion. Richardson enters into historically fraught responses to *Othello*. Ironically, an older review of a 1970 play of *Othello* by theater and dance critic Clive Barnes finds blackface to be a necessary component of the telling of Othello, and disapproves of a black actor in the role: Barnes, referring to Moses Gunn in a 1970 production of the play, does "not approve of black actors playing Othello—it is too obvious....Othello was written for a white actor in blackface. Mr. Gunn plays him black—plays him from the deliberate position of black consciousness." Of course, this statement is problematic on multiple levels, not the least of which is the assumption of a "black consciousness," especially in a theatrical context. Nevertheless, it points to a widely accepted perspective that Othello should be played in blackface as to appear explicitly mutable, ambivalent. Thus, the aesthetic of ambivalence is met with ambivalent criticism.

For all the ambivalence surrounding Othello, however, the role still comes with a decided sense of the monstrous, and this monstrosity is attached to race and rage. According to Richardson's surrogate, Marcelo Gomes, "I literally wasn't performing in my own skin; I was painted to appear darker than I actually am. Each act you get more and more paint on your body because you have less and less clothing on....Othello is such a beast." Noted as recently as 2007 without an inkling of disapproval, a *New York Times* critic writes, "Mr. Gomes, painted a striking bronze with body makeup, cuts a fervent figure as the general betrayed by the conniving Iago....As Desdemona Ms. Kent is gentle and pure; her dewy innocence is radiant."¹⁶⁰ Not only is Gomes' bronze makeup described as "striking," but it is placed in contrast to Kent's "pure," "dewy" complexion. Thus, the bronze tone is implicitly equated with impure morality, further aligning blackface with melodrama's preoccupation with virtue and morality.

In addition to blackface makeup and brown tights, dancers playing Othello are subjected to armor-like costuming evoking six-pack abdominals and large pectoral muscles, and later the metallic covering is removed to expose the dancer's actual musculature. The increased shedding of costuming and exposure of the dancer's body corresponds with the breakdown of Othello's morality and virtue. Pointing to the level of ambivalence surrounding the production is the following description of the makeup as decreasing in amount throughout an SFB performance in which Cyril Pierre played Othello in blackface: "Pierre's bushy hair and minstrel show makeup, which grew progressively lighter through the evening, was disconcerting, if not downright

¹⁶⁰ Gia Kourlas, "With the Handkerchief, a Hint of Ice Capades," *New York Times*, May 24, 2007, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/24/arts/dance/24othe.html>>.

offensive.”¹⁶¹ For some, blackface is essential to Othello; to others, it offends. Seemingly unapparent to the production’s creators, however, is the parallel between Othello’s moral breakdown and the morally questionable practice of blacking up used to portray such collapse.

Whereas most studies of blackface and minstrelsy have addressed minstrel shows or contemporary popular performance such as hip-hop music, Manning and McMains have most recently theorized the practices in dance, specifically. Both scholars apply the terms to dance traditions not immediately associated with minstrelsy, complicating the assumption that any practice resembling blackface or minstrelsy should be perceived as necessarily offensive. In doing so, they ostensibly pardon otherwise culturally problematic performance practices. Manning develops the term “metaphorical minstrelsy” to account for 1930s modern dance in America in which white dancers took on nonwhite subjectivity. According to Manning,

metaphorical minstrelsy [is] a convention whereby white dancers’ bodies made reference to nonwhite subjects. In contrast to blackface performers, modern dancers did not engage in impersonation. Rather, their bodies became the vehicles for the tenors of nonwhite subjects. Modern dancers did not mimic others but presented an abstraction or personification of others—Oriental, Indian, Negro. During the 1940s metaphorical minstrelsy disappeared as a convention within modern dance, and thus it is difficult to fathom the historical moment of the 1930s, when it was a dominant convention in American theater dance.¹⁶²

The unspoken crux of Manning’s concept, however, is visibility. She seems to suggest that because racial mimesis operates in early modern dance such that it does not rely on visible surface cues on the face or body (namely, makeup), practitioners of “metaphorical minstrelsy” should be absolved of accusations of “impersonation.” Such a statement assumes that impersonation is, firstly, related to the visibility of surface and skin, and that it is, secondly, the more violent practice. It seems that the absence of the reliability of visual cues is what compels Manning to label this practice “metaphorical.” Therefore, we might question the validity of bringing in the term “minstrelsy” at all to refer to practices that eschew blacking up in favor of corporeal and choreographic appropriations of subjectivity, of haphazardly embodying the Other. If minstrelsy refers more to genre, blackface refers more to formal signifiers of the minstrelsy genre that may or may not work in the service of a minstrel show proper. Manning suggests that choreographic embodiment assuages the potential violence of otherwise imitative, minstrel performances. In other words, modern dance’s supposed investment in the dancing body’s ability to manifest subjectivity sets it apart from speaking mask.

¹⁶¹ Allan Ulrich, “Lubovitch’s ‘Othello’ a tragedy in more ways than one,” SFGate.com (*San Francisco Chronicle*), Feb 28, 2002, <http://articles.sfgate.com/2002-02-28/entertainment/17531133_1_iago-othello-and-desdemona-antony-tudor>.

¹⁶² Manning 10.

McMains' example comes from contemporary ballroom dance competitors who paint their faces and bodies brown to satisfy "Latin" categories. Unlike Manning, McMains focuses on surface more than style. She writes,

Although competitive ballroom dancers are not the only consumers of self-tanning products, the prevalence of artificially darkened white skin in Dance Sport Latin competitions invites examination into the relationship between ballroom "Latin" dances and their ethnic referents. I introduce the term brownface, not a word used in the DanceSport industry, in order to call attention to the racial and potentially racist consequences of this practice....Eastern European DanceSport competitors may...be solidifying their own white status by performing distance from Latinos in brownface.¹⁶³

Like numerous theorists of blackface before her, McMains associates blackface (and "brownface") with the reification of whiteness even more than the impersonation of blackness. Because blackface and blackness already signal ambivalence within a predominantly negative framework, we might do without a distinction between blackface and brownface. "Brownness" has recently been positively reappropriated in studies of Latinidad by the likes of José Muñoz to signal affective or empathetic kinship and affinity, as in "feeling brown." Brownface (as opposed to feeling brown) carries a negative connotation and functions similarly to blackface in its reliance on visibility and approximating the Other. Brownness as a category does not exclude blackness as a category of othering; thus, brownface would best be conceived as a form of blackface. It is important to note that the body carries style in Lubovitch's *Othello* differently than the "Latin" dancer in DanceSport: if the ballroom dancer tries to approximate a foreign style, *Othello*'s demands rest in the realm of Western ballet and contemporary dance, styles that are only legible to the extent the audience is versed in Africanist influences inherent to American dance and those contributed by Richardson's individual versatility.



Cyril Pierre (as Othello) and Lucia Lacarra in in SFB's *Othello*. Photo by Bob McLeod.

¹⁶³ McMains 109, 147.



Yuan Yuan Tan and Yuri Possokhov (as Othello) in SFB's *Othello*. Photo by Jerry Telfer.

The Blackened Body

Although blackface practices initially invite theorizations of the face and the mask, Lott reminds us that

We are justified in seeing early blackface performance as one of the very first constitutive discourses of the body in American culture. Certainly minstrelsy's commercial production of the black male body was a fundamental source of its threat and its fascination for white men....The minstrel show as an institution may be profitably understood as a major effort of corporeal containment—which is to say that it necessarily trained a rather constant regard on the body.¹⁶⁴

By referring to blackface performance as a masculinist “discourse of the body,” Lott suggests that the “face” in blackface is a placeholder for larger racially mimetic concerns regarding the growing dominance of the “production” of the black body in American entertainment culture. While early minstrelsy produced the black male body through repeated performances of acting, song, and dance representing caricatures such as Jim Crow and Zip Coon, Lubovitch's contemporary *Othello* does not “produce” the black male body insofar as it compulsively tries to recuperate a corporeal authenticity of blackness *through* bodily performance. Furthermore, ballet operates in a non-profit framework, and its images are not proliferated and reiterated in the commercial realm to the same degree as those of historical minstrel shows. While black corporeal authenticity is already an impossibility, the idea that Richardson has the capacity to lend the role of Othello a degree of racial believability is essential to the logic behind blackening the bodies of subsequent dancers in the role. I refer to the bronzed body as the “blackened

¹⁶⁴ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 117, 118.

The foregrounding of action and appearance of the body in this ballet are critical to broadening the discussion of blackface in performance, as most studies of the form have lingered on the “face” in blackface as an opportunity to theorize the mask. It is important that the body—and not just the face—becomes covered in makeup in this production. Blackface is another element of Lubovitch's production adopted (or inherited) from film and opera. I am interested in what occurs when we shift our discussion to the painted and costumed body. To depict blackness through associations with the masked or the sculptural recalls modernist fetishizations of “Africa,” for example, Picasso's 1907 *Les Femmes d'Alger*.

body” in order to draw parallel conclusions between the function of blackface in minstrelsy and the darkened body in contemporary ballet. In other words, I refrain from suggesting that bronze—as opposed to black—makeup somehow alleviates the severity of the practice; thus tone is not correlative with degree of racism. In this way, I point to a practice that may appear similar to that of McMains’ “brownface” while theorizing its results differently. Non-black Othellos blackening their faces and bodies is less a reification of whiteness, and more a striving for virtuosity and authenticity of blackness.

Othello shifts the attention from the face and mask toward the body and its dancing, allowing for a consideration of how the blackened body supplements and exacerbates elements that have already been theorized around blackface. For one, the relationship between performer and penis as illustrated by Lott’s discussion of blackface’s racialized masculinity is altered. Lott writes,

As [Ralph] Ellison puts it, “The mask was the thing (the ‘thing’ in more ways than one).”...Bold swagger, irrepressible desire, sheer bodily display: in a real sense the minstrel man *was* the penis, that organ returning in a variety of contexts, at times ludicrous, at others rather less so.¹⁶⁵

While we might assume that the blackface mask operates as a phallic prosthesis, Lott equates blackface (as performed by whites) with the penis itself, suggesting a violent amputation and re-suturing (or “re-membling,” as it were) of the organ, as opposed to remaining in the realm of the symbolic. By not donning blackface, Richardson is at once emasculated and already in possession of the sexually suggestive “penis” of blackness sought after by whites in blackface. In terms of costuming, noticeably adorning Richardson’s legs are brown lycra tights. Moreover, his is the only pelvic area that remains relatively exposed, for all the other male characters have an extra flap of fabric covering the region. As such, the actual anatomical bulge serves as a reminder of Othello’s ever-brewing anger, conflating sexuality, race, and rage.¹⁶⁶ When Richardson embodies the role, masculinity seems to be returned to the black performer, only to find that his is the penis being stolen and apportioned in the name of authenticity when others play the role. Thus, virtuosity takes on the role of phallus, as it is ultimately Richardson’s virtuosic movement quality that is coveted by Othellos in black makeup.

