

Easier Said Than Done: Talking Identity in Late Twentieth-Century American Concert
Dance

By

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines how choreographers Bill T. Jones, Joe Goode, and Wallflower Order Dance Collective mobilize auditory, visual, and kinesthetic modes of communication to underscore the unstable relationship between talk, dance, and gesture. I argue that this very instability affords dance theater its power to perform alternative racialized and gendered subjectivities. The project departs from dance studies' long-standing investment in the notion of choreography as bodily writing to examine theories and ideologies of dance's status as a form of speech.

This dissertation is about how a generation of dance artists dealt with their anxiety around (modern, contemporary, postmodern, American, concert, art, stage) dance's status as a language that could speak *for them* so that they could be heard—not only as individuals (hear my story) but as representatives, public figures of underrepresented groups, experiences, lifestyles. The works I have chosen best exemplify or perform a productive tension between talking, dancing, and gesturing that illuminates the historical terms and contexts, the very history itself, of western concert dance practice and its autonomizing discourses. These works show us how the tension between talking, dancing, and gesturing expose related tensions between “high” and “low,” art and street, art and social/popular dance practices; black and white; and between hearing and non-hearing cultural contexts.

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Introduction, or Prelude to a Diss

A Dancing Dance Critic Looks Back to Move Forward

From 1997 to 2003, I wrote dance criticism for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* and several other newspapers and magazines. I probably saw between four and six dance performances per week in proscenium theaters, black box theaters, and studio theaters; in abandoned parking lots and on street corners; in cemeteries and inside drained swimming pools. The Bay Area has the largest number of dance companies per capita in the country, and I saw everything: modern dance, contemporary dance, hip hop, ballet, hula, Cambodian dance, Kathak, butoh...the list goes on and on. The editors at the *Bay Guardian*, may it rest in peace, were open to everything, and gave me 500-1500 words almost every week.

While writing, I was also dancing and performing with local pick-up companies. I took class every day and rehearsed in the evenings and on weekends. Far away from my native Brooklyn, the Shawl Anderson Dance Center in Berkeley became my West coast family. (It still is.) I spent my days surrounded by dancers and choreographers. I thought of myself as a dancer's dance critic, writing for the people most invested in and familiar with the practice of dancing and making dances.

Recently, a random self-Googleing episode led me to look back at my reviews.¹ I did not find a dancer's dance critic there. I found neither an open mind, nor a diplomatic pen,

¹ "Feeling lucky" one morning, I typed my name into the Google search box and discovered that a review of mine was cited in Yutian Wong's *Choreographing Asian America*. Wong writes,

In her review of *The Nature of Nature* that appeared in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, Sima Belmar accused Li-Jue of perpetuating stereotypes. Belmar described the costumes, visual installations, and set design in great detail and even quoted directly from the text that accompanied the dancing. In fact, she had something to say about the entire performance except for the dancing itself. She wrote:

The dancers of Facing East are all beautiful movers. But the piece relied so heavily on the costumes, set, sound, and unexamined text, that the choreography looked like a lazy afterthought, one that might stir you from sleep, but not enough to get you out of bed. Stripped of its accouterment, would there have been a dance at all? ... Facing East cites as its mission to present work that explores being Asian American and female. Thus far Li-Jue has done little more than serve up weakly ironic takes on stereotypes and slurs for our collective.

... what is such an exploration of Asian American women supposed to look like? What does a critic like Belmar see as lacking in Li-Jue's choreographic answer? (Wong 29).

What *does* a critic like Belmar *see*? A critic like Belmar. Exactly. I won't go into the ways I would write that review if I could turn back time or outline the myriad assumptions that

nor a generous heart. Instead, I found a voice performing its authority. And I was devastated.

Blame it on the space and time constraints of weekly print journalism. Scholar MJ Thompson's points about the benefits of academic time certainly ring true to me today. She said in conversation with Bill T. Jones,

The question is, how reflexive can you be? How much can you implicate yourself in the writing? How are you going to represent whatever it is that you're looking at and yourself at the same time? That has been the dilemma and it's dangerous, and also part of the thrill. Do I think that all writers have the opportunity to take that time? No, it's something extra great you get here, that maybe folks out there in the world outside the academy have less access to.²

Out there in the world of print journalism, we don't (I didn't) have the time or the space. And here I am, now writing inside the academy with all the time and space in the world. This project is, in fact, the most space and time I have ever devoted to writing about dance. I think that I spent eighteen months writing about Wallflower Order Dance Collective's *Defiance* (Chapter 1), and the dance is only two-and-a-half minutes long! Granted, I also gave birth to a second daughter during that time, but still!

But even if Thompson's remarks offer my past self a hall pass for having lacked a certain amount of self-reflexivity in review after review after review, I know that the problem of writing dancing is not only a matter of limited space and time. Neither is it about dance's purported ephemerality.³ Nor is it about dance's inscrutability as a language.⁴

undergirded my argument. I was mean. I didn't understand. I was mean *because* I didn't understand. As Bill T. Jones said, "That mean article of Arlene Croce's, did she understand that I was doing something that she could never understand?" This is not to say that I would have enjoyed Jue's work any more had I been better equipped to enter into the discourses of Asian Americanness, but I would have been able to address how the work negotiated such discourses, and the tension between experience and discursivity itself. To be fair to my younger self, I didn't even know what discursivity meant in 2001.

² Michelle Dent, Bill T. Jones, and MJ Thompson, "Bill T. Jones: Moving, Writing, Speaking," *TDR: The Drama Review* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 60.

³ Most twentieth-century dance critics—with notable exceptions such as Jill Johnston—wrote with a perception of the dance as a disappearing act, a performance eluding capture. The titles of Marcia Siegel's collected writings exemplify this perspective—*At the Vanishing Point: A Critic Looks at Dance* (1972), *Watching the Dance Go By* (1977), *The Shapes of Change: Images of American Dance* (1985). See also Deborah Jowitz, *The Dance in Mind: Profiles and Reviews 1976-83* (1985); Arlene Croce, *Afterimages* (1977). In the 1980s and early 1990s, the field of Performance Studies held on to a notion of performance (including dance) as an "ontology of disappearance," an idea that finds its fullest elaboration in Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked* (1993). Scholars have since challenged these accounts of performance as disappearance, proposing that we think instead of the Derridean trace or "presence-in-absence" (Franko 1996; Lepecki 2004), the archive in relation to repertoire (Taylor 2003),

Rather, I think that the problem is about learning to see, hear, and feel with dancing without succumbing to the “authority effect.”⁵ Jane Tompkins captures it nicely:

re-enactment in lieu of reconstruction (Franko 1989; the entire *Dance Research Journal* 43/1, Summer 2011).

⁴ Contesting the prevailing assumptions around dance’s relationship to language has been a driving force in Western concert dance’s aesthetic, political, and ideological shape-shifting. Dance Studies as a field was built on a scaffold of structural and poststructural literary theory. The field valorized choreography as a practice and object, legitimating and making legible dance as a subject of academic inquiry. This strategy also liberated writers from the daunting task of preserving or capturing the ephemeral. The new dancer-theorists brought their kinesthetic, interoceptive knowledge of dancing to bear on these “readings” of choreography.

Susan Leigh Foster’s groundbreaking *Reading Dancing* was the first dance theory text to think dance through semiotics. Foster focused on choreography as a practice of writing that inscribes both the space of dancing and the body of the dancer. Foster laid the groundwork for theories of the dancer’s agency through a metaphoric and material association between choreography and writing. The dancing body inscribes and is not merely inscribed on. The dancing body is “a bodily writing” (Barthes). Susan Leigh Foster, *Reading Dancing*.

Mark Franko’s *Dance as Text* considers the political and ideological significance of the rise of “antitextual” dance in seventeenth-century France, a time “when a body, independent of language, could mean something ‘more’ or other than what language said it did” (Mark Franko, *Dance As Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5). Franko (who borrows the phrase “Dance as Text” from a 1988 MLA session organized by Foster, Franko, *Dance as Text*, 197, n.59.) informs us that the question of how to read dancing was already raised by dance theorists and practitioners in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Franko, *Dance as Text*, 14).

Following the “Choreographing History” conference, several anthologies and monographs emerged that formed the core theoretical curricula of dance departments. These anthologies analyzed dances and dancing bodies as “texts,” searching for “meaning in motion.” See Foster, ed., *Choreographing History*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995; Foster, ed., *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996; Ellen W. Goellner and Jacqueline Shea Murphy, eds., *Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995; Jane Desmond, ed., *Meaning In Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997. More recent anthologies engage kinesthesia and kinesthetic awareness as objects and methodologies, but continue to think of dancing as a form of inscription that continues to require “reading.” See Sally Ann Ness and Carrie Noland, eds., *Migrations of Gesture* (2008); Carrie Noland, *Agency & Embodiment*.

⁵ Jane Tompkins, “Me and My Shadow,” *New Literary History* 19, no. 1, (Autumn 1987): 175-176.

[T]he human frailty of the speaker, his body, his emotions, his history; the moment of intercourse with the reader—acknowledgment of the other person’s presence, her feelings, her needs. This ‘authoritative’ language speaks as though the other person weren’t there. Or perhaps more accurately, it doesn’t bother to imagine who, as Hawthorne said, is listening to our talk.⁶

In *Forms of Talk*, Erving Goffman tells us that in “canonical talk,” listeners are meant, “to look into the speaker’s words, which, after all, cannot be seen. It is as if they must look at the speaker, but not see him.”⁷ Canonical talk produces a listener who operates under the spell of Tompkins’ authority effect, looking past the speaker while looking right at her. This mode of listening then produces a speaker who speaks as though the other person weren’t there. Goffman’s project is to point the listener towards the speaker—her bodily movement, facial expressions, dress, and vocal tone—because, for Goffman, meaning emerges from the complex ways these bodily and emotional aspects interact with verbal (or gestural) language. At the same time, people engaged in talk co-produce meaning as a function of the dialogic encounter. Non-canonical, anti-authoritative speaking-listening-seeing requires multisensory, multimodal attention.

This project has been a practice of listening to dances as a non-canonical form of talk. It is an effort to avoid treating “the performance as a thing in itself, for itself,” “the audience as the mirror of a semiosis of performance, a receiver,” “the audience as contained by the performative agency onstage.”⁸ Approaching dance as a form of talk means taking an isolated piece of choreography in the context of a single performance iteration as an *utterance*. How the artist speaks about her work and other things; how journalists write about the work; what was happening on the street outside the theater, in other words, the entire “production format”⁹ of a dance is taken into account.

Deborah Jowitt writes, “Critical writing, along with the responses (public and private) to what is written, lobby conversations, interviews, dancers’ tales, and so on cling to a dance performance, making it resonate in the memory, prolonging its life.”¹⁰ Yes, everything said, written, and danced about a dance clings to it like a barnacle. Also like a barnacle, this verbal and choreographed surround clings to a dance for the rest of its life. But I think what dance critics, Jowitt and myself included, don’t realize is that most barnacle species are not parasites; they do not harm their host animals. Our beloved dances

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 140-141.

⁸ Randy Martin, “Dance Ethnography and the Limits of Representation,” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies in Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 336.

⁹ Goffman, *Forms of Talk*.

¹⁰ Deborah Jowitt, *The Dance in Mind: Profiles and Reviews 1976-83* (Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1985), ix. Jowitt saw her role as critic (at least in the early to mid 1980s) as “contributing to the ‘hum’ surrounding a work” (ix). I like the aural metaphor here, the hum comprised of shared murmurs about dances.

and dance standards are not at risk of annihilation when writers take into account all that clings to them.

On the contrary, dance writing benefits from thinking about dance performance as an “interaction ritual.”¹¹ My thinking is indebted to linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein’s update of Goffman’s notion.” In “The Voice of Jacob,” Silverstein asks,

If not merely two simultaneously experienced indexical signs—here, voice quality and skin texture—were to emanate from a source, but a whole barrage of them, how might one make sense, might one discern some coherence in what they seemed to be pointing to? ... Wherein lies congruence or mutual reinforcement of particulars in the barrage of such indexicalities?¹²

The dance theater works I study present a whole barrage of indexical signs—dance, oral speech, signed speech, music, song, and dress performed in different social and cultural registers. Add to those, the conversations, interviews, and tales that cling to them, and it at first appears that Silverstein’s questions are, in a sense, the wrong questions for us. The effort to discern some coherence, congruence, or mutual reinforcements within these works, is to impose a reality effect through an authority effect. In other words, these dance theater works index, above all, the reality of identity’s multiplicity through processes of multimodal, multisensory, cross-disciplinary subjectification. The works themselves resist efforts to assert a self’s coincidence with itself by performing becoming.

Still, even though Silverstein’s job as a “student of interaction and of communication,” is to understand how we manage to successfully read “identities-in-culture,” he points out that we have to participate to know; that “the creation and maintenance and transformation of identities is ‘interaction ritual,’” or, as Thomas DeFrantz would say, “talking back with the body.”¹³ This dissertation represents my effort to treat the fluctuating relationships between scholars, artists, and works on the one hand, and those between sensory, generic, and disciplinary elements within the works on the other, as together, forming an interaction ritual. This perspective led me to extend the notion of interaction ritual to the modes of communication within each dance as well. So, both inside and outside the “work,” talk happens.

Talking Identity

The rationale for selecting the case studies for this project was three-fold. Firstly, all of the artists are “dance theater” artists who use talk and dance in their works. Second, all

¹¹ Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*, (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

¹² Michael Silverstein, “The Voice of Jacob: Entextualization, Contextualization, and Identity.

¹³ Thomas DeFrantz, “The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power,” in *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*, ed. André Lepecki (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 79.

have been working since the 1970s and continue to work today. Finally, all have been associated with “identity politics” performance.

What I mean by “identity politics” performance or “identity politics” dance theater is a practice of deconstructing identity, a deconstruction that “is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated.”¹⁴ Through diverse talking and dancing articulations, Jones, Goode, and the women of Wallflower deconstruct identity as a “normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience.”¹⁵ By repetitively restating and restaging the very labels and descriptors that constitute the “regulatory practices” of identity formation, they expose the performativity of identity while simultaneously, deftly, providing communities organized in the name of a given identity something with which to identify.

Because the talking dances I discuss were created and performed in the immediate aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, during years that saw the rise of second wave feminism, the advent of multiculturalism, and the boom of identity politics, I thought this dissertation was going to be about how dancers performed identity. I thought it was going to be about how the use of verbal language rescued dance from its inscrutability and, thereby, saved dancers from violent spectatorial objectification and fetishization. I thought it was going to be about how these dances challenged the very notion of stable identity, performing subjectification¹⁶ and flux, destabilizing the center, exhibiting disidentificatory processes. These are all right and true, but it turns out that this dissertation is also about paying attention to how we see and hear dance, exactly what multimodal work demands of us.

Dance scholars writing in the era of identity politics historicized the dance theater works discussed in this project as examples and exemplars of politically driven, identity-based art. Their works became sites for feminist, critical race theory, and political economy

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 189.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁶ I understand performing subjectification to mean re-enactments of “scenes of subjection” (Hartman 1997) or instances of interpellation (Althusser 1970) that turn subjection into forms of agency. Wallflower stages the command to be normatively feminine in order to replace it with performances of warrior womanhood; Goode signals the specter of punishment for performing a dangerous effeminacy; and Jones re-cites angry blackness to contest the critical establishment’s historicization of his work. All deploy repetitive acts of failure to comply with normative identity constructions, as well as repetitive citations of commands to comply (“If I Were I,” “He’s a Good Guy,” “I am supposed to be dead”) in order to demonstrate how agency is a function of such failure. “In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; ‘agency,’ then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 185). Further, the performances of Wallflower, Goode, and Jones bracket the “I” as a mode of “thinking through of the constitutive ambivalence of being socially constituted, where ‘constitution’ carries both the enabling and violating sense of ‘subjection’” (Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 123). This aesthetic and politics of simultaneous embracing and ambivalence is the hallmark of performing subjectification.

analyses.¹⁷ Research on the intersection of identity politics and dance practice abound as dance studies as a field comes into its own in the 1990s. Feminist dance scholars such as Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Ann Cooper Albright, Ann Daly, and Sally Banes focused on how racialized and gendered identities were created and performed on stage by dancing bodies. The staging of autobiography seemed a personal-as-political strategy, even as these “autobiographies” were actually performances of fracture, fragmented and refracted through play with vocal tone and aggressively danced bodily interventions.¹⁸

With the benefit of considerable temporal distance, I can see how all of these works fit the criteria for identity politics performance, but also how they go beyond it. I move beyond a reading of their works through identity politics, not to de-politicize them, but to allow the artists’ extraordinarily divergent aesthetics to show (and tell) different stories and offer different theorizations of the relationship between talk and dance.

Because Krissy Keefer (former Wallflower dancer and current artistic director of San Francisco-based Dance Brigade), Joe Goode, and Bill T. Jones are alive and working as dance theater artists today, I could talk to them and listen to their most recent ways of talking about themselves.¹⁹ Listening to them recount their personal dance histories, it

¹⁷ See Cooper Albright 1997; Banes 1998; Daly 2002; Dils and Cooper Albright 2001; Martin 1998). For example, Cooper Albright addresses the relationship between talking, dancing, and presence in dance theater works by David Dorfman and Blondell Cummings, highlighting the effects of connection with and talking back to audiences, forging community. In Cooper Albright’s account, dancing is always double, both a form of speech and the body of the speaker. The dancer’s presence is unstable but unmistakable. On Jones see Cooper Albright 1997, Martin 1998, Shea Murphy 1995. On Goode see Gere 2001, 2004, Burt 2001. On Wallflower Order see Deborah Jowitt’s 1981 *The Village Voice* review of Wallflower Order, “Abandoning the Ivory Tower,” *The Dance in Mind*, 278-281.

¹⁸ Cooper Albright recognizes these tensions when she writes about American autobiographical choreographies of the 1980s as “performance, rather than as merely a recitation of experience or a confession of a life’s juicier details” (120). Nevertheless, her faith in the dancing body’s ability to resist historical reference, the pressure of the written or spoken word to define it, hinges on a notion of the live body’s unequivocal visibility. Crucially, Cooper Albright sees the dancing body, and bodies in general, as “speaking” for itself. She writes that “in the very act of performing, the dancing body splits itself to enact its own representation and yet simultaneously heals its own fissure in that enactment” (125). There are two bodies here: the one that speaks on its own (without words) and the body of the voice that speaks (with words). And those two bodies are also one body: the body as a mode of autobiography and in excess of it. Cooper Albright is cautious: “Often...we slip into a mindset that assumes bodily experience is the ‘raw’ material of art and literature, like the clay a sculptor shapes. But experience is recognizable only through consciousness, be it physical or intellectual consciousness” (127-8). However, though Cooper Albright is careful (and correct) to say that the dancing body is double, one of those bodies becomes a sort of independent body-mind (one that speaks for itself) and the other a vehicle of mind (the vocal production of language).

¹⁹ I tried and failed to contact Jones. Fortunately, I had ample opportunity to witness his talk in multiple interviews, lectures, lecture-demonstrations, Ted Talks, and “Bill Chats.”

quickly became clear that these “identity politics” choreographers felt a *real* sense of being condemned to silence by their artistic forebears. Doubled by a broader sexist, homophobic, and racist social silencing practice—a context in which the subaltern could dance, perhaps, but never speak—these dance artists talked to each other and to their audiences. For them, to read their dancing in the absence of their verbal speech was not to listen and not to question the stereotypes of their visible bodies. Throughout this project, I include the artists’ accounts of dance history as vital historical information, rather than subject them to correctives based on canonical or, even, revisionist narratives.²⁰

Franko’s genealogical approach to dance history confirms that dancers have spoken and fallen silent at different points in history for different reasons.²¹ And this happens with an eye toward both the social order and dance’s aesthetic order. In the case of the social

²⁰ Writing against modern dance master narratives, scholars such as Mark Franko and Susan Manning have revised canonical modern dance history to “propose methodologies for opening the canon to theories of spectatorship” (Mark Franko, *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), ix), and “to historicize spectatorship as a series of sociohistorical encounters between performers and viewers” (Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xviii). Franko insists that theoretical accounts of dance require an accurate historical perspective (Franko *Dance as Text*, 14). My hope is that I have maintained an accurate historical perspective throughout this dissertation while, at the same time, taking into account that “all identities are not equivalent, and racial identities, in particular, support political narratives that hold material consequences for their inhabitants” (DeFrantz, “Donald Byrd: Re/Making ‘Beauty,’” in *Dance Discourses: Keywords in dance research*, eds. Susanne Franco and Marina Nordera (London: Routledge, 2007), 223). I am not sure the two goals are mutually exclusive, but there is a way in which genealogical approaches to dance history seem to relegate the artist’s perspective to an amusing but dismissible point of view. Critical writing as intersubjective listening takes the artist’s account of history, inaccurate as it may be argued to be, as an integral part of the creative process, as disforming what counts as accurate history. The choreographer-dancer’s account of history becomes not merely a part of dance history but of dance’s historicization.

²¹ In *Dance as Text*, Franko argues persuasively that Western concert dance *fell* silent at a certain point in history; text, narrative, and voices were present at its origins in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to Franko, seventeenth-century mute dance practice demonstrated a political and ideological challenge to the social order. In the mid-twentieth-century, dance modernism’s mutism, otherwise known as “pure dance,” demonstrated aesthetic challenges to narrative dance expressions. (Franko discusses the politics of 1930s dance modernism in *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics*). Both instances shared the belief that dance could express more, or at least differently than verbal language. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Susan Foster writes that “contact improvisation eschewed any form of dialogue during performances, claiming that speech signaled the presence of a ‘mind’ inattentive to the body’s constantly changing movement” (Susan Foster, “Walking and Other Choreographic Tactics: Danced Inventions of Theatricality and Performativity,” in *SubStance* 1, no. 2/3, issue 98/99 (2002): 136).

order, Wallflower, Goode, and Jones talked while dancing as a way to contest normative commands to perform identity in particular ways. And their audiences heard them.²² Within the small world of concert dance and its aesthetic order, these artists challenged what they perceived as dance modernism's and postmodernism's aesthetic demands of anonymity.²³ The two orders come together in their works. In other words, Wallflower, Goode, and Jones critique normative (at the time) concert dance practice in analogical relation with broader oppressive social forces. Lesbian, feminist dancer; gay male dancer; black gay male dancer—by performing physical, citational acts of meta-commentary on the practice of dancing, they refract their social identities through the identity category “dancer,” refusing anonymity in the process.

So, it turns out, these dance theater works do more than expose the multivocal (having multiple meanings), polyvocal (having multiple voices), coherent, if not stable nature of identity. What we learn is that talk doesn't merely supplement dance in its expression nor does it take over where dance leaves off or cannot seem to go. My case studies serve as catalysts for new ways of thinking about the interaction between talk and dance. They teach us how to “see” in multimodal ways. Or, they teach us to recognize how we see and to see differently. Because of their multimodality, they offer us multiple lenses from which to experience the work.

“Big arm movements are a poor language”²⁴

²² One critic sums up what appears to be a typical reaction to a Wallflower performance: “They generate such an ensemble energy in working to make each other look good that they all look superb...They are dedicated to the airiest ideals of modern dance, yet elicit an audience response comparable to a popular rock group!” (Eugene Magazine, press brochure). On audience identification with Goode, see Gere 2001; with Jones, see “Bill T. Jones: A Life Well Danced,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfvUYqJjQbs>.

²³ Modernism and postmodernism are deeply contested terms in dance history and theory. The battle over their definitions that erupted between Sally Banes and Susan Manning is just the most public and cited example (Banes 1987; Manning 1989; Banes and Manning 1989). In her review of Banes' *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, Manning rejects Banes' application of the term “post-modernism” to the dance experiments of the Judson Dance Theater. She writes, “*Judson Dance Theater* occupied one of the last out-posts of modernism, for it focused on the reflexive rationalization of movement and upheld the distinction between modern and ballet” (page), and claims that postmodern dance actually began in the early 1980s. Andre Lepecki corroborates Manning's view, but insists that the postmodern moment in American dance history was “brief, sketchy, and soon dead” (Lepecki 1999). For Wallflower, Goode, and Jones, there was no place for the expression or exploration of personal identity within dance modernism because they felt it to be a space of wordless dancing in homogenizing unitards.

²⁴ “If music doesn't express the feelings of the players, what else is there to express them? Big arm movements are a poor language.” Quoted from an 1836 issue of *Le Siècle*, in Marian Smith, *Ballet and Opera in the Age of Giselle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3. Like Franko's *Dance as Text*, Smith's book traces a genealogy of concert dance's relationship to speech from the perspective of a musicologist and historian.

For different reasons and at different times in their careers, Wallflower, Goode, and Jones felt that dance (big arm movements) was indeed a poor language. Their doubt around dance's ability to convey clear political ideas (Wallflower), a positive image of gay subjectivity (Goode), and reveal the particularity of an individual's history (Jones) did not entail an outright dismissal of dance's power to communicate. On the contrary, they recognized the affective power of dancing bodies and the concomitant risk of consumption without consent. Concert dance's extreme visibility—the darkened theater, the proscenium arch, the code of audience silence—coupled with mainstream racist, homophobic, and sexist habits of looking, forced the dancing body to speak with a forked tongue, a far cry from Martha Graham's movement that never lies. So, these artists used words, disappointing those audiences who craved the passive consumption of beautiful bodies in motion. The works, if not the artists themselves, recognize that the problem is in seeing. The (white, heterosexual, male) gaze resists listening to body talk, the dancers' as well as his own. By turning the faceless space of the proscenium theater into a space of aurality, a dialogic space, a space of talk, they point a finger at normative audience behavior and say, "Are you listening?"

Gesture²⁵

Pointing fingers. They are a reminder of the bodily gestures that interact with aural talk throughout this project. Deictic, space-time gestures are choreographed into each dance and speech act that I consider. In Wallflower's *Defiance*, the women "argue every point to puncturing" with the American Sign Language gesture that points with one hand to the fingers of the other. Goode points to and away from himself in deictic gestures coated in and coded with effeminacy in *29 Effeminate Gestures*. And Jones repeatedly directs his index finger toward his temple, his heart, his belly, and his audience, to move discursively through thought, grief, intuition, and confrontation. Linguist Eve Sweetser defines those gestures that enter the interlocutor's personal space, "discourse interactional gestures," interpersonal gestures with "a pervasive deictic character."²⁶ These pointing or indexical gestures, which locate a conversation in a specific spatiotemporal moment, combine with "representational content gestures" to "reach into the interlocutor's space...clearly marking a shared focus."²⁷

Attention to gesture helps shift our imagination away from thinking that dance is inscrutable, positioning speech-like bodily movement as a form of agency-in-movement. Gesture is a "pure performative,"²⁸ a doing that is a saying that is a doing. There is a

²⁵ I am indebted to the work of several gesture studies scholars, including Kendon 2001, 2004; McNeill 1996; Sweetser 2009. Other influential works from outside the field of gesture studies include, Agamben 1999; Ness and Noland 2008; Noland 2010; Rodriguez 2014; Smart 2005; Young 2011.

²⁶ Eve Sweetser, "What Does It Mean to Compare Language and Gesture? Modalities and Contrasts," in *Crosslinguistic approaches to the psychology of language: Studies in the tradition of Dan Isaac Slobin*, eds. Jiansheng Guo et al. (New York: Psychology Press, 2009), 364.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Adam Kendon, "Andrea de Jorio and His Work on Gesture," in *Gesture in Naples and*

flexibility to gesture, “a concept with fuzzy boundaries.”²⁹ Gesture has been widely accepted as having a double aspect: a physical act (a doing) and a meaningful act (saying). What is difficult to discern is what distinguishes a physical act that says something from one that says, ostensibly, nothing. There seems to be a category of physical acts that say nothing, though no one can decide what those could be. Even “pure” formal experiments are performed in cultural registers and thus always say something about the performer. This is the relationship of gesture to voice or voicing.

This brings me to how the terms voice, speech, talk, and language function in this project. When I started this project, I wanted to know what roles talk, dance, and gesture play when they are performed together in the service of identity politics on the dance theater stage. I wanted to know, How do aurality, vocality, and linguistic signs specifically adjust, confront, displace, and support dancing as a language, and how, in turn, does dancing undercut or amplify the notion of an integrated identity? Can the movements in dance be considered a language? Do dances speak? Do dances have a voice? Do dancers have a voice if and when they don’t speak?

I fell down the rabbit hole with these questions, terrified of defining terms metaphorically when I wanted to be thinking materially, worried that making fast and loose analogies between dance and speech would undermine one or both. These questions took my dance and performance studies training on an odyssey through gesture theory, language-in-use theory, linguistic anthropology, Deaf studies, and musical theater history. On the other side of the tunnel, I have arrived at some core principles: my research puts to rest the question of whether or not *Western concert dance* is a language (it’s not); it puts to rest the question of whether or not it can speak (it can); it puts to rest the question of whether or not it has voice (it does). Voice does not require language—think of a baby’s cry or a kitten’s purr. Neither does voice depend on aurality, orality, or a notion of the phoneme. All speech has voice that is an “articulated combination”³⁰ of anatomy and iterative cultural practice. Put differently, what renders a speaker a subject, whether oral or visual (or tactile for that matter), is a notion or sense of voice. So, there can be no speech without voice. Dance could be a form of gestural, visual-kinesthetic speech. Dance has voice and can communicate affect, that physio-emotional response that incites us to say, “That moved me.”

And yet, to call dance a form of speech risks doing violence to gestural languages whose official recognition as bona fide languages was hard won, to say the least. Hence, in this project, I do not consider dance a language. Rather, in this project, dance is a form of articulation, an exploration of joints and an act of joining. It can be fluent or disjointed, an

Gesture in Classical Antiquity: A translation of La mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire napoletano (Gestural Expression of the Ancients in the Light of Neapolitan Gesturing) (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), xcvi.

²⁹ Ibid, xix, n.1.

³⁰ Caitlin Marshall uses Stuart Hall’s concept of “articulate combination” (Hall 1980) to define voice as a complex structure composed of “body (human or otherwise, abled or otherwise) + iterative cultural practice (what you could call repertoire) + power (the force that compels the act of voicing and that drives repertoire)” (personal email communication). See Marshall’s “Crippled Speech,” forthcoming in *Postmodern Culture*.

expression of the coherence but not stability of identity. Its voice lies in the joint, the space between, the action of articulation. In order to reach across, jointed articulations are required. To assert an empowered female identity and move audiences to action (Wallflower), to expose the performativity of gender and become a “gender hero” (Goode), to combat objectification and take hold of history (Jones), the artists reach across through articulate acts of talking and dancing.

Chapter Breakdown

In Chapter one, I focus on Wallflower Order Dance Collective’s signature work, *Defiance* (1976). The dance features strong dancing, spoken word, and American Sign Language (Ameslan or ASL). Because ASL is a bona fide language that belongs to the American Deaf community, it occupies an uncomfortable position alongside other movement forms Wallflower used to expand movement vocabularies and drive home a generalized and generalizing second wave feminist message. This chapter explores the aesthetic effects and the political stakes of Wallflower’s use of ASL as an aesthetic resource for their dance theater production in the context of the collective’s complex relationship to dance and speech. It asks, How does the presence of ASL partially solve and complicate what the Wallflower dancers perceived as the “problem” of dance’s seeming incapacity to communicate a political agenda? How does ASL both support and contest the idea that dance speaks? When dance, oral speech, and sign language are co-present in a work of performance, what sort of relationships between talk, voice, speech, language, and dance emerge?

Chapter two revisits another signature work, Joe Goode’s *29 Effeminate Gestures* (1987). Historicized as *the* quintessential identity politics performance piece of Goode’s career, *29* makes its point—about how heteronormative ideology disciplines gay bodies into gestural regimes that fail to fully take hold— in the absence of first-person, direct address. Rather, *29* addresses the peril of such failure by mobilizing what has become a central critical choreographic, if under-analyzed, strategy of Goode’s—his mining of the heteronormative scripts of the mid-twentieth century Hollywood film musical. Throughout his oeuvre, Goode’s largely white, middle class, concert dance-loving audiences watch again those musical romantic comedies with their happy endings, overblown characterizations, and all that singing and dancing, but through the eyes of a man both heir to and marginalized by this quintessential American art form.

My interest in the content, form, and trajectory of Bill T. Jones’ speech comes from my position as a white, female, former dance critic, seeking to imagine how journalistic dance criticism can include the choreographer’s voice beyond the pre-performance interview or feature story without “also assum[ing] a (white) critical ‘we’ unable to understand aesthetic motivations of ‘their’ ‘black art.’”³¹ The final chapter turns to Jones’

³¹ Thomas DeFrantz, “African American Dance: A Complex History,” in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 6. Ramòn Rivera-Servera notes, “One of the things that we must contend with is the way critics were attending to the postmodern scene in New York, especially in 1980s work, in ways that presumed whiteness...” (Ramòn Rivera-

speech as radical interventions into “the interested act of dance criticism.”³² Following Fred Moten’s formulation of the “poet-critic,” I try to listen to Jones as a choreographer-critic, who operates in a “dual mode,” moving in the necessity of a breakdown of the oppositions between poet and critic, experimentalist and theorist, from within the complexity of the Afro-diasporic cultural field.³³ I discuss how Jones *disforms* the conventionally unidirectional choreographer-critic relationship as an act of social life from a position of social death.

A Dancing Dance Critic Moves Forward

Talk operates as a metaphor for dialogic communication, the presumption of an Other with whom one is trying to communicate. It is also an actual (and actuating) practice in which choreographers and dancers engage. In both senses, talk invites the other to “see what I mean,” or, following Merleau-Ponty, to see my green. Merleau-Ponty’s remarks illustrate a synesthetic practice that quietly introduces talk as the path to imminent experience:

It is said that the colors, the tactile reliefs given to the other, are for me an absolute mystery, forever inaccessible. This is not completely true; for me to have not an idea, an image, nor a representation, but as it were the imminent experience of them, it suffices that I look at a landscape, that *I speak of it with someone* [my emphasis]. Then, through the concordant operation of his body and my own, what I see passes into him, this individual green of the meadow under my eyes invades his vision without quitting my own, I recognize in my green his green, as the customs officer recognizes suddenly the traveler the man whose description he had been given. There is here no problem of the *alter ego* because it is not *I* who sees, not *he* who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general, in virtue of that primordial property that belongs to the flesh, being here and now, of radiating everywhere and forever, being an individual, of being also a dimension and a universal.³⁴

Servera, “Dancing the Latino Postmodern: A conversation with Meriàn Soto, Viveca Vazquez, and Arthur Aviles, moderated and edited by Ramón H. Rivera-Servera,” in *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies: Latin@ Dance*, eds. by Ramón H. Rivera-Servera and Cindy Garcia (Society of Dance History Scholars, 2014), 18-20.

³² Ann Daly, *Critical Gestures: Writings on Dance and Culture* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), xxix.

³³ Fred Moten and Charles Rowell, “‘Words Don’t Go There’: An Interview with Fred Moten,” *Callaloo* 27. No. 4 (Fall 2004): 956.

³⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 142. There is a significant literature that engages dance through phenomenology, including the writings of Merleau-Ponty, but it holds a marginalized position in dance studies. See Sheets-Johnstone 2011, Fraleigh 1996, Kozel 2007. For an excellent discussion of the place of phenomenology in dance studies—one that, nevertheless, excludes dance phenomenologists—see Ness 2011.

In this passage, talk is as embodied as dancing and operates as a vehicle for a chiasmic transfer of sense. Within this soft, green, meadow, however, is also a very real potential for violence. The image of the customs officer suddenly recognizing a traveler conjures a scopic regime marked by invisible surveillance. This is not the heartbreakingly stunning, invisible chiasmic flesh of Merleau-Ponty's thought. It's a curious image, tucked inside a hopeful, perhaps romantic unfolding. It is the so-called shadow side that happens in broad daylight. Someone describes the traveler to the customs officer, who is there to make sure what does not belong stays out. Someone is given a description and a whole complex of recognition pulls the finger on the trigger before anyone has a chance to speak. "I get you" becomes "Gotcha!" even when the traveler is unarmed.

I am not sure writers need to recognize in their green the green of the choreographer. And I am not sure that writers and choreographers are talking about the same landscape when they politely or belligerently discuss a work. But I am sure that talk can be a practice of "experiencing with" that can filter feed a dance's written barnacle. Talk can be full of idea, image, and representation and still bring us together in imminent experience. This means talking and seeing at the same time, talking and dancing at the same time—being an individual, being a dimension.

Recently, I came up with a metaphor to describe how I watch dances now. When I am struggling to connect with a performance, I pretend I am at the ophthalmologist. I press my face against the imaginary phoropter and then, each time I find myself unable to see, I switch a lens, and ask, "Is it better now? [Lens switch]. Or now? [Lens switch]. Now? [Lens switch]. Or now?" It is impossible to see through more than one lens at a time; the challenge is to become very aware of the switch, to remember what you saw before, and to think about how it relates to what follows. But even then, when we switch lenses multiple times, it becomes difficult to see which lens was actually clearer. We get confused. It is inside that confusion that talking and listening has to begin. And inside that listening talk, we begin to hear writing.

If I were to write dance criticism again, I would try to heed Bill T. Jones' call for critics to "own up to your eyes, which are not universal eyes, but particular eyes."³⁵ How to listen and watch dance in a way that leads to writing that does not seek to capture the dance or translate it into words or turn it into a metaphor for something else? How to listen and watch with an awareness of the real danger of violence against women, LGBT, and black people? The dance theater case studies I discuss have taught me how to become conscious of my habits of vision and hearing. They have taught me to see bodies that aren't "there" and hear speech in the absence of words. They have given me new tools for how to write.

I thank the artists, and their works, for these writing lessons.

³⁵ Dent, Jones, and Thompson, 60.

Chapter 1

Signed, Sealed, Delivered: Wallflower Order's *Defiance*

Defiance

If I were I
I would not say those pleasant things that I say;
I would not smile and nod my head
When you say
No!
I would not bear, restrain, repress my disagreement,
But argue every point to the puncturing -
Then smile,
If I were I.

If I were I
I would not stand chained to cooperation;
Give my hand humbly to your lead
In your way -
No!
I would unlink the ring that binds my neck and gags me
And let my great hate vomit in your face -
Then laugh!

If I were I.³⁶

—Dorothy Miles

Introduction

In 1975, five women in Eugene, Oregon founded the Wallflower Order Dance Collective.³⁷ In addition to works rooted in a “new women-identified culture infused with a lesbian sensibility,”³⁸ the group created and performed dances in defense of “political

³⁶ This is the poem as it is published in Dorothy Miles, *Gestures: poetry by Dorothy Miles* (Northridge, CA: Joyce Motion Picture Company, 1976).

³⁷ The founding members of Wallflower Order were Krissy Keefer, Laurel Near,* Lyn Neeley, Linda Rose, and Alex Dunnette. For more on Wallflower's history, see Keith Hennessey's “Freedom and Community: From The Wallflower Order to the Dance Brigade,” *In Dance*, November 1, 2011. *Three Near sisters appear in this chapter: Laurel, Timothy, and Holly.

³⁸ Krissy Keefer, personal communication, February 6, 2013.

prisoners, endangered species, and gay rights.”³⁹ Krissy Keefer, founding member of Wallflower and current artistic director of San Francisco-based Dance Brigade, explains that, in order to get across a very specific political agenda, Wallflower had to talk while dancing. For Keefer, dance alone was an “inefficient” medium for producing a unified message of female solidarity. Talking, in particular storytelling and the oral presentation of written poetry, joined forces with strong dancing and urgent song to form Wallflower’s performative strategy for presenting a universalizing and unifying discourse. This discourse grew out of a second wave feminist and multiculturalist ethos that depended on assumptions and projections about the shared experience of all women regardless of class, race, sexuality, or (dis)ability.

At the same time that Keefer professed doubt about dance’s ability to communicate a clear political message, she and her colleagues at Wallflower also expressed faith in “the power of movement” to “change people’s lives on a real gut level.”⁴⁰ Nina Fichter speaks of Wallflower’s ability to spur audiences to action: “To come see five women dancing strong, motivated, active, it inspires people to do things.”⁴¹ Describing her and the other dancers’ fear of speaking in front of the camera, Laurel Near surmised, “Maybe that’s why we all became dancers partially. We do a lot better with feelings and expressing through movement than the mouth.”⁴² The group called themselves a “dance collective” because dance—specifically classical ballet and modern dance—was their shared medium of expression. Because the collective’s members self-identify as dancers with a feminist agenda, their works always address, explicitly or implicitly, conventional assumptions about dance’s relationship to the category of “woman,” often in contradictory ways. On the one hand, Wallflower Order does battle with the negative association of women with dance as a silent, bodily art form by shouting their truth to power. On the other hand, they claim a certain power and agency for the dancing female body above, beyond, and outside speech. In other words, Wallflower Order exposes the “both/and” tension that lies within feminist identity politics between the discursive and experiential as well as between the aesthetic and political.

In order to complicate naturalized associations between “woman,” dance, and silence or mutism, Wallflower did not merely add oral speech to dance. Along with spoken word and song, Wallflower’s aesthetic strategy for producing “utopian performatives”⁴³ also

³⁹ Keefer, text from Dance Brigade’s 35th anniversary performance at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. Wallflower Order toured from 1975 to 1983 throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. They toured California against the Briggs initiative (California Proposition 6), a 1978 ballot measure to ban gays and lesbians from teaching in the California public schools.

⁴⁰ Krissy Keefer, *Wallflower Order Dance Theatre Collective*, directed by Marion Barling (Vancouver BC: Women In Focus, 1982), DVD.

⁴¹ Nina Fichter, *ibid.*

⁴² Laurel Near, *ibid.*

⁴³ Jill Dolan, “Feeling Women’s Culture: Women’s Music, Lesbian Feminism, and the Impact of Emotional Memory,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 215. Following performance theorist Sue-Ellen Case, Dolan explains that to say, “I am a lesbian feminist,” is not an essentialist move, but rather a performative one: “Identity

involved combining multiple physical and gestural vocabularies from disparate non-dance traditions, including gymnastics, kung fu, and American Sign Language (Ameslan or ASL). Unlike the movement forms drawn from sport, martial arts, and concert dance, however, ASL is not typically a movement resource for hearing dance groups.⁴⁴ Because ASL is a bona fide language⁴⁵ that belongs to the American Deaf community, it occupies an uncomfortable position alongside these other movement forms when used to expand movement vocabularies and drive home a generalized and generalizing political message. This chapter explores the aesthetic effects and the political stakes of Wallflower's use of ASL as an aesthetic resource for their dance theater production in the context of the collective's complex relationship to dance and oral-verbal speech. It recounts the history of how and why ASL was introduced to the collective, and asks, How does the presence of ASL complicate the "problem" of dance's seeming incapacity to communicate a political agenda? Does ASL bolster the perception that dance speaks? In what ways does it interfere with that perception?

To answer these questions I focus on Wallflower's signature work, *Defiance* (1976).⁴⁶ The work takes its name and spoken content from the poem "Defiance" written

might be a practice rather than an ontology, and community might be symbolic, rather than functional, but those myths of coherence and belonging productively fueled the political movement with focus, hope, and camaraderie" (209).

⁴⁴ One notable exception is New York dance theater artist Jane Comfort. Comfort, a contemporary of Wallflower Order, included sign language in her work *Sign Story* (1979). Comfort also claims to have invented her own sign language for her dance *Eatless Textures* (1981). Smith, Amanda. "Sassy, Intelligent, Provocative, and Funny: Postmodern choreographer Jane Comfort, whose works are as cheeky as they are probing, appears at Jacob's Pillow this month," *Dance Magazine*, July 1999. Accessed on Comfort's website, <http://janecomfortandcompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/JaneComfortPressKit2013.pdf>.

⁴⁵ ASL is a visual, kinetic, and kinesthetic language made up of gestures that are linguistic signs.

⁴⁶ Miles' poem is the only ASL poem Wallflower used in their work. Texts that are signed in other dances are translations of English texts into ASL. Such dances, of both Wallflower Order and Dance Brigade, include *The Garden of Non Duality* (2000), *War of the Flea* (1981), choreographed by Lyn Neeley, *A Melody of Love Songs Show Some Emotion* (1981), created by Timothy Near, the Sugar Plum in *The Revolutionary Nutcracker Sweetie* (1987), choreographed by Krissy Keefer, and *Gorgons* by Nina Fichter, *Pandora's Box*. In Dance Brigade's production of *Cave Women* (2000), Debby Kajiyama signed Yoko Ono's 1973 speech to the First International Feminist Conference at Harvard University. It is interesting to note that Ono's speech tells the story of when she began to stutter in her thirties: "...this is one thing I want to say, sisters, because, with the wish that you know, you're not alone... because the whole society started to attack me and the whole society wished me dead, I started accumulating a tremendous amount of guilt complex and in result of that I started to stutter... And that's when I realised how hard it is for woman, if I can start to stutter, being a strong woman and having lived thirty years by then, learn to stutter in three years of being treated as such, it is a very hard road."

by Deaf British poet Dorothy Miles (1931-1993), and this chapter is, in part, an effort to rewrite Miles as a Deaf cultural producer into Wallflower's history. Miles has been all but erased from Wallflower's history, subsumed under general categories of equal rights and liberation for all oppressed peoples.⁴⁷ By extension, ASL becomes just another movement resource among others, providing dance-like material easily extractable from its communicative context and copied as choreography. Addressing the dance in relation to Miles' performance of her poem raises a number of questions about the history of cultural appropriation in American modern dance, the limits of poetic license in relation to access, and the historicization of "signature" works. But what interests me in this chapter is how ASL poetry and performance help us navigate disagreements over what constitutes language and speech in relation to metaphorical and material conceptions of voice. If ASL is a linguistic and gestural speech modality that has voice in the absence of vocalization, can dance, a non-linguistic form of communication, also have voice? Is language required to produce voice? Or voice dependent on sonority? If dance is non-linguistic and conventionally silent, what is the voice of dance?

DEFIANCE, THE DANCE⁴⁸

Laurel Near choreographed *Defiance*⁴⁹ as part a larger work called *Window Pain*,⁵⁰ a dance about "pent up" teenage girls, "...not feeling good about yourself, trying to be something other than who you are, not liking your body, what you say..."⁵¹ *Window Pain* takes place at a school dance. In early 1960s dresses, Keefer and Near arrive at the dance, painfully self-conscious about their appearance and unsure about how to behave. Keefer calls, "Hey Laurie, where's the party?" Near responds, "I'm not ready." Keefer calls, "Come on! We're gonna be late!" Gray, Neeley, and Fichter follow performing broad stereotypes:

⁴⁷ In all recent press materials from Dance Brigade, which still performs *Defiance*, there is no mention of Miles. During Dance Brigade's 35th anniversary concert at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco in 2011, Keefer said that Timothy Near introduced sign language to Wallflower and "into a broader women's culture," but did attribute the poem to Miles. *Defiance*'s roots in Deaf culture were partially acknowledged in a 1984 piece in *The Daily Californian*, and then quickly covered over. Shannon Hickey writes, "Originally written by a deaf woman frustrated by her 'non-integration' in society...*Defiance* also communicates women's feelings of frustration and powerlessness when dealing with men in any context." Shannon Hickey, "Wallflower Order uses dance, song, sign language and kung fu," *The Daily Californian*. January 27, 1984, 14-15.

⁴⁸ My analysis of *Defiance* is based on Marion Barling's documentary video *Wallflower Order Dance Theatre Collective*, courtesy of Dance Brigade archives, 3316 24th Street, San Francisco. The dancers performing are Krissy Keefer, Laurel Near, Lyn Neeley, Nina Fichter, and Pamela Gray.

⁴⁹ Keefer explains that Wallflower members took turns conceiving of and choreographing dances within the collective structure.

⁵⁰ The film credits the dance as *Windowpanes*. Keefer confirms that the dance was called *Window Pain*. Krissy Keefer, personal communication, February 6, 2013.

⁵¹ Laurel Near, *Wallflower Order Dance Theatre Collective*.

Gray is the cool girl in her leather jacket, Neeley the nerd with big glasses, and Fichter the pretty, confident girl. Fats Domino’s “Something’s Wrong” accompanies their fidgety, self-conscious movements, like smoothing their hair and dresses; their sporadic popular dance moves (the pogo, the swim); and their self-/other-appraisals. At one point, Keefer and Neeley begin couple dancing together and Fichter shouts, “What are you doing? What are you queer or something?” Near adds, “Don’t dance together. You’ll hurt the boys’ feelings,” to which Gray retorts, “Don’t worry about it: you’re all queer anyway.” We hear, “What’s a queer? What’s a queer?” in what sounds like Keefer’s voice, Keefer shrugging her shoulders and looking anxiously around.

Defiance begins with Near center stage, slowly taking off her shoes. She steps slightly downstage while the other four dancers face upstage, removing their shoes and socks, and letting down their hair. Near, still in her shy, uncomfortable character, tucks her hair behind her ears, and steps out into a wide second position, her legs rotated externally at the hip socket. In silence, she signs the “if” sign, a sign “based on the old weight system.”⁵² At first gently and then more sharply, she signs and speaks Miles’ poem. Her knees bend to shift her body from side to side, as her hands seem to ricochet off one another laterally, her head and gaze following her hand movements. Her voice remains sweet. When she turns the sign for “No” towards herself—thumb meeting index and middle fingers with a snapping action, like a mouth slamming shut—her body shocks back from the force of the gesture.

As Near nears the end of the poem, the other dancers form a phalanx behind her. They begin tapping their right feet, repeatedly pulling them off center into a slight lunge in such a way that their skirts tic-tock like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. They tap and rock silently and then Near joins in their rhythm. The full quintet repeats “If I were I” three times, doubling the phrase in a 4/4 time signature.⁵³ At the end of the third measure, they erupt into a brief locomotor pattern: step-cross-hop-lunge. Their feet move in counterpoint to the signing gestures.

Soon after the women form a united front, they begin to dance in canon. Simultaneously, each dancer repeats a different line from the poem with its concomitant gesture. They break their line formation and stagger their spacing. As their speech becomes louder and louder, to the point where it is difficult to make out the words, the quintet suddenly regroups, setting up for the final gesture, the core gesture of the dance, which is also a gesture of the core. With their heads bowed down, chins to the chest, the dancers walk their hands up their midlines from pubis to throat. As they spider walk their fingers, they make clicking sounds, and the effect is like a roller coaster approaching its precipice. When they arrive at the top of the gesture, they slap their hands together and shoot their

⁵² Timothy Near, e-mail communication with the author, March 4, 2014: “Each hand is in an “f” shape and they move up and down as if to balance the ‘what if’ of the situation, the ‘either or’ idea.”

⁵³ It might be metricalized like this:
If	I	^ were I	If I were I	^^
If	I	^ were I	If I were I	^^
If	I	^ were I	If I were I	^^

right arms into the up-space diagonal. The dance ends with the dancers in this position, like superheroes going up, up, and away.

The context and set-up of *Window Pain* reveals the vulnerability that precedes the dancers' coming to empowerment as a collective. We see the movement from a representation of women repressed and divided among themselves to a performance of solidarity and power. We witness their transformation into empowered womanhood from "mute" girlhood—a defiant performance, a performance of defiance. *Window Pain's* classic opening manoeuvre, stripping off one's "costume" to reveal a true self, reveals not five individual true selves, but one collective true "woman." By removing markers of difference, they suggest they are all the same in a strategically essentialist move that builds coalition through shared affect. Structurally, the piece moves from a solo dancer/speaker to a group dance/speech. The tone becomes increasingly aggressive, confrontational, and loud.⁵⁴ The point of view of an individual female extends to a shared group perspective. As such, the personal embodiment of feminist ideology becomes the political body of feminism. The quartet literally "backs" Near, folding her "I" into a "We."

DEFIANCE, THE POEM

Most of us wear a mask to hide our strongest feelings, so that the real "I" is often hidden behind a false "I." At the time I wrote "Defiance," I had been holding back a lot of anger for a long time—and I was angry with myself, too, for not being honest. I tried to express both ideas in the poem, which was written for sign language presentation.
—Dorothy Miles⁵⁵

In a film of Miles performing *Defiance*, the poet stands in a red turtleneck facing the camera. Miles begins the poem speaking and signing, "If I were I."⁵⁶ The first "I" is expressed as the letter "i" (pinky held up) shrouded by the other hand. The finger-spelled letter "i" is covered over by "a 'portmanteau' gesture, placing the sign for 'I' directly on the handshape for HYPOCRITE."⁵⁷ With a backwards roll of the wrist, Miles reveals the second "I," the "real I," and pulls it towards her chest. Miles' posture conforms to the spirit of the phrase, her solar plexus pulling back with the fake "I," her spine straightening

⁵⁴ CODA performer Sherry Hicks said that when the dancers' speech gets loud and noisy, the signing does not: "There's a way to get loud in ASL, a way to modulate." Personal communication.

⁵⁵ Dorothy Miles, *Gestures*, 47.

⁵⁶ I thank native signers Shira Grabelsky, Sherry Hicks, and Antoine Hunter, and ASL interpreter Debby Kajiyama for translating Miles' ASL. All are professional performers. This chapter would not have been possible without their generous input. For a discussion of how Miles worked with English, ASL, and BSL, see Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Inside Deaf Culture*. Padden and Humphries explain that when Miles speaks English and signs simultaneously, she is foregrounding the differences in the languages, something non-signers often miss.

⁵⁷ Mark Lasswell, "Where Silence is Golden." *The Wall Street Journal*, January 27, 2005. Accessed on October 10, 2014, wsj.com.

with the true “I.” The surface “I” that hides a true self curls away from its own expression. When the true “I” emerges it does so with force and with a stern facial expression. When Miles signs “I would not smile and nod my head...” or “I would not bear, restrain, repress my disagreement,” her signing tone is at once syrupy (mollifying, submissive) and tense, as she smiles and nods her head. Her posture and sign tone shift when she says, “No!” Her stare becomes firm. When she recites, “But argue every point to the puncturing –Then smile,” she punctuates the phrase with a sharp nod, a “So there!” gesture of the head.

All of Miles’ signs appear in a restricted kinesphere directly in front of chest or slightly off to the side of her shoulder.⁵⁸ The frame cuts her off at the hips, so her lower body is not visible, but she does not appear to be moving her feet. Miles’ creative ASL poetics involve taking two signs and drawing them into each other. For example, she links the signs “chained” and “cooperation,” turning cooperation’s positive value into negatively valenced submission. She plays with the position of her head, tilting it in qualitatively different ways to signify coyness in one instant, strength in the next. When she signs, “pleasant,” wiggling her fingers in front of the lower part of the face, her face wears an unpleasant expression, as if she has a bad taste in her mouth.

Miles mostly directs her gaze toward the camera, but occasionally looks off on the diagonal towards which she positions her torso. The general sense is that the “You” in the poem may include the viewer, implicating us in chaining and gagging her. For the “great hate” sign, Miles’ hands facing each other, fly up sharply towards the audience, the “vomit” snapping her head back. After she says, “Then laugh!” she laughs, her shuddering scapula sending her shoulder up to her ears. There are pauses in her performance when Miles appears to be thinking or feeling something. She furrows her brow. She crumples slowly into sad face. To finish, with a coy smile, she slowly begins to cover the fake “i” but doesn’t finish the gesture. “Defiance” ends with the fake “i” and the real “I” both present.

DEAF POLITICS, DANCE POLITICS

I decided on doing the poem “Defiance” which, it sounds like ‘If I Were I’ but the name of it is ‘Defiance,’ and it was written by a Deaf poet named Dorothy Miles from England. And I read her poem and just felt like it said a whole lot to my own emotional self...Every night it’s sort of like a catharsis to be able to go through that poem because it just expresses, you know, not being able to express yourself. And especially women, I think, repress and try to be nice and smile it all off instead of saying what they really think and being able to speak. Like right before these interviews, we all just got, a lot of us got terrified of having to speak about what we felt, what our lives are like. And that feels like a

⁵⁸ See Rachel Sutton-Spence with Paddy Ladd and Gillian Rudd, *Analysing Sign Language Poetry* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). According to Sutton-Spence, “Recently, people have begun to appreciate that sign languages across the world, as well as being uniquely expressive, are also uniquely physically constrained...In a very deep sense, their visual logic seems incapable of being adequately expressed except within certain parameters” (Sutton Spence 230). In other words, to be “adequately expressed,” sign language cannot leave a certain restricted kinesphere or play too liberally with hand shape. To do so is to move into poetry...or dance.

real woman thing to, um, for a whole lot of women, not to be able to express themselves through words. Maybe that's why we all became dancers partially. We do a lot better with feelings and expressing through movement than the mouth.
—Laurel Near⁵⁹

Laurel Near knew that a Deaf poet wrote “Defiance,”⁶⁰ but the poem spoke to her as a woman and as a dancer. She takes hold of the fake “I” in Miles’ poem and transmutes it from a subject position within Deaf culture to articulate a hearing female dancer’s double call to silence. For many reasons, this is fair use. A multilingual (ASL, BSL, and English) and multimodal (gestural and oral) poem,⁶¹ “Defiance” supports Wallflower’s

⁵⁹ Laurel Near, *Wallflower Order Dance Theatre Collective*.

⁶⁰ Timothy Near taught her sister, Laurel Near, Miles’ poem “Defiance.” She also served as theatrical advisor to Wallflower, and directed their show *Pieces of Lies*. Timothy Near was an actress working in Los Angeles in the 1970s. Around 1973, she was invited to do a workshop with the National Theater of the Deaf (NTD), where she met Dorothy Miles. Timothy spent two years with NTD as a voice actor (voicing for the Deaf actors), but she also performed in sign. In 1976, Timothy joined her sister, renowned lesbian feminist folk singer and political activist Holly Near, on the Women on Wheels tour, signing her songs in concert. Timothy recounts, “I showed my sister Holly her song, “You’ve Got Me Flying” (she wrote it for me). I said, ‘You want to see your song?’ She loved it. She asked me to perform with her in her concerts. We used this as an opportunity to raise awareness in hearing people about the Deaf” (personal email communication). Keefer corroborates: “At some point, Timothy signed the song “You’ve Got Me Flying” while Holly sang it....After that all the concerts had to be signed” (Timothy Near, e-mail message to the author, February 26, 2014).

According to her website, Holly Near began working with sign language interpreter Susan Freundlich in 1976. This was also the year Holly came out publicly as a lesbian at the first Michigan Womyn’s Festival, and the year feminist, activist, singer-songwriters Meg Christian, Cris Williamson, and Margie Adams toured California, performing in front of enormous, sometimes women-only crowds. The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival introduced sign language interpretation as a permanent feature in 1980. Performance scholar Jill Dolan also connects Holly Near, the women’s movement, and sign language awareness: “Women’s music was pedagogical in the 1970s...Before I heard [Holly] Near sing, I didn’t know about the freedom struggles in El Salvador or South Africa. Before I saw Susan Freundlich signing her concerts for the hearing-impaired, I hadn’t thought about what it would mean to be differently abled in American culture” (Dolan 217). And JoAnne Myers does so without directly referencing the Nears: “Lesbian performers were the earliest to recognize disabled lesbians among their audiences. Sign language interpreters have shared the stage with performers since the early 1970s” (Myers 103).