The blackening of Richardson’s surrogates further reveals the role’s messy harnessing of masculinity. It is less during Richardson’s performance itself and only retroactively—after learning that other casts are blackened up—that we would be compelled to consider the provocation that Richardson may be performing black-on-black minstrelsy. Upon the realization that Lubovitch’s *Othello* is otherwise performed in blackface, Richardson’s participation in the ballet attains the problematics of what Chude-Sokei refers to as Burt Williams’ black-on-black minstrelsy. Chude-Sokei offers nuance to the difficult task of having to reconcile the face and the body in blackface:

¹⁶⁵ Lott 25. “Racial defensiveness was imaged in this period in more disguised ways as well. Minstrelsy’s obsession with the penis and with the world’s mother seems to have given rise to an inordinate amount of anxiety and fantasy regarding the threat of castration,” Lott 151.

¹⁶⁶ “The fact is that minstrel songs and dances conjured up not only the black body but its labor, not only its sexuality but its place and function in a particular economy,” Lott 117.

Given that traditional minstrelsy was based on the absence of actual Negroes, the mask signified what Wilson Harris calls the ‘absent body’ of the represented. Bert Williams’s presence onstage was thus rendered through a hyperbolic absence, and his performance danced in and around that ‘zone of non-being’ that Fanon locates behind the mask that overdetermined black flesh.¹⁶⁷

According to Chude-Sokei, Richardson’s presence in the role does not necessarily reverse the “absent body”; instead, it is more akin to a doubling of absence. As the black body is hyperbolically emphasized in *Othello*, it is simultaneously removed, mirroring what Lott refers to as “cultural strategies...devised to occlude [the] recognition” of exploited human labor at the foundation of America’s economy.¹⁶⁸ Blackface practices are always haunted by the specters of slavery, and the blackened dancing body both effaces and reveals the physical labor of the slave. It would be simplistic to assume that the historical distance of Lubovitch’s *Othello* from chattel slavery and early minstrelsy absolves his production of participation in what Chude-Sokei (after Fanon) cites as blackface’s capacity to “overdetermine black flesh.” If we recall that flesh is both the site of the slave’s wound and the site of the dancer’s labor, it would seem that the blackened dancing body would desire nothing more than to match that overdetermination of flesh with an overdetermination of dance technique, namely, virtuosity.

In refusing to determine a stable “racially beset victim” nor a “racially motivated villain,” Lubovitch’s *Othello* ultimately satisfies Williams’ concept of racial melodrama, both within the production’s performances and through surrounding practices of hiring—and replacing—Richardson. Like virtuosity’s mode of revealing and concealing the body’s labor, leading to a hyperbolic aesthetic, *Othello*’s melodrama lies in its appropriation of blackface to hyperbolically present and absent the black dancing body.

¹⁶⁷ Chude-Sokei 35.

¹⁶⁸ “In reality...it is *human labor* that must reproduce itself as well as create surplus value. In these societies the body is a potentially subversive site because to recognize it fully is to recognize the exploitative organization of labor that structures their economies. Cultural strategies must be devised to occlude such a recognition: reducing the body purely to sexuality is one strategy; colonizing it with a medical discourse in which the body is dispersed into discrete parts or organs is another. Shackling the body to a discourse of racial biology is still another, and in western societies the black body in particular has, in [Richard] Dyer’s words, served as the site of both ‘*remembering and denying* the inescapability of the body in the economy,’ a figuration of the world’s body and its labor, easily called up and just as easily denied. In antebellum American it was minstrelsy that performed this crucial hegemonic function, involving the black male body as a powerful cultural sign of sexuality as well as a sign of the dangerous, guilt-inducing physical reality of slavery but relying on the derided category of race finally to dismiss both,” Lott 118

CHAPTER FOUR

Difficult Fun: The Racial Politics of Improvisation in William Forsythe's Ballett Frankfurt



Eidos Telos by William Forsythe. Desmond Richardson, far left. Francesca Harper, far right.
Photo by Dominik Mentzos.

The whole point of improvisation is to stage disappearance. —William Forsythe¹⁶⁹

Blackness, in all of its constructed imposition, can tend and has tended toward the experimental achievement and tradition of an advanced, transgressive publicity. Blackness is, therefore, a special site and resources for a task of articulation where immanence is structured by an irreducibly improvisatory exteriority that can occasion something very much like sadness and something very much like devilish enjoyment. To record this improvisational immanence—where untraceable, anoriginal rootedness and unenclosed, disclosing outness converge, where that convergence is articulation by and through an infinitesimal and unbridgeable break—is a daunting task. This is because blackness is always a disruptive surprise moving in the rich nonfullness of every term it modifies. Such mediation suspends neither the question of identity nor the question of essence. —Fred Moten¹⁷⁰

By Way of Fun

1994 marks the year Desmond Richardson left the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to form Complexions with choreographer Dwight Rhoden. The same year, he traveled to Germany to dance with William Forsythe's Ballett Frankfurt, returning to New York in the summers to work with Complexions. In America, employment opportunities for concert dancers of Richardson's caliber and versatility are often limited to companies with classical or mainstream artistic visions, and such companies rarely hire

¹⁶⁹ William Forsythe in Gilpin 122.

¹⁷⁰ Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 255, footnote 1.

African American dancers.¹⁷¹ “I knew it was time for a shift in my last year of Ailey,” recounts Richardson, “I put my feelers out, and Francesca Harper approached me about working with Forsythe.”¹⁷² Harper, whose mother Denise Jefferson directed the Ailey School, had worked with Dance Theater of Harlem before joining Ballett Frankfurt, and trained with Richardson during their youth. “I went to the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris,” recalls Richardson, and after an audition involving much improvisation, [Forsythe] said, ‘When can you arrive?’”¹⁷³ Despite his quick transition from Ailey to Frankfurt, Richardson had developed a taste for contemporary European dance much earlier, having attended the Internationale Akademie des Tanz in Köln, Germany for two summers as a teen.

An expatriate who danced with the Joffrey Ballet and the Stuttgart Ballet, Forsythe is an American who found support for his contemporary ballet aesthetic within German cultural funding structures.¹⁷⁴ He was resident choreographer of Stuttgart Ballet before becoming artistic director of Ballett Frankfurt in 1984.¹⁷⁵ Forsythe is known for deconstructing ballet technique in the service of an avant-garde aesthetic.¹⁷⁶ In the 1990s his style was highly kinetic, intricate, and distorted, and often called upon Thom Willems’ experimental electronic music comprised of decontextualized chords and beats.

¹⁷¹ I interviewed dancer Stephen Galloway at length about his career with Forsythe (which lasted the entirety of Ballett Frankfurt). As a dancer who also worked as costume designer, I bring him into the chapter again in the section on the socked foot.

Aside from mimicking *Soul Train* in his childhood living room (where he had to “make space where there was no space”), Galloway confirms that his only childhood dance experience consisted of rigorous ballet training from a very young age. He grew up in Erie Pennsylvania, studying with Kathleen Green and Sharon Battle (who had worked with Arthur Mitchell, New York City Ballet’s first African American dancer) at Erie Bayfront Ballet before training with Jean-Luc Barre and Martha Rathaus.¹⁷¹ From France and Israel, respectively, Barre and Rathaus influenced Galloway’s preference for contemporary European and non-American ballet aesthetics. Galloway was subsequently invited to study at American Ballet Theater’s highly selective summer program under Mikhail Baryshnikov. Nevertheless, when the possibility of dancing with ABT presented itself, Galloway feared tokenism: “They were preparing me to be this black Prince Siegfried type of thing....I’m 6’3.5.”” Thus, he decided instead to travel to Europe at eighteen, preferring the work of European choreographers such as Maurice Bejart, Jiri Kylian, and Mats Ek.¹⁷¹ Within months, Galloway found himself in Forsythe’s studio, learning a solo from *France Dance*, and was offered a contract the same day in 1985. Originally interested in dancing with the Stuttgart Ballet, Galloway explains, “Eventually I was going to go back to dance with Stuttgart and not stay with Bill [Forsythe], but it was *fun* and everything seemed to fit.”¹⁷¹ “When I was there,” recounts Galloway, “there were eight people of color (five were American) with all different backgrounds.”¹⁷¹ As an exemplary Forsythean dancer, Galloway was chosen to appear in a film for Lufthansa Airlines welcoming passengers as they landed in Germany. At least in the eyes of the cultural tourist industry, Galloway was perceived as an ideal cultural representative, regardless of race. (Galloway, interview with the author.)

¹⁷² Richardson, interview with the author.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Like Richardson, Forsythe was raised in New York.

¹⁷⁵ Ballett Frankfurt closed in 2004 (as the city government wanted to fund more classically oriented ballet), at which time he founded a smaller ensemble known as The Forsythe Company. While most opera houses in Germany at the time housed both opera and ballet, Forsythe distanced himself from opera, focusing solely on dance.

¹⁷⁶ This aesthetic has since been referred to by Hans Thies Lehmann as “postdramatic.”

Richardson was seeking an environment in which he did not need to perform in the service of Ailey's over-rehearsed, normative images of blackness. He also sought a context where he was not called on to fulfill the demands of "black" characters (as in ABT's *Othello*) or satisfy the logic of tokenism as the only African American principal dancer in a major American ballet company. Like African American artists Josephine Baker and James Baldwin in Paris, Richardson would find in Ballett Frankfurt a creative experimentation afforded by trans-Atlantic expatriation. This space of experimentation worked reciprocally for two well-known American dance artists (Forsythe and Richardson) at Ballett Frankfurt from 1994-1997. Forsythe and Richardson find different ways of redefining racial affiliation in the move to a European context: Forsythe would be able to infuse his work with black vernacular elements of music and dance; meanwhile, Richardson would be able to distance himself from dance that correlated skin color with character or expressive style. In creating work that formally sampled and deconstructed racial signifiers, both artists lingered in the unrecognizable: on the one hand, German audiences may not have perceived American cultural markers in the first place; on the other hand, Forsythe and Richardson intentionally foreclosed the possibility of tracing movement's racial authenticity.