⁶¹ As an oral Deaf poet (Miles lost her hearing at age eight, after contracting spinal meningitis), Miles spoke and signed her poetry, which she wrote in English, ASL, and British Sign Language (BSL).⁶¹ She also translated her English poems into ASL and BSL. In the introduction to her collection of poetry, *Gestures*, Miles explains that English is her mother tongue, that her “poems are written from the words and music that still sing in my

translation of its specific Deaf cultural context into a second wave feminist ethos; there will be no more silent smiling in agreement but rather an explosion of inner truth. Miles' reference to gagging suggests that this inner truth is a *voice* caught in its throat (neck). Because neither Near nor any of the other members of Wallflower are deaf, and all were brought up in the silencing spaces of ballet studios and coming into their own through the feminist rhetoric of "raising one's voice," it is easy to see how Near would interpret this to be a vocal form of speaking up and speaking out.

Several of the liberties Wallflower takes with Miles' text are productive, especially in relationship to their dancing. The position and dynamic of Wallflower's "I"s—ricocheting off to the sides of their bodies and landing at a distance from the conventional "I" space in front of and close to the chest—suggests a remove from the ambivalent self of the poem. Catching the swell of feminism's second wave, *Defiance's* multiple "I"s re-sound into the "We," striking back against a generalized, oppressive "You." Further, their directional play with the sign for "No," externalizes the "you" of the poem, placing the oppressor in a confrontational position vis-à-vis the poet. So, when the dancers back away from the "No" gesture, they exhibit the force of the command. But by directing the "No" sign away from their audiences and towards themselves, they remove Miles' implication that we, the audience, are complicit in the command. We, the poem's hearing audience, are the ones saying "No" to Miles as a representative of Deaf people. In Miles' hands, "If I were I" juxtaposes a meek, supplicant self with a defiant one. In fact, the gesture remains an objectified "I"—the finger-spelled letter "i"; it does not become "me."⁶² Wallflower's audience does not occupy the position of the oppressor "You" of the poem, but rather exists as a potential ally in the fight for equality. Wallflower's subjunctive "I" is a distant memory, firmly supplanted by an empowered female subjectivity.

Another example is how Wallflower signs, "smile." The normative sign for smile is small and performed right below the mouth. The index fingers are swiped underneath the lower lip and turned slightly upward. Wallflower exaggerates the gesture to the point where it looks like a slicing off of the head. The gesture, as re-enacted by Wallflower, connects the smile to the notion of gagging in the poem by positioning the sign closer to the neck. In this way, the smile becomes a form of gagging in the dance's representational scheme. Lost is the movement from neck to chest to gut as Miles signs and speaks "bear, restrain, repress." Gone is the acceleration of the signs for "hate" and "vomit." Nevertheless, as

mind" (*Gestures*). She tells us that to understand her intention behind each poem, the poem must not only be read, but also seen. Miles emphasizes the distinction between writing her poems in English and then interpreting or translating them into Sign, versus crafting a poem originally in Sign. To write in ASL, for Miles, is about moving from creating ASL poetry with English structures to an independent ASL poetry, a movement from writing with an auditory center to writing in the visual-kinesthetic register.

⁶² Antoine Hunter points out, "The 'I' gesture is more of an object, the 'I' as object instead of 'me.'" Personal communication, February 2, 2014. To signify "I" in ASL, there is no need for the finger-spelled "I." One merely points to oneself.

poetry, “Defiance” invites interpretation, including a shifting of the size and position of the sign, and a play with directionality and beats.⁶³

Beats. A, perhaps the most significant liberty Wallflower takes with Miles’ poem is their rhythmic alignment of sign and word. This does not happen during the opening solo. It is when the soloist is folded back into the group and subject to their martial 4/4 time structure that Miles and her poem are also folded in, rhythmically “beat” into solidarity and uniformity. Further, the cacophonous canon, when the dancers split off and simultaneously perform individual sections of the poem/dance, makes the signing *and* the speaking less understandable. With both signed and spoken speech becoming visual and auditory noise, dancing *as rhythmic feet* steps in to clarify the message and keep it in line.

Defiance’s power comes from this rhythmic repetition. English and ASL, aural and visual, are drawn into unison, binding the dance, the dancers, and their message together. *Defiance’s* multiplicity of languages (English and ASL), genres (ballet and kung fu),⁶⁴ sensory channels (auditory, kinesthetic, visual), and modes of communication (linguistic and dance) make up a barrage of indexical signs⁶⁵ that is contained by a 4/4 time signature. This reduces any dissonance between the various communicative registers deployed in the piece. One might think of *Defiance* as a triple-channeled, but singularly voiced dance theater text, one that strategically galvanizes disparate communicative

⁶³ Hunter explains, “The smile gesture wouldn’t be performed at the mouth if it was the spirit smiling for example. Then it would be performed at the chest.” Personal communication, February 2, 2014.

⁶⁴ The rifle- (and bayonet-, and dagger-)toting, pointe-shoe-sporting soldier-ballerinas of the Chinese model ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* (1964) served as the choreographic and political model for Wallflower. In *The Red Detachment*, erect torsos are not so much framed by *port de bras* as energetically supported by the full extension of the arms into space. The dancers, in their Maoist khakis, move at top speed and cradle pistols to their cheeks, the way Giselle might embrace Loys’ neckerchief. The Wallflower dancers, who began to study kung fu together in Eugene, recognized a kinship between these two seemingly polar movement traditions—“grounded” martial arts and “ethereal” ballet—and brought them together to produce a visual and kinesthetic image of female dancer empowerment.

We see the influence of both kung fu and ballet in *Defiance*, where the dancing happens primarily from the waist down in a series of low positions. These lower body utterances—the deep bends in the knees, with torsos balanced erect above—foreground the pelvis as motor. When the dancers quickly rotate one leg inward, drawing into parallel, the stance suddenly becomes offensive and on the attack. The propulsion in and out of these low positions is not only a performance of power but also a kinesthetic metaphor for movement as political protest. In other words, the choreography and performance of *Defiance* both represents and performs social and political movement.

Choreographer Nina Haft, who moved to the Bay Area in 1984 to study with Wallflower, explains the self-defense, domestic violence activism history of the kung fu community in Eugene and the Bay Area. Several kung fu schools opened, providing a space where the woman’s role of “talking it over” was replaced with fighting back (personal communication).

⁶⁵ Silverstein, “The Voice of Jacob.”

materials in order to move the “I” of the poem to a “We,” and centripetally indexes the message: we’re in this together, you and us.

Unison dancing in *Defiance* produces empowered womanhood and an image/affect of solidarity on the spot. Keefer recalls, “five women dancing together was our statement, like we were trying to find harmony in the world of chaos.”⁶⁶ And audiences felt the power of their unison, not as a sort of “mass ornament” that turns “individual girls [into] indissoluble girl clusters,”⁶⁷ but as a collective attunement that nevertheless supports individuality and female empowerment.⁶⁸ As *Defiance* walks a straight and narrow path toward its object⁶⁹—hammering the dance’s heteroglossia into one clear message with centripetal force—its multimodal construction nevertheless confirms that sign language, oral language, and dance have individual albeit co-dependent voices. Talk, dance and sign are three “concrete utterances” that say “the same thing, while mutually reinforcing each other’s power to speak with strong voices. This planar, register, and modal diversity complicates Keefer’s assertion that dance needs language to convey precise information.

But at what cost? The presence of dancing in non-hierarchical alignment with both ASL and oral speech risks turning the signing into a form of dancing, destroying or invisibilizing ASL’s grammar in the process. The dancing in *Defiance*—in particular, its martial rhythmic structure—coordinates sound and image in a way that renders less significant ASL’s linguistic nature. As a piece of dance theater created by a collective whose “primary art form is dance,”⁷⁰ ASL is subsumed under the dual banner of Dance and Theater, losing its status as a language attached to a particular culture.

Raising one’s voice as a mode and symbol of empowerment is a move meant to combat the objectification of women’s bodies by the male gaze. In a deaf context, however, to turn to a raised voice is to capitulate to “the authority of the ear.”⁷¹ The complexity of the situation exemplifies a larger sensory politics of identity; in this case, we see the consequences of a well-intentioned attempt to join a feminist politics to a politics of

⁶⁶ Keefer, personal communication.

⁶⁷ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin. (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 76.

⁶⁸ “They generate such an ensemble energy in working to make each other look good that they all look superb... They are dedicated to the airiest ideals of modern dance, yet elicit an audience response comparable to a popular rock group!” (Eugene Magazine, press brochure); “When the dancers move in unison, it’s clear and confident because they’re attuned to each other’s timing, to each other as friends, not because they all match the stereotype of what dancers are supposed to look like” (Portland Scribe, press brochure).

⁶⁹ “The linguistic significance of a given utterance is understood against the background of language, while its actual meaning is understood against the background of other concrete utterances on the same thing...that background that, as we see, complicates the path of any word toward its object” (Bakhtin, *Discourse in the Novel*, 281).

⁷⁰ Wallflower Order Dance Theatre Collective flyer, Cambridge, MA.

⁷¹ Michael Davidson, “Hearing Things: The Scandal of Speech in Deaf Performance,” in *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature*, eds. H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson, and Heidi M. Rose (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 221.

disability. For Laurel, speaking for Wallflower, being a woman meant being obliged to keep quiet, and being a dancer means being happy to remain so. For her, Miles' poem seemed to provide an outlet for personal expression as a woman who has internalized her oppression as the inability to speak. Nevertheless, Wallflower learned Miles' poem from a hearing person with a normative voice and with normative sensory assumptions of what qualifies as empowerment and voice. Without Miles' voice, it is not surprising that Wallflower missed the specificity of Deaf experience and culture that lies at the core of the poem. However, by exploiting the ASL as a form of dance, the dancers neutralized this complexity into a message of generalized female disempowerment. The Deaf poet became a figure for the social muteness of women and, in so doing, reified normative assumptions of deaf "muteness" as powerless.

The contexts of second wave feminism and Western concert dance history dovetail at the spoken-speech-equals-empowerment nodal point. But the movement among the Deaf to assert their right to and the rightfulness of signing—the anti-oralist, pro-manualist discourse of Deaf nationalist culture—understands the call to speak as a disempowering imperative. It seems, then, that these two historically contemporary identity politics movements share the stage in *Defiance* with conflicting or opposing modes of (self)-representation that Wallflower Order coordinates toward a single message of solidarity. In this context, the signing in the dance appears to function as a metaphor for voice at the same moment in which the Deaf were making it known that signing, though it can certainly produce metaphors, *is* the voice of the Deaf. In Deaf culture of this period, to speak orally is to suppress your "natural" voice, which is your gestural voice. *Defiance* is partly about an emergent capacity to speak, to raise one's voice: if I were I, I would replace my submissive gestures (nodding, smiling) with speech. From the point of view of a generalized identity politics, it is not important whether that voice is oral or gestural. But from an anti-oralist position within the Deaf community, this difference matters.

On violence to ASL: Sign Language is not Dance

Once, after a concert, a hearing dyke came up to me. She said, 'Thank you for sign dancing! I don't know sign, but it's so pretty - it's dancing!' Sign dancing???? She meant well. But like many hearing queers, she had funny ideas about signed music and interpreters...Hearing audiences love sign dancers. Deaf audiences love skilled interpreters. Look inside yourself. Which audience matters most to you?
—John McBride⁷²

In December 2013, dozens of letters were sent by members of Seattle's Deaf, CODA, and Certified Deaf Interpreter communities, and from organizations such as the

⁷² John McBride, "Thank you for sign dancing—NOT!" The article was originally published in CTN Magazine's Fall 1995/Winter 1996 issue, republished on planet deaf queer with permission. John McBride worked as a sign language interpreter for musical and theatrical events before his untimely death from AIDS.

National Association of the Deaf (NAD) and Facundo Element,⁷³ to Seattle Men's Chorus (SMC) director, Frank Stilwagner, about the SMC's long-time sign language interpreter, Kevin Gallagher.⁷⁴ In letter after letter to Stilwagner, members of the Deaf and ASL interpreter communities describe Gallagher's "signing" as a form of dance, as "sign choreography."⁷⁵ They argue that ASL is used "in choreographic and artistic ways (becoming more gestural instead of a language),"⁷⁶ Tiff Young writes, "The way he signs words were either over exaggerating, (almost like a mime...all hand gestures—no language)

⁷³ From the Facundo Element website: "Facundo Element is an organization that actively works to remove oppression and misrepresentation of D-E-A-F people through the means of mass media and non-violent activism. We stand by the transformative power of sign language."

⁷⁴ According to the Seattle Deaf community, Gallagher, who is not a Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) Certified Deaf Interpreter is an imposter (Mark Hoshi, letter to Stilwagner, 12/22/2013), and SMC is in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The Seattle Deaf community's complaint is two-fold: the Seattle Men's Chorus is claiming but not providing access to their concerts for the Deaf community, and Gallagher is "appropriating the language of a cultural and linguistic minority group for the benefit of hearing audiences" (Facundo Element, letter to Stilwagner, 12/19/13). <http://openlettertosmc.blogspot.com/>.

From this point of view, Wallflower is using Sign as "a language 'foreign' to their usual cultural milieu" (Davidson, "Hearing Things," 219), thus embodying (or appropriating) Deaf culture as a "sign" of alienation, isolation, and oppression. Despite their role in the historical and historic introduction of sign language into the women's movement, ASL in the hands of Wallflower seems to be just one more movement resource, on a par with gymnastics and kung fu, mobilized in the service of a coalition politics that did not often take into account the intersectional nature of personal identity; the Deaf struggle against audism is not part of their agenda even as the Deaf community was acknowledged and welcomed in a radical way for the time. Both Near and Keefer frame ASL's entry into the women's movement as almost accidental, which might explain why the ideological assumptions and effects of using ASL were not always consciously considered.

On the one hand, Timothy is sensitive to the differences between sign language and dance when she says, "dance is gestural but sign is actually saying specific thoughts." On the other hand, she attributes the wildly positive reaction of concert goers to her signing Holly's songs to "a combination of sister magic, sign magic, and a new awareness of a silent culture that wanted attention. And it was beautiful." This focus on the magic, silence, and beauty of ASL aligns it with dance in ways that are both productive and problematic. The presence of ASL in Wallflower's work affirms the capacity of the body to communicate as well as oral speech, while privileging the physical and kinesthetic properties of dancing as an empowered feminist modality of expression. ASL is a gestural language that, as such, has affinities with dancing. But it is also emphatically *not* dancing.

⁷⁵ Rob Roth, letter to Stilwagner, undated but probably 12/20/13.

⁷⁶ Ryan Schlect, letter to Stilwagner, 12/20/13. Schlect is an actor who worked with Deaf theater companies including Deaf West Theatre in Los Angeles.

the best way to describe it is jazzy hands.”⁷⁷ Dance, here, is incomprehensible movement, meant to be enjoyed as spectacular display: we don’t understand Gallagher, Gallagher is dancing. For the Seattle Deaf Community, dance is not a language. After all, there are no certified dance interpreters. The SMC situation is specifically tied to interpretation as translation—of word and spirit—from one language to another.

What the SMC crisis shows us is that the stakes are high when a movement begins to shift from a sign to a dance gesture in the context of language-to-language translation; the line between dance and language is only productively blurry and unstable until it becomes a question of access. Although acting as a sign language interpreter for an aesthetic performance, Gallagher was nevertheless meant to translate English song lyrics into ASL. He did not have license to interpret freely, to perform interpretive dance, if you will. The Seattle Deaf community was in firm agreement over which movements and which moments in Gallagher’s performance shifted from linguistic signs to dance. And the very notion of “sign dancing,” as John McBride explains, is rooted in hearing culture’s audism. This audism lies at the root of Western concert dance practice, a milieu composed almost exclusively of hearing people whose native tongues are oral languages.⁷⁸ It might be that it is the audist perspective that puts pressure on dance to speak. As a community that speaks in a gestural language, the Deaf do not place the burden of meaning-making on all forms of bodily movement in equal measure. Native signers do not expect dance to speak *like language*, but it seems that hearing people often do. And then, when confronted with gestural language that they know is a language but that they do not understand, hearing non-signers often receive sign language as dancing.

Davidson compares Cook’s and Lerner’s performances to, “Chicano/a interlingualists and feminist performance artists for whom performing or materializing the text always implicates the word as a problem, not a conduit, in which cultural identity is hybrid, not unitary.”⁷⁹ Here, to perform a text is to materialize it, both in the sense of making it appear before the eyes and to give it a specific, heteroglossic body. What Wallflower has in common with Davidson’s interlingualists and feminists is the fact that they are hearing non-signers. *Defiance* expresses a tension between gesture and speech, and between seeing and hearing, without either resolving this tension or allowing an easy mapping of one communicative mode onto one perceptual channel. This reframes the question of how dancing is or is not like speech to ask how dancing may negotiate the (phonocentric, audist) tension between gesture and orality. But for the Deaf what is at stake in this performative play is a “‘whole culture’ that lives in a colonial relation to the spoken word,” a situation that begs the question, “Which audience matters most to you?”

Though Wallflower worked to cultivate Deaf audiences for their dance theater performances, they were not claiming to be sign language interpreters. Indeed, ASL is recognizable as a language in *Defiance*, but it isn’t quite understandable.⁸⁰ At a remove from

⁷⁷ Tiff Young, letter to Stilwagner, 12/22/13.

⁷⁸ Bay Area choreographer Antoine Hunter launched the Bay Area Deaf Dance Festival in 2013. The festival features deaf choreographers from around the globe.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Neither Shira Grabelsky nor Antoine Hunter could understand the poem as Wallflower signed it, although they both said that, for the most part, the dancers are true to ASL’s

issues of access, it is still fair to accuse them of “appropriating the language of a cultural and linguistic minority group” to develop their feminist aesthetics and politics. But to leave it there would miss a whole host of performative effects that challenge audist ideology and entrenched discourses of dance modernism. Taken in the context of ASL poetry and performance, *Defiance* (inadvertently) shifts from a linguistic politics of ASL to an exploration of ASL’s performative power.

A Beautiful Thing, Silent Music

What belongs to the language game of ASL is a ‘whole culture’ that lives in a colonial relation to the spoken word.⁸¹

Miles worked as an actor with National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) from 1967-1975 and credits them with transforming her writing practice from one of “little verses” to a full-blown ASL poetry.⁸² But despite NTD’s contribution to Miles’ development of a “new technique’ of combining spoken poetry with sign language,”⁸³ Miles’ had a gripe with the company, one that sheds light on the problem of sign language becoming an aesthetic resource and movement vocabulary for non-Deaf performers:

I disagreed with some of the things they did with signs, for example, I felt that sometimes they made the signs just a demonstration of a beautiful thing, separate from the personal feelings, and I believe that deaf people should be doing both of them together—feelings and signs.⁸⁴

linguistic structures, as well to the spirit if not the “letter” of Miles’ poem. This is in large part because the signs in the poem are largely *not* iconic. Despite being unfamiliar with ASL, the Wallflower dancers were capable of replicating Miles’ gestures well enough for them to be recognizable as linguistic signs. In this way, ASL slips into dance while not entirely leaving the zone of language.

⁸¹ Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 115.

⁸² The National Theatre of the Deaf was founded in 1967, two years after the publication of Stokoe’s dictionary. The first play created in ASL premiered in 1971, but, according to Oliver Sacks, their first play in true Sign appeared in 1973: “...up to that point, their productions had merely been transliterations, in signed English, of English plays” (Sacks 145). Most of the actors in NTD were deaf and most of those grew up with deaf parents. The voice actors and the director were the only hearing members, and the company’s audiences were 85% hearing. According to Miles, NTD placed a premium on being able “to see and hear every word” (*The Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox*, DVD).

⁸³ Miles, *Gestures*, 31. “...as I wrote I was also trying out a new idea, choosing my words carefully so that the signs related to the words would become poetry in motion...I stayed with many of the principles of English-language poetry, but I stopped worrying about meter and rhyme and other ‘rules’” (30).

⁸⁴ *The Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox* directed by Miriam Nathan Lerner and Don Feigel (Rochester, NY: Rochester Institute of Technology, 2009), DVD. There is not space in this

What does it mean for a person to make a sign as a mere “demonstration of a beautiful thing,” disconnected from that person’s feelings? What I think Miles means by “personal feelings” is something like full communication, the complex of meanings expressed in a given utterance. But it also means something specific, non-abstract, and not entirely open to interpretation. For Miles, to sign is to express denotative and affective content from a specific social and cultural reality and positionality. When a sign becomes a “beautiful thing” it becomes objectified, and, by extension, so does the signer.

Although Miles does not explicitly compare NTD’s demonstration of beautiful signs to dance, a startling number of sign language poets, performers, linguists, and theorists use dance as a hinge for understanding the linguistic, aesthetic, and performative qualities of sign languages. These discussions take place within the context of Deaf culture, where the notion of interpretation has very specific political overtones. Issues of access are paramount. As the Seattle Men’s Chorus debacle shows, a set of seemingly neutral philosophical questions about the relationship between talk, dance, and gesture becomes a problem with serious stakes for the Deaf. The entire oralist movement that denied the Deaf access to their gestural language was built on insidious assumptions about humanity’s relationship to spoken language. But it seems that sign language in and as performance can have less fraught, indeed, positive and generative associations with dance.

Pioneering ASL linguist William C. Stokoe’s remarks illustrate the extraordinary tangle dance and ASL find themselves in whenever dance is used to explain something about ASL.

Movement as dance is of course linked with music in Western culture, but at the cost of more and more separation from language. ASL poetry reunites dance and artistic utterance; it shows that there is a nonparadoxical meaning in the term *silent music* and reminds us that rhythm stems from movement, not from sound.⁸⁵

As a linguist, Stokoe does not consider dance or music themselves as languages, as modalities with linguistic characteristics even if they are expressive forms with communicative potential. His comment is meant to decenter sound from any conception of poetry and music, and to underscore poetry’s rhythmic, movement-based core. Sound becomes additive to music as rhythmic movement. Poetry is where words dance rather than sing. Understanding poetry as rhythmic speech allows sign language poetry to be music(al), recognizes the ability and centrality of the body to the production of poetry, and provides a

project to discuss the history of NTD and how their particular mode of performing Deaf culture may have influenced Wallflower’s staging of *Defiance*. It is clear from Miles’ comments about NTD, however, that there are multiple ways to imagine bridging Deaf and hearing culture, that no way will satisfy all interested parties, and that there is something particular to NTD’s aesthetics and politics that seem to sanction an aestheticization of ASL.

⁸⁵ William Stokoe, “Foreword,” in *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature*, eds. H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson, and Heidi M. Rose (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), xiii. Emphasis in the original.

context for bodily gesture to speak poetically as much as, albeit differently from, the oral production of words. Stokoe is trying to break music's conventional/normative equivalence with sound in a way that is more radical than John Cage's 4'33". Cage finds music in the sort of silence that is based on sound (to not make sound is to make silence) and in the ambient noises made audible in the absence of playing music. Both kinds of "silent music" depend on the ability to hear. Stokoe's silent music is also not silent (ASL poets make sounds, their breathing is audible), but operates rather in the visual-kinesthetic register that does not hold aurality at its center. For Stokoe, ASL poetry is visible music utterly independent of sound.

But ASL poetry is not itself dance. The "artistic utterance" in Stokoe's comment is gestural rather than oral/verbal, but it is unequivocally linguistic. The utterance is produced gesturally instead of verbally, and its grammatical structures are not dependent on the grammar of a verbal language.⁸⁶ If, according to Stokoe, rhythmic play and visual choreography make an utterance poetic, then it seems that dance turns everyday gestural speech into poetry. It seems also that dance takes the place of aural music as accompaniment. Dance itself is kinetic, rhythmic, silent music in Stokoe's logic. As such, it acts as a rhythmic accompaniment to speech, like the beating of a drum or the tapping of a foot. And because dance is conventionally understood as bodies in rhythmic motion, the gestures of ASL poetry seem to dance. Finally, because it involves the rhythmic stylization of a gestural language, ASL poetry seems like a dance that also speaks. But it is not dance that speaks in Stokoe's assessment, it is language, although, significantly, the non-linguistic, rhythmic accompaniment is integral to what is being said because it informs how it is being said.

Following Stokoe, H-Dirksen L. Bauman describes the intimate relationship between dance and language in gestural poetry:

Ironically, as ASL poetics crosses into comparisons with dance, it is not drifting away from poetry but actually coming closer to the very origins of the poetic line and its metric feet. As ancient Greek dancers performed to the spoken word, the rhythm of their feet marked what have become known as the metric 'feet' of the poem. Although it does not come across in videotapes, performing ASL poets frequently revive this original notion as they keep the beat of their poem with a tapping foot, reconnecting the poetic line with the movements of the body. But the lines in ASL are not necessarily restricted to the tapping of a literal/metaphorical poetic foot; they gesture through time and space, controlling and dispersing energy

⁸⁶ Signed Exact English (SEE) is a transcription of English words and grammar into sign, perceived as an affront to ASL and other true sign languages. Debby Kajiyama says, "Some feel SEE is not a real language because it is a transcription of a spoken language. SEE is often not conceptually accurate." Here, Kajiyama offers the example of the sign for "sink." There are two signs in ASL, one for the sinking of a ship, for example, and another for the place where you wash the dishes. SEE has only the sign for the sinking ship. In *Defiance*, the dancers sign the word "were" in SEE; the word "were" has no equivalent in ASL.

as a dancer does. Unlike a dancer, however, the gestures and movements of the body produce precise grammatical and visual images.⁸⁷

Bauman's Greece is the apparent site of Stokoe's "reunion" of dance and the artistic utterance. Bauman makes sure to distinguish between dance and sign language, to clarify their similarities and differences; to mark where gesture as language ends and dance begins. It is on the point of grammatical precision that ASL and dance diverge, and a politics of ASL precisely *not* being dance moves into the foreground. Again, when the discussion moves from poetry and expression to communication and access, the beautiful friendship between dance and ASL begins to break down.

To say that ASL dances or dance speaks is to make an interpretive leap that risks turning ASL into a metaphor for dance and dance into a metaphor for language. Both Stokoe's and Bauman's ideas are more nuanced than that. Stokoe is making two claims at once: ASL is bona fide language like English or Swahili, make no mistake, and gestural poetry is as musical as sonorous poetry. Bauman also affirms ASL's grammatical precision, but he goes beyond an understanding of dance as mere rhythmic feet. Bauman's dancer engages in spatiotemporal manipulation, constructing meaning and force. Because ASL poetry is a linguistic performance that also controls and disperses energy, it has the potential to foreground the body in performative ways, invoking ASL's painful history of repression, destabilizing normative relations between voice and sound.

Michael Davidson writes about Deaf performance that disrupts the "conventional opposition of signing and speech" by using both oral speech and Sign, what he calls a "deaf performative."⁸⁸ In his discussion of the Deaf performance duo Flying Words (Peter Cook and Kenny Lerner), Davidson writes that although their collaboration may be taken as a betrayal by "Deaf nationalists," "for the two of them it is a way of extending the gestural potentiality of ASL into what one might call an 'immanent critique' of audist ideology."⁸⁹ In other words, Cook and Lerner challenge audism's phonocentric conflation of full humanity with oral speech.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ H-Dirksen L. Bauman, "Getting out of Line: Toward a Visual and Cinematic Poetics of ASL," in *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature*, eds. H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson, and Heidi M. Rose (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 107.

⁸⁸ Davidson, "Hearing Things," 217. Deaf politics in the 1970s and 1980s exploited the opposition between oral speech and manual sign: "In the wake of the Gallaudet 'Deaf President Now' protests of 1988 and the launching of a powerful political movement for the empowering of Deaf persons, the use of speech-based pedagogies represents the continuing authority of hearing culture" (Davidson, "Hearing Things," 217). In the 1960s, historians, psychologists, parents, and teachers began to critique oralism, and pro-manualism novels, plays, and films emerged.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁹⁰ For analysis of Derrida's reflections on phonocentrism in relation to sign language, see Nelson 2006.

Lib Taylor elaborates the concept of the deaf performative as imminent critique in her article, “See to Hear—Deaf Sign Language as Performance.” She explains that when ASL is used in self-reflexive ways in theatrical performance it may have a disruptive function, what she call’s ASL’s *performative function*. This self-reflexivity⁹¹ is characterized by bringing the body into the foreground, inviting it to be seen. Foregrounding the body is, as Davidson writes, “One dream of modernism... to return the text to its materiality, to make the text speak authentically by removing it from the instrumental purposes to which speech is linked.” But, Davidson continues, “For postmodern d/Deaf performers, this materiality can no longer sustain its purely aesthetic focus.”⁹² For those Deaf performers to which Davidson refers, the purely aesthetic dream of modernism represents a violent praxis when the material text is the Deaf body signing.

In Davidson’s view, modernism’s textual materiality, in its movement away from instrumentality, is a movement away from linguistic communication that carries culture and politics with it, into an apolitical realm of universal meaning and the transcendental beyond. For d/Deaf performers, speech is always material and always political as long as it takes part in hearing culture. In Peter Cook’s mind, this modernist materiality is synonymous with dance. For Cook, though both dance and sign are embodied practices, ASL is not meant to be perceived as “body” but rather as “signs.” These signs are meant to be seen but not at the expense of understanding what they are saying. For Cook, to what extent he uses his “full body, “...depends on the audience, on what you want to show. I balance depending on my audience and my goal. Could I use only my body? Then it would become dance instead of sign.”⁹³ This suggests that when the body moves from the background to the foreground in a performance that incorporates sign language, we have moved away from linguistic communication and grammatical precision towards something artistic and expressive.

For Davidson and Cook, to foreground the body in its visual materiality means to destabilize, disrupt, or distort grammatical meaning. To foreground the body too much would be to spill over into dance and away from sign. What Taylor wants us to understand is that when non-signers witness sign language in everyday speech, they cannot help but foreground the body of the signer because they do not understand the language. Seduced by the expressive, iconic, and spectacular nature of the gestures, non-signers turn sign into dance.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Self-reflexivity is the Greenbergian definition of modernism...

⁹² Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand*, 93.

⁹³ Peter Cook quoted in Liz Wolter, “ASL Literature Comes of Age: Creative ‘Writing’ in the Classroom,” in *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature*, eds. H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson, and Heidi M. Rose (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 153. Wolter explains, “The body is like background support for signs.”

⁹⁴ An auditory analogy might be being a non-speaker of Italian and thus hearing the language as beautiful music.

Sign language's iconicity,⁹⁵ its "pictorial dimension," looks like mime to non-signers. Taylor explains: "The iconicity of DSL makes it appear as if meaning can be yielded to a non-signer easily; we suppose the manual signs to be transparent. After all, iconic signifiers resemble the signified, and therefore it seems any competent reader of visual signs, used to decoding gesture and mime (such as the spectator of theatrical performance), ought to be able to interpret Sign Language."⁹⁶ For non-signers, a simple direction such as, "Turn left at the tree," becomes an interpretive dance or an encounter with Marcel Marceau. To see the signer's body, i.e. to see it as a dancer, a dancing body, when signing in everyday, non-performance contexts, is to misunderstand ASL as performance, or as dance.

Taylor has good reason for wanting to establish a clear distinction between ASL in performance/as performative and ASL in everyday conversation/as communicative, and it would miss the point to put pressure on those divisions. Signers have had to fend off comparisons with mime, "as something rudimentary, primitive, pantomimic, a poor thing."⁹⁷ And yet, Taylor makes it clear that sign language performance is a space of critical play. Taylor compares ASL in its performative function to contemporary dance as a space where "powerful images...emerge and dissolve, fuse and disperse, form and transmute, build and disintegrate."⁹⁸ This kind of dance—dance in the disruptive register—often, though not always, eschews spectacular display.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Katharine Young, "Gestures, Intercorporeity, and the Fate of Phenomenology in Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore*, 124, no. 492 (2011): 57: "Iconics represent concrete acts and objects. Though they have elements of mimesis, iconics are not fully mimetic, and although individuals and groups produce recognizable repertoires, they are not fully conventional either. I might, for example, affiliate the Red Queen's remark, "Off with his head," with an iconic gesture for cutting off a head, in which the edge of my hand represents the blade of an ax and an abrupt downward motion the act of chopping."

⁹⁶ Lib Taylor, "See to Hear—Deaf Sign Language as Performance," *Performance Research* 4, no. 3 (1999): 18.

⁹⁷ Oliver Sacks, *Seeing Voices* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 20. In 1966, "Bernard Bragg coined the term *sign-mime* to reflect the differences between the artistic language used in performance and the everyday language of the Deaf community" (Bauman, Nelson, and Rose, 244). The term is significant. To mime is communicate non-linguistically. It is iconic rather than symbolic. It is usually negatively valenced, "mere mime," and a derogatory term when associated with ASL. Oliver Sacks writes, "Notions that 'the sign language' of the deaf is no more than a sort of pantomime, or pictorial language, were almost universally held even thirty years ago" (Sacks, *Seeing Voices*, 76); "Stokoe was convinced that signs were not pictures, but complex abstract symbols with a complex inner structure..." (Ibid 77).

⁹⁸ Taylor, 19.

⁹⁹ Discourses on the relationship of "disruptive," critical, or contemporary dance to spectacular and virtuosic display are complex and fraught, often running along racialized lines. See Ariel Osterweis' dissertation, "Body Impossible: Dynamics of Race, Sexuality, and Virtuosity in the Dance of Desmond Richardson" (2007) for a discussion of the politics of virtuosity.

Taylor helps us relate to dance and ASL poetry as two forms of performance practice that redefine the very relationship between language and voice. Despite the important political ramifications of performing ASL poetry for hearing audiences, where policing the line between dance and language becomes necessary, both Miles and Wallflower demonstrate how poetry—always a poetry of motion—is never a merely linguistic matter.

Miles performs an immanent critique of audist ideology by challenging the idea that voice is inextricably tied to sound. By speaking in her voice—a triple voicing of English, Deaf vocalization, and ASL—Miles affirms that ASL is neither acoustic nor metaphoric voice, but material voice, and that Deaf voice is acoustic voice with a difference.

(Failing to) Hear(ing) the “Deaf I” in *Defiance*

Miles’ poem engages a central vocal metaphor—that of “saying”—in two ostensibly silent modes of communication: ASL and writing. The speaker/signer of “Defiance” *ungags* herself, freeing her speech from her throat even as she speaks fluently with her hands, arms, shoulders, face, and head. The poem does not say, for example, “I would unleash the cuffs that bind my wrists and paralyze me.” And this may be partly due to the fact that the oppressive “you” in the poem is a hearing person or hearing culture writ large, responsible for turning an “I” in to an “i,” a voice (a subject) into a letter. Miles is performing a struggle between two selves: the “fake” person she presents to the hearing world, silent and submissive, and her “true” self, a subject that speaks and signs in her voice. If we take this second “I” as the “Deaf I”¹⁰⁰ of defiance, the poem’s Deaf subject is gagged not merely metaphorically but literally. Voice, whether auditory, gestural, or visceral, is the condition of possibility for subjecthood.

Thus, “Defiance” the poem disrupts the speech/sign binary with an added critique of audist ideologies of the *sound* of voice.¹⁰¹ Deaf speech has been described, derogatorily,

¹⁰⁰ Thanks to Susan Schweik for hearing the “Deaf I” in “Defiance”: “That poem, my first reading and their first reading, is that it’s about conventional femininity and breaking it open, standing up, fighting back. But defiance is the *Deaf I*, so it can be read as defiance in relation to hearing culture.” Personal communication.

¹⁰¹ Sutton-Spence, perhaps the foremost expert on Miles’s poetry, explains that Miles wished to affirm both linguistic and biological deafness, “to draw attention to an even larger perspective, one which reclaimed those biological givens into a larger and more positive perception” (229). This latter move involved the assertion that “Deaf peoples’ biological reality is uniquely interwoven with a linguistic interface...to exist inside the Deaf-Mute experience is to construct a profoundly different sense of the world. This manifests itself on the visual plane...it then manifests itself in the physical reality of Deaf bodies in respect of sign languages. Not only the hands, but the face, the eyes, eyebrows, cheeks, shoulders, fingers, arms and the upper torso are all activated. Then there are the social roles of touch, vibration and rhythm, all of which coalesce to create communication” (229-230). This sort of attention to the particularities of Deaf sensory experience gets lost in Wallflower’s dance. The special physical effects of Deaf biology, the physical practices it elicits that shape the body in recognizable ways, much like dance practices do, are only

as monotone, guttural, and unintelligible. The oralist movement prohibited Deaf people from using and developing sign language, and forced them to learn to speak, while continuing to marginalize and pathologize Deaf speech.¹⁰² According to Sutton-Spence, one of the most significant differences between Deaf and hearing access to each others' languages is the fact that Deaf people cannot switch to the majority language as their primary language: "This has less to do with the inability to hear than the inability to speak in any way that could even begin to compete with the speed and fluency of visual languages."¹⁰³ Sutton-Spence uses several of Miles' terms (without explicitly citing them) from her poetry—defiance and gagging in particular—to describe Deaf efforts, failures, and refusals to conform to dominant oral languages. When Miles recites her poem verbally, we can hear her vocal difference. In a sense, for Miles to sign *without* speaking would be the ultimate gagging as it would reinforce the notion of the deaf-mute and deny her vocal difference as a constitutive aspect of her subjectivity.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion: Poetry *as* motion. The voice *in* dance.

A simple rotation of the femur in and out at the hip socket, a brief traveling phrase along the diagonal, three steps forward, three steps back: how does Wallflower's movement, that which is (literally) underneath the speaking and gesture space—rocking, stepping, bending—relate to oral and signed speech?

partially admitted into the dance. Of course, as hearing people, the Wallflower dances cannot access this biological reality, and as second wave feminists it was not on their agenda to emphasize difference.

¹⁰² Charlie Swinbourne, "Deaf voices are natural, so why are they still mocked?" November 11, 2012. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/nov/11/deaf-voices-mocked>

¹⁰³ Sutton-Spence, 228.

¹⁰⁴ Taylor claims that Sign Language fascinates because it seems to contain "hidden secrets and concealed messages" (Taylor, "See to Hear—Deaf Sign Language as Performance, 20). She attributes this sense of mystery to Deaf Sign Languages's "presumed silence" (Ibid 20). The inability to speak and the inability to hear are conflated, erroneously forming the hearing-centric concept of the Deaf-Mute. "Far from being a silent language, Sign Language is punctuated and interrupted by unruly and uncontrolled noises and it is these sounds which draw attention to the deaf body as well as disrupting the elegance of the choreographed signing, and attention to its tangibility and visceral nature" (Ibid 21). A central part of Taylor's project is "to propose that the use of Deaf Signs, in however stylized a form, in performance offers potential for disruption" (Ibid 21). For Taylor, those "unruly and uncontrolled noises" in conjunction with "the physical dimension of Sign can be used deliberately as a performative, gestic rhetoric to fragment and disturb the dominance of the verbal" (Ibid 21): "Voiced grunts, moans, murmurs, sighs and whispers escape from the mouth but unshaped into the disciplined voiced sounds which we recognize as verbal sign vehicles in spoken languages" as well as "other bodily sounds..., sounds not directly associated with the production of spoken words but which are the by-product of a sign system produced by physical movement" (Ibid 21).

The dancing in *Defiance*, and in much of Wallflower/Dance Brigade's work, has abundant power and clarity in terms of the political tasks it is mobilized for. Some of the most powerful locomotor movements occur in the absence of oral speech or sign, as a sort of ellipsis or caesura, in a moment of "silence." In these moments, the dance seems to stand alone, given its own space to activate its particular temporality: stretching the "No!" and reverberating its exclamatory power. This terse approach serves the dance's political aspirations, clarifying its message. It accents or emphasizes the point; it functions as a full-body index of person, I, you, and we. The choreographic structures—the movement from individual to group, the splintering of the group into individuals in the service of a community in/as canon, the rocking repetition that invites the audience into rhythmic solidarity with the dancers—all of these simple and direct choices position dancing as an equally efficacious communicative modality alongside both ASL and English. Wallflower's dancing, though non-linguistic, does not exist off the gesture-speech continuum entirely.¹⁰⁵ Any one modality—dance, oral speech, or signed speech—can function as a bridge between the other two.

As Davidson, Cook, and Taylor have shown, Deaf, bilingual (oral and signed speech) performance problematizes the transparency of the word. And as Bauman and Taylor assert, Deaf poet-performers additionally mobilize non-linguistic elements in the process: energy, force, rhythm, affect, tone, the stuff of dance, its "corporeal orature."¹⁰⁶ These elements play an enormous role in mitigating the totalizing effects and unifying force of oral speech within a phonocentric model. Although Miles' expressed concern over the potential for sign language in performance to become a mere "demonstration of a beautiful thing"—a conventional definition of dance¹⁰⁷—she nevertheless engages choreographic strategies in her performance of "Defiance," controlling and dispersing energy as a dancer does.

Meanwhile, Wallflower rebels against a very similar sort of "beautiful thing" when they bring sign and oral speech on stage with dance. For these young women, reacting to a modernist sense of the silent dancing body-as-text, the word is not the problem; it is the (partial) solution. This is not to say that Wallflower put full faith in the ability of the word to convey a unitary identity—bodies and mouths both speak with forked tongue—but rather that the collective gathered the word into dance's embrace so that they could "speak" fully,

¹⁰⁵ For linguists, communicative movements exist on a continuum between the linguistic and the gestural. A sign is always both gestural and linguistic. David McNeill working from Adam Kendon's gesture-speech "continuum": "First, the degree to which speech is an obligatory accompaniment of gesture *decreases* from gesticulation to signs. Second, the degree to which a gesture shows the properties of a language *increases*. Gesticulations are obligatorily accompanied by speech but have properties unlike language. Speech-framed gestures are also obligatorily performed with speech, but relate to speech in a different manner - sequentially rather than concurrently, and in a specific linguistic role. Signs are obligatorily *not* accompanied by speech and have the essential properties of a language" (David McNeill, "Gesture: A Psycholinguistic Approach," 3).

¹⁰⁶ DeFrantz, "The Black Beat Made Visible," 67.

¹⁰⁷ When dance is concerned with beauty—of line, for example—the dancer can become a mere vehicle, her identity obscured, denied, or ignored by choreographers and critics alike.

loudly, and clearly. In spite of second wave feminism's "raise your voice" rhetoric, Wallflower understood that voice is full-bodied and that one can shout with one's *grand jété*. Call it "agitprop"¹⁰⁸ or "preaching to the converted,"¹⁰⁹ Wallflower's *Defiance* unmasks the utilitarianism within dance modernism itself, its valorization of "pure movement," beauty of line, and self-referentiality to shame dancing that resists the dancer's disappearance. In Wallflower's capable bodies, dance becomes a tool of political activism and a conduit of personal expression, while paradoxically (according to modernist ideology) emerging as an autonomous power. In *Defiance*, dance speaks in a voice all its own.

It has not been my intention to criticize Wallflower from a twenty-first-century vantage point, but rather to show how ASL's disruptive power can be both appropriated and defused by a hearing cultural performance. In *Defiance*, ASL destabilizes the perception of oral speech and dance as occupying opposite ends of the communication spectrum, with oral speech occupying the space of precision, efficiency, and clarity, and dance floating nebulously in its own mystery theater. This is not unlike how ASL functions in Miles' poem, where gesture disrupts voice as the function of normative sonority. Although Wallflower's historical and political recontextualization, and aesthetic interpretation, of Miles' "Defiance" interferes with ASL's reception as a minority language, the dance highlights the potential performative power of ASL. In *Defiance*, ASL sharpens the political point of the dance by working in tandem with the other signifying systems, oral speech and dance, "raising" dance to the status of speech with its own particular voicing. The result is a work that does not merely produce an identity politics, but also reflects on and recasts the politics of representation as a politics of communicative register, producing a *poetics of voice* that no longer hinges on normative auditory speech.

The poetics of voice in both *Defiance* and "Defiance," dance and poem, seems to hinge around the image of vomit. There is performative force to the double meaning of the word "gag." One gags another, preventing (oral) speech. One gags at the sight, thought, sound, feel of something vile; choking, retching. The subject of Miles' poem moves quickly, violently, from an object-position, gagged by an externally imposed ring, to a subject capable of vomiting in the face another, likely the one with the gag. And then laugh! Both the vomit and the laughter are aurally, visually, vibrationally LOUD. A communication of visceral force, the voice of Miles' poem comes not only from the throat, at the site of the vocal chords, but from the hands, the shoulders, and from deeper, lower, from the gut. Wallflower's dance communicates tactile force at the site of their click-click-click and slap. Miles and Wallflower cut through orality, sonority, and visuality with a tactile-visceral knife. They demonstrate that voice, the true "I" that is discursively and phenomenologically complex yet somehow always "me," can move around and issue forth from different points in the body. If it can issue forth from the guts, why not from a sharply pointed foot or deftly mobilized knee joint.

¹⁰⁸ Deborah Jowitt, "Abandoning the Ivory Tower," in *The Dance in Mind* (Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1985), 279.

¹⁰⁹ Tim Miller and David Romàn, "Preaching to the Converted," *Theatre Journal* 47, no. 2 (May 1995): 169-188.

Looking back from a post-essentialist vantage point where political expression is allowed more ambiguity and indirection, Keefer's doubt about dance's ability to speak seems unfounded.¹¹⁰ Wallflower danced at the vanguard of the women's movement, steeped in anti-objectifying practices that paradoxically engaged the vocal against the material, and the kinetic against the verbal. The presence of ASL in *Defiance* makes "nonparadoxical meaning" out of this strategy. ASL dematerializes the dancing body through its existence as gestural voice. The dancing body suddenly has the capacity to become voice—in the dual sense of having the sort of tone that affects meaning and of being a metonym of personal identity—with a voice's capacity for precision. If dance is shown to have at least the potential to speak like, but not as a language, the dancer's historical muteness changes meaning, and shifts from a position of submission to one of agency. The dancer's body becomes less objectifiable, less subject to a voyeuristic gaze, when it is shown to be capable of a similar kind of forceful and precise communication as sign. The dancing body as visible voice allows the dancer to be seen without being looked at. The dancer is the body of Goffman's speaker who steps into the foreground and demands to be heard as a subject. She is the hand of David McNeill's gesturer emerging as a textured, energetic, shaped part of the body with a life outside the gesture, a hand that stiffens and aches, writes and washes a baby, shakes or holds another's hand.¹¹¹ ASL's linguistic status thus dematerializes the dancing body by materializing or, to follow Christine Sun Kim, *physicalizing* its capacity as voice.¹¹² ASL in *Defiance* does not show that dance is a language like oral speech; it affirms that dance has its own communicative power, non-linguistic but nevertheless precise.

Chapter 2

The Song-and-Dance Man: Joe Goode, 29 *Effeminate Gestures*, and the Hollywood Musical

Why is it so threatening for a man to use his body in an expressive, extravagant way? I don't understand why that's viewed as maudlin and inappropriate. I don't get it. Dance has been traditionally a very inaccessible art form. You've either had a very faceless brand of

¹¹⁰ Although this chapter has shown that dance in performance speaks in a voice of its own, it is also true that dancers in traditional studio training contexts are obliged to keep silent.

¹¹¹ Gesture researcher David McNeill contends that the hand of the gesturer is not the hand of the gesturer when gesturing: "The hand and its movement are symbolic; they present thought in action. The hand represents something other than itself. The hand is not a hand..." (McNeill, *Hand and Mind*, 1). The gesturing hand is not real; we are not to see it. We are meant to see through it to the point it is trying to make, the information it is trying to convey, the feeling tone it is trying to establish.

¹¹² For a brilliant aesthetic investigation into the physicality of sound and of the ways sound-images happen in the flesh, see the work of Christine Sun Kim. <http://christinesunkim.com/>; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/10/christine-sun-kim-deaf-pe_n_1870489.html.

modern dancing or you've had story ballets about princesses and dolls that come to life. I want to bring story back into modern dance in a way that's contemporary and human.
-Joe Goode, PBS Special 1980s

I was always unsatisfied as a dancer being mute. It never made sense to me. And I wanted to imbue the form with what I saw as a more human, kind of fallible texture.
-Joe Goode, KQED SPARK, July 2003.

Introduction

Joe Goode's *29 Effeminate Gestures* (1987) begins with Goode standing in a spotlight at the house right edge of a theater's orchestra section, around row F. He is wearing a yellow and black baseball cap and dark blue coveralls, a hot pink shirt visible at the collar. His face is frozen in a mask-like smile with an exaggerated overbite, his eyes are crinkled shut, and he holds up his right hand in a thumbs-up gesture. Standing in place, Goode says, "He's a good guy," first in a fairly straightforward manner, and then he repeats the phrase with a different emphasis, stretching the *ooo* in good. From there he continues repeating and extending the phrase in a fantastic assortment of rhythms and cadences that propel him through the audience and onto the stage. With his hands in tight fists, his arms flung out from his sides, he makes guttural noises and steps to the rhythm of his words, occasionally looking directly at the audience members whose knees he tries to avoid as he moves sideways down the row. He repeats the phrase, "He's a good guy" approximately forty times in a wide range of vocal variations—from growling bass to shrieking falsetto—and with caricatured gestures of hyper-masculinity—arms held in a low machine-gun position or as if driving a car, fists playfully punching the air, elbows pumping in and out. Once on stage, still chanting, "He's a good guy," he takes hold of a chain saw, turns it on, raises it to the level of his genitals, and begins screaming over the din, "He's! A! Good! Guy! He's! A! Good! Guy!" He takes the saw to the wooden chair on which he found it, and cuts through its back, continuing to scream, "He's! A! Good! Guy!" Resting the saw on the remains of the chair without turning it off, he abruptly tosses his hat, backs away from the chair with a defiant gaze while rolling down the coveralls and tying the arms around his waist. He removes his sneakers and stands with an open chest, like a gymnast preparing for a vault. Standing on the diagonal, he turns his face to the audience and shouts, "29 effeminate gestures!," his hands spread wide, arms slightly curved at the elbow.¹¹³

With the chainsaw continuing to emit its high-pitched whine atop the mutilated chair, Goode begins the series of 29 gestures. He dusts off under his nipples, rises onto the balls of his feet and lifts his arm in a high wave with gaping mouth, he presents a limp wrist, blows a kiss, cups his hand over his mouth with a look of surprise, performs a swishy walk, pulls an imaginary piece of fuzz from his breast and sprinkles it to the floor, flicks his wrist as if to say, "go away," bites his palm, wiggles his fingers in a "toodle-loo," pats his butt cheeks, points to himself as if to say, "who me?," dries his nails, wipes his forehead, draws a

¹¹³ My description of *29* is based on a recording of the piece when Goode performed it at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in 1997. Courtesy of the Joe Goode archives, Joe Goode Annex, San Francisco.

heart from his nipples to his groin, touches his chin, lunges in parallel attitude with his hand shading his eyes.

Goode's final gesture is harder to describe because it leans away from the linguistic and toward a form of expression more recognizable as dance. Goode's right hand reaches up from behind his head until his fingers drape over his forehead. His left arm wraps across his body, while he sinks into his right hip, bending his left leg at the knee and slightly raising his left heel. In this position, he oscillates slowly, sliding his fingers upward as if pulling a string out of the top of his head. Despite its deeper abstraction, this gesture carries a clear affect of excess, more precisely, of pleasure in excess. And, as we shall see, this pleasure-in-excess (and pleasurable excess) will proliferate over the course of the dance both thematically and phenomenologically.

These gestures—that run the gamut of co-speech gestures that do not form a codified linguistic system and gestures that speak for themselves—proceed against the increasingly grating and agitating sound of the chainsaw while inviting such modifiers as “limp” and “swishy.” Having established himself as a good guy (and the pun is not lost on us), Goode now orients his body in the direction of the saw atop the mutilated chair as if in conversation with that good guy gone bad. No longer good, no longer good at being a man. The repetition of the word good has the effect of accumulating and evacuating (conventional) meaning all at once, to the point where layers of masculinity seem to peel away with the ease of tossing off a hat. Goode's representation of normative masculinity begins to break apart, and his performance of effeminacy moves into the fissures. In other words, the hat is tossed, the coveralls are half-removed, leaving us with an image of the male that holds both the normatively masculine and feminine.

Now, Goode turns off the saw and faces downstage to begin the series of gestures a second time, turning his extraordinarily mobile and elastic face in the audience's direction as he waves that coy “toodle-loo.” This time, he speaks as he gestures:

If you talk too much... If you laugh too much... If you feel too much... If you react too much... If you think too much... If you gesticulate too much... If you are excited by too much... If you enjoy the aesthetic of too much...

Over the course of the work, Goode repeats the gestural sequence three more times to sound effects he produces vocally, to recorded music, and, finally, to a variation of the song “Sunrise, Sunset” from *Fiddler on the Roof*, which he sings. Each time Goode performs the twenty-nine gestures, the words, sound effects, and music become the unspoken consequences of the “too much.” These consequences, which I discuss later in the chapter, are unfixed and unsettled, running the gamut from humorous to ecstatic to despairing. In all cases, the consequences are felt big and drawn broad.

29 is the counter-argument to “less is more,” a maximalist's rebuttal against minimalism. It is considered Goode's signature work, despite being the only solo in his company's repertory.¹¹⁴ It was named an NEA American Masterpiece. The title of the piece suggests that it about gay male identity—only men are called effeminate—as an embodied,

¹¹⁴ 29 premiered one year after Goode formed his company, the Joe Goode Performance Group, in San Francisco.

performed, and performative gestural practice. At first glance, *29* seems like a classic identity politics dance theater work, replete with oral speech and exaggerated expressions of masculinity and femininity that expose the prison-house of gesture as well as the performative possibilities of gesture itself. Over the course of the 12-minute work, Goode strips down his opening hyper-masculine performance and builds up his performance of effeminacy, destabilizing any sense of how body, movement, gender, and sexuality map normatively onto one another. Funny, angry, and melancholic by turns, *29* remains a beloved piece of dance theater that, with every re-performance, continues to raise questions about how dancing interfaces with verbal expressions of personal identity and selfhood on the American concert dance stage.

But *29* is anything but a quintessential identity politics performance piece. Although Goode speaks directly about gay male subjectivity through the work, he does so without “reading his diary on stage.”¹¹⁵ Unlike the more autobiographical works of the period, *29* makes its point about how heteronormative ideology disciplines gay bodies into gestural regimes that fail to fully take hold without direct address and without speaking in the first person.¹¹⁶ Rather, *29* addresses the peril of such failure by mobilizing what will become a central critical choreographic, if under-analyzed, strategy of Goode’s—his mining of the heteronormative scripts of the mid-twentieth century Hollywood film musical. Throughout his oeuvre, Goode’s largely white, middle class, concert dance-loving audiences watch again those musical romantic comedies with their happy endings, overblown characterizations, and all that singing and dancing, but through the eyes of a man both heir to and marginalized by this quintessential American art form. By reading mainstream Hollywood films of the 1950s and 1960s, those “heteronormative artifacts queerly against the grain,”¹¹⁷ Goode brings his gay male subjectivity to the traditionally abstract universalist realm of the modern, concert dance stage.

The concert dance stage into which Goode imports aspects of his gender and sexuality via the American musical is also a space where talk has been largely forbidden. Goode’s drive to perform identity has always been matched by an equally strong imperative to speak on stage. In collusion with his gay spectatorship of the American musical, therefore, Goode stages his dancer-choreographer spectatorship of its generic structures. Because of the ways in which Goode’s gay identity is intertwined with his identity as a dancer who likes to talk, these two modes of spectatorship go hand in hand. What I hope to show in this chapter is that *29* is both signature and seminal in Goode’s oeuvre because it is as much about bringing talk to dance—turning dance into dance theater and a dance company into a performance group—as it is about deconstructive restagings of gay male identity. Put differently, what *29* shows is that there is no staging one without the other due in large part to the already entangled and unstable relationship between the two. And, although

¹¹⁵ Kathy Been Adams, “Artist brings life experience to performance art,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, September 25, 1989: “Like many dance-performance artists Goode uses personal history to tell universal truths. But unlike many of his contemporaries who never get past reading their diaries on stage, Goode provides a wealth of insight.”

¹¹⁶ See Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference*, for an in depth discussion of the autobiographical turn in American dance theater.

¹¹⁷ David Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 426.

Goode's work historically has been received in the context of American concert dance practice, I argue that it is his engagement with the Hollywood musical—the musical's role as the work's central "speech genre"¹¹⁸—that helps us hear how talk, dance, and gesture perform not only identity but disciplinary disintegration in 29.

Generic Investigations

As a child in the 1950s, Goode went to Sandy Vossler's Dance Academy, where he took acrobatics, jazz, ballet, tap, baton, hula, "everything they offered."¹¹⁹ In high school, he performed with a local ballet company. He took his first modern dance class in college, where he majored in theater. Each of these dance training experiences offered something to Goode: the "do or die approach to dance" and "cheesy expressivity"¹²⁰ of Vossler's Luigi-style jazz; ballet's storytelling capacities; and the ways modern dance eschewed the mirror and worked with the body's internal sense of itself moving through space. Early modern dance expressionists such as Graham, Humphrey, Limón, and St. Denis subscribed to an autonomous dance discourse that emphasized the body's potential to express emotional truths, and the body did not need words to do so. Without laying claim to any sort of naturalness or realism, this form of mute dancing, which relied unabashedly on historical and mythological narratives as well as western fantasies of the Orient, nevertheless insisted on its own authentic performance of inner selves. But, when he reflects back on his dance training, Goode claims that none of these genres on its own seemed capable of addressing or expressing the issues that concerned him at the time, in particular, his gay identity.