A hand slaps the ground: *bang!* Feet pound *stomp-stomp-swipe*, then *clap* from off-camera, downstage. A female dancer slides her hand down the top of her own diagonally lunged leg only to skidder back upstage as if to try to escape herself. She blurts an effortful *ugh* between otherwise seamless movements. We hear the exhale of a breath (as if squeezed out through muscle tissue) as another dancer leaning back on his hands, pelvis facing the ceiling, right leg stretched out along ground, arcs his left leg up and over past his right side. Then, *bang!* Another hand to ground. A duet: *assemblé* into *passé* into a disobedient backward thrust of the butt into a toe *tap*. We hear another *clap* into a *développé penché* into a hinge back onto the dancer's partner who appears just in time. Cut to director seated at downstage table with composer and music mixing board uttering to the camera, "Now doing the Handel actually makes sense. It's so completely wrong that any more of this [music] would be too much." Cut to a previous moment in which deep electronic chords and beats resonate through the staged rehearsal, theatrical apparatus exposed: lighting fixtures, sweatpants, huffing, road cases, taped Marley floor. The ball of a socked foot torques: *squeak!* The camera cuts diagonally to a dancer, the epitome of sinew, mass, control, and release. He beats his legs together in an *assemblé* as his straight yet dangling arms cut across space horizontally in opposition to his torso and lower body. He grabs his partner with both hands, arms stretched out, and swings her along the ground in a sweeping arc. He "pops" his shoulder into a liquid flow of arm movements that initiate an upward hip movement. As if disconnected from the rest of his body (yet seemingly emanating from an innermost corporeal source), he inverts his extended leg, upturning his hip, a simultaneous act of reverence for and defacement of classical ballet. It is as if the upper and lower halves of his body disconnect and reconnect, mirroring the relationship between this dancer and his partner. Out of this thread of unending movement emerges a double *coupé* pirouette into a brisk, disjointed extension of the leg reaching overhead; *clap!*

Here I recount a section of Forsythe's ballet, *Invisible Film*, as filmed and rehearsed

onstage in Mike Figgis' 1995 documentary, *Just Dancing Around*. I launch this chapter with this particular episode for several reasons: it features Richardson as the latter figure who "pops" and sinews through the movement, it exposes Ballett Frankfurt's working methods, and, with "invisible" in its title, the piece self-reflexively comments on what Forsythe refers to as improvisation's capacity to "stage disappearance."¹⁷⁷ In mimicking the fragmentation and flow of Forsythe's choreography, *Just Dancing Around* provides glimpses of the dancer's labor as it intersects with what Richardson refers to as "fun."¹⁷⁸ Given the difficulty of maintaining such a high level of technique during Forsythean improvisation, only a contemporary ballet dancer of the most elite caliber could construe such activity as "fun." In the context of Forsythe's working environment, "fun" is most often used by dancers to describe a collaborative sense of artistic agency in executing a challenge.¹⁷⁹ In this case, the dancer's sense of fun does mean that an audience is necessarily having fun. Indeed, what is fun for the dancer is often difficult for the audience. Richardson experienced with Forsythe a different sense of what it was to have fun than he had experienced at AADT. As we saw earlier, the type of virtuosity Richardson cultivated with the AAADT was geared toward pleasing audiences through an aesthetic of accessibility, representative of a mainstream African American tradition. The AAADT's aesthetic is one in which difficult movement seeks to create an easy experience for the audience. Forsythe's brand of difficulty, however, is one that rejects accessibility. To "Just dance around" is to be steeped in experimentation. Rather than display effort, Forsythe's is a brand of difficulty that disavows it; "just dancing around" and "fun" are discursive performances of nonchalance that attempt to undermine the difficult, risky aspects of the work. Labor-as-fun both embraces and effaces the "difficulty" that defines both the choreography's execution and its reception. As I will show later on, Forsythe's aesthetic is one propelled by a modernist aesthetic of difficulty, one that we can recall for the moment is "that recurring *relationship* that came into being between modernist works and their audiences."¹⁸⁰ But in Richardson's body, Forsythe's difficult

¹⁷⁷ Forsythe's "disappearance" offers an alternative to and inversion of Krista Thompson's "hypervisibility" (after Saidiya Hartman) because such hypervisibility is comprised of reified, commodified images that get circulated in the media. In contrast, by demanding improvisation based on non-media-produced images and movements that preclude replication by the mainstream, Forsythe forecloses the possibility of the hypervisibility of the black body. As discussed in Chapter One, Thompson refers to hypervisibility as "invisiblizing," and I would like to make a distinction between invisiblizing and what Forsythe calls disappearance. Whereas invisiblizing suggests being subjected into a position of oppression, here disappearance suggests a mode of escape, a resistance to capture and duplication. Thus, disappearance, for the black dancing body in Ballett Frankfurt, places the performer in a position of agency and control.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with author.

¹⁷⁹ Galloway repeatedly referred to the work and process as "fun" during our interview.

¹⁸⁰ Diepeveen xi.

Despite its reference to the literary in his work, Diepeveen imbues difficulty with a sense of the bodily and the affective. He writes, "Difficulty is an odd aesthetic experience; using their whole bodies, people react viscerally to difficulty, often with anxiety, anger, and ridicule. The public debate about difficulty and its scandalousness, then, was much more than a story of elitism and middle-class anti-intellectualism. It was also a story of anger, of pleasure, and of the body. Moreover, those affective responses are enmeshed in the

choreography will be made differently difficult by virtue of his location in a black vernacular tradition.

As a critic committed to his own aesthetics of difficulty, Fred Moten offers new resources for situating this critical conversation in Richardson's career. Moten refers to the "rich nonfullness" of blackness.¹⁸¹ As such, "articulation," explains Moten, takes place "by and through an infinitesimal and unbridgeable break."¹⁸² What Moten refers to in turns as disruption and invagination, "the break" is the space of black performance, both the performance of *being* and the aestheticization and articulation of that performance through artistic practice. According to Moten, inherent to the break is its resistance to analysis. Just as a dancer would describe a choreographer's clarification of a movement phrase, Moten refers to clarifying analysis as a "breakdown," as in breaking movement down to expose its mechanics. In black radical performance, the break forecloses "breakdown," and what remains is "open analytic failure (the breakdown of the breakdown)."¹⁸³ Significantly, Moten suggests that the hegemony of the visual (in art and racism) can be rematerialized through the more expansive ensemble of the senses. Such ensemble is practiced and aestheticized in the black radical tradition. In his shift from the visually-centered aesthetic of the soloist favored by the Ailey company, to the collaborative, ensemble-based improvisation of Ballett Frankfurt, Richardson actively materializes Moten's deracializing "ensemble." While not part of the same project or era as the artists Moten refers to as comprising the black radical tradition, Richardson's collaboration with Forsythe aligns him (and to an extent Forsythe as well) with black radical aesthetic traditions in surprising ways. Of course, a certain kind of apparently modernist sense of restraint is already embedded in an Africanist tradition, one to which Richardson had access before he met Forsythe. As Brenda Dixon Gottschild reminds us, the "Africanist aesthetic principle of the cool" in dance is such that "body parts might be working fast and furiously—or hot—in executing the steps, while in contrast the face exhibit[s] the detached, still life 'mask of the cool.'"¹⁸⁴ Forsythe's demand for improvisation onstage (within otherwise structured pieces) brings Forsythian fun and Africanist cool together, merging movement ideologies from Europeanist and Africanist veins.

As this chapter continues, I inquire into Ballett Frankfurt's practices of improvisation and how they depart somewhat from Gottschild's notion of Africanism and refigure what Moten calls the "black radical tradition." In doing so, I remind readers that Forsythe is an inheritor of what Gottschild refers to as the "Africanist aesthetics" of George Balanchine's neoclassical style of American ballet. Africanist aesthetics also enter into Forsythe's work via musical influences of hip-hop and funk and, most importantly for

standard ways of conceptualizing difficulty and profoundly influence how difficulty shaped modern culture" (xiv).

¹⁸¹ Fred Moten 255, footnote 1.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid 140.

¹⁸⁴ Gottschild, *Black Dancing Body*, 159. In the context of Forsythe's working environment, "fun" is most often used by dancers to describe a dual sense of collaboration and artistic agency in executing a challenge.

the purposes of this chapter, via Richardson's hip-hop-informed improvisational style. Also influencing Forsythe's work from a strand of dance history that has heretofore been theorized separately from ballet is contact improvisation. Contact improvisation's imperative to invent movement in the moment imbues the dancer with a greater degree of artistic agency, subverting ballet's choreographer-as-master paradigm.¹⁸⁵ While under-emphasized in accounts of Ballett Frankfurt, it is important to note its influence in order to better understand the bridge it will create between Richardson and Forsythe's studio.

Of course, this collaboration is not without its racial politics. Racial authenticity and its related paradigms of accessibility and appropriation have continually haunted American culture. Due to its connotations of racial designation and ownership, authenticity is already a vexed subject. To think authenticity is to agitate complacent assumptions that certain artistic styles or techniques belong to certain racially determined groups. Germany provided Forsythe with the artistic space to subvert the racism and firmly held myth of authenticity informing ballet in America. In Ballett Frankfurt, ballet is not only the domain of white dancers, and hip-hop beats don't belong solely to African American choreographers. That one would question Forsythe's connection to black traditions parallels an issue central to (yet repressed in) dance history, namely, what does it mean for black dancers to do ballet? The idea of ownership is debunked not through staged socio-cultural commentary,¹⁸⁶ but through a laborious commitment to form and experimentation and a rejection of traditional narrative (or story ballets). Deconstructing ballet technique from within with the use of postmodern improvisational practices, Forsythe's work allows us to think anew dance scholarship's habitual positing of contact improvisation as either homogeneously white or inclusively democratic. Richardson's participation in—and influence on—Forsythe's work unsettles polarizing assumptions of contexts and participants of both ballet and contact improvisation.