Goode moved to New York in the 1970s and performed in plays ("off off Broadway"¹²¹) while dancing as a scholarship student for Merce Cunningham and Viola Farber. He worked with Jean Erdman, the New Dance Group, and Twyla Tharp, and regularly attended Cunningham's events at Westbeth, where he first saw Meredith Monk's interdisciplinary performances. Monk, along with Judith Jamison, whose performance of Alvin Ailey's *Cry* he saw while in college, had a strong impact on him for what he perceived as their private and personal performances, their fearless "inhabiting of experience."¹²²

Along with his training in modern dance, its physical techniques and psychologizing discourses, Goode's formative experiences with experimental theater in New York also shaped his aesthetic. In particular, Goode cites his experience with Richard Schechner's *The Performance Group* as profoundly influential. Goode performed in *The Marilyn Project* (1975) at the Performing Garage, a work about the last twenty-four hours of Marilyn Monroe's life. Two casts performed the work simultaneously. Goode played one of Marilyn's make-up men. Goode remembers the work as being "the most transformational thing because there were nights, moments, where I felt like myself, and there were nights

¹¹⁸ M.M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

¹¹⁹ Joe Goode, personal communication.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

where I felt like we spoke in one voice and moved in one action. It was not about being expressive or soulful in the way I was used to. It was much more constrained.”¹²³

Despite his variety of performance experiences as both performer and spectator, Goode continued to identify as a dancer and regarded the mutism of the modern dance stage as a symptom of its resistance to staging personal identity. To be taken seriously as a professional concert dancer in 1970s New York, according to Goode, one had to stifle one’s personal identity and keep one’s mouth shut. Under the influence of Cunningham’s technique and performance aesthetic, Goode felt that personal stories and emotional expression had to be foregone in favor of “becoming a line or a movement in space.”¹²⁴ Though “wildly attracted to” Cunningham’s and Cage’s experimentation with chance procedures, Goode also wanted to know who those dancers so busy making lines in space were: “I wanted to know how they felt about the sky crashing down on them or the lights going black or even about the relationships that we were seeing, the partnerships and the weight-bearing things.”¹²⁵ Broader societal pressures to tamp down one’s particular queer physicality were matched by the New York dance scene’s demand to do the same. This was not only a function of modernist, “pure” dance but also of the minimalist, task dances of the 1960s Judson era. Unlike his avant-garde, formalist or “analytic”¹²⁶ predecessors of the Judson era, who abandoned or reconfigured traditional modern dance technique, Goode challenged the conventions of technical dance performance by insisting that dancing should not inhabit a mysterious realm of wordlessness, a world in which the dancer is unknowable and thereby wholly objectifiable. Many choreographers cite the New York dance scene as an imprisoning place from which they had to flee. Their escape from New York is repeatedly described as an escape from “emptiness,” the inhuman face of modern

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ This postmodernist praxis appears to exist in stark contrast to the “artificial” breaking out into song and dance of the musical.

¹²⁵ Ibid. Unlike John Martin, modern dance’s most steadfast champion and proponent of the notion of “kinesthetic sympathy,” dance critic Edwin Denby shared in Goode’s dissatisfaction with the neutrality bordering on normopathy of “modern dance face”: “...it occurred to me that one of the things that has made me uncomfortable at recitals of modern-dance groups is the way the dancers seem to disappear as human beings and only function as instruments. When you see six of them on the stage, all you can do is count six, you can’t tell six what. They don’t seem to be girls combining with other girls, they don’t seem to have any human relation to one another. They seem artificially depersonalized, and their bodies operated from offstage. I smell a Führer somewhere, and I get uncomfortable. I wish our dance groups would look as if they were free agents. I wish they would look as if they liked being together, at least as much as folk dancers do, or lindy-hoppers” (Edwin Denby, “Modern Dancers and Human Beings,” in *Dance Writings* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 56).

¹²⁶ Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987).

and postmodern dance, and artistic disciplinarity.¹²⁷ Goode leaves New York behind by coming to San Francisco and adding verbal language to his dance works. For Goode, “Language makes [the body] accessible in a certain way but aside from that it’s humanizing. Everyone has a voice and body, and when both are employed, it feels more human. Not some *rarefied hothouse flower* that knows how to do things I can’t do.”

For Goode, the dancing body as a “rarefied hothouse flower”—overly precious, untouchable, unknowable, and artificially grown—offers audiences a sort of visual pleasure that occludes any understanding of how the dancer feels and thinks. The suggestion here is that behind or beneath the dancer’s mask of technique lies a human being that is not being allowed to show her true face or have a voice. As we have seen in the discussion of Wallflower Order in Chapter One, there is a long-standing evolutionary humanist discourse in which speech and language define humanity against animality. Goode’s work takes part in this discourse, emerging as it does from his belief that a certain wholeness—humanity in its glorious multimodality—is conferred on the dancer when she talks.

By the time he moved from New York City to San Francisco in the late 1970s, Goode had cobbled together those elements of traditional modern dance, interdisciplinary performance art, experimental theater, and provincial dancing school jazz to create his first works. Dance theater is usually viewed as a cross between experimental theater, performance art, and concert dance and not within a genealogy of the film/stage musical. On the surface, the cheesy pizzazz of the musical seems to have little in common with the durational surrealism of a work like *The Marilyn Project*, never mind the blank “modern dance face” of Cunningham’s aesthetic. And in many ways, *29* is too non-linear, too abstract to be mistaken for anything made in Hollywood or on Broadway. However, all three genres eschew naturalistic theater in favor of the sorts of temporal play that defamiliarize everyday, “realistic” human behavior. In *29*, Goode borrows the repetitive structures and emphasis on transitional moments or intervals he discovered in modern dance and postmodern theater. He combines them with his technical dance training, while privileging the sort of entertainment one associates more readily with the musical. In other words, the elements of “high art” performance are literally affected by the musical because what Goode borrows, above all else, is the musical’s embodied emotional tone.

By placing a premium on accessibility and on the high drama of a “low” form, Goode’s work draws closer to the musical than to a Kaprow happening or Cunningham event. The Hollywood musical, with its exaggerated, “reality enhanced” style, also serves Goode in his humanizing crusade. As Raymond Knapp explains, it is precisely the heightened style and effect of Hollywood musical camp that offers audiences “access to a heightened emotionality and permission either to feel the moment more deeply or to laugh

¹²⁷ The documentary film *Artists in Exile: a story of modern dance in San Francisco*, features several of these choreographers. For example, Theresa Dickinson, founding member of Tumbleweed, an all-women dance company that debuted in 1973, cites Twyla Tharp as a sort of dehumanizing choreographer. She says, “As I left [New York], I remember saying to Twyla [Tharp], that I really didn’t want to be in a place where it wasn’t okay to be a human being. And she said, ‘I don’t want to be a human being. I want to be a dancer.’” *Artists in Exile: a story of modern dance in San Francisco*, directed by Austin Forbord and Shelley Trott, (Oakland, CA: Rapt Productions, 2000), DVD.

at it and with ourselves and, perhaps, more fully embracing our humanity.”¹²⁸ Goode exploits the “...youth, community, warmth, personal expression and spontaneity; in short, all those ‘folk’ qualities most prized by the Hollywood musical.”¹²⁹ He does so while posing a challenge to its normative, utopian narratives. He privileges the fun tone of the musical comedy over the serious, occasionally maudlin face of abstract modern dance.

Also, talk in the context of the musical is not only a mark of humanity, but of ordinary humanity. Goode’s exploration of domestic scenes and everyday behaviors privileges the ordinary over the rarefied zone of disciplinary (or disciplined) artistic expression. The jeans and t-shirts, tables and beds, slouching and shrugging that populate Goode’s repertory all contribute to the ordinary human quality of Goode’s characters. In 29, Goode’s character is a working class Joe, a janitor or construction worker, who unfurls his blue-collar costume to reveal the effeminate man underneath. As we will see, this relationship between inner truth and outer performance will be utterly destabilized by the work. What is important to note here is that both men talk, and their talking, despite being highly stylized, brings them together in a shared ordinariness. Goode’s talking dancer is not just a human being; he is an ordinary human being. Talking is a strategy to blur the division between the undesirable characterization of the dancer as either inhuman or super human.¹³⁰

Disintegrating Disciplinarity/Disintegration Aesthetics

There is perhaps no other performance genre more suited to bringing both “humanizing” storytelling and expressive, extravagant male dancing back into concert dance than the Hollywood musical. But Goode’s intertextual relationship with the Hollywood musical does not begin and end with its perceived humanizing effects and broad accessibility. As a dancer-choreographer and storyteller-director, Goode depends on the musical form for its clear, crystallized gestures, both physical and vocal; its hyper-real and hyper-heteronormative representations and storylines that underscore gender performativity; and its generic structure that is characterized by perpetual breaking in and out of talk, dance, and song. Knapp explains how the song-and-dance number in the Hollywood film musical has a dual function as promoting “a fuller sense of the world” and as “artificial intrusion.”¹³¹ Knapp coins the acronym MERM, Musically Enhanced Reality Mode, to describe the “audio and visual violations” of the musical number. He describes how musical numbers often begin as a “small extension of natural reality” and then move toward MERM, a hyper-realistic “vehicle for personal identity formation and expression.”¹³² 29 works this paradox and structure: the movement from one section to the

¹²⁸ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 7-8.

¹²⁹ Jane Feuer, “The Theme of Popular vs. Elite Art in the Hollywood Musical,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 12, no. 3 (Winter 1978), 494.

¹³⁰ For Goode, virtuosity of the super-human dancer is not the problem. The problem is the silent virtuosity.

¹³¹ Knapp, 67.

¹³² *Ibid*, 69.

next extends or accumulates the affective information and creates a sense of depth and reality in the viewer. We feel like we're getting to know Goode, getting to know all about him.

Writing in the context of musical theater history, Bradley Rogers explores the intrusive, violating effects of the musical theater actors' breaking into song and dance. Rogers initiates an historiographical shift that reveals how the melodramatic tableaux became the song-and-dance numbers that turned the melodrama into musical theater. He traces this history from nineteenth-century melodrama to musical theater to point out the shifting nature of the relationship between narrative and visual spectacle or kinetic work.¹³³ He explains that, historiographically, the musical has been understood as an "integrated" art form. Here, integrated refers to the way song and dance traditionally have been subordinated to the "book," the musical's narrative and dramatic action. As a result, historical accounts of musicals rarely extract the song-and-dance numbers from the dramatic action to subject them to an analysis that takes into account the ways they subvert narrative. Rogers provides a corrective to that historiographic habit, claiming that it ignores the musical's roots in melodrama, a genre that has always deployed bodies visually to disrupt narrative. He, thereby, proffers a theory of the musical as a *disintegrated* genre in which song, gesture, and, above all, dance are used in spectacular opposition to narrative, inhabiting the space of affect and responding to the insufficiency of language.

Like Knapp's *MERM*, Rogers calls dance in the context of the musical an "interruptive rhythm," one with direct roots in tableau: "The tableau was the principal device of interruption, and it inherently pointed toward the inadequacy of linguistic communication."¹³⁴ For Rogers, dance, gesture, and tableau are non-linguistic modes that marshal "the visual and musical resource of the stage and the immediacy and temporality of the theatrical situation."¹³⁵ They are the realm of showing and feeling, bringing the acute sensations of pleasure and pain, to which words can merely point, to the surface.¹³⁶

29, as a work created and received in the context of concert dance, performs a modal role reversal: dance isn't the interruptive rhythm, talk is. In other words, if, as Rogers attests, dance is an interruptive rhythm in the context of theater, speech becomes interruptive in the context of concert dance. With "dance theater" as a particular form of multimodal and multi-channeled disintegration, it depends on your generic point of view whether dance *or* speech operates as the locus of affective engagement. Coming from the modernist dance world where mute dancing is the convention, and where, with Cunningham, it reaches an apex of autonomy as it disengages from the musical score, these expectations turn talk—a matter of no surprise in theater—into shock.¹³⁷

¹³³ Bradley Rogers, "Redressing the Black Crook: The Dancing Tableau of Melodrama," *Modern Drama* 55, no. 4, (2012), 476-496.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 482.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 483.

¹³⁶ Rogers does not talk about how narrative is made up of words that carry vocal tone and thus cannot be devoid of affective and other registers.

¹³⁷ Cunningham's own early training and performance experiences were in theater, specifically vaudeville.

In everyday conversation, interlocutors turn to what are sometimes called paralinguistic, perilinguistic, or simply gestural cues in order to understand the meaning of a given utterance. The bodily action that surrounds, grounds, or runs alongside language is absolutely crucial for successful communication. Because Goode's speech in 29 is literally affected, his language defamiliarized through rhythmic and tonal variation, he invites the viewer to look to the dancing for help in understanding what is being said, what the words mean; that invitation powerfully reverses the notion that words help illuminate dance's mysterious meanings. What Rogers's model offers, therefore, is not only the possibility that linguistic communication may be inadequate for condensed, immediate affective expression, but that dance may explain, in no uncertain terms, what all that talk is about.

What is also helpful about Rogers argument is how it exposes the tension between dance theory's contradictory assumptions of dance's projected inadequacy on the one hand, and its unique capacity to communicate the ineffable on the other.¹³⁸ Dance scholar Ramsay Burt straddles these two positions when he writes of Goode's combined use of dance, gesture, and talk in 29. After Goode destroys the chair with his chain saw, he performs five variations of those twenty-nine gestures that range from the recognizable and conventional co-speech gesture to the idiosyncratic and abstract. Of these variations, Burt writes,

Taken together, these verbal and nonverbal commentaries in effect proved how much dance movement can convey that cannot be put into words. But at the same time, dance is invariably hard to see and is not particularly good at conveying precise information or specific narrative content: the phrase 'dancing all over the place' suggests evasion. Dance is a time-based art that often reveals processes of change and transformation. Goode clearly wanted to convey very specific information in this solo, and this is why the initial sequence of 29 gestures was repeated three times in a row without choreographic variation.¹³⁹

Burt divides the dance into two categories, the verbal and the nonverbal, without clarifying where gesture fits. On the one hand, dance fills the gaps left between speech and experience, speaking in a realm beyond words. On the other hand, dance is too vague, too ephemeral, and too imprecise to provide audiences with information or even story. Ultimately, he places gesture in a mediating position between dance and speech.

In 29, gesture indeed seems to come to the rescue of dance as it f(l)ails to communicate. And it appears to hang in the space between talking and dancing because gesture is a form of talk that is like dance and a form of dance that is like talk. As the fundamental source of movement exploration and invention in the work, gesture offers

¹³⁸ Of course, dance scholars, including Burt in other writings, have insisted on dance's communicative power—to move self and other—as embodied agency (Noland 2009), neurological pathways (Noe 2004), kinesthetic empathy (Foster 2010), expression theory (Franko 1995).

¹³⁹ Ramsay Burt, "The Performance of Unmarked Masculinity," in *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders*, eds. Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 57-158.

unique vocabularies, extending established dance vocabularies, and creating interactions between everyday co-speech gesture and dancing. Yet, although on first glance Goode's gestural work does indeed appear to mediate the divide between mute dancing and verbal-vocal performance, gesture has its own logic and is itself a form of knowledge (as gesture studies researchers continue to discover). It is clear to me that gesture in 29 does not mediate between the talking and dancing, but rather does its own affective, aesthetic, and communicative work. It does so primarily by being so closely attached to our sociocultural selves.¹⁴⁰

In a sense, Goode's twenty-nine gestures are like the activated tableaux Rogers describes. Snapshots of the work reveal Goode in frozen bodily positions of exaggerated emotion. But in performance, the gestures are moved through, activated. At the same time, however, many of the gestures are recognizable, conventional gestures that "speak" on their own or in connection with linguistic modes of communication. They are in fact linked together in a string not entirely unlike sign language. "Who me?" "Go away." "Come here." The gestures, then, do not clearly or cleanly inhabit the space of either talk or dance, but rather embody both. This is further emphasized by how full-bodied the gestural sequence is. Goode's feet gesture with a strong heel-ball-toe flick; his hips gesture, swinging side to side, as if saying, "Kiss my ass!"; his chest gestures, coyly curving inwards, bravely puffing out. If, for Goode, dance threatens to speak too vaguely or with forked tongue, and words fail to finish their thoughts, then gesture speaks kinetically to our audiovisual biases more loudly, more clearly, but with enough ambiguity to suggest endless potentiality.

What the use of gestures exposes in 29 is the fact that dance is not the only carrier of affect; talk is as well. Goode's oral production interrupts affectively in part because it is a recitation of lines from a non-linear "book," but also because it is produced with vocal gestural play. Goode's signature drawl, his long, drawn vowels, and dreamy cadence; his rhythmic, percussive sound patterns composed of everyday "human" noises like grunts, sighs, whistles, shrieks, huhs, uh-huhs, uh-uhs, and sharp intakes of breath; in other words, his *vocal gesture*¹⁴¹ pours feeling into words, clarifying their feeling-meaning while perhaps diminishing their denotative, storytelling purpose.¹⁴² Further, Goode's play with sound and

¹⁴⁰ David Efron's research on Jewish and Italian immigrants on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and how their gestural vocabularies changed over generations to reflect their new culture, i.e. they gesture less as they become Americans. Efron does not address how imported gestural regimes alter local ones. David Efron, *Gesture and Environment: a tentative study of some of the spatio-temporal and "linguistic" aspects of the gestural behavior of Eastern Jews and Southern Italians in New York City, living under similar as well as different environmental conditions* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1941).

¹⁴¹ Linguist Eve Sweetser explains that vocal gesture is so-called because it does not follow linguistic rules. In other words, there is no codified structure for *how* you say something. Of course, there are cultural norms for vocal gesture as anyone who has told a child to use her "inside voice" knows. Sweetser, personal communication.

¹⁴² These vocal gestures along with truncated sentences, (desiring) subject sentences without objects; repetitive refrains (for example, in *Big Linda* (1986), "maybe...maybe...maybe..."; characters or voices speaking for other characters, for their interiority as they dance—these are elements in every Goode work.

noise does similar work. When Goode restarts the gestural series for a third time, after having reached under the chair to pull out a tea cup and sip from it, he accompanies each gesture with sound effects of bombs bursting in air, sirens, machine guns, groans of injury, missiles whistling, fighter jets zooming overhead. These sounds attach to the gestures, disintegrating them as soon as they are performed while simultaneously marking them as themselves destructive, disintegrative of the subject that performs them.

Because of this elaborate vocal play, dancing does not have a singularly defined role in harboring and controlling affect. Talking and dancing both serve these affective capacities, and they do so because of the gestural tone of both. So, while we might appreciate his effort to recover dance's power out from the weight of textual authority, Rogers still keeps a certain amount of the dance/talk binary intact, perhaps tipping the scales toward dance in a way that keeps us from noticing their dialectical relation. This is largely a function of Rogers' position as a *theater* scholar. Dance does not merely activate in his analysis; it renders the narrative static, no longer wholly responsible for propelling the action on stage. Rogers' intervention has a disciplinary cast to it: it uses dance to intervene in theater's, or rather, drama's disciplinary presumptions about the primacy of the text. His model pays less attention to the affective qualities of talk because talk has already gotten the bulk of attention from theater scholars. Rogers' emphasis on dance's affective power and his focus on actual musicals rather than dance theater works influenced by the musical keeps me from being able fully to adapt his model to the work of Joe Goode. But what it does offer is the possibility of bringing awareness to the disciplinary boundaries and limitations inherent in single-mode analysis.

What scholars of dance theater need is an analytical approach that is fluid, multimodal, and lens-switching. Attention to gesture helps initiate such an approach because gesture mitigates (without mediating) the conventionally viewed and felt binary opposition between dance and talk. I liken such an approach to being at the eye doctor. The doctor has you press your face against the phoropter and then, each time she switches a lens, she says, "Is it better now? [Lens switch]. Or now? [Lens switch]. Now? [Lens switch]. Or now?" It is impossible to see through more than one lens at a time; the challenge is to become very aware of the switch, to remember what you saw before, and to think about how it relates to what follows.

29 functions as a play with the disciplinarity of vantage point¹⁴³ because the dancing, gesturing, and talking share the burden of cognitive and non-cognitive, intellectual and affective, rational and kinesthetic registers. The dancing body is no longer the locus of rarefied meaning in isolation as it has been in mutist dance performance. The dancing body neither needs to speak nor is it rendered speechless. In *29*, the dance is not subordinated to the spoken text nor does it dominate its meanings; however, to my reading, this balance of power does not automatically signal "integration," in either Goode's¹⁴⁴ or musical theater historiography's sense of the term. Rather, I see a piece like

¹⁴³ My analysis of *29* is rooted in my position as a "dance person" who wants neither to claim dance's power above and beyond talk nor to bemoan dance's communicative limitations.

¹⁴⁴ According to Goode, his process is one of integrating oral speech with dancing, not seamlessly, per se, but in terms of giving both equal air time. His notion of integration falls

29 disintegrating talk, gesture, and dance by placing them in non-hierarchical relation with each other. Indeed, it is precisely by refusing hierarchy, by refusing to allow either of those modalities to hold center, that the piece performs an aesthetics of disintegration. 29 is a work with a mobile center and, as such, it both thematically and structurally performs identity-in-flux, a self's non-coincidence with itself, a subjectivity politics. The viewer must move nimbly between the communicative modalities as they illuminate and obfuscate each other's meanings by turns. The "good guy" of 29 is now hyper-masculine, now effeminate, now talking, now gesturing, now dancing. He does not cohere, but rather, like the multiple expressive modalities he mobilizes and occupies, he overlaps with himself, a mobile palimpsest, thicker, richer, ever-changing, always already dis-integrating. In other words, 29 performs a dis-integration of a Goode self.

Disintegrating Identity through Disidentification

If Goode's self-perception as a paradoxical creature, i.e. a concert dancer who likes to talk, motivated in part his multimodal and non-hierarchical approach to choreography, one that drew him to the Hollywood musical for formal and thematic material, he is also engaged in an "active reordering"¹⁴⁵ of Hollywood's social scripts from the point of view as a gay male subject. In this section, I explore Goode's spectatorship as a gay male dancer to show how he simultaneously stages gay male subjectivity and critiques concert dance's bias towards the mute dancer. In other words, Goode's play with genre and communicative mode operates in chiasmatic relation with his play with gender identity.

José Muñoz's notion of disidentification helps elucidate Goode's creative intertextual engagement with Hollywood cinema as a performance of a *subjectivity politics*.¹⁴⁶ According to Muñoz, disidentification is a practice of "desire with a difference,"¹⁴⁷ "a hermeneutic, a process of production, and mode of performance"¹⁴⁸ in which minority subjects with hybridized identities partially identify with mainstream representations of

more along the lines of desegregation, of allowing dance and speech to share the stage where they had once been kept apart.

¹⁴⁵ Brett Farmer, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorships* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 80.

¹⁴⁶ Farmer uses the term "gay subjectivity" in place of "gay identity" to mark "a complicated field of subjective articulation that is provisional and shifting" (Farmer, *Spectacular Passions*, 7). Unlike the unflinching feminist identity politics of Wallflower's *Defiance* that strategically denied any notion of identity-in-flux in favor of a unified expression of female solidarity, 29 operates in just such a provisional and shifting field. Thinking of 29 as something more akin to a subjectivity politics, marking a shift away from identity, draws our attention to and invites our acceptance of the performative and fragmented, in flux yet always situated, nature of personal selfhood. Further, this shift foregrounds identity as a dialectical disidentificatory practice, with its mushrooming multiplicity and palpable instability.

¹⁴⁷ José Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999), 15.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 25.

humankind. Goode, as a gay male subject, creates disidentificatory performances through a play of partial identifications with Hollywood's "prescribed 'public' scripts of identification."¹⁴⁹ At the same time, as a dancer who likes to talk, Goode identifies with the musical's generic form. Thus, as a genre largely concerned with heteronormative romantic narratives, but where the talking dancer does not represent an oxymoron, the musical offers Goode unparalleled material support to express his particular hybridized identity: a song-and-dance structure to emulate, storylines to reframe, and exaggerated physical gesture to develop.

It is crucial to note out of the gate that Muñoz writes (almost) exclusively about queer of color performance artists. Their "hybridized identificatory positions"¹⁵⁰ are central to his theory. Still, I will argue that Goode is a white queer artist who also holds a hybridized identificatory position as a gay-identified concert dancer. Goode is a white male spectator/consumer of Hollywood film—akin to D.A. Miller in relation to musical theater, or Wayne Koestenbaum in relation to opera—and his whiteness will have a role to play in my analysis of 29. For now, I argue that as a "disidentificatory subject, hybridized by his conjoined gay male and concert dancer identities, "Goode "tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form."¹⁵¹ Borrowing and riffing off its gestural and vocal tone, Goode exploits Hollywood's broad cultural reach and his own awkward fit within its history. Even for those audiences who do not read Hollywood cinema queerly, Goode's references to specific films stick to the talking-dancing bodies in the work, grounding them in a shared audio-visuo-kinesthetic space. Like the melodies borrowed from familiar songs and narrative arcs from familiar storylines that worked to get the stories of eighteenth-and nineteenth-century ballet-pantomimes across to their audiences,¹⁵² visual, movement, and sound images from Hollywood musicals such as *Pajama Game* and *Fiddler On the Roof* involve viewers of Goode's work in a collective, disidentificatory wink.¹⁵³

The specific ways in which Goode engages with Hollywood tropes of masculinity, femininity, the working class, and kinship are always in part about Goode's subjectivity as an artist of the body. We have already seen how Goode's dancer spectatorship of the musical disrupts generic boundaries, critiques mute dancing, and creates a non-hierarchical relationship between communicative modes in performance—a disintegrated aesthetic. Returning for the moment to Rogers' analysis of the musical's inherently "disintegrated" structure helps us see how Goode's performed and performative critique of heteronormative gender and sexual identity produces positive, non-object characterizations

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 15.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 32.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 12.

¹⁵² Marian Smith, *Ballet and Opera in the Age of Giselle*.

¹⁵³ Along with the musical, Goode engages the romantic comedy and the western throughout his later work. He creates composite characters by reframing, reconstructing, and rereading Hollywood's stock characters: the ingénue, the femme fatale, the cowboy. Although I refer to these genres at different points throughout this chapter, there is not space to fully address these other intertextual relationships with Hollywood cinema.

of gay male subjectivity by becoming dancing body that speaks.¹⁵⁴ At the same time, Goode foregrounds the fragmented, dis-integrated nature of the self. In Rogers' understanding, rather than being subordinated to the dramatic action and narrative, the dancing in musical theater has its own power and purpose. Tying together the notions of disidentification and disintegration, the dancing body itself—representationally and phenomenologically—operates in a disidentificatory relationship with the musical's social and textual scripts: dancing “inside ideology,”¹⁵⁵ the dancing body-subject erupts with its own “worldmaking power.”¹⁵⁶ Although I have put pressure on the idea that the dancing in 29 has this sort of power by claiming its non-hierarchical relation to both talk and gesture, the combined notions of disidentification and disintegration describes both the structure of 29 and the subjectivity that it performs.

Goode's reaction to mute dancing was in large part a function of a generalized sense of the dancer's dehumanization that, from Goode's point of view, found its particular expression in the work of Merce Cunningham. As noted earlier, Goode cites Cunningham as a central force in propelling him to take technical dancing and pair it with verbal speech. Cunningham understood his work to be, at least in part, about democratizing space and time (“There are no fixed points in space”¹⁵⁷; dancers can perform “different movements in different rhythms” at the same time), complicating classical structures (making every dancers in the “corps” on stage a soloist), an interest in the awkward, and “a nearly inhuman level of technical virtuosity”¹⁵⁸; it was emphatically not a site for identity expression.¹⁵⁹ Although several thinkers, Cunningham included, emphasize

¹⁵⁴ In a sense, 29 is an effort to move away from “the familiar ‘punishment’ scenario long associated with portrayals of gay men on stage and screen” (Knapp, 239), the persistent “homosexuality-must-be-punished’ trope” (Knapp 208). Dissatisfied with playing archetypal roles (such as the “maniacal or Machiavellian” characters he found himself cast as in New York or the “Everyman who did big broad jumps across the stage”) as well as with Twyla's shimmying in hot pants and Cunningham's technical body machine, Goode went “looking for an experience that felt honest and contemporary with my life and my issues, assuming that there are other people who have those issues. Originally my work with language was about needing to be a gay man up front and center not as a dirty little abject secret thing, but who I am in my work, acknowledged and honored.”

¹⁵⁵ Muñoz, 12.

¹⁵⁶ Muñoz, ix.

¹⁵⁷ Cunningham quoted in Jacqueline Lesschaeve, *The Dancer and the Dance: Merce Cunningham in conversation with Jacqueline Lesschaeve*, (London: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd., 2000), 18.

¹⁵⁸ Emily Coates, “Beyond the Visible: The Legacies of Merce Cunningham and Pina Bausch,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, PAJ 95, 32, no. 2 (May 2010), 1.

¹⁵⁹ Jacqueline Lesschaeve overdetermines an association between Cunningham and dance's mutism in the first lines of her preface to *The Dancer and the Dance: Merce Cunningham in conversation with Jacqueline Lesschaeve*: “If a dancer dances, if he choreographs, he does so because to him this mute art is more eloquent than any other. I know the dancer's distaste for language, which he believes somehow in contradiction with his life and art. I felt, however, and still feel, that under certain conditions, and once this reticence was

his elicitation of a dancer's individuality within ensemble dancing, this individuality is easy to miss. As Cunningham himself states, "It's subtle enough; it doesn't happen in an obvious way or place, but I'm sure it's felt."¹⁶⁰ Cunningham's radical commitment to formal and anatomical investigations that threw into question the role of the artist in making choreographic decisions (chance procedures) and turned audiences into agents by offering them perspectival choice, did not include staging his homosexuality. This is at least in part a generational issue. Nevertheless, Goode's talking while dancing is specifically in response to what he perceived as Cunningham's closeted choreographic practice in the midst of his "open secret" relationship with John Cage, and the "dogmatically heterosexual partnering and pairings" in Cunningham's choreography.¹⁶¹

Carrie Noland points out that Cunningham's choreographic "formalism and astringency" does not signal a lack of expression, but rather expression freed "from its subservience to the psyche," engaged with the sensorium, and "implicated in human embodiment."¹⁶² She writes, "For Cunningham, no movement performed by the human body can ever be lacking in expressive content, either because the human body always communicates some kind of dynamic or because the audience member maps onto the moving body a personal meaning"; the body's movement "is not expressing more than it is (or, rather, more than it is *doing*)."¹⁶³ But this was not Goode's perception: the sort of "human situation on stage" Noland finds in Cunningham's *Sixteen Dances*, with its depictions of archetypal emotions, its concern "with specific emotional qualities, but...in image form and not personal,"¹⁶⁴ was a cover-up for not only personal identity but the *drama* of personal identity. Drama in the sense of an unfolding tale, a hyperbolic and deeply embodied performance of emotion, and a favorite modifier for "queen." Goode was not interested in a human situation on stage that was "a set of kinesthetic, proprioceptive, weight-bearing, and sometimes tactile problems to be solved,"¹⁶⁵ although that sort of practice forms part of the ground of his creative process. He didn't believe in the possibility of a presubjective human interaction, "an intersubjective milieu before that embodiment

overcome, the questions of poetics raised by dancing could be brought up." Cunningham also frames himself as a dancer who doesn't like to talk: "I couldn't talk with dancers" (Lesschaeve, *The Dancer and the Dance*, 43).

¹⁶⁰ Cunningham quoted in Lesschaeve, *The Dancer and the Dance*, 19.

¹⁶¹ Joe Goode, personal communication. "It really surprised me because here's Merce, this famous homo with this famous homo partner and yet he's making this work that is very boy-girl. That was really troubling for me and puzzling, and I felt a kind of shame in it that I felt I had to participate in to dance it." Goode spent approximately eight years in New York, studying with Cunningham and Viola Farber and feeling "very schizophrenic." Susan Manning corroborates Goode's sentiment: "Cunningham's aesthetic—his disdain for self-expression and his reverence for impersonality—partly served to closet the gay male dancer" (Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, 209).

¹⁶² Carrie Noland, "The Human Situation on Stage: Merce Cunningham, Theodor Adorno, and the Category of Expression," 47-48.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, 50.

¹⁶⁴ Cunningham quoted in *Ibid*, 52.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 55.

enters a narrative, a conventional, socially defined relation to the other.”¹⁶⁶ His work is, therefore, a play with those very narratives and conventional social relations. So, to explore gay identity in concert dance where it had previously been doubly closeted in Cunningham and Cage collaborations, Goode disidentifies with the genre where drama means all three things—the musical.

The overdetermined association between dance and mutism is matched by the overdetermined bond between gay male subjectivity and Hollywood film, the musical in particular.¹⁶⁷ A basic move of queer readings of Hollywood film is note how the heteronormative rhetoric clashes blatantly with the camp performances, the big hair and the big eyelashes, the big land and the big singing and dancing. Goode was born during the so-called Golden Age of the Hollywood musical, and the surface rigidity of gender roles in the musical becomes a space of critique for him. Whereas the happy ending of Hollywood films from their beginnings to today foreclose the possibilities for alternatives, caulking the cracks in the pavement almost as soon as they appear, Goode works within the cracks, resisting the “clotural containment”¹⁶⁸ that renders a gay “life-world”¹⁶⁹ unviable.

Goode engages Hollywood musical camp, “display[ing] an ironic taste for melodrama, both as an artistic form and as a mode of feeling or personal expression.”¹⁷⁰ For theorist and historian of homosexuality, David Halperin, this taste for melodrama stems from a sense of the unenunciability of gay male identity and leads to “a pre-Stonewall practice of queering straight culture.”¹⁷¹ 29 seems to reflect this taste and feeling, but it does more than merely enunciate pre-Stonewall affects in a post-Stonewall world. It is itself a play with enunciation itself and, as such, it goes beyond a limited structure of queer feeling toward a broader engagement with non-normative expressive behaviors, anything that causes a person to stand out.

Dance scholars David Gere and Ramsay Burt have both paid critical attention to 29. Both locate the work within a camp aesthetic of the “too much.” According to Gere, Goode’s central aesthetic strategy is exaggeration understood as a consciously political deployment of camp. He writes that Goode’s piece can “easily be interpreted as the symbolic realization of an extroverted strategy of resistance.”¹⁷² For Gere, this exaggerated extroversion is more or less synonymous with effeminacy as a theatrical gestural practice, and Goode’s gay male identity is expressed as taking pleasure in the too much by talking, gesturing, and dancing in the register of the too much.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 56.

¹⁶⁷ Farmer argues for a formal recognition of the “correlation between an excessive cinephilia and male homosexuality” (Farmer, *Spectacular Passions*, 2).

¹⁶⁸ Farmer, 79.

¹⁶⁹ Muñoz, 34.

¹⁷⁰ Halperin, 408.

¹⁷¹ Halperin, 418. See also Jack Babuscio’s “The Cinema of Camp (AKA Camp and the Gay Sensibility),” 1999.

¹⁷² David Gere, “29 *Effeminate Gestures*: Choreographer Joe Goode and the Heroism of Effeminacy,” in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities on and off the Stage*, ed. Jane Desmond (Madison, WI: Wisconsin, 2001), 356.

Whereas Gere attributes *29*'s power to its heroic display of effeminate gesture, Burt suggests that its reappropriation of effeminacy and "gay political message" does not account for the work's "enduring success." Simultaneously complimenting and challenging Gere's analysis, Burt claims that *29* troubles gender norms "through exploiting the power of unmarked masculinity."¹⁷³ Following Peggy Phelan, Burt asserts that Goode is able "to perform [his] masculinities in ways that remain unmarked without...reinforcing restricted definitions of masculinity."¹⁷⁴ Burt argues,

... the piece's fascination lay in the tensions it created between elements of the material it brought together. There was a tension in the piece between dance, spoken or sung words, and gestures; there was also a tension between Goode's performative declaration, by dancing these effeminate gestures, that he is a gay man, and his use of many signs of normative heterosexual masculine power that would ordinarily render him unmarked... Through this, the piece enacted a reinscription of queer folk within society, and it can therefore be seen as a ritual of healing of violent and traumatic exclusions.¹⁷⁵

Together, the insights of Gere and Burt point to without explicitly naming Hollywood as a fundamental interlocutor for Goode. Indeed, *29* reflects an absorption and reconstitution of Hollywood cinema's exaggerated expressions of *both* heteronormative femininity and masculinity. It is precisely how Goode applies camp readings of or draws out camp performances from the musical that lends *29*, and nearly the entire contents of his choreographic repertory, its power. As he attaches the self-proclaimed effeminate gestures to a list of tendencies that have unnamed consequences, gay male identity and queer masculinity become partially coded in and coated with gestures and verbal utterances that are "too much."

For example, in the spoken section of *29*, each verb is over-articulated, stretched into its own affective force. His voice rises and falls, lirts and suspends, drawing us into "the know." Goode's vocal tone fits several of Susan Sontag's fifty-eight criteria for camp, in particular its stylization, exaggeration, its play with "going against the grain of one's sex."¹⁷⁶ But it is anything but apolitical or "neutral with respect to content,"¹⁷⁷ and it definitely has its share of tragedy. Although the consequences of behaving in the zone of the "too much" are open to interpretation, as the work proceeds, things become both less humorous and less innocuous. You know what talking, laughing, feeling, reacting, thinking too much means, don't you? If..., then when we know what you are. If..., then this could happen to you. Goode, the blue collar working man, disintegrates into the effeminate man who takes too much pleasure in the too much, drawling instead of speaking, lifting his chest ecstatically toward the sky instead of standing "straight," drawing his elbows in

¹⁷³ Burt, 150.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 152.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 155-156.

¹⁷⁶ Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject—A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 56.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

towards his body instead of out. The dancing, talking, and gesturing seem to seamlessly fold into one another, blurring the boundaries between them; the overarticulation of vowels crosses talk with vocal gesture, the spread of the gestural space across the entire body crosses gesture with dance. Because of this blurring, the second, effeminate subjectivity does not overcome the first, hyper-masculine one but rather, in a sublimating move, incorporates him.

Halperin defines camp as “an ironic taste for melodrama.” If we take Halperin’s connection between gay male subjectivity and melodrama and combine it with Rogers’ understanding of melodrama as a space in which dance has the capacity to overtake narrative, then it is possible to see Goode’s camp as not only an expression of his gay subjectivity, but as a way back to dancing. Being a male dancer is already to inhabit the space of melodrama, the space of the too much. From this point of view, Goode’s perception of Cunningham’s choreographic output in relation to his turn toward the musical not only helps situate 29 in a history of modern concert dance and modern concert dance in a history of the American musical, but also illustrates how Goode’s identity as a gay man and a dancer intersect in both the making and (queer) reading of 29.

Gestural Habitus

29 has the musical to thank for its disidentifying, disintegrated aesthetic. But its focus on gesture has another source—Goode’s own body. 29 was also born out of a confrontation with a heretofore unconscious yet self-marking gestural regime. Goode had set out to make a piece composed entirely of gesture. He began by observing his own gestural vocabulary in a mirror. But this simple formal task quickly morphed into something personal and painful. Goode explains, “I discovered upon looking in the mirror that the gestures were effeminate. I was appalled for a while...and then I was appalled that I was appalled.”¹⁷⁸ Crudely drawn, Goode’s awakening to his gestural habitus—the closest stuff we can’t see, the closet stuff everyone else sees—marks a distinctly human crisis between inner and outer subjectivity. This moment of self/sensory misrecognition marks a crisis of double identity, gay and dancer, in the face of a double command: the dancer is supposed to notice his movements and control their presentation, and the gay man is supposed to be able to do the same. Thus, both Goode’s habitual gestural behavior and his emotional response to them became the material for the piece.

There is a tension between Goode’s investigations into his own gestural habitus, his unconscious movement behavior brought into awareness and thus strangeness, and his investment in extraordinary dancing. Habitus, here, may be understood as what philosophers since Wittgenstein have called “the ordinary,” physical and conceptual practices that we perform habitually and thus out of awareness. 29 was born out of the coming to awareness of Goode’s ordinary, everyday gestural behavior. When he discovered, to his “horror,” the effeminate look of his gestures, he began to develop a piece that expressed that horror, taking the familiar (as unconscious and unfelt) made strange and staging that defamiliarization. What disturbed him was that he had been utterly unaware of

¹⁷⁸ Goode cited in Selby Schwartz, “The Silent E: 29 *Effeminate Gestures*, 24 Years Later,” *In Dance*, April 1, 2011.

how his gestures read, that he could not *feel* how they would be read, and how much they conflicted with his sense of embodied selfhood. This selfhood was manly, butch, and brawny, tall and broad, tied to a body that knows its way with power tools. In a sense, Goode's revelation of his gestural habits after the fact meant that his body came out of the closet before he did. Of course, Goode was an openly gay man at the time of the revelation, but I think he had been unaware of the performativity of his gestures prior to this exploration. Goode made *29* to perform that coming to awareness. Additionally, Goode as a dancer, who has labored his whole life to develop technical control of his body, was doubly shocked to discover that he moved unconsciously, that his body spoke in ways he did not intend. It is perhaps because *29* was originally Goode's way of confronting that shock that makes it a heroic dance.

Goode's perception of his work as integrated mirrors the sense of self he had prior to his revelation about the appearance of his gestural behavior. When the mirror told a different story, it initiated a disintegration of identity (as wholeness) into shards that make up his particular subjectivity. By observing his gesturing, Goode began to feel them and to explore that kinesthetic experience as attached to and detachable from gay male coding. The piece, thus, invites us to feel our gestural habits, how we move in our bodies on an everyday basis, to see how they hook onto and diverge from societal norms of physical behavior in relation to specific identities, and to give us the opportunity to experience/imagine them unhooked.

What emerges is the sense that both gay male and dancer subjectivities are grounded in paradoxes, in struggles with societal expectations of physical behavior, and in danger of violent repression. Above all, they emerge as entangled with each other in ways that are extremely productive for Goode. Both subjectivities are revealed to be structured around a play of identifications and disidentifications that do not integrate into a single whole, under the umbrella of a single albeit hyphenated identity marker. As Burt writes, "By mixing and confusing effeminate gestures with the actions of a good guy, the piece allowed Goode as performer to trouble and subvert the homosexual/heterosexual binary."¹⁷⁹ Unlike *Defiance* and its lassoing of hybridity under an empowered female identity, *29* does not resolve the struggle but rather places identity within the play, as play. The male dancer who also strategically identifies as gay becomes the figure most capable of multiple embodiments that coexist without cohering.

Orientalism: The Return of the Rarefied Hothouse Flower

The dance sequence of *29* grows out of the twenty-ninth gesture as performed in the iteration with the war sounds. As he stands oscillating dreamily back and forth with his eyes closed, he and the audience begin to hear the sound of drums. Goode rotates out of the twist and begins to move upstage, walks a small circle around himself, then a larger one, slowly removes his shirt, and, continuing to turn, ties the shirt around his head, forming what looks like a sort of keffiyeh or turban. The gestures return but they develop and stretch into recognizably technical dance vocabulary—walking steps become deep lunges and grand battements (high kicks), there are over-the-shoulder rolls and big, low

¹⁷⁹ Burt, 159.

turns in arabesque. Goode also performs movements of his pelvis, hip circles that conjure belly dance. His chest is ecstatically open, and he is smiling, indulging in arcing suspensions. As the music begins to fade out, Goode faces us upstage; his gaze and arms lower, he unties the shirt from his head and lets it fall.

Up to this point, 29 structurally posits (technical) dancing as an extension, a fulfillment, and an exaggeration of the gestures, following as it does from other exaggerations effected by talking while gesturing and making sounds while gesturing. In this way, dancing becomes the “too much” of gesture and seems to present a further articulation of effeminacy. The hyper-masculine gestures with which Goode opens 29, do not return; the swagger is overcome by the swish. But the unmistakably Orientalist tone of the dance sequence begs the question of why in a work about gay subject formation do the gestures accumulate toward and arrive at this exoticized, silent dancer. The combination of technical dancing performed silently but to “foreign” music and costume generally coded as Eastern, interferes with Goode’s project to rescue the dancer from his status as a “rarefied hothouse flower,” complicating an understanding of how bodily action does and does not contribute to a resistant politics in 29. Listening to Goode’s dancing as Bakhtin listens to Tolstoy’s writing, it is impossible not to hear the Orientalist resonances. How are we meant to understand this silent, exoticized dancing body in light of Goode’s critique of mute dancing?

When asked about what the recorded music signifies in 29, Goode said, “Gestures mean different things in different cultures. In certain tribal cultures, the effeminate person is revered.” And Gere corroborates: “The accompaniment evokes Polynesian slit drums, a veiled reference to cultures in which the effeminate man, the *mahu*, holds a respected role in society as teacher and surrogate mother.”¹⁸⁰ As we have seen, Gere strongly identifies with Goode’s gestural language in large part because he understands his own body to have been disciplined into a particular gestural regime that signified masculinity: arms held straight and down to avoid curvy expressivity, hands made into fists to hide fluttering fingers.¹⁸¹ To stray from this body language was to exhibit a dangerous effeminacy. When he witnessed Goode’s piece, Gere found himself face to face with a finger-fluttering, wrist-flicking superhero, one that not only “comments upon gender-specific behavior” but also theorizes “the efficacy of effeminacy in the process.”¹⁸² Because he identifies so strongly with Goode’s performance of effeminacy as integral to gay identity, Gere appears to accept the dance sequence as contributing seamlessly to that identity, describing the four variations of the initial gestural sequence as “elongations” and “embellishments.”

For Selby Schwartz, writing in celebration of 29’s 25th anniversary, “the dance section” of the piece “is the moment of individualized movement...a dance that seems to have all of the best qualities of living in a body...This dance is about enjoying the body that you have, which is necessarily different from all other bodies...Everybody has its own ‘too much-ness,’ its painfully awkward physicality, its ways of exceeding the roles it is supposed to play.” For Schwartz, the dance sequence breaks both molds of masculinity, the hyper-

¹⁸⁰ Gere, “29 Effeminate Gestures and the Heroism of Effeminacy,” 372.

¹⁸¹ See Muñoz’s similar discussion in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

¹⁸² Gere, “29 Effeminate Gestures and the Heroism of Effeminacy,” 352.

masculine and the effeminate, erupting into something individual, personal, idiosyncratic, and free. Her analysis is humanist at the core, “centered upon the agency of human individuality and subjective intuition.”¹⁸³ But, as Said continues, “this by no means excludes power,”¹⁸⁴ and it is this power differential that causes 29 to reify the very rarefication it seeks to dismantle. Goode “comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second.”¹⁸⁵

According to 29’s composer Erik Ian Walker, the music is actually a “sound-alike” based on a composition by Nigerian drummer Babatunde Olatunji.¹⁸⁶ For Gere, this sequence, with its evocation of Arab dance and dress mixed with sub-Saharan African musical forms, unproblematically develops the heroic power of effeminacy initiated by the gestures. Though he acknowledges that the “Polynesian” rhythms evoked by the music may be “a romanticized version of those societies,”¹⁸⁷ for Gere, the dancing is largely a “natural” extension of the gestures themselves. For Schwartz, too, the dancing seamlessly exposes difference and speaks for the too-much-ness of “every body” at the same time.

Burt sees the keffiyeh moment as recalling “Nureyev’s swashbuckling pirate solo from *Le Corsaire* or perhaps Nijinsky’s Golden Slave from *Schéhérazade*—the improvised turban exotically framing his desirable male body.”¹⁸⁸ Burt, like Gere, also misrecognizes the already obfuscated cultural origin of the music and dancing: “To an upbeat, Latin-inflected drumming track he performed a bravura solo that still incorporated many of the 29 gestures, now incongruously combined with vigorous break dancing or aikido rolls and wheels on the floor and slicing arm movements. It was a solo whose energy and confident expansiveness and whose martial arts references might otherwise be considered unproblematically masculine.”¹⁸⁹ For Burt, the dance sequence transmutes the effeminate gestures into a masculine register, now problematized by this very transmutation. Burt leaves the question of the source of the music to his own exoticizing imagination and fails to question how the “unproblematically masculine” maps onto the black (break dancing)¹⁹⁰ and the Asian (aikido).

By referencing *Schéhérazade*, Burt perhaps inadvertently situates 29 in the context of Western concert dance’s Orientalist cultural appropriations, tying them to the work’s gay male identity politics. The Golden Slave also indexes another keffiyeh-toting male dancer, Valentino, the “male butterfly,” a “deviant form of masculinity,”¹⁹¹ that is marked by a

¹⁸³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), xxix.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 11.

¹⁸⁶ Olatunji was himself connected with Broadway and Hollywood as the composer of both the stage and film versions of *Raisin in the Sun*.

¹⁸⁷ Gere, 372.

¹⁸⁸ Burt, 158.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ I don’t know what to say about the fact that there is no mistaking the dancing for break dancing. There is nothing like break dancing going on here.

¹⁹¹ Gaylyn Studlar, “Valentino, ‘Optic Intoxication,’ and Dance Madness,” in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), 28.

feminizing love of pleasure. 29, thus, takes part in both American modern dance's and Hollywood's deep lean into Orientalist tropes. Gaylyn Studlar makes the connection clear, writing that, in the 1910s "art dance" brought a decadent sensuality to the American concert stage, to vaudeville, and to hundreds of local halls across the country as dancers like Ruth St. Denis and Roshanara performed interpretive 'ethnic' dances that invariably linked Orientalism and eroticism in capitalizing on a longstanding American fascination with the East and eastern dancing."¹⁹²

Burt, Gere, and Schwartz make me wonder if, under the pressure of multicultural ideology and minoritarian politics (or, in Schwartz's case, an understandable resistance to adding critique to homage), critics and artists committed to a belief in dance's resistant power, may be loathe to analyze the discrete parts that make up a performance of dance theater. But a closer look at the dancing in 29 sheds light on the work's aesthetic and performative matrix, and suggests another matrix of the body, Otherness, sensuality, autoerotic pleasure, and silence. Thought of in this way, the impact of this variation of the gestural phrase may elongate or exaggerate Goode's effeminate identity, as Gere suggests, but it does so via a paradoxical return to exoticized silence.

In my experience of the dance, the heroic effeminacy, resistant gender politics, and bodily celebration of difference gets lost in or is diminished by a network of fetishization produced by the choreography, sound design, and costume. Goode's torso now naked, his large, extended movements; his sensuality and lyricism combines with the music to produce an uncomfortable association between the dancing body and a generalized, "dark other." Goode reverts to being a mute dancer, that "rarefied hothouse flower," during a dance that is comprised of a fusion of exotically coded movement and contemporary, postmodern dance vocabulary. He performs a dance that takes pleasure in the body as a site of the sensuality, splendor, and silence of the Orient, the "too much," "over there" where his "true" self lies. The dance sequence suggests an excess that cannot be contained by either gender norms or language itself, a transcendental space outside verbal language.

The context of the piece, its development and overt identitarian message are meant to rescue the dance from this analysis. The words and the gestures of the previous sections are meant to stick to the now mute dancing body, to continue to be audible as the dancer moves. My intention is not to accuse Goode of a colonizing appropriation, but rather to point out how right I think he is when he says that mute dancing often offers visibilities and identities that run counter to those felt to be true to the dancer.¹⁹³ And this is a crucial distinction, between the visual effects and the kinesthetic experience of technical dancing. In other words, the shared experience of otherness and outsidership that Goode has

¹⁹² Ibid, 23. Even Cunningham's *Sixteen Dances*, which Noland discusses in "The Human Situation on Stage," is influenced by the *Natyasastra*, "the sourcebook of Hindu/Sanskrit classical theater."

¹⁹³ At the same time, Halperin explains, "Any decent account of gay culture would have to survey and to examine a great number of its characteristic practices, genres, social and aesthetic forms. Opera, pop music, fashion and style, architecture and design, printing, painting and the fine arts; the gay lure of British culture, French culture, Arabic culture, Japanese culture; divas and their defining features in different national contexts (Mexico, Argentina, France, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, Japan...)" (Halperin, 403).

discussed with me and performed in many of his works, and the ways in which his gay male identity is mobilized to speak for minority identity in general, fall back into the very exoticization Goode resists as a talking dancer and a gay man.

However, there is a further complicating and perhaps productive tension between exoticizing Orientalism and the way Goode understands the exotic. For Goode, the “exotic dancing body” is synonymous with the mute dancer, one that would never speak or emit war sounds or guttural noises. Goode explains that the “exotic creature that didn’t speak” maintained a certain mystique around the dancer, creating an unbridgeable distance between the average human being and this dancing Other. In this case, the Other is the white Euro-American modern dancer (as archetypal figure or line in space) and the exotic Other becomes a metaphor for that. Some look at 29 and see him being satirical, of parodying works like those of St. Denis, offering an extreme, Orientalized metaphor for Dancer as Other, as dehumanized and superhumanized simultaneously. But despite speaking, singing, and sounding in 29, there seems to be an exchange of one exotic dancing body for another: the concert dancer is de-exoticized by the talking and general noise-making but then re-exoticized by the Orientalist movement tropes. There appears to be a reversal of Said’s formulation at work: rather than thinking “that these people over there were not like ‘us’ and didn’t appreciate ‘our’ values,”¹⁹⁴ Goode locates the gender values he holds and finds missing in American culture “over there.” The performative selves that pile up in the first sections of 29 are replaced, temporarily, by an act of “setting [oneself] off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.”¹⁹⁵ Part of how this happens is because of the very intersectional identity—gay male and dancer—that provoked the creation of 29 in the first place.

What the Orientalism in 29 suggests is that Goode’s confrontation with American masculinity, as both a gay male and dancer, is also a confrontation with whiteness. The Anglo man cannot have a feminine side, so the struggle is double. It is not surprising, then, that he turns to “other cultures”¹⁹⁶ to find expressions of masculinity that fold in the feminine. The exoticizing discourse of the dancing—its Orientalist tone and reference—breaks the development of Goode’s identity as a man who is also effeminate, as a dancer who also talks, and it does so in two ways: 1) by the fact that he does not actually talk when he dances, the aural register taken up instead by “ethnic” music, and 2) by the nature of the dancing itself. In a sense, Goode takes one “regular constellation of ideas”¹⁹⁷ (men should know how to use power tools, men should not gesture too much, men should not dance) and replaces them with another. But the danger in the faux belly dance is that where Goode sees the powerful effeminate man, the white homophobe just sees the queer.¹⁹⁸ As Gaylyn Studlar writes in her discussion of Valentino, when dancers like Ted

¹⁹⁴ Said, xx.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 3.

¹⁹⁶ Goode, personal communication.

¹⁹⁷ Said, 5.

¹⁹⁸ Studlar helps draw together a number of threads: “Influenced by European ballet tastes, dance in the United States was offering a startling transformation of gender norms through androgynous inscriptions of the male body and reversals of sexual role playing, often mediated through the iconography of the Orient that reversed the long-standing male

Shawn insisted on the male dancer's masculinity having feminine qualities but not being effeminate, "that distinction was lost on most American men..."¹⁹⁹

Goode's recent bequeathal of 29 to dancers Miguel Gutierrez and Melecio Estrella, speaks volumes to the problematic nature of transfer in terms of how the dancer's identity depends on an exotic Other while simultaneously and paradoxically being the space of true selfhood. The dance sequence in 29 seems to suggest that "somewhere, there's a place for us," a place where gay male subjectivity, in whatever guise, but in particular in its effeminate gestural expression, can be free of oppressive western social codes of behavior. When Goode passed 29 on to Estrella and Gutierrez, he presented the dance as set choreography and text until the dance sequence. For the dancing, he asked that the men choreograph or improvise as they wished. This implies that the dance sequence is where the piece becomes your own, and that learning choreography is a depersonalizing process, a taking on of another body that is not yours and cannot become yours even through your own personal expression and idiosyncrasies. Estrella and Gutierrez make the piece their own in this moment and they do so because of the way Goode designed the dance section as an explosion of selfhood within the context of an Orientalist fantasy.

And yet, Estrella and Gutierrez are dancers of color. Would the surfaces of their bodies change my reception of 29, complicating its Orientalist critique? Muñoz himself writes in the preface to *Disidentifications* about the "queer theater" artist, Jack Smith, offering a potentially less damning critique of the sort of Orientalisms that exist in 29:

As I learned more of Smith's performances, I became partly disturbed by what could be described as the orientalizing and tropicalizing aspects of the work, which is to say he played with over-the-top images of 'exotic' Third World ethnoscapes. These reservations were significantly diminished when I looked closely at the available documentation of Smith's work... I began to think that Smith has little to do with actual Third World cultures and instead worked through Hollywood's fantasies of the other. The underground genius utilized these fantasies of the other in a reflective fashion. The excess affect of Maria Montez and the gaudy fantasies of harem culture were utilized to destabilize the world of 'pasty normals' and help us imagine another time and place. In Smith's cosmology, 'exotic' was an antinormative option that resisted the overdetermination of pastiness... His performances of the 'spitfire' and Scheherazade were inflected with

fascination with the culturally taboo (i.e., darker) woman and that conflated a wide range of foreignness, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Russian, and Asiatic. Confirmed by the success of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, high art dance narratives, like tango teas, were often semiotically loaded within a libidinal economy of excess" (Studlar, 33). Goode's headdress and Valentino's Sheik. Women like Valentino, so the female gaze somehow turns Goode's "effeminacy" into a positive value, which has something to do with his female characters—there's a tangle here with Gere's identification with 29. It is as if, in the dance sequence, Goode is channeling Valentino, not for the female gaze, but as "...a fantastic vision of the reconciliation of masculinity and femininity through a privileging of the dancer's body as a site of expressive knowledge and sensual understanding" (Ibid, 40).

¹⁹⁹ Studlar, 34.

disidentificatory difference that help toxic images expand and become much more than quaint racisms. ...Glitter transformed hackneyed Orientalisms and tropical fantasies, making them rich antinormative treasure troves of queer possibility.²⁰⁰

Oddly, Muñoz seeks to rescue Smith's work from accusations of unreflective Orientalism by claiming that the artist's distance from the "actual Third World" functions as the gap in which a self-reflexive disidentificatory difference can produce non-normative chronotopes of "queer possibility." This idea certainly resonates with Goode's, Burt's, and Gere's understanding of what an imagined other time and place can provide for sympathetic audiences. But having nothing to do with the actual Third World is the very definition of Orientalism, something Muñoz knows. Perhaps it is just that despite his whiteness and because of his firm place in film and performance art, Smith's disidentification with Hollywood is impossible to miss, the critique easy to spot. 29, as a dance theater work received in the context of American concert dance, plays on shakier ground. The dance section is performed and received in earnest, as Goode and his followers attest. It seems to me that 29 turns sharply away from camp, becoming less self-aware, less critical.

Knapp writes,

To some extent, all musicals, whether on stage or in film, become camp the moment they become *musical*, for the first notes that sound under dialogue are like a set of arched eyebrows serving as quotation marks around whatever is ostensibly being expressed, whether musically or dramatically...the element of camp shifts sudden attention to the performed nature of the drama.²⁰¹

For Knapp, camp is a political strategy in the guise of a performance style; it activates the audience into a critical position that questions the veracity of a representation. The song-and-dance sequences of the musical are the signal that this questioning should begin. Camp, here, is not a mere aesthetic strategy of exaggeration but a physical performance of critical awareness; it is an arched eyebrow—a gesture of being in the know—but also pursed lips, swishy hips and other gestures that draw attention to the body as a practice of embodiment, with access to a wide range of movement possibilities and available to multiple interpretations. It is also a finger that points to the performativity of identity. 29 emphasizes the embodied, material nature of camp, a physical play with excess on excess that offers a "double-edged vision" (Kelly 1979) that does not stop at critical deconstruction but moves on to the active production of alternatives.²⁰² Or, as Muñoz writes, work that goes "a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it

²⁰⁰ Muñoz, x.

²⁰¹ Knapp, 7.