Richardson's collaboration with Forsythe reveals the complex relationship between improvisation as what Forsythe calls a "[staging] of disappearance," on the one hand, and what Moten refers to as the inevitably "improvisatory exteriority" of blackness, on the other. For Moten, blackness itself is defined by an ontology of improvisation. He sees this ontology reflected in the work of black artists such as John Coltrane, Charles Mingus, Amiri Baraka, Samuel Delany, and Ralph Ellison and their improvisatory mobilization of "the break." In the context of Ballett Frankfurt, Richardson reveals how ontological improvisation in everyday life can coalesce with—or upset—assumptions and discourses of formal improvisation in contemporary dance. In Germany, Richardson's artistic experience is such that the improvisation of being meets the improvisation of being-in-the-studio. If Forsythe's improvisation is informed by Paxton's experimental impulse of "surviving in a dance moment,"¹⁸⁷ Moten helps us see how Richardson could make use of

¹⁸⁵ Although the results of improvisation's inventions are often fleeting, in Forsythe's work much of the improvisation developed in rehearsal is maintained and revisited (if not completely duplicated) from one performance to another. Also, for more on the choreographer as master (as in, ballet master), see the work of André Lepecki.

¹⁸⁶ As in the work of Bill T. Jones.

¹⁸⁷ Paxton, <<http://vimeo.com/groups/contactimprovisation/videos/1731742>>.

that improvisation differently. Moten reminds us that the improvisation of blackness is an ongoing practice of improvising in and through the break, a rupture that can never be sutured: the “improvisatory exteriority” of blackness “can occasion something very much like sadness and something very much like devilish enjoyment.”¹⁸⁸ The relationship between sadness and devilish enjoyment resonates with the relationship between difficulty and fun inasmuch as both pairings indicate the emotional register of prevailing over challenge. Artists such as Mingus, Delany, Ellison, and (I would add) Richardson work in and through genres and/or instruments of the “master,” appropriating forms canonized by Western Civilization in the service of African American aesthetics and expressive practices. And even though Richardson’s experience with Forsythe resonates with such transgressive reappropriation, this chapter focuses more closely on the apparatus concealed by the discursive function of “fun.”

Exactitude, Deconstructing Ballet

In its title and execution, no piece makes more explicit Forsythe’s sensation of fun than *The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude* (1996). Moreover, as an exploration of the dizzying “thrill” of precision in executing physically challenging dance, this piece undoes assumptions that choreographic fun is necessarily messy or haphazard. “*Vertiginous Thrill*,” according to Galloway, is “one of [Forsythe’s] most technically difficult classical pieces, and it was made on two African Americans, Harper and Richardson.”¹⁸⁹ The fact that the pas de deux of *Vertiginous Thrill* was created on two black dancers dispelled biologically-based discriminatory notions of the black body in ballet. Significantly, when Richardson and Harper look at each other while dancing this duet, they recognize each other as two black *selves*, entirely shifting the racially subjective relationship between dancer and choreography in ballet pas de deux. It is known as one of the most challenging pieces in all of ballet’s repertoire. *Vertiginous Thrill* makes a point of utilizing a recognizable ballet vocabulary and is concerned more with order than distortion. Danced to Franz Schubert’s *Symphony No. 9 in C major, 3rd movement*, the piece deconstructs classicism by placing steps out of their typically rendered sequence. If a pas de bourée is usually followed by another similarly transitional step such as a glissade, *Vertiginous Thrill* asks its dancers to dispense with ballet’s familiar successions and launch into demanding pirouettes and jumps with very little preparation. Such highly kinetic choreography is made even more difficult by the exaggerated tutus (which look like flat, inflexible discs) created by Galloway. “That piece puts fear in every Classical ballerina across Europe,” says Galloway “I’ve spoken to ballerinas who find it easier to do Balanchine’s *Theme and Variations* than to do *Vertiginous Thrill*”¹⁹⁰ Reflecting on Forsythe’s comparatively radical casting choices, Galloway muses, “If [Harper and Richardson] had been in America, they never would have been chosen to do those pieces because they wouldn’t have been in [a ballet] company.”¹⁹¹ Paradoxically, the history of American ballet is forever changed via

¹⁸⁸ 255.

¹⁸⁹ Galloway, interview with the author.

¹⁹⁰ Galloway, interview with the author.

¹⁹¹ Galloway, interview with the author.

the employment of African American dancers in Germany, *outside* the U.S.’ geographical borders.

In order to grasp the racial significance of *Vertiginous Thrill*, it is important to understand the distinction between adopting Africanist aesthetics and casting African American dancers. While Forsythe inherits Balanchine’s Africanist tendencies, he eventually exceeds them. According to Gottschild, American ballet (the tradition informing Forsythe’s ballet background) is inherently Africanist and was inaugurated by Balanchine. She cites choreographer-anthropologist Katherine Dunham’s view of how Balanchine became “the conduit for the (African) Americanizing of ballet”: “Balanchine liked the rhythm and percussion of our dances.”¹⁹² “While the Africanist presence in modern art has received fluctuating attention over the course of the century,” Gottschild explains, “from the start the Africanist influence in American ballet has been tucked away in an interstice of history where it has been overlooked.”¹⁹³ She writes,

My purpose here is to retrieve the hidden legacy, the black text in Balanchine’s Americanization of ballet....It is clear that he was a ballet choreographer who worked in the ballet medium and subscribed to a ballet aesthetic. I hope to make equally clear that throughout his career, he introduced to the ballet canon Africanist aesthetic principles as well as Africanist-based steps from the social, modern, and so-called jazz dance vocabularies ¹⁹⁴

Gottschild writes, “It’s not the case that Balanchine was a choreographer of black dance,” creating a distinction between “Africanist” and “black” dance. To Gottschild, black dance is that which works predominantly in diasporic dance forms and is performed mainly by black dancers.

Research on Forsythe has tended to focus on formal issues (choreography, failure, improvisation technologies) and cognition.¹⁹⁵ Based on the lack of scholarship and criticism on socio-cultural identity issues in his work of the 1990s, Forsythe is

¹⁹² 63. Dunham was “referring to her own African American dance company and to their work with Balanchine on the musical, ‘Cabin in the Sky’ (1940).”

¹⁹³ Gottschild 59.

Gottschild suggests four basic grounds upon which American ballet’s Africanism should be assessed. The following are what she identifies as her “guiding principles...grounded in contemporary revisionist scholarship”:

1. Ballet is a form of ethnic dance (an observation made by dance anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku) and, like all (ethnic) dance, is subject to the influences and presences that are valued in its cultural context.
2. Influences from past and present cultures are woven into, intermeshed with, and redistributed in any given cultural form (such as ballet, for example) at any given moment in time.
3. The Americanization of ballet by a Russian immigrant, George Balanchine, shows both African American and European American influences.
4. An Africanist perspective can be used to reveal the Africanist presence in American ballet. (Gottschild 61.)

¹⁹⁴ Gottschild 60.

¹⁹⁵ See Gilpin, Hagendoorn, Vass-Rhee, Lambert-Beatty, Lehmann, Siegmund.

inadvertently framed as exceeding questions of race. This is likely due to the company's resistance to traditional narrative and literal casting choices. Forsythe's dancers are selected for their unique physical and technical attributes and their ability to improvise inventively, rarely asked to portray a character of a certain racial identity. Unlike the work of Bill T. Jones or Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, for example, the Ballett Frankfurt dancer is not asked to create discourse around her particular socio-cultural position, rarely asked to comment onstage about her race, religion, sexuality, health, or other markers of identity and subjectivity. Forsythe's works privilege movement-based as opposed to narrative or realist concerns. And when text or narrative enters, it does so in a fractured, fragmented manner.¹⁹⁶ It would be amiss, however, to assume that the absence of the self-conscious voice of the performer—one that tends to carry a documentary or pedagogical logic in, for example, Jones' work—signals an absence of conscious, complex thought on the part of the dancer. Quite the contrary: instead, the task of articulation falls on the dancer's ability to invent and deconstruct movement, during both rehearsals and performances. In addition to invention, a heightened degree of attention is required of the Ballett Frankfurt dancer.

Forsythe's relationship to ballet is such that he deconstructs the technique from within in addition to placing it in proximity with other dance forms.¹⁹⁷ As dance scholar and Forsythe dramaturge Gilpin explains,

Rather than retrieving and reproducing classical balletic forms that are fixed entries in the roster of movement, Forsythe bursts open these forms so that previously hidden moments in balletic movements are made plainly visible. In doing so, not only are movement and form given a new life and a new set of possibilities, but so is ballet in general. Failure and falling, for example, are retrieved and revalorized as intrinsically necessary and equally valid structural components of classical dance. What Forsythe moves towards is an opening of the apparently immutable, because historically sanctioned, assumptions of his discipline.¹⁹⁸

Like Rhoden's work for *Complexions*, such mutability from within ballet is augmented by the external influence of black vernacular dance vocabularies. Gilpin goes on to confirm that, in addition to making visible previously hidden elements of ballet, Forsythe indeed draws from vernacular styles such as breakdancing:

Although the Ballett Frankfurt dancers are trained in ballet (and other) techniques, and although the women frequently dance on pointe, it would be difficult to describe many of Forsythe's choreographies as ballet or simply dance....movement vocabulary ranges from classical ballet to

¹⁹⁶ In keeping with postdramatic theater and dance. See Hans Thies Lehmann.

¹⁹⁷ Certainly, there are multiple styles of ballet—from (Italian) Checetti to (Russian) Vaganova—but for the purpose of this chapter, I will not engage in the subtle differences between ballet styles, with the understanding that the American style of ballet of the Joffrey Ballet (where Forsythe danced) is a mix of various styles.

¹⁹⁸ 122.

breakdance.”¹⁹⁹

While Forsythe claims to have been influenced by Fred Astaire and participated in popular dance competitions in his youth, he becomes acquainted with diasporic forms such as breaking, popping, and locking through dancers such as Richardson.²⁰⁰ Such forms enter into Forsythe’s vocabulary through the dancers’ improvisation, and would likely not emerge without this space of experimentation.

A Sonic Break

Before embarking on a detailed exploration of improvisational movement practices in Ballett Frankfurt, it is important to understand the role of musical and sonic appropriation in Forsythe’s rehearsal environment. To consider how Forsythe was specifically influenced by African American-derived rhythm and percussion, let us look at a detailed example of music functioning in his studio practice. To do so is to derive the Africanist presence in Forsythe’s work. According to Galloway, “It all started with the music. [Forsythe’s] working relationship with [composer] Thom Willems was amazing. They were creating scores (musically and choreographically) at the same time.”²⁰¹ Richardson states that Forsythe “knows how to find the beat, and he would say, ‘No guys, you have to find the beat,’ and he would put on Funkadelic or something like that during *entreche trois*.”²⁰² Galloway claims that Forsythe

listens to rap; he listens to all of it because what he likes is that beat, that rawness.... I think he was opening up a dialogue. We [dancers of color] could have been offended, but not at all; I totally got what he was doing.... That music wasn’t new to him. Billy [Forsythe] was always the soul brother number one.²⁰³

Richardson parallels Galloway’s observation by stating, “Forsythe is a ridiculous mover—funky, musical.”²⁰⁴ In Figgis’ *Just Dancing Around*, Forsythe appears in a staged rehearsal improvising to Public Enemy’s rap, “Fight the Power.” In fact, it was Galloway who had brought in the song, and Forsythe used it to demonstrate the type of impulse he sought in a duet in *Invisible Film*.²⁰⁵ According to Galloway, “That’s how we used to do all the time.”²⁰⁶ “A lot of the vernacular influence was musical,” says Richardson, “because [Forsythe] wasn’t popping or locking.” Hip-hop music, often abandoned for the actual performance score, was used in rehearsal to create a certain type of movement quality: “He took away the rap for the piece [*Invisible Film*]”—much of the score consisted of

¹⁹⁹ Gilpin 117

²⁰⁰ Additionally, Forsythe’s current dramaturge, Freya Vass-Rhee, informs me (via research-based email exchange) that Forsythe often recounts a story about how he found acceptance in black clubs during his teen years, and that acceptance was based on his dancing skills (email, April 1st, 2011).

²⁰¹ Galloway, interview with the author.

²⁰² Richardson, interview with the author

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Galloway, interview with the author.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

Handel—“but we kept the same intention, creating a great juxtaposition.”²⁰⁷ Africanist presence is there as activator of the movement if not explicitly there in final performance.²⁰⁸ Richardson claims that Forsythe “loves street dance; he rehearses to Outcast, hip-hop, then switches it up, but keeps the pops in the movement.”²⁰⁹ In its ghosting, Forsythe’s use of rap is an *immaterial* example of Moten’s *ensemble*. Later we will see that Forsythe’s role in *Vertiginous Thrill* exemplifies ensemble in material terms.

By admitting that “We [dancers of color] could have been offended” by Forsythe’s use of hip-hop, Galloway arrives at the crux of the question of authenticity defining the question of race in ballet. While his experimental compositional process affords his dances much spontaneity and his dancers much responsibility, in using rap as a generative source during rehearsal, only to remove it during performance, Forsythe risks effacing the cultural legacies maintained by hip-hop music. What happens when a foundational rehearsal influence remains but a trace in performance? On the one hand, Forsythe places a radical trust in the dancer’s body-memory, in its ability to retain a musical beat and transform it into corporeal terms no matter the sonic accompaniment in question; on the other hand, a diasporic cultural form becomes undetectable, relegated to ghostly status. Such a practice inadvertently reifies and reinforces the reliance on recognizable western cultural genres and pieces, such as the Handel concerto that replaced Public Enemy in performance. Such a phenomenon might encourage us to question the political ramifications of theorizing the “Africanist presence” in the first place: what are the stakes of relegating unclaimed diasporic influences to the label of “Africanist” when such labeling risks encouraging effacement in the name of diversity, fluency, and versatility? At what point does the violence of “borrowing” overrun the supposed flattery of “influence?” Ultimately, Forsythe’s practice of rehearsing to rap only to render it inaudible and undetectable during performance echoes his suggestion for dancers to leave their bodies behind, to make themselves disappear. These practices of removal, however, result in differing racial dynamics for different dancers and are not easily subsumed by a single discourse. Herein I explore how making one’s body disappear through improvised movement contrasts with the process of removing music from a piece. While the audience is never privy to Public Enemy’s rap in performance, they indeed witness the dancers’ movement before it is left behind, left to disappear.

Improvisation

Although Forsythe employs virtuosic dancers, he challenges them further by identifying those qualities that made them exceptional and idiosyncratic in the first place, urging them to expand upon them more fully. In other words, he creates a practice of improvisation based on movements or flourishes that would merely be considered

²⁰⁷ Richardson, interview with the author.

²⁰⁸ Balanchine is said to have been influenced by the dance and music culture of Harlem (burlesque, jazz) and by composers such as Stravinsky who explored Africanist elements. In other words, he did not work with music in exactly the same way as Forsythe.

²⁰⁹ Interview with the author, 2009.

embellishment (or supplemental) in more traditional contexts of virtuosity.²¹⁰ Whether manifesting itself in a musical performance or a choreographic work, composition defines and embellishment supplements, and this supplementation lends individuality in degrees only ever comparable to the entirety of the composition and its collection of fellow musicians or surrounding dancers. Improvisation, in contrast, places more emphasis on sustained inventiveness.²¹¹ In the history of Western concert dance (especially ballet), virtuosity has been defined by distinguishing oneself from the collective, and improvisation has been defined by working within a collective. Ballett Frankfurt has not heretofore been included in what Foster calls “genealogies of improvisation.”²¹² Not being clear about that is one of many things that makes the intro hard to follow Forsythe’s improvisational techniques have been theorized separately from genealogies that include contact improvisation figures such as Paxton and Richard Bull. To place Forsythe within a genealogy of contact improvisation is to complicate both the assumption of the practice’s exclusionary whiteness as well as the assumption of its singular embrace of the pedestrian. By working at the intersection of classical ballet, vernacular dance and music, and contact improvisation, Forsythe’s pieces create a space for virtuosity in the context of collective improvisation.²¹³

Reflecting on the creative process at Ballett Frankfurt, Richardson explains that Forsythe encourages dancers to improvise according to “Laban’s kinesphere and [Forsythe’s] own alphabet and matching methods. I was there for the inception of the alphabet.”²¹⁴ The kinesphere refers to Rudolph Laban’s notion of the space surrounding

²¹⁰ Virtuosity is often defined through the discernment of a certain excess, an embellishment of form that exceeds the call of a composition. In the case of classical musical works such as concertos, the virtuoso tends to be a soloist who sets himself apart from the orchestra by embellishing an existing composition. Such embellishment, while improvisatory to varying degrees, operates in the service of a predominantly scripted aesthetic: the virtuoso is an individual, an embellishment himself who stands apart from (yet must answer back to) the collective. Such embellishments might have taken shape in movements such as the flick of a wrist in a piano concerto or the insertion of an extra ankle beat (*battu*) or *fouette* turn within an otherwise set choreographic composition.

²¹¹ Thus, if embellishment is transgressive, improvisation is creative. Embellishment’s transgressions are only made possible in relation to an otherwise bounded composition; improvisation is a continual act of creating anew. Nevertheless, with improvisation’s unending creation comes its own disappearance and destruction. Therefore, the embellishment found in traditionally virtuosic performance exemplifies allowable transgression’s function as that which ultimately maintains the norm. Improvisation, while subsuming the role of both transgression and norm in a studio full of its practitioners, is only transgressive to the extent that it is set apart from mainstream concert dance genres and practices.

²¹² Throughout Richard Bull text.

²¹³ Nevertheless, I find it important to point out that improvisation in contact improvisation is quite different from improvisation in jazz music. Perhaps Foster makes too easy a connection between the two.

²¹⁴ Richardson, interview with the author.

Cognitive dance scholar Hagendoorn describes the alphabet system as motor schema: “A motor schema is an abstract representation of a prototypical movement sequence such as a tennis serve or an arabesque. It refers to the pattern or the structure of a movement sequence rather than giving a full description of its dynamics.... This approach is one of the cornerstones of William Forsythe’s *Self Meant to Govern* (1994) and *Eidos: Telos* (1995), of which *Self Meant to Govern* is now the first part. *Self Meant to Govern* is based on a collection of some 130 movements and a number of associative rules for combining them. First, every one of the 130 movements was given a name such as book, ball, beard, brick, bottle, oyster, pizza, chest, crack,

the body and one's awareness of moving through that space. Forsythe's "alphabet" is a process in which words and their order correspond to certain movements and the phrases they comprise. In other words, a movement "was given a name such as book, ball, beard, brick, bottle, oyster, pizza, chest, crack, wallet, lion, atlas, faint, zebra. The dancers could then jump from one word to another, in the sense that 'honey' could give way to 'pizza,' because they are both food items, but also because they are both five-letter words."²¹⁵ According to Richardson, "[Forsythe] would say, don't only use your classicism, use different styles of movement, and orient it different ways.... 'Shift the room: the floor is up there, and you have two long pencils in your ear; you are writing your name with your ear.'"²¹⁶ This example of reorientation demonstrates Paxton's continued influence on Forsythe. According to Paxton, "Contact Improvisation constantly challenges one's orientation: visual, directional, balance, and where in the body and consciousness is positioned.... Contact Improvisation treats the space spherically, so you do not have the horizontal with sky above and floor below reality."²¹⁷ "My attention went more toward other dancers onstage," recalls Richardson. "With contact improv, you're not necessarily having to look. You have to listen, and you have to listen with your body.... [Forsythe] used the term 'contact improv.' He would talk about Paxton and say 'this was my background in New York City' (he took classes with Paxton)."²¹⁸ By combining Paxton's methodology, Laban's kinesphere, and his own alphabet method, Forsythe creates a hybrid type of improvisation that invites the chance occurrences that come of spatial reorientation and unconventional movement phrasing.

Dance scholar Danielle Goldman refers to improvisation as a "vital technology of the self... primarily concerned with *practice*."²¹⁹ Because improvisation is primarily a mining of one's individually generated movement, the self in this case is not conceived as a static entity, but in constant motion, inevitably subjected to—and subjecting—change. Richardson recalls the need to remain in a heightened state of awareness during such improvisatory rehearsals and performances, a space that allowed for one's individual emotions to enter the creative process.²²⁰ According to Galloway, "I was always able to be me in the repertoire.... As far as improv, if I was pissed off, I could be pissed off.... [It would not result in] a pissed off section; it would inform movement choices." Thus, emotions enter into the choreography not through expression (as in expressing anger) but through formal choices made under conditions that allow for emotionally charged experimentation. While improvisation might benefit from emotional experimentation

wallet, lion, atlas, faint, zebra. The dancers could then jump from one word to another, in the sense that "honey" could give way to 'pizza,' because they are both food items, but also because they are both five-letter words. The dancers could also take the last letter of one word as a cue for a movement starting with that letter: 'wash' could then be connected with 'honey.'" Hagendoorn 225.