²⁰² Rosi Braidotti in Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, "The notion of the univocity of Being or single matter positions difference as a verb or process of becoming at the heart of the matter': Interview with Rosi Braidotti," in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: MPublishing, University of Michigan Library, 2012), 22.

proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.”²⁰³ This excess functions as marker of both gay and dancer subjectivity. It also is and points to excessive layers of communication: the very interdisciplinary, multimodal nature of dance theater and the film musical as companion performance genres. And yet, during the dance sequence, the too much gives way to the not enough.

Conclusion

Goode’s ‘good guy,’ who opens *29*, nods his head rhythmically with a wide, plastic grin on his face each of the first two times he says, “He’s a good guy.” The audience laughs and the laughing grows louder as Goode himself chuckles and shuffles along slightly ape-like. His overbite and exaggerated smile make him look either super stoned or slightly off mentally. When he tilts his face slightly upward and pants, “He He He He He He...” while pumping his elbows in and out, the audience becomes nearly hysterical at the masturbatory effect. By the time Goode shouts, “*29* Effeminate Gestures!,” his San Francisco audience at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts is completely disarmed and settled in for a light-hearted romp.

At the end of *29*, Goode radically shifts from his comic approach to the subject of disintegration to land on a strongly melancholic and disturbing note. We left him at the end of the dance sequence, standing with his shirt at his feet, his head bowed down in silence. He begins the final iteration of the gestural sequence by moving towards the audience from upstage left, having been pulled there from downstage right where the work began. The by now familiar gestures take on a painful cast, each one seeming to knock a bit of wind out of him, his sternum slightly collapsing as his fingers curl toward his heart. A hand covering his mouth is no longer a coy, “Oops!” but rather a silencing. His head is thrown back, and the reverberations through his body slow down. His eyes are closed tight, and his pointing index finger is now accusatory. His mouth and heart are emphasized as sites of loss and trauma.

As he moves forward in halting steps, he begins to sing a section of “Sunrise, Sunset” from *Fiddler on the Roof*. In a mournful wail, he alters the lyrics from, “Is this the little girl I carried? Is this the little boy at play?” to, “Is this the little boy I buried?” He sings in a deep, guttural moan, the words hard to discern but the melody clear. Ironically, Goode’s voice sounds like Deaf voice in this section, a voice that has no ear for language, that is produced via a visual-kinesthetic feel for language, a practice of matching the shapes of the mouth and the tension of the face of speech therapists. It sounds like the voice that went missing in Wallflower Order’s performance of *Defiance*, and it is here uncomfortably linked to suffering. The words become wails of agony. His face is a mask of pain, a reversal of his opening face, that wide plastic smile. About half way downstage, Goode takes hold of a power drill that has lowered from the ceiling, and continues to limp forward. He extends his arms directly in front of him, holding the drill in both hands and pointing it at the audience. Then he turns the drill on himself, pointing it towards his chest, and continues

²⁰³ Muñoz, 31.

his wailing singing. Crumpled on his knees now, he shifts the aggressive, suicidal gesture to an affectionate one, cradling the drill against his cheek, and rocking himself to blackout.

Hollywood film makes its first explicit appearance here, at the very end of the work, and in a most unlikely fashion. In his later work, Doris Day, Rock Hudson, John Wayne, and a host of other recognizable 'excessively' gendered stars, characters, and genres make their appearance. But 29 cites *Fiddler*, drawing childhood, tradition, and violent change into its discourse. The work, thereby, represents and physically engages the "psychic and material complexity of childhood,"²⁰⁴ something found in the works of several queer-identified, experimental artists. Although an actual child appears in only one of Goode's works, his first self-described musical, *Deeply There: Stories of a Neighborhood* (1998), adolescent figures, versions of "the lost boy" (Burt) are images he frequently revisits.²⁰⁵

Fiddler On the Roof is an unexpected choice, not the usual gay identified musical despite Jerome Robbins' contribution.²⁰⁶ *Fiddler* is about a father, a family, and a culture coming to terms with the changing nature of the society in which they find themselves. The traditions that open the film are slowly eroded as each of Tevye's three elder daughters chooses a different marital path. Firmly ensconced in heteronormative coupling, *Fiddler* is about survival as the ability to let go of tradition and be open to change. "Sunrise, Sunset," appears in the film during the wedding ritual. Tevye's eldest daughter, Tzeitel, is marrying Motel the tailor against the matchmaker Yente's and her parents' wishes for her to marry Lazar Wolf the wealthy butcher. The song, sung in voiceover by Tevye, his wife Golde, Perchik the secular Jewish revolutionary, and Hodel, Tevye's second daughter, is a bittersweet and dirge-like waltz about the changes that occur during the passage of time. It is about letting go of the past and succumbing to the pull of the future. The song culminates with the breaking of the glass and shouts of, "Mazel tov!," confirming the marriage.

Fiddler is, of course, also about gender, and the wedding scene offers further images of a decline in patriarchal authority and the rise of feminist voices. Not only does Tzeitel choose her mate, Hodel dances with Perchik. Men and women are forbidden from dancing together in orthodox Jewish culture, but when the Rabbi is asked whether this is a sin, he replies, "Well it is not a sin exactly..." and before he can finish his thought, Tevye exclaims, "You see? It's not a sin!", and the men and women dance together. But as tradition after tradition is joyfully overthrown during the wedding scene, a group of Cossacks on horseback arrive. They proceed to destroy everything in sight until the constable, who is painted as mildly sympathetic to the Jews throughout the film, arrives to stop them. The Cossacks leave the wedding, but continue through the village, pillaging and setting fire to homes and businesses.

²⁰⁴ Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 243.

²⁰⁵ In much of Goode's later work, he borrows the musical structure more obviously, simultaneously moving away from critical camp. Characters and stories progress in a more linear fashion, making his work look more like a traditional musical.

²⁰⁶ For a discussion of *Fiddler on the Roof* in relation to the construction of cultural identity, see Alissa Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof*, (New York: Picador, 2014).

The insertion of a pogrom scene might have been the producers' effort to include difficult historical facts in their otherwise idealized version of Jewish culture in Czarist Russia, "the cutest shtetl we never had" (Irving Howe).²⁰⁷ But following as it does on the heels of a small gender revolution within the community, one has to wonder if it reflects a certain amount anxiety about how far such revolution can penetrate. The limit case in *Fiddler* is the marriage of Tevye's third daughter, Chava, to a gentile. But even then, Tevye mutters his blessings over the couple as they say good-bye for the last time. It appears, then, that, although the violence that ensues after the wedding is a representation of a version of historical fact, and not about the men and women dancing together, there is an implication of a deeper command(ment) at risk. As the constable says, "Orders are orders. You understand?" Where, as Frances Negron-Muntaner writes, "all heterosexuality is lethal, but only for men"²⁰⁸ in *West Side Story* (1961), another vehicle for Jerome Robbins' choreography, in *Fiddler*, all love outside the established order is always in danger of violent retribution.

Orders are orders. And yet, Tevye bends, and the order shifts. Even though Goode made *29* before gay marriage became a major ballot issue, and *Fiddler* takes place in pre-revolutionary Russia, I can't help but wonder: Tevye has two younger daughters who follow him and his wife to New York; should one of them bring home a woman and ask for their marriage to be blessed? Would there be no other hand? By performing a "queered" version of "Sunrise, Sunset," Goode exploits the wedding scene's depiction of changing gender norms as a collision of joy and violence, re-sounding the sounds of war from the earlier iteration of the gesture sequence. Goode's San Francisco of 1987 was a space of freedom for his gay male and talking dancer desires, a space where a boy can grow up to be an effeminate man who takes pleasure in dancing. But it was also the place where so many gay men, many, many dancers among them, got sick and died. The joyful romp with which *29* begins and the mournful note on which it ends captures these mixed feelings and realities. Whereas *Fiddler* ends with a promise of a future—in Chicago, America! In New York, America!—the future of the wailing boy in *29* is cut off at the knees. This little boy is buried. "Laden with happiness and tears," *29* goes as the song goes.

The saw and the drill are also tools that build and tools that destroy. *29* charts the course of a subjectivity that builds up and breaks down over and over again until it ends with a man rewound to a boy. Part of what makes the end of *29* so powerful is how it rolls off the back of hilarious caricature into something sorrowful and frightening. Audiences laugh all the way through until the dance sequence, when the mood starts to shift until it takes a 180-degree turn at the end of the piece. *29* ends with the child who couldn't grow up to be the effeminate man who also likes and knows how to use power tools, the dancer who also likes to talk. If both American society and the American concert dance world blocked Goode's efforts to be both, in *29* he is, more or less, with some exceptions, allowed to be both.

²⁰⁷ Gerald Sorin, *Irving Howe: A Life of Passionate Dissent*, (New York City: New York University Press, 2002), 224.

²⁰⁸ Negron-Muntaner, "Feeling Pretty: *West Side Story* and Puerto Rican Identity Discourses," *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 100.

Chapter 3

Still Angry: Bill T. Jones' "B(l)ack Talk"

Introduction

The circle of the dance is a permissive circle: it protects and permits...
—Frantz Fanon

In October 2013, the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco celebrated the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company's 30th anniversary with a series of films, performances, and lectures. For the symposium, "Just Enough, Just in Time: Bill T. Jones in Reflection of 30 Years" a panel of critics and scholars gathered to discuss Jones' life and work.²⁰⁹ Marcia Siegel, Ananya Chatterjea, and Adrienne Edwards²¹⁰ presented papers that were careful reflections on Jones' career, refracted through the panelists' particular interests—equal parts biography, dance history, performance analysis, and homage. At the end of their paper presentations, during the audience Q&A session, Jones came down from the back of the Forum theater and stood in front of the women. He took the mic and told the panel,

This is a moment when I should be dead. But I'm not dead...There's something I'm trying to say as I am dead now. This is the dead person talking. Dead people, dead artists don't get a chance to, where you will have the final say, right?

From there, Jones produced a torrent of words, many of which he has pronounced with some variation in countless interviews and lectures, in his signature professor-preacher-barker style. Though Jones' presence at the panel allegedly was a surprise to the panelists—he was not supposed to be there, we were informed—the fact that he was there and spoke up comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with Jones' history. Jones is known for his "back talk," a refusal to hold his (floating)²¹¹ tongue in the face of his critical reception. In this case, Jones, talking back to his critics live from the grave, took the opportunity to add

²⁰⁹ I was in attendance that day, October 10, 2013, and took scattered notes. Fortunately, Jones' speech was captured by an audience member and posted on YouTube, "Bill T. Jones is dead," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8okiKbSTb2M>. The panelists' talks were published in the *Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company 30th Anniversary program/catalogue*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco CA, September 20–November 3, 2013.

²¹⁰ Siegel has been writing about dance for over fifty years and has followed Jones' career from its start in the 1970s. Chatterjea is a dance scholar, dancer, and choreographer, whose research focuses on dance and social justice. Edwards, doctoral candidate in performance studies at NYU, is a curator, scholar, and writer, who focuses on artists of the African diaspora and Global South.

²¹¹ A reference to Jones' 1979 solo *Floating the Tongue*.

his voice to the critical literature that describes, remembers, contextualizes, and analyzes his work. If, as Ann Daly writes, “A work of art is as much constituted by what is said and written about it as by its internal physical form,” then Jones makes sure that this constitutive verbal surround comes as much from him as from his critics.²¹²

In his exquisite monograph on Alvin Ailey, Thomas DeFrantz asks, “How does concert dance created and performed by African American artists fall into and outside of the circle that protects and permits?”²¹³ DeFrantz describes the Fanonian circle as a space where the performer “dissolves into the crowd, thereby enacting a relationship of black identity in antiphonal call-and-response forms.”²¹⁴ Outside the circle, i.e. in public space, “the dancer offers stylized movements as objects to be casually consumed by immobile spectators.”²¹⁵ DeFrantz understands the public space of concert dance as “a white space, a space of production and consumption, a modernist space, a fetishized space, a Europeanist space.”²¹⁶ For DeFrantz, the black artist who enters this space becomes responsible for how black identity is constructed for public consumption. Outside the circle that protects and permits, antiphony, or call-and-response, “the principal formal feature of [Black diasporic/Black Atlantic] artistic practices and expressive cultures,”²¹⁷ loses the context of the inner circle, its “physical intimacy...where all can see the other dancers across the way.”²¹⁸ Outside the circle, visibility (and audibility) is poor.²¹⁹

My aim in this chapter is to expand our understanding of Jones’ back talk by placing it within the call-and-response aesthetics and politics of blackness. I ask, what happens when we listen to Jones’ back talk as an effort to produce “antiphonic communal

²¹² Ann Daly, *Critical Gestures*, 60. Daly reminds us that another choreographer whose words continue to stick to her dances, for better or for worse, is Yvonne Rainer (61). Michelle Dent and MJ Thompson also reflect on how Jones’ “outbursts” hook onto his choreographic works and are repeated by critics in their writings.

²¹³ Thomas DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 197. DeFrantz’s discussion of the Fanonian circle takes place in the chapter “break,” “Black Atlantic Dance” in *Dancing Revelations*. DeFrantz structures his book to “resonate with black musical practice” by interspersing these breaks that serve as “a counternarrative to the main body of the writing” (Ibid, viii). I think of these breaks as in antiphonic relationship with the main body of the text, not supplementary but an integral part of the text-crowd.

²¹⁴ Ibid. Antiphony is one of several Africanist elements in black performance culture enumerated by Robert Farris Thompson. Thomas DeFrantz, following Farris Thompson, offers the following definition of Africanist dance: “Africanist dance values downward-directed energy, insistent rhythmicity, angularity of line, the percussive rupture of underlying flow, individualism within a group dynamic, and access to a dynamic ‘flash of the spirit’ that is spontaneous and unpredictable” (Ibid, 146).

²¹⁵ Ibid, 197-198.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 198.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ A reference to *We Set Out Early... Visibility Was Poor* (1997).

conversation”²²⁰ with his (largely white female) critics, “outside of the circle that protects and permits?”²²¹ I listen to Jones’ back talk as a form of “b(l)ack talk,” a strategic appropriation of blackness²²² in the space where it is doubly disallowed/disavowed—the white concert dance space.

Because he is but one of many talking dancers who sought to contest the valorization of the mute dancer, *that* Jones talks does not represent a radical intervention into canonical Western concert dance history. Rather, it is *how* Jones talks and *to whom* that radically disrupts canonical Western concert dance *historiography*. By talking back to his critics, Jones attempts to recreate the physical intimacy of the inner circle, bending the one-way street that characterizes the canonical choreographer-critic relationship into an antiphonic circle. In doing so, he (re)configures not only his identity as a black dancer in a white (post)modern dance world, but also the very discourse that denies him the power to do so.²²³ I close read Jones’ “offstage” public talks, rather than the spoken elements within his dance theater works, in order to highlight how Jones widens concert dance discourse to include scholarly and journalistic dance writing practice by “enacting a relationship of black identity in antiphonal call-and-response forms.” This move to recreate (or perhaps expose) concert dance discourse in the image of an antiphonic circle is how Jones *disforms* canonical dance criticism.²²⁴

²²⁰ Paul Gilroy, “...to be real’: The dissident forms of black expressive culture,” in *Let’s Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance*, ed. Catherine Ugwa (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 13.

²²¹ This is Frantz Fanon cited in Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, and Thomas DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture*.

²²² E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

²²³ Ann Daly writes of “Discussing the Undiscussable”: “Her manifesto reconstructed the vanishing object of her critical desire: virtuosic, musical, hermetically sealed dances that deal with life only from the safe distance of metaphor and that require for their completion the critic’s formal evaluation” (Daly, 61). It is this notion of completion, a period at the end of the line or, perhaps, the closure of a circle, that Jones pushes against. Twenty years later—same magazine, different writer and choreographer—Tere O’Connor took issue with how Joan Acocella historicized his work. During the Acocella/O’Connor debate, dance critic Deborah Jowitt agreed with Acocella when she likened a dialogue with choreographers to a descent into the “intentional fallacy of criticism.” Jowitt: “If I were writing a review of a performance instead of a feature story, I wouldn’t be asking him [O’Connor] these [background] questions.” A feature story is about the artist, a space where the artist is *allowed* to talk about his/her work. A review is the sacred space of objective critique, in which the work is supposed to speak first to and then through the writer. The work, in its ontological evanescence, bears no trace of the artist according to these critics. Deborah Jowitt, “Getting It: A choreographer squares off against critics of an evanescent art form,” *The Village Voice*, February 28, 2006.

²²⁴ Ann Daly defines “canon criticism” as “the approach that centers around the ideology and practice of connoisseurship...the act of criticism becomes the enforcement of a set of standards regarded as universal and eternal, and, hence, objective. That is to say, it is a project of exclusivity” (Daly, xxxiii). Daly calls Croce’s article “a manifesto for canon

I borrow the term “disform” from Ronald Judy. In *(Dis)Forming the American Canon*, For Judy, the 1977 Yale seminar “Afro-American Literature: From Critical Approach to Course Design,” was a project of canon formation that “articulates a body of work that contradicts, and so disrupts the integrity of, the dominant discourse of American cultural history,”²²⁵ thereby *(dis)forming* the American canon. Dance critics in large part have been responsible for the way we remember dances, writing history and theory both before and after the creation of the field of dance studies. They have been the arbiters of concert dance canon formation. I frame Jones’ intervention into the ways (white) critics write (black) dance history as a disforming strategy in order to emphasize Jones’ aesthetics as a black politics. Jones recognizes dance criticism as a form of writing history that is dependent on a unidirectional relationship between choreographers and critics, in which the choreographer makes and presents the work, the critics writes about it, and the case is closed. When Jones talks b(l)ack to his critics, he all at once inscribes an aesthetics of antiphony into the public discourse on dance, disforming the dominant discursive practice of American dance criticism-as-historiography. Jones “redirect[s] the focus of the debate away from the question of who is in or out of the canon to the question of the canonical *form* in its social and institutional contexts.”²²⁶

To listen to Jones’ back talk as b(l)ack talk, I situate his speech in the theoretical context of afro-pessimist theories of “the fact of blackness” or “the social life in social death.”²²⁷ Following Fred Moten’s formulation of the “poet-critic,” I am trying to listen to Jones as a choreographer-critic, who operates in a “dual mode,” “moving in the necessity of a breakdown of the oppositions between poet and critic, experimentalist and theorist, from within the complexity of the Afro-diasporic cultural field.”²²⁸ This does not mean taking Jones’ account of concert dance history as accurate or accepting his interpretation of his works and process as the final word. It is about listening to Jones as an artist speaking from

criticism” and goes on to discuss the racializing and racist assumptions that drive its ideology. Daly reminds us of an earlier DCA conference (1990) at which Urban Bush Women artistic director and choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar asked, “What is the difference between a classic and a cliché? Does race have something to do with it?” (Ibid, xxxiv).

²²⁵ Ronald Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arab Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), 1.

²²⁶ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), xii.

²²⁷ Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” *InTensions*, no. 5, (Fall/Winter 2011): 1-47. <http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/articles/jaredsexton.php>.15.

²²⁸ Moten and Rowell, “Words Don’t Go There,” 956. Moten’s poet-critics include Amiri Baraka and Nathaniel Mackey. On several occasions, Moten has included Jones among other black artists who work “in the break.” In “the plan,” he writes about how he is going to teach his undergraduates *Zong!*: “We’re gonna need all the help we can get, so we’ll read a bunch of other stuff, especially Ian’s book, and some Glissant and Adrian Piper, some Renée Green and Bill T. Jones, some Cecil Taylor.”

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/01/the-plan/>

the dual tombs of “blackness” and “dancer.” In other words, if the conventional choreographer-critic relationship is one in which the critic has the last word on a work, then that relationship forms a sort of sociality in which the choreographer occupies a position of authorial “death;” that structure is further compounded for a black choreographer who faces the form of “social death” described by Orlando Patterson and elaborated by many critics of the Afrodiaspora. As a black choreographer, Jones’ back talk is a form of social life within a doubly determined artistic and social mortality.

Antiphony Outside the Circle: Bill calls, Arlene responds

[Sings] *One dark and stormy night, Bill Jones was feeling blue. Things didn’t seem right, and he didn’t know what to do. I said, “Baby, please, tell me, ain’t you satisfied?” He looked around, so pitiful, and to me he replied, “Keeps on raining. Look how it’s raining. Your daddy he can’t make no time. Cold winds blowing, cold winds blowing, soon I’ll find.* [Speaks] We used to call that type of public complaint “The Blues.”

I’m not complaining. I’m calling out. ... I called to get a response.

—Bill T. Jones, addressing The American Dance Critics Association, June 4, 1995

At the panel discussion in San Francisco, Jones took issue with Edwards and Chatterjea in particular,²²⁹ but I am most interested in what veteran dance critic Siegel had to say.²³⁰ In her talk, “Dreams of a Fabricated Man,” Siegel described Jones’ early solo

²²⁹ Addressing Chatterjea, Jones fired, “Just like you say queer body. I never called myself queer, my generation, it freaks me out. It’s easy to say but it’s like some people don’t use the word nigger because we worked so hard not to be called niggers, right? So that’s one thing I’d like to talk about.” He said to Edwards, “So, you and I have never talked. How is that possible?” Edwards tried to respond by reminding Jones that they had spoken at a talk she gave on his 1997 *We Set Out Early...Visibility Was Poor*, but he kept at her: “Why are we just now talking? What scared you so much about me that I was unapproachable? When did I become uncool? And am I cool again? It’s a painful question and it takes time and patience. Like I say it’s usually asked when you’re dead but I ain’t dead.”

²³⁰ The focus of this chapter is on Jones’ relationship with journalistic dance critics, for whom I argue he explicitly performs verbal/vocal blackness without laying claim to a “black choreographer” identity. Although the field of dance studies distanced itself from journalistic dance criticism to create dance theory, my project reads dance criticism as a form of popular theorizing. Allow me to briefly characterize how dance scholars approached Jones’ work.

In the 1990s, white dance scholars wrote extensively about Jones’ work (see Shea Murphy, R. Martin, Cooper Albright, Daly). Written during the writers’ own contemporary moment, these analyses share the conviction that Jones’ group works stage a politics of race through movement in ways that simultaneously honor and transcend identity politics. In other words, works like *Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land* (1990) expose identity markers as performative while also performing “an awareness

dancing as seemingly “totally spontaneous and uncensored, both physically and mentally—a commanding presence in those days when deliberate neutrality prevailed downtown.”²³¹

of particular, physical, vulnerable bodies” (Shea Murphy, 98). When writing about Jones’ solo works of the period, scholars characterized those dances as vehicles for expressing the universal within the particular through direct verbal address that confronted “the very real racial gulf between the predominantly white audience and Jones’ position as a black dancer (Cooper Albright, 120). Most writers refer to Jones’ black identity in conjunction with his gay identity and HIV-positive status; they rarely focus on how he performs blackness. Danielle Goldman is a notable exception. See her chapter, “The Breathing Show: Improvisation in the Work of Bill T. Jones,” in *I Want To Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

Except for passing remarks about his well-known mouthiness (Daly), no dance scholar, black or white, has subjected Jones’ oral discourse to sustained analysis. I can imagine two reasons why dance scholars avoid discussions of Jones’ offstage back talk. First, scholars of dance, particularly during the early years of Dance Studies, worked hard to keep choreography and dancing at the center of their writing. Second, Jones’ often incendiary talk does not help writers in their efforts to expose and celebrate his radicalism as a choreographer.

²³¹ Pitting Jones’ multimedia spectacle, theatrical style, and black cultural citations against the “prevailing” downtown neutrality, Siegel reiterates Sally Banes’ characterization of “downtown dance” as primarily associated with the Judson Dance Theater postmodernists, specifically their formal or “analytic” strain (Banes 1987, 1993). Although Banes mentions other approaches that the members of Judson (and Grand Union) used, including highly theatrical and text-heavy choreographies, she valorizes task-based, pedestrian work as the era’s biggest intervention into and contribution to (post)modern dance history.

In her review of *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, Susan Manning rejects and reformulates Banes’ characterization and historicization of postmodern dance. Manning positions Jones alongside “downtown artists” Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, David Gordon, and Douglas Dunn. According to Manning, Jones (along with other members of his generation, including Karole Armitage, Molissa Fenley, and Mark Morris) deployed “the resources of virtuosity and theatricality” to “push toward a collapse of the distinction between modern dance and 20th-century ballet” (Susan Manning, “Modernist Dogma and Post-Modern Rhetoric: A Response to Sally Banes’ ‘Terpsichore in Sneakers,’” *TDR* 32, no. 4 (1989): 37-38). For Manning, Jones’ work meets the conditions of her definition of *modernism*: “the reflexive rationalization of movement and the dual practice of 20th-century ballet and modern dance” (Ibid, 35). Manning goes on to define postmodernism as resulting “when either of the two conditions of modernism...cease to exist” (Ibid, 37). Here, Jones takes his place as the only black artist in a roster of white concert dance artists, modernist or postmodernist.

But in the preface to her 2005 *Modern Dance Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, Manning called Jones a “black postmodernist” (Manning, ix), an artist who, “used spoken text, costuming, and gestural allusions to confound spectators’ preconceptions of race, gender, and sexuality” (Ibid, ix). In this book, Manning seeks to revise American dance historiography, pointing out that “until recently a divided historiography marked the

She called Jones' performing "loud, insistent, angry." Alongside these euphemistic references to Jones' blackness, she explicitly noted the black dance elements in Jones' work—"wry minstrel shuffles and imitation tap," "shuffles and smiles [that] could spark an ironic connection to minstrelsy"—and referred to his athletic background as well as his "raffish black extended family." Siegel also remembered Jones' solos of the 1970s, in which "he'd make allusions to critics he scorned or admired. If I was singled out, I didn't know whether to feel complimented or offended."

Siegel did not explicitly connect Jones' allusions to critics with the other Africanisms she recalls in his early work. But Brenda Dixon Gottschild, who has devoted her scholarly career to "digging the Africanist presence in American performance," most certainly would. Dixon Gottschild would recognize in Siegel's memory the antiphonal rhetorical strategy known as "playing the dozens." Reflecting on Jones's work in the late 1980s, Dixon Gottschild remembers Jones' performance-presentation at a Dance Critics Association conference in New York:

Jones 'played the dozens'—that is, he critiqued the critics. He had been invited to give an informal solo performance that would then become part of the discussion by a panel of dance critics and scholars. He danced and spoke a caustic response to critical reception of his work (not necessarily by the critics who invited him to the conference), in no uncertain terms. Although his 'critique' was not cast in racial terms, he embodied the conflict that exists between the performer who is both black and gay and the predominantly white, heterosexual, middle-aged, middle-class female critic writing for mainstream American publications.²³²

annals of American theater dance" (Ibid, xxi), one that, on the one hand, wrote "the history of black dance," and on the other, "served as a crucial means for constructing the whiteness of (post)modern dance" (Ibid, xxi). Manning claims Jones challenged this historiography by "explod[ing] the distinction between black concert dance and postmodern dance on stage," thereby making it "difficult for critics and scholars to uphold the distinction on the page" (Ibid, xxii). According to Manning, Jones' choreography, along with multiculturalism's effect on university curricula and the entrance of "the critical concept of whiteness" into the humanities, launched new historiographies that were "more inclusive" and "cross-cultural" (Ibid, xxii).

Fred Moten closes his epic chapter "In the Break" with a quote from Banes' *Greenwich Village, 1963* (Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 54): "...there were no black underground filmmakers...there were no downtown black dancers...there were no black Happenings-makers; no black pop-artists... That is, many black artists may not have had a taste for the kind of iconoclastic activity—the product of some measure of educational privilege—in which the white artists reveled" (Moten, *In the Break*, 169). His chapter is his response to that sort of historicization of the avant-garde.

²³² Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 155.

Dixon Gottschild places Jones' critique of his critics among other Africanisms, including "African American preaching styles,"²³³ and rap. "Playing the dozens," a ritual play of insult that has its origins in slavery, well within the circle that protects and permits, has an antiphonal structure with strict rules: "Everybody has to understand the rules, including the people watching."²³⁴ When Jones plays the dozens with his critics, he is "snapping on" people who do not understand the rules.

Jones' antiphonal, call-and-response, playing the dozens strategy of the 1970s and 1980s became the topic of heated debate at the 1995 Dance Critics Association meeting in Pittsburgh, where Jones, as he said, "called to get a response." The transcript of the event reveals Jones and his critics playing by different rules. Jones' invitation to speak at the meeting came on the heels of the controversy that erupted around *The New Yorker* critic Arlene Croce's article, "Discussing the Undiscussable," in which she lambasted Jones for crossing the line between "legitimate" "anti-art"—"intimidation as part of the game postmodernists play"²³⁵—to "actual" intimidation that "disarmed criticism."²³⁶ Croce mobilized her vitriol around *Still/Here*, Jones' 1994 work that presented the voices, faces, and movement vocabularies of people with terminal illness, only to drop it in favor of sputtering and spitting at "dissed blacks, abused women, or disenfranchised homosexuals," "overweight dancers...dancers with sickled feet,"²³⁷ plus the NEA, butoh, Pina Bausch, and people living with AIDS.²³⁸

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Professor Jerry Watts cited in Taylor, "COMMITMENTS: Snapping Back: When playing 'the dozens,' nothing's off limits—not even your mother. All you need is a quick wit, a sharp tongue and a cool head," *Los Angeles Times*, May 30, 1994. http://articles.latimes.com/1994-05-30/news/ls-63970_1_quick-wit.

²³⁵ Arlene Croce, "Discussing the Undiscussable," in *The Crisis of Criticism*, ed. Sharon Beder (New York: The New Press, 1998), 21.

²³⁶ Ibid, 24.

²³⁷ Ibid, 17.