²¹⁵ Hagendoorn 225.

²¹⁶ Richardson, interview with the author.

²¹⁷ Paxton, 178; <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrUeYbUmhQA&feature=related>>.

²¹⁸ Richardson, interview with the author. Paxton was "previously a dancer in the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and an active participant in the Judson Dance Theater" (Goldman 95).

²¹⁹ Goldman 88.

²²⁰ Galloway echoes such description of (and delight in) Forsythe's improvisatory working methods.

from its practitioners, the viewer of Ballett Frankfurt's improvisatory methods registers its effects on a formal level.

But improvisation has more significance in Forsythe's ballet practice. What Richardson contributed specifically an already multi-dimensional improvisatory method, one invested in breaking, popping, and locking that reflected his childhood dance experiences. When Forsythe encouraged him to improvise, Richardson drew from these vernacular forms, popping with the same ease he approached ballet and modern dance movements. In addition to his committed interest in musical beats from hip-hop and rock,²²¹ Forsythe was interested in the way the dynamics of popping and locking inform contemporary ballet. As Richardson recounts of his hybridization of popping and ballet,

The initiation behind popping and...ballet is...extremely similar and exacting. In popping, your hand must be specific, coming from a place and coming down from it. Transitions are the connectors, especially in street dance and ballet. There is air in the transitions. Bill said the good ballet dancers dance the transitions.²²²

Richardson points to the complexity of Forsythe's improvisatory process, and how combining multiple modes of improvisation invites both fracture and flow. If the imperative to connect otherwise disparate movements (based on words from the "alphabet" method) creates a somewhat jerky passage, paying heed to the smooth transitions afforded by ballet and popping inserts what a b-boy would refer to as a "liquid" dynamic. Recounting his experience rehearsing *Invisible Film*, Richardson explains, Forsythe "wanted us to have ferocious velocity, yet soft. My partner Stephe is extremely feminine, but I can be extremely masculine with force and power. He liked the dichotomy of that but didn't want us to...growl. He wanted us to...hit and melt, hit and melt. I stop, she goes down, I pull her up. That's the tension in between." Richardson suggests that Forsythe's unique hybridity of movement modes results in nuanced gendered relationships in which men are given license to be "soft," to "melt" when partnering with speedy women who forcefully "hit" their movement. The use of multiple improvisatory methods is what lends Ballett Frankfurt its ability to fold ballet in on itself, to deconstruct itself, leaving behind only a trace of recognition.

Gerald Siegmund refers to this formal "folding" of the body and technique as a process of rendering the choreographed body illegible. He writes,

The result of this turning in on oneself, of folding the body over, is an overriding of its historical text, which cannot be written anymore, an effacement which makes the body illegible. You cannot read these bodies anymore because they refuse to become signs in an economy of exchange.²²³

Much of the illegibility (if ballet is the "historical text" to which legibility refers) is due to the introduction of diasporic dance vocabularies like popping and locking. Siegmund

²²¹ Rock is a genre with African American foundations, however effaced or frequently forgotten those foundations may be.

²²² Interview with the author.

²²³ Siegmund.

suggests that after *Vertiginous Thrill*, Forsythe's work tended more toward an "internalizing of space":

They refer to ballet's vocabulary as a trace in their bodily memories, but they do not stand in for it. The dancers have absorbed the historical language of ballet into their bodies only to make it implode by undoing its coded relations. The moving body here does not so much create kinaesthetic space but rather internalises space, thereby imploding both visible space and body in the process.²²⁴

Siegmund is astute in recognizing the use of a classical "text" (ballet) to efface its own legibility. The idea of internalization complicates Moten's discussion of the black body's externalization, its hypervisibility. "Between looking and being looked at, spectacle and spectatorship, enjoyment and being enjoyed," writes Moten, "lies and moves the economy of what [Saidiya] Hartman calls hypervisibility"²²⁵ Richardson's career exemplifies such hypervisibility, that despite the prevalence of his image circulating in an economy of visual culture, audiences do not necessarily recognize his formal contribution to the work of choreographers such as Forsythe. This lack of recognition can be attributed to two phenomena, namely, the naturalization of normative images of blackness in the public's imagination as well as the way improvisation can render the visible illegible. While the former exemplifies the way visual culture operates in relationship to the Ailey company, the latter epitomizes Forsythe's work.

By performing with Ballett Frankfurt, Richardson subverts habituated modes of viewership in a global cultural economy of visibility dominated by easy correlations between skin color and performance style. In contrast to his earlier career, Richardson's work with Forsythe "refus[es] to become signs in an economy of exchange," foreclosing the possibility of reading his movement according to surface or technique that characterized previous readings. Richardson exercises a praxis of Moten's "Blackness," which "is always a disruptive surprise moving in the rich nonfullness of every term it modifies." "Such mediation," according to Moten, "suspends neither the question of identity nor the question of essence."²²⁶ The external folds into the internal, the visible into the invisible. In other words, the presentational quality favored by the Ailey company is abandoned in favor of Forsythe's insistence on the demonstrative, movement which

²²⁴ Siegmund.

²²⁵ 1-2.

²²⁶ Fred Moten 255, footnote 1.

Moten is astute in pointing out that "nonfullness" and improvisatory modes of art and everyday life do not necessarily mean a loss of identity. I include here Gilpin's claim that Forsythe's working methods could indeed force a "loss of identity." While agree with her explanation of Forsythe's motion toward the idea of "disappearance," I disagree with her claim that identity could ever be lost, especially as we turn to questions of race in Ballett Frankfurt's repertoire and rehearsals. Gilpin writes, "Forsythe's strategies of composition and performance differ significantly from those of other contemporary movement performance director/choreographers. He is extremely committed to working within already existing paradigms of dance, even if he attempts to transgress, augment, and explode them in the process. Forsythe celebrates dance to such an extent that, at least in some of his productions, the body disappears. Although an ambivalence about the dancing body still exists for Forsythe, he plays it out in other ways: he displays the dancing body's dizzying beauty while at the same time forcing its loss of identity."²²⁶

highlights itself as opposed to showing off a character, a narrative, or a canon of recognizable feats. Richardson describes the demands of performance quality such that, “In America it’s a little more in-your-face; in Europe it’s very internal.”²²⁷ He explains, in Ballett Frankfurt, “If you’re going to perform something you have to be absolutely demonstrative [with movement]. You have to tell the audience...how it goes so they’re with you. They’re looking at your exchange, how you are in and out of the movement, the articulation of the steps.”²²⁸ The shift from the presentational to the demonstrative is a shift from showing *off* to showing *how*. By “presentational,” I mean something like “I offer myself to you,” and by “demonstrative,” I mean “here are the mechanics of movement—and their effacement—revealed for you.” Thus, Richardson undergoes a shift in subjectivity from a “look at me” presentation of self or character to an idea of the self as creator/executor of movement. Paradoxically, such an eschewing of self-identity within the work in favor of the identity of the work itself results in—and is produced by—a more autonomous (and responsible) dancer than that required by traditionally look-at-me presentational choreography. Instead of steadfastly adhering to a prescribed (normative, legible) identity, Richardson is instead exercising his artistic agency. Within these frames, it is thus possible to see how an apparently restrained collaboration with a Europe-based white male formalist choreographer could be experienced by Richardson as an exercise of agency.

To view Richardson dancing in Forsythe’s work is to witness an “implosion” of both racial and choreographic signifiers, as Richardson disrupts both expectations of the black masculine body as well as those of ballet technique. Herein lies Richardson’s unexpected contribution to a particular black radical tradition. If, as Moten posits, “Blackness—the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line—is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity,”²²⁹ it is, paradoxically, through non-representational choreographic action that Richardson sutures the rupture between “personhood and subjectivity” that has historically defined blackness. To observe Richardson in Ballett Frankfurt is to observe a person (not merely a personality) making decisions—kinesthetically, spatially, rhythmically. As Forsythe explains, “The tensions of the piece come from literally watching people having to make drastic decisions.”²³⁰

Forsythe explains the company’s process such that, “We used the improvisation technologies that we’d been developing over many pieces, which involve minute arithmetic, or geometric physical analysis that keeps iterating. It’s like a fractal: you solve the situation and you feed the result back into the situation again. Any given state

²²⁷ Richardson, interview with the author.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Moten 1.

²³⁰ Burrows, Forsythe 1998.

Caspersen provides some genealogical background for Ballett Frankfurt’s impulse to encourage decision-making in dance: “Balletic training itself is great, but I find often the ballet institutions instill a strong sense of shame in the dancers and weaken their belief in their own ability to make decisions about art” (Burrows, Caspersen 1998).

produces another movement.”²³¹ According to Galloway, Forsythe’s pieces lack strictly bounded finish: “A piece wouldn’t have an identity. It was constantly evolving. You would always go back and work on a piece.”²³² Gilpin mirrors Galloway’s observation by writing, “Forsythe is not interested in the survival of his work as an object; that would fetishize the work as a finished, categorizable, reproducible object. He is similarly adamant about the fact that his choreographies, unlike classical ballets, cannot be recorded using Labanotation.”²³³ Thus, Forsythe’s works inadvertently personify Moten’s resistance of the object. Moreover, it is Richardson’s intentional engagement with black performance (popping, breaking) within the context of Ballett Frankfurt that highlights the dispossessive force of the object, the cycle of formation and deformation defining the relationship between subject and object. As Moten asserts,

The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist....While subjectivity is defined by the subject’s possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed—infused, deformed—by the object it possesses.²³⁴

We can think of Forsythe’s pieces (especially their reliance on ballet technique) as objects and Richardson as the (black) subject who is “deformed—by the object [he] possesses.” We can also invert this formulation to ascertain the slipperiness between the status of subject and object in the context of ever-evolving improvisatory choreography. In other words, in pieces such as *Invisible Film*, Richardson both takes part in—and is at the mercy of—the unpredictable status of the product. According to Galloway, much of Forsythe’s resistance to finish and categorization is realized through the dancers’ improvisation onstage as well as off: “We also improvised onstage. Studio improv would change onstage because I would have forgotten about studio movement, even during partnering. Pieces like *In the Middle Somewhat Elevated* or *The Second Detail*...were more set, but as far as our work was concerned...we would never do a pas de deux the same way each time.”²³⁵ Regarding *ALIE/NA(C)TION*, choreographer and dancer Dana Caspersen reveals, “We don’t do the same thing every time. We have this established structure and then we’re composing with it.”²³⁶ Despite his own resistance to the idea that his pieces are objects, Forsythe’s works are sold to dance companies internationally, even in their ever-changing states. Like Richardson’s virtuosity, it is that which is most precarious about Forsythe’s choreography that affords it its sellable aspect. If audiences flock to witness Richardson’s exceptional movement quality—to see if he can reproduce the same phenomenal feats of yesterday’s performance—they are attracted to the kineticism and surprise of Forsythe’s deconstructive pieces. The work’s fetishizability as a finished product is up for debate, it can certainly be sold and reproduced; yet, this reproduction embraces its refusal of

²³¹ Forsythe in Burrows.

²³² Galloway, interview with the author.

²³³ Gilpin 123

²³⁴ Moten, “Resistance of the Object,” *In the Break*, 1-2.

²³⁵ Galloway, interview with the author.

²³⁶ Burrows, Caspersen.

identical duplication. Thus, its very resistance to objecthood is precisely that which generates its fetishizable auratic sheen. Ultimately, by remaining open to the unpredictability of improvisation, Richardson and Forsythe's pieces are implicated in the continuous possession and dispossession of the subject/object's relationship to blackness.

The further Forsythe moves from pieces like *Vertiginous Thrill* that rely on ballet vocabulary, the more he approaches a working in and through the "break" as vocabularies from popping and hip-hop enter into his movement palette through Richardson. This lingering in the rupture of the break exceeds the racial identity of the dancer, but relies on diasporic movement. Pieces such as *Vertiginous Thrill* are more Balanchinian in their adherence to recognizable ballet vocabulary, and are therefore more easily categorized as Africanist, as subtly inviting a hip thrust or polyrhythm. As Forsythe demands more and more improvisation and dancers such as Richardson lend Forsythe's movement more breaking and popping, the choreographic heteroglossia of Gotschild's notion of Africanism becomes less relevant, and the work begins to resonate more closely with Moten's "blackness." The concept of Africanist aesthetics still asks of us to recognize and acknowledge diasporic elements and movements. As psycho-social modes, blackness and moving through the break, however, embrace the impossibility of resolution, of authenticity or originary movement. To theorize within an Africanist framework is a positive exercise of attribution and identification, whereas theorizing blackness in Moten's mode is a melancholic act, a commitment to remaining active within a cycle of loss. Moten's "difficult" blackness rather than Africanism turns out to be a more productive lens to think through this phase of Richardson's career. Not only is he literally "breaking" (inserting break dance into ballet), but by improvising in Forsythe's work, he is actively dancing through the "break." Melancholia suggests a compulsive return, and Forsythe's choreography intervenes to recognize and reverse such return with a compulsive "leaving behind," a "disappearance." He claims that his dancers are repeatedly "leaving behind" their bodies, and their actions are a kind of "letting go." As the body folds over on itself, it approaches something like "transparency" and "disappearance":

The more you let go of your control, and give it over to a kind of transparency of the body, a feeling of disappearance, the more you will be able to capture differentiated form, and differentiated dynamics. You can move very fast in this state, and it will not give the same impression—it won't give the impression of violence. You can also move with tremendous acceleration provided you know where you leave the movement—not where you put the movement, but where you leave it. You try to divest your body of movement, as opposed to thinking you are producing movement. So it would not be like pushing forward into space and invading space—it would be like leaving your body in space. Dissolution, letting yourself evaporate. Movement is a factor of the fact that you are actually evaporating.²³⁷

²³⁷ Forsythe in Siegmund 136-137.

More a sensorial guide for the dancer than a critical assessment of the body's actual relationship to space and time, Forsythe's discussion of "leaving" the movement as opposed to creating an "impression of violence" is a choreo-philosophical embrace of the trace, one that dispenses with production and offense. Forsythe recognizes that such kinetic, forceful dancing typically gives the impression of violence. He stages movement that could otherwise be read as violent in a manner that is in fact an active refusal of violence, transforming the function and legibility of velocity in contemporary dance. By both experimenting with the break and maintaining a degree of expression carried over from the mainstream work of Ailey, Richardson thus informs and makes more explicit in Forsythe's work the bridge between popular dance and an aesthetics of difficulty.

Difficulty and the Socked Foot

The complexity of influences informing Forsythe's improvisational process and the velocity of his style results in an aesthetic that can be challenging for the audience to experience and interpret. A concept that deserves translation from the realm of the literary to the realm of the choreographic is that of "difficulty" as put forth by Leonard Diepeveen, who frames difficulty "in terms of a reading process," central to "high culture." He refers to difficulty as a "form of attention," writing,²³⁸

Modernism's difficulty...is not merely a classifiable set of techniques. To discuss difficulty solely as the property of texts is to impoverish it and miss how difficulty became an integral part of high culture. Difficulty must be understood in terms of a reading process, and it manifests itself socially; modernism begins with a typical interaction between art and its audience. Difficulty...is that recurring *relationship* that came into being between modernist works and their audiences.²³⁹

According to Diepeveen, high modernist poetry (such as that of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein), while certainly difficult to write, ultimately places the demands of

Gilpin refers to such practice as "disappearance." I might hesitate in rehearsing this trope, especially in regards to race. "The movement composition research of the Ballet Frankfurt attempts to expose and examine precisely these disturbing moments of lost attention. In such choreography, the double-edged tension of disequilibrium is a state that emerges from the infinite operations that dismantle historically established bodily configurations. This state reveals what is always in the process of disappearing; the dancing thereby highlights the continuous vanishing moments of movement, and offers a redefinition of dance as we have come to know it. Dance, as Forsythe's work suggests, is a process of embodied disappearance....This work embodies a process that can only be witnessed in the act of its disappearance." (Gilpin 121.)

²³⁸ 244.

²³⁹ Diepeveen xi.

Despite its reference to the literary in his work, Diepeveen imbues difficulty with a sense of the bodily and the affective. He writes, "Difficulty is an odd aesthetic experience; using their whole bodies, people react viscerally to difficulty, often with anxiety, anger, and ridicule. The public debate about difficulty and its scandalousness, then, was much more than a story of elitism and middle-class anti-intellectualism. It was also a story of anger, of pleasure, and of the body. Moreover, those affective responses are enmeshed in the standard ways of conceptualizing difficulty and profoundly influence how difficulty shaped modern culture" (xiv).

difficulty onto the reader, withholding or delaying pleasure until the reader's labor of interpretation reaps its intellectual rewards. For high modernist critics, intellectual pleasure comes from the reader's fulfillment of the difficult task of interpretation. As such, a certain degree of intellectual virtuosity is attributed to the astute reader of a "difficult" text.²⁴⁰ What we see in Ballet Frankfurt is that Richardson transitions from a company (Ailey) in which difficult movement is called upon to satisfy an easily "read" aesthetic to a company (Frankfurt) in which difficult movement works in the service of an aesthetic that is challenging for the viewer.

Modernism in American dance does not share an easily grafted chronology with literary or visual art modernism. For example, even though Martha Graham is considered the quintessential modern dance choreographer, she is not "modernist" by most poetic or aesthetic standards; her emphasis on a synthesis of expression and form are nearly the opposite of the more abstract goals of the likes of Gertrude Stein.²⁴¹ While Balanchine is often referred to as a "Neo-Classical" ballet choreographer, Susan Manning and others note that his frequent rejection of characterization and narrative aligns him more securely with the modernist project. As an inheritor of Balanchine's proto-modernist tendencies, Forsythe further abandons theatrical conventions, more fully satisfying a modernist preoccupation with difficulty.²⁴² It is this stylistic inheritance that makes Gottschild's discussion of Africanist aesthetics applicable to Forsythe's work, but the departure from Balanchine lends Forsythe's work its difficult abstraction, aligning him more closely with Moten's own modernist commitments and strategic modernist

²⁴⁰ I elaborate on "spectatorial virtuosity" in the Complexions chapter.

²⁴¹ Dance scholars who have elaborated on the modernism/postmodernism debate in dance history include Sally Banes, Susan Manning, Susan Foster, and Ramsey Burt.

²⁴² The tension between intellectualism and its opponents in dance reception is put forward by dance scholar Mark Franko, who writes, "The journalistic response to Forsythe, and Forsythe's critical reaction to that response, reveal the dirty little secret of 'anti-intellectualism' in American dance criticism (Franko 42)...Forsythe's relationship with the American critical establishment during the 1980s was, indeed, complex, if not vexed. I attribute it to the rejection of intellect in dance, and most particularly to the rejection of intellect in ballet." (Franko 40.) The 1990s, however, signals a shift in Forsythe's journalistic response, for as he became more established and his work entered the repertoire of more ballet companies, Forsythe's work no longer represented the occasion to reject the intellect in dance, and instead became the gauge of a sought after ingeniousness. As of late, the perception of a certain brand of intellectualism has become imperative in contemporary ballet and dance, which is precisely why much dance by black artists (such as that of Rhoden) working in a vein similar to, but decidedly more continuously kinetic than, Forsythe is admonished by critics as too physical and muscular, and not intellectual enough. This is due partially to a privileging of kineticism in the work of Rhoden (and others influenced by Forsythe), but also due to racial biases about the relationship between intellectualism and kineticism. Explicit engagement with the discursive has much to do with such bias. Forsythe himself is known for "[speaking] back to the critics."²⁴² By speaking back to critics in their own language, referencing their use of critical theory and hiring resident philosophers and dramaturges, Forsythe creates a forum for himself to engage intellectually with critics on their own terrain, as opposed to relying solely on the "genius" of his choreography to speak for him. Forsythe's verbal discourse works in conjunction with the difficulty of and in his choreography in that the discourse buttresses any difficulty the viewer might encounter in the work. More in keeping with the visual art domain, the artist who speaks creates a foundation for the acceptance of difficulty and intellectualism in the work.

“breaks.” Choreographic aesthetics of choreographers such as Forsythe and Rhoden linger more in abundance than lack. Such abundance parallels what Dipeveen refers to as modernist poetics’ “too-muchness.” Difficulty in postdramatic theatre and dance can arise, however, not only from “too-muchness,” but also its opposite (which we could call “not-enoughness”).²⁴³ Forsythe is the rare choreographer whose aesthetic of abundance has satisfied critical demands for intellectual/receptive difficulty.