²³⁸ Cultural critics of all stripes responded to the essay—letters were solicited from several well-known voices by *The New Yorker's* then editor Tina Brown—either in defense or condemnation of Croce's argument. These letters to the editor appeared in the January 30, 1995 issue of *The New Yorker*. Critics of the essay were most offended by her audacity to discuss a dance she did not see and by her concept of "victim art." Many writers recognized the essay's stab at professional boundary maintenance and the panic at the core of Croce's "cri de coeur... a landmark admission of the bankruptcy of the old critical vocabulary, confronted with ever-new and evolving forms of art" (Joyce Carol Oates, in Beder, PAGE). Twenty years later, critics recognize that Croce is left "stranded on the wrong side of history. Artists bringing personal histories to the table are now mainstream" (Jays, David. "No Pity Party: moving beyond 'victim art.'" *The Guardian*, January 8, 2015). Other responses, as well as Croce's original piece, are collected in Beder, Sharon, *The Crisis of Criticism*. For a discussion of the Croce controversy in the context of Tina Brown's stewardship of the magazine, see chapter 3 of Schilb, *Rhetorical Refusals: Defying Audiences' Expectations*.

Although “Discussing the Undiscussable” is by far one of her most vicious “reviews”—telling your readers, “Don’t go” is about as bad as it gets for a performing artist—Croce’s piece is just the apogee of her frustration with Jones as only “the most extreme case among the distressingly many now representing themselves to the public not as artists but as victims and martyrs.” It is also not the first article in which Croce lays out her canon criticism. In a near perfect echo of her “dissed blacks” diatribe, Croce wrote in her 1974 review of two drag ballet companies, that “homosexual balletomanes” and “insulted feminists,” both “sexually prejudiced” groups, do not understand ballet when they “celebrate ballet’s distortions of women” or “denounce it.”²³⁹ For Croce, ballet is a world of “signs and designs” that has nothing to do with actual women: “The arabesque is real, the leg is not.”²⁴⁰ To discuss the leg does violence to ballet’s signs and designs; to be asked to know the dancer from the dance is an affront to good taste.

At the Dance Critics Association meeting, Jones, still shaken and raw from the impact of Croce’s non-review, accused Croce of anti-black racism and homophobia.²⁴¹ A large portion of the dance critics in attendance urged Jones to “keep cool about the whole thing,” to not take it so personally, to rise above the fray. Deborah Jowitt would not concede that Croce “intended to hurt,” while Jones pointed out that Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou begged to differ. Marcia Siegel stood up and said, “I think this is a racist article,” but then quickly followed up with, “But it’s more than that. It’s offensive in many ways, to me and to others.”²⁴² A shouting match erupted between Jones and current *New Yorker* dance critic Joan Acocella, when Acocella said, “I want to go on record and say I thought that, whether you agree or disagree with it, Croce’s article was neither racist nor homophobic.” At one point an unnamed critic says, “I’m an outsider...” and Jones interrupts, “Me too!”

The exchange between Jones and his critics at DCA reveals a conversation at cross-purposes. Jones calls to the critics—“What do you believe? And, does it show in what you write? Can you be decent? What’s decent?”—then the critics change the subject in a manner that seeks to reinforce their dominance. Deborah Jowitt insisted that critics did speak out against Croce’s article and that Jones “can’t heap somebody else’s shit on our heads.” Joan Acocella said criticism is not personal, “It has to do with...art.” Jones said to Acocella, “You’re patronizing me. Are you trying to say I’m crazy, Joan?” Antiphony is a practice of non-hierarchical collaboration, but when critics respond to Jones’ call, which he explicitly situates within a black historical context,²⁴³ with discourses on free speech, the separation of art from life (i.e. from the artist as person), they become the author(itie)s.

²³⁹ Arlene Croce, “The Two Trockaderos,” *The New Yorker*, October 14, 1974.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ The American Dance Critics’ Association Conference, Sponsored by The Dance Alloy, Pittsburgh Ballet Company studios, Keynote Address, Bill T. Jones, 4 June 1995, Box 32, Folder 6. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library.

²⁴² Tony Kushner flirted with the accusation in his letter to the editor: “I can’t tell whether she’s guilty here of racism or of mean-spirited provocation or merely of inept phrasing.” *The New Yorker*, January 30, 1995.

²⁴³ “As I said to a group of Italian students recently in Milan, I think about people lying in the bottom of—excuse the analogy—slave ships, and they’re chained, and they’re lying in

Croce Hears the Call

Time and tensions did not permit either Jones or the critics to look closely at Croce's piece. But even if there had been an opportunity for calm reflection, I do not think Jones would have been able to see through his outrage to a surprising fact about Croce: Croce hears his call. She hears his call when she remembers the time, "When I blasted an early work of his with the phrase 'fever swamps,' he retaliated by using the phrase as the title of a piece."²⁴⁴ Though she frames her relationship with Jones in antagonistic terms, and Jones vows to never mention her name,²⁴⁵ Croce and Jones have been taking turns putting marks through each other's names in history since the beginning of his career.

Half way through "Discussing the Undiscussable," Croce thundered,

their shit and their piss, and they've been there for a week or so. And what do you do in the bottom of the slave ship that's pitch black is, you call out, in your native tongue, in hopes that somebody from your village will call back. And this calling out became a form, right?—this call and response. So no, I'm not guilt-tripping you. I'm calling out, that's all. Do we speak the same language? Maybe not." Jones' apology for the analogy is another way of asserting that although he and his white critics do speak the same language of concert dance discourse, as a black man, there is a limit to their ability to communicate.

²⁴⁴ "Jones is the apostle of postmodern pop; he has marched the New Narcissism right into the fever swamps" ("Names and Places," July 12, 1982). It is notable that Jones chose to create *Fever Swamps* (1983) for a company run by another black, gay man, a move that helps underscore the anti-black racism in Croce's writing about Jones. The dance itself is formalist, "quirky, self-referential" (DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 168), and seems to deliberately shy away from narrative, same sex partnering, or anything that may be considered "in bad taste." Croce, creating her own fever swamp with "Discussing the Undiscussable," claims to have liked Jones when "he seemed to be uninterested in conforming to the stereotype of the respectable black choreographer" (Croce, 19), before he got sucked into "the ethos of community outreach" of the late 1980s. Ailey was nothing if not the respectable black choreographer (see DeFrantz 2006 for an in-depth discussion of the context for Ailey's performative respectability), so it seems fair to read her comment as a jab directed at yet another black choreographer. By naming a dance for Ailey "Fever Swamps," Jones latches Croce's criticism onto a "respectable" black choreographer, deftly redefining respectability and exposing her seemingly personal vitriol as an instance of institutional anti-black racism.

²⁴⁵ In his 2005 interview with scholars Michelle Dent and MJ Thompson, Jones said, "Then I got this response from the writer at the *New Yorker*, whom I never mention by name. I'm serious—and please, we will not say the name. Just as the person who said, 'Don't come and see the performance,' and did not see it themselves, tried to put a mark through my name in history. I am now repaying the compliment. I never say her name again, in this life. OK?" (Dent, Jones, and Thompson, 49). At Yerba Buena in 2013, Jones lets slip Croce's name.

It wasn't long before Jones became openly inflammatory. Politically provocative, accusatory, violent, it was a barely domesticated form of street theater. And it declared war on critics, the most vocal portion of the audience. Jones's message, like Forsythe's, was clear: No back talk!²⁴⁶

Siegel may have been unsure about whether to take offense when Jones singled her out for attack, Croce had no doubt; offset and without scare quotes, Croce's "No back talk!" is clearly directed at Jones (rather than the other way round) for disarming, or disforming, criticism.

After the Croce debacle, Jones began talking about "taking the high road" by turning to form.²⁴⁷ He began to make dances that "eschewed all the conventions of dance theatre—direct address, narrative, and mime; overt articulations of meaning; the expanded use of objects as props or otherwise less ambiguous symbols."²⁴⁸ At YBCA, he contextualized this shift as an effort to play by the rules of dance modernism. In reference to the late 1990s, Jones cried,

That was a period when I had been so beat up by *Still/Here* and people saying I'm preaching to them all the time that I thought, 'Well I'm gonna take the high road. I'm going to go the aesthetic introspective route.' 'Oh he's lost it. It was so much more interesting when he was giving the finger to audiences blah blah blah...' I was trying to get into the club that Paul Taylor was in, that Merce was in, that Trisha was in. Did I ever get to that club?

Here Jones marks the Croce affair as a watershed moment in his career, not merely one that forced him to rethink his choreographic and performative strategies. At the risk of giving Croce a degree of power Jones has since worked hard to deny her, her article seems to have brought those strategies to Jones' awareness, affording him even more possibilities for radical binary play. In other words, in a perhaps perverse way, Croce participates in Jones' antiphonal circle. By precisely *not* attending a performance of *Still/Here* she brings Jones' discourse to critical attention, addressing his back talk, talking back to it. As such, she inadvertently hears the call and responds.

So, for all its meanness, Croce's "no back talk" operates as a critical hinge around which to understand the complex dynamics and meanings of Jones' brand of call-and-response. In a backhanded way, she hears him. She grants Jones the same aspect of the 60s experimental dance legacy that I recognize as his central disforming strategy, "the power they claimed to control the terms on which they could be artists and be written about as artists" (20). By labeling him a choreographer who talks back to his critics, who even dares to use their own words to do so, Croce inadvertently reveals how Jones disforms the critic-

²⁴⁶ Croce, "Discussing the Undiscussable," 22.

²⁴⁷ Danielle Goldman situates the Croce affair "[b]etween Jones's overtly political *Last Supper* and the discussions about formal purity that encircle his work of the late 1990s" (Goldman, *I Want to Be Ready*, 119).

²⁴⁸ MJ Thompson, "Sincerely Dancing: Bill T. Jones' Sleight-of-Hand," *TDR* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 76.

choreographer relation through a performance of blackness, a repetitive re-enactment and re-imagining of the “problem of speaking for a black in an anti-black world.”

The Turn to (Dis)Form

Beat up as he may have felt, Jones much-discussed “formal turn,” what he also called his turn to “beauty,” hardly lacks politics. After feeding journalists this notion of turning form, Jones went on to signify on formalism as code for white aesthetic practice. Jones choreographs his public talks as a meeting between formalism and emotional expression. The relationship between the two holds a privileged place in Jones’ discourse, which revolves around a handful of interrelated (binary) themes:²⁴⁹ the encounter between European modernism and African so-called primitivism and between “high” art and popular culture—collapsed at the level of his bicultural body; the theaters of white concert dance (art) and the black church (religion/faith)—collapsed through a notion of secular spirituality; his dancing and his speech—collapsed by their co-presence on stage and by how his speech becomes part of how his dances are remembered. All at once, Jones’ discourse exhibits a utopic desire for their total undoing, a penchant for deconstruction, a deep knowledge of the power of their hierarchical relations, and a savvy ability to manipulate that power in the service of his aesthetics and politics.

Jones’ back talk often hinges on a tense play between formalism and emotional expression, overlapping with the relation between modernism and primitivism, and between the European and the African, “two massive cultural constellations [that] are fused and interwoven in many aspects” but “also manifest distinct, discrete, and somewhat opposing characteristics and lend themselves to discussion as binary opposites, if not separate streams.”²⁵⁰ When Jones says, in speaking “autobiographically” he “thought that the formalist palette was being expanded,”²⁵¹ he expresses disillusionment in the face of a critical response invested in policing the ground between those separate streams.

As an artist who has made a career of making dances for public space as white space—“the club”—Jones uses his wide public platform to express his concern with how he is seen as a (black) artist working in the context of (white) postmodern dance theater. He does so, in part, by strategically exploiting the fact that his white critics do not understand the rules of call-and-response. In his solo dances, Jones deploys antiphony in two ways: [1] he embeds antiphony within a dance by setting a call and response structure between

²⁴⁹ I listened to scores of Jones speeches and interviews, many of which can be found on YouTube. I culled these repeated themes from the following: “TEDxMet: Icons” (12/18/13); New York Live Arts, *Live Ideas: The Worlds of Oliver Sacks* (April 17, 2013); *Counterculture* with Kweli Washington (11/30/12 Dateline NYC); “The Creative Process” lecture at Vassar College (5/19/2008); ArtsBrookfield25.com; Chicago Humanities Festival. BTJ: A Life Well-Danced, with Onye Ozuzu, Chair of Dance Department, Columbia College, Chicago, 2013; BTJ: Legacies & Legends, 2/2011, NJPAC Alternate Routes; The Colbert Report (12/7/2009). See the Bibliography for published and archival sources of interviews.

²⁵⁰ Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*, xiv.

²⁵¹ Daly, 71.

“black” movement and vocal production, and “white” movement set to European music, and [2] he actually calls from the stage to the audience. Michelle Dent recognizes this device in his solo *Untitled* (1989): “By actually asking, ‘What time is it?’ Jones was employing rhetorical strategies associated with the practice of call and response of black Christian worship, the political activism of the Civil Rights Movement, and the techniques of rupture associated with the historic avant-garde.”²⁵² Jones’ public talks parallel this strategy when Jones juxtaposes European Enlightenment rhetoric with “spontaneous” eruptions into black spiritual and secular song—the black church meeting the ivory tower. In doing so, he lays claim to his biculturalism, his right as heir to two intellectual and aesthetic traditions. At the same time, he brings the politics of race and the burden of representation into relief through repeated performances of a particular oratorical style. In his talks, Jones develops a kind of performance lecture format that recalls the strategy of Brechtian defamiliarization, a distancing mechanism required of conceptual “high art.”²⁵³ Through didactic explanation, and an abrupt and conscious code-switch, Jones manages to destabilize the racist categorization of the black vernacular as wholly natural, spontaneous, and emotional while, at the same time, redefining formalism as a black practice.

For example, at a certain point in Jones’ interview with acclaimed neurologist and author, Oliver Sacks,²⁵⁴ Jones talks about a relation of hierarchy he perceives in modernism between formalism and expressionism: “That which was too expressionistic, too imbued with emotional information or something extraneous to the elemental act of time, space, gravity, was somehow or other less than...” Sacks replies with a reflection on Wagner, in which he called him “a great criminal” for being “manipulative,” full of “false, specious sentiment,” “overblown and inflated,” and for moving him “in a way which I can’t bear; I feel ugliness taking hold of me,” Jones, looking straight into Sacks’ eyes, begins to sing a spiritual: “Walk with me Lord, walk with me, walk with me lord, please walk with me, while I’m on this tedious journey walk with me lord, walk with me.” When he sings, “Hold my hand lord, hold my hand, hold my hand lord please hold my hand,” he touches Sacks’

²⁵² Michelle Dent, “Checking the Time: Bill T. Jones’s American Utopia,” *TDR* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 35. The *TDR* issue in which Dent’s article appears, features five articles devoted to research on Jones in a section entitled, “Bill T. Jones: Dancing and Talking.” Guest edited by Dent, the issue “investigate[s] the multivalent impact of Jones’s life and art on audiences and critics.” (abstract). The abstract acknowledges that Jones’ words are part of his work and the writers take his words seriously in ways that his critics do not.

²⁵³ He tells Ann Daly that he speaks in performance in order to “undercut this transcendent experience” (Daly, 75) of the theater and raise audience awareness of their habits of spectatorship.

²⁵⁴ New York Live Arts, *Live Ideas: The Worlds of Oliver Sacks*, curated by Lawrence Weschler, April 17-21, 2013. This conversation took place on April 17, 2013. Weschler joined Jones and Sacks on stage. Jones talked about how he perceives his emotionally charged, expressionist performances as obstacles to getting “inside the club of being considered a good artist”: “That which was too expressionistic, too imbued with emotional information or something extraneous to the elemental act of time, space, gravity, was somehow or other less than...”

hand. He then abruptly asks, “Now, I’m manipulating you now, huh?” Sacks replies, “You’re full of surprises.”

Jones explains that his song was a way of bringing up something that he felt got in the way of getting “inside the club of being considered a good artist.” He continues,

I have a series of improvisations that I do called *The Sweet Impediment to Greatness*, and I dance to Al Green, I dance to anything that gives me a feeling, and I just let go. I call it *The Sweet Impediment to Greatness* because it can’t be great because it is so available, so emotional, and yet this is the same man that loves Bach, that loves Balanchine, and is trying to find the voice.

Jones indexes blackness by singing songs of the black church and the Blues, and referring to Al Green and improvisation, and then associates that blackness with availability and emotionality.²⁵⁵ He does this in contrast to (unspoken) whiteness, the formalism of Bach and Balanchine, the beauty of whose voices somehow are produced and received by the intellect, something not unlike Croce’s “signs and designs.”²⁵⁶ What Jones seems to be saying is that the ways in which black vernacular performance draws audiences into feeling prohibits those performances from offering the critical Kantian distance that makes the work of art.

Next to this and other performances of black emotionality in contrast to white intellectualism, Jones juxtaposes an exploration of those same available and emotional black aesthetic practices *as form*. In 2013, he tells us that his mother’s praying was,

the first theater I ever saw, my mother, Estella Jones, down on her knees on Christmas morning. Now I say it was theater because this was the woman I knew, all 200 pounds of her, but she would transform, and she would begin to riff and improvise. She’s doing something that is so pure that in my life the only place I see it now, because I’m not a religious person, is on the stage.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵ Jones often conflates the autobiographical with the available and emotional. Ann Cooper Albright writes, “The denigration of the autobiographical as too experiential and personal to be considered ‘high’ art was a reaction to the ways in which women’s autobiographies and nineteenth-century slave narratives challenged the prevailing notion of selfhood as one of individuation, defined in opposition to the other” (Cooper Albright, 123). Both Jones and Cooper Albright elide blackness with emotional autobiography begging the question of how formalist sentiment falls somehow outside of autobiography.

²⁵⁶ Jones frequently refers to Balanchine as his favorite choreographer (sometimes it’s Merce Cunningham). In the dance *How to Walk an Elephant* (1985) that Jones and Zane made for Ailey extensively drew upon Balanchine’s *Serenade* (1934), and was slammed by critics. Thomas DeFrantz writes, “Jones, for his part, claimed ownership of the Balanchine legacy as an artist committed to concert dance; like Ailey, Jones saw the Euro-American heritage of neoclassical ballet as an important aspect of his own explorations” (DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 170).

²⁵⁷ ArtsBrookfield25.com.

Back in 1998, describes his interaction with his mother in *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land* in this way:

When my mother is praying in a very traditional way—which was taught to her by her mother and her mother's mother—and then I'm standing next to her on the opera house stage and I'm shuddering, doing isolations in the joints, the back, the shoulders, the hips, it is not *interpreting her words at all*. I'm responding to the cadences, the rise and fall of her voice, her breath, the rhythm which is there. I'm trying to underline: do you see what a poet she is? Do you see what an orator she is?²⁵⁸

Estella Jones' performance of prayer is not just form, but “pure” form, “an exploration of rhythms and cadences not unlike Jones' anatomical investigations. The scene in *Last Supper* is an exercise in overlap rather than contrast.

It seems, then, that for Jones, deploying black speech and song alongside white dance idioms in white public space is a practice of resistance and accommodation, those “inseparable twins,” “this double quality [that] ought to be central to all accounts of the performance traditions of new world blacks and their relation to the history of the cultural industries.”²⁵⁹ Sometimes it is hard to say what it is resisting and what it is accommodating, so embedded is Jones in his own and mainstream dance critics' accounts of the white avant-garde.

To resist that recuperative, canonizing move, Jones talks about his mother's prayer as a performance with recognizable and complex formal structures—yet another disforming move. Along with the ways he draws his critics into an antiphonic circle from within the outside, Jones' move to read his mother's prayer as an exploration of the formal concerns of poetry, oration, and dance, complicates DeFrantz's claim that, “Concert dance is never vernacular dance; dance that is prepared can only make reference to dance that emerged in closed black spaces.”²⁶⁰ In this view, Jones' mobilization of black vernacular dance, speech, and song in the context of concert dance fails to resist its mutation—its becoming choreography, its “whitening,” and its misunderstanding. It seems to me that Jones both feels the truth of DeFrantz's assessment and resists it by performing repeated public discourse that points to that reference. In other words, to resist the transformation of the vernacular of “closed black spaces” into choreography as a performance of whiteness—choreography as writing—Jones joins black vernacular “corporeal orature”²⁶¹ with verbal orature. Jones' discourse on form and formalism helps critics see beyond mere reference to a potential experience of emergence, of actualization. Jones' b(l)ack talk resists the six-of-one-half-dozen-of-the-other historicization of black vernacular as either separate stream or element of postmodern bricolage. Jones' repeated bicultural performances disform the relationship of choreography to writing and dancing to speech. That perpetual play is the way he manages to speak a black politics.

²⁵⁸ Daly, *Critical Gestures*, 74.

²⁵⁹ Gilroy, 16.

²⁶⁰ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 199.

²⁶¹ DeFrantz, “The Black Beat Made Visible,” 67.

The Angry Black Choreographer

It had been a busy week of searching. Wednesday, Oren Jacoby²⁶² discussing why the alienated black protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is not simply bitter, but speaks for all in his rage.
—Bill T. Jones, TEDxMet talk

you all say things like that about me easily—Bill equals anger...
—Bill T. Jones²⁶³

Carl Paris captures the affective quality of Jones' verbal discourse of the 1980s:

Jones helped to shape those times by marking his own aesthetic and political territory, negotiating a dichotomous world of black and white, aggressive and passive, gay and straight. Both outspoken and ambivalent about being a black homosexual postmodern dancer and choreographer, Jones invokes a Janus-like figure, challenging himself to please stand up, fighting over which 'Bill T.' will prevail, and playing out this conflict in his choreography as well as in his public statements.²⁶⁴

Paris recognizes Jones' dance and speech as performative stagings of his particular identity struggle as a black dancer-choreographer in a white dance field. More recently, Paris attributed Jones' "confrontational style"²⁶⁵ to the tension Jones felt (and claims to have felt) between his success in the white postmodern dance scene and his black male identity. Jones and his critics perpetually note his antagonistic style, one that simultaneously seduces audiences to look at his body, while exploiting their fetishistic gaze in order to exert control over it.²⁶⁶

²⁶² Jacoby is the director of the stage adaptation of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which premiered in Chicago at the Court Theater in January 2012. Jones spoke at the *Ellison at 100* event at the Studio Museum Harlem on March 1, 2014.

²⁶³ Keynote address to The American Dance Critics Association, June 4, 1995.

²⁶⁴ Carl Paris, "Will the Real Bill T. Jones Please Stand Up?" *TDR: The Drama Review*, 49.2 (T 186), Summer 2005, 64.

²⁶⁵ Paris, 2010 CORD proceedings, 22.

²⁶⁶ Cooper Albright cites Jones' reasons for speaking on stage as a mode of "Claiming a voice within an artform that traditionally glorifies the mute body" in order to "change the dynamic of the objectifying gaze" (Cooper Albright, 120-121). At YBCA, Chatterjea said, "Repeatedly, Jones has mediated the hypervisibility and sometimes the invisibility of the black body by surrounding it with a high level of aurality, talking to his audiences continuously, during performance and outside of it." In interviews and in his memoir, *Last Night On Earth*, Jones explains that he began speaking on stage as a response to his black hypervisibility/invisibility, confronting and antagonizing his audiences in order to counteract objectification and fetishization.

Jones' willingness to navigate and manipulate the terms of discourse of mainstream dance history and criticism is one of the keys to his enduring success but it also doesn't sit right with him. In particular, he takes up the burden of representation of black identity with ornery resistance. Time and again, he describes his discomfort with being labeled a "black choreographer."²⁶⁷ But Paris notes the ambiguity at the heart Jones' relationship to his blackness. Paris contends that Jones "never completely separated himself from his ethnicity; he actually found his racial identity useful, if not altogether desirable,"²⁶⁸ despite his frequent remarks about feeling alienated from both black and white dance culture(s). He writes, "Jones has not been shy about referencing aspects of his black culture when it suited him."²⁶⁹ We continue to find this ambivalent and equivocal reference to black culture in nearly every one of Jones' public talks.²⁷⁰ And yet Jones regards those references as embodied expressions of his blackness that he is compelled from the outside to make. Although in terms of the formation of the dance canon, Jones has largely succeeded in evading being interpellated as a black choreographer, he has nonetheless been persistently subjected to other names, among them, the "angry black man."

In this section, I consider Jones' angry discourse as a sort of "parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command, a repetition of the law into hyperbole, a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it."²⁷¹ Propelled by a legitimate anger, Jones signifies on the angry black man stereotype through repeated performances of spectacular scenes of subjection.²⁷² These performances performatively reveal his white critics' desire to witness and punish his disobedience, turning the spotlight on the canonical mechanism for writing (black) dancing.

Fred Moten offers us a way to situate the ambivalence Paris locates at the heart of Jones' performances anger *within* blackness as opposed to in tension with it. Moten identifies a "normative impulse that is at the heart of—but that *strains against*—the black radicalism that *strains against it*," a "strife between normativity and the deconstruction of norms...essential not only to contemporary black academic discourse but also to the discourses of the barbershop, the beauty shop, and the bookstore."²⁷³ And, I would add, the discourses of concert dance. Jones performances of anger display just this sort of strain, a desire for recognition as an "unmarked"²⁷⁴ choreographer that strains against a black

²⁶⁷ *Last Night On Earth*.

²⁶⁸ Paris, 70.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁷⁰ See Dent and Thompson; Ozuzu. Thompson uses the notion of passing as "one way to understand the speed and dexterity with which Jones displays, then masks; speaks, then contradicts; continually shifts direction and refuses the pronouncements of viewers, critics and, perhaps, even himself" (Thompson, 80).

²⁷¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 122.

²⁷² Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²⁷³ Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 177–178.

²⁷⁴ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

radicalism that strains against it. Thinking Jones' performances of anger in this way situates his seemingly contentious relationship to his blackness as a form of black political and aesthetic expression.

Jones anger is a performance of Moten's strain, a response to the ways critics refuse to recognize black performance forms as form while, at the same, consuming those performances as pure affect. Jones performs a black politics by signifying on the stereotypical angry black man—performances of anger as invitation to see it as performance and thus, paradoxically, hear it as beyond mere reference. Jones' angry performances function as a specifically black form of play that is “part of the signifying game that alternately invites deeper readings and masks complexity—depending on the viewer's commitment to reading well.”²⁷⁵ They are also expressions of what it means “to suffer from political despair when your identity is bound up with utopian political aspirations and desires,” an effort to reconfigure identity “in the absence or betrayal of those aspirations.”²⁷⁶ Jones asks scholars MJ Thompson and Michelle Dent in 2005, “Why can't I be free?”—from “racial looking,” to produce “politically neutral art,” to talk about race when you want to talk about art, and to talk about art when you want to talk about race?²⁷⁷

Jones' cry, “Why can't I be free?” is a performance of agency couched in a discourse of emancipation.²⁷⁸ The rhetoric of freedom from constraint is the container for his performances of anger, affective displays that cut through the “integrity” of the critical establishment. Speaking with scholar-critic Ann Daly in 1998, Jones said in reference to his citation of Leroi Jones'/Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* into *Last Supper*, “Already retro at that time in the early 1990s, it harked back to a time that many people would like to forget, of real anger in the '60s. Black rage was allowed then. In the '90s, black rage is not allowed anymore, because supposedly we all have moved on past it.”²⁷⁹ Fast forward to the early twenty-first century and to express black rage is still to have “bad manners”: “...twenty-first-century social graces dictate that references to race always be issued *sotto voce*, so as not to cause any undue discomfort.”²⁸⁰ Speaking then as now, Jones' performances of black rage cut *ad alta voce* across sociotemporal boundaries.

Although, as I said in the beginning of this chapter, how and to whom Jones talks disforms canonical dance criticism and historiography, *that* he talks does matter. That he talks, angrily, shows his audiences, again and again, that we have not “moved on past it.” Jones' anger is real. He tells Onye Ozuzu, “What does it mean to be a real black person? First of all, a real black person is an angry person”—but his critics have trouble hearing the content of that anger beneath the affect. Omar Ricks explains that it is part of the black intellectual experience to be heard as angry. In his analysis of the 2012 election and liberal pundits' rage over Obama's failure to rage in a debate with Mitt Romney, Ricks writes,

²⁷⁵ Thompson, “Sleight of Hand,” 79.

²⁷⁶ Moten, *In the Break*, 93.

²⁷⁷ Jones, Dent, Thompson, 53.

²⁷⁸ Judy rethinks the slave narrative as a form of “writing for agency” rather than “writing for emancipation” (Judy, 161-162).

²⁷⁹ Daly, 75.

²⁸⁰ Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 5.

But unlike others' political anger—say, that of the 'angry white man' of the 1994 and 2010 elections—the anger of actual Black people is never allowed to ground legitimate political demands and movements *for Black people's interests*. When it does, those movements go down in history as illegitimate 'threat[s] to the internal security of the United States.' Our interests are delegitimized before we can even articulate them.²⁸¹

Though it is sometimes hard to argue that Jones works in the interest of black people—he frequently calls out structural racism only to attenuate the impact by drawing out a performance of licking his personal wounds—his critics perceive his anger as a threat to *their* internal security and to the security of their profession. As usual, no one says it more clearly than Croce:

The concerts that Bill T. Jones gave with his partner, Arnie Zane, were different from the ones he gave after Zane's death, though both were fairly typical of the post-sixties atmosphere of 'conceptual' dance.²⁸² Talking and singing were mixed with nondancing. It was Jones who split the mixed media from the message, with his baiting of the audience. This was an aggressively personal extension of the defiant anticonventionalism of the sixties, when you were manipulated into accepting what you saw as art. With Jones, you were actually intimidated.²⁸³

In her disavowal of Jones' hereditary relationship to postmodernism, Jones becomes the angry black man left alone in his blackness without his white buffer