By way of conclusion, perhaps no piece’s creative process better exemplifies Richardson’s participation in Forsythe’s aesthetic of difficulty than *Eidos: Telos*. In 1994, Richardson and Forsythe launched their collaboration with *Eidos: Telos*, a piece whose title translates from the latin to “final form” (after the death of Forsythe’s wife, Tracey-Kai Meier).²⁴⁴ Pieces such as *Eidos: Telos* in the 1990s inaugurated the now-pervasive European aesthetic of sock-footed dancers, evoking the warming and cocooning of the foot and ankle that typically takes place at the very beginning of dance class. According to Galloway, socks first made a formal appearance in Forsythe’s works when Galloway costumed the piece *Quintet*.²⁴⁵ The costuming of *Eidos Telos*—socks and relaxed warm-up pants—effaces the masculine, raced muscularity for which Richardson is known in the U.S.²⁴⁶ That Richardson could slip and fall at any moment distances him from the star-status he attained at Ailey, which relied on the traction of the bare foot. The sock represents the nexus of difficulty and fun, spectacle and responsibility in Ballet Frankfurt. If the bare foot offers contemporary dancers a certain level of stability and traction and the pointe shoe creates an unnatural sense of tapering height, the sock creates a slippery surface that completely alters the relationship of the foot to the ground, thus the frequency of flat-footed slides in Forsythe’s work. The sock dismantles the single stardom of the virtuoso, creating a collective of vulnerable virtuosos (idiosyncratic still) who achieve a sense of fun in the face of difficulty. It also brings the playful experimentation of the studio onto the stage.

The precariousness of dancing in socks ultimately magnifies Richardson’s virtuosity, but it does so by reminding us of the imminent threat of failure. Heidi Gilpin writes, “Forsythe explores...the extrakinespheric moments when the boundaries of equilibrium are transgressed, when falling is imminent because something has failed. That something is balance....Failure contains within it notions of absence, of lack, as well as very distinct elements of movement and performance.”²⁴⁷ The “absence” and “lack” Gilpin points to returns us to Moten’s melancholic blackness, the continual working in

²⁴³ Dipeveen mentions “too-muchness” in reference to high moderns such as Gertrude Stein.

²⁴⁴ It should be noted that, due to his resistance to finish in his improvisation-driven pieces, the only finality Forsythe locates is in death itself.

²⁴⁵ Interview with the author.

²⁴⁶ Forsythe’s ruminations on the relationship between economy and authorship resonate with my discussion of agency and blackness later in the chapter. “The cost of time is so drastic....How is this economic context within which we all work shifting the future of work and the future of authorship?... There [are] different levels of authorship. If I’ve made the material and you’re realigning it...you don’t get paid for it, but if you’re developing the material yourself and I need to use it, then...you get paid for that section” (Burrows, Forsythe 1998).

²⁴⁷ Gilpin 120, 114.

and through a rupture that can never be sutured.

But more interestingly Forsythe insists that the body's constant absenting of itself, its intentional failure, stages the dancers' accomplishment. Dance critic Roslyn Sulcas (who has written extensively on Forsythe) observes, "There is no exhibition of prowess in *Eidos: Telos*. Every movement is full of understated, elaborated detail as different body parts appear to initiate their own small dance simultaneously; no step ever serves as a transition to another, more important visual effect." Forsythe tells Sulcas, "What I wanted to show in *Eidos*...is the extent of the dancers' accomplishment."²⁴⁸ Forsythe does not necessarily link a dancer's accomplishment to high-flying, breakneck kinetics, despite his frequent embrace of such physical fireworks. Rather, understated intricacy and compositional skill become the marks of accomplishment. In fact, Richardson had to adapt himself to a more understated presence at Ballet Frankfurt. As Galloway, recounts, "Sometimes [Richardson's] charisma (and presentational quality) fit in our company and sometimes Bill [Forsythe] had to tone it down."²⁴⁹ By refusing to call upon one movement to transition to the next in a manner that is habitual to ballet, Forsythe further locates himself in the non-narrative, fractured aesthetics of modernist difficulty. In *Just Dancing Around*, Forsythe warns in rehearsal, "We're running the risk of a kind of disconcerted modernity, whereas I think it needs far more economy. I think everyone should get to the point." The "economy" to which Richardson was accustomed functioned according to the logic of giving the audience what they paid for. In other words, as Galloway reflects, "Bill [Forsythe] and I used to joke: Desmond [Richardson] is not going to waste your time when he's on stage."²⁵⁰ "Getting to the point" in Forsythe's work, however, is more about sustaining attention within demanding and highly kinetic choreography as opposed to dancing dramatically or traveling from point A to point B in as short a line as possible.

While his audience experiences an aesthetics of difficulty, in soliciting an economical practice, Forsythe is actually asking for quick decision-making, thus a more efficient process of continually "disappearing" the body. Significantly, Forsythe cites a kind of "muscle memory" in recounting the body's continuous acts of disappearance. Sulcas continues,

Forsythe...likes to think of the dancers' responsibilities in [*Eidos: Telos*] as similar to those of virtuoso musicians who make choices about order and timing when performing sequences in a cadenza. 'It's not a question of memorizing intellectually,' he says. 'It's about the body being a form of memory; the physical patterns in your body are listening to the music and recalling themselves.'²⁵¹

In other words, Forsythe's disappearance relies not on forgetting, but on memory. Similarly, Richardson is not meant to forget the diasporic traditions of his past in working in Forsythe's experimental studio. It is not a matter of "unlearning" the techniques of his past, a logic driving much contemporary dance training. Rather, he relies on his body as

²⁴⁸ Sulcas.

²⁴⁹ Interview with the author.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Sulcas.

“a form of memory” and a body who makes choices, embracing both a loss of control and a sense of agency and authorship. By rejecting a combination of movements that could be identified as one style or another, Richardson in Ballett Frankfurt relinquishes the relative legibility of Africanism, choosing to work in the break, in the illegible space of blackness. It is, paradoxically, through non-representational choreographic action that Richardson sutures the rupture between “personhood and subjectivity” that has historically defined blackness.

EPILOGUE

To speak to Richardson's impact on and interest in teaching and "inspiring students,"²⁵² I can vividly recall a moment at the Ailey School as a scholarship student of seventeen, stretching my psoas in a deep lunge on the periphery of the studio before an informal performance when Richardson kindly and quietly began stretching in the space next to me, lending positive words of encouragement. Even then, Richardson seemed aware of his impact on future generations of dancers, that even minimal contact with him could amount to a meaningful experience for the receptive dance student. In fact, he uses this rationale to describe why he enjoys appearing on *So You Think You Can Dance*. His interest is in inspiring those who might not otherwise have the opportunity to see concert dance. Future iterations of this project will discuss his appearances on the Fox television show and reception to those appearances. Richardson's first commercial job (at age seventeen), while employed by Alvin Ailey's second company, was dancing in Michael Jackson's video, "Bad." Over the next fifteen years, Richardson went on to perform with Jackson six times. I plan to address the pairing of Richardson and Jackson as demonstrative of the way excess and virtuosity come together in an effort to categorize artists with extreme skill, charisma, and ability. Such qualities are met by audiences with a fluctuating dynamic of adoration and abjection. Another set of sites for future research includes Richardson's work on Broadway (in work by Twyla Tharp and Bob Fosse) and in film (*Chicago, Across the Universe*). Most recently in 2011, Richardson performed in the World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar. Founded by Leopold Senghor, the first World Festival of Black Arts took place in 1966 and featured artists such as James Baldwin and, significantly, Alvin Ailey. The expanded project will also include this festival as an example of transnationalism and Richardson's role as an American cultural ambassador, a role he began to assume as a dancer with Ailey. As a term developed by Senghor himself, *négritude* will be theorized alongside a history of dance in the Black Arts Festival. To engage more with popular, commercial, and international dance contexts in Richardson's career will undoubtedly require a concerted discussion of the cult of individuality, fame, and charisma in relation to virtuosity. Finally, further investigation of the mechanics and reception of Richardson's movement will bring about a thorough exploration of the theoretical limits and possibilities of "posthumanism," the mechanical/machine-like, the automation, the technological, and Afrofuturism, and how these concepts relate to technical/virtuosic dance ability. To reconcile Paul Virilio's discussion of the automobile and speed with that of Lepecki (after Peter Sloterdijk) will allow for a more thorough investigation of the relationship between embodiment, modernity, stasis, and speed. To augment such a comparison with a focus on the role of race and gender in dance practice will bring attention to socio-cultural aspects of subjectivity's kinesthetic manifestations.

²⁵² Interview with author.

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Appendix to Chapter Two

A. Original Program Material from ABT's *Othello*

OTHELLO

A Dance in Three Acts

Choreography by **Lar Lubovitch**

Music by Elliot B. Goldenthal

Scenic Design by George Tsy-pin

Costumes by **Ann Hould-Ward**

Lighting by Pat Collins

Projections by Wendall K. Harrington

Assistant Choreographer: Ginger Thatcher

Additional Creative Assistants: Rebecca Rigert and Scott Rink

TIMING:

Act 1 - 30:00

Act 2 - 25:00

Act 3 - 25:00

Originating as a story in the *Hecatommithi* (Hundred Tales) of Giraldi Cintio published in Venice in 1566, the characters and basic plot were subsequently adapted by William Shakespeare into his play, *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, around 1602. *Othello* was given its World Premiere by American Ballet Theatre on May 23, 1997 at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York, danced by Desmond Richardson (Othello), Sandra Brown (Desdemona), Parrish Maynard (Iago), Martha Butler (Emilia), and Keith Roberts (Cassio). This production of *Othello* was co-produced with the San Francisco Ballet in collaboration with the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company.

Act I, Scene 1:

The Cathedral San Marco in Venice; Othello and Desdemona are wed.

Act I, Scene 2:

A great hall in the Palace of the Doges; Cassio leads the court in a tribute to Othello and Desdemona; Othello presents a gift to his bride; Iago waits and watches.

Act II:

A seaport in Cyprus; On this stormy night, the port is filled with women anxiously awaiting the return of their men. Othello, now commander of the island fortress of Cyprus, has successfully led them in a battle at sea against enemies of the Venetian state. At Othello's request, Cassio has remained in Cyprus as a guardian to Desdemona. In celebration of the ship's safe return, a local woman (Bianca) begins a Tarantella.

Desdemona loses her handkerchief. Iago weaves a web.

Act III, Scene 1:

Othello's chambers

Act III, Scene 2:
Desdemona's bedroom²⁵³

²⁵³ <<http://www.abt.org/education/archive/ballets/othello.html>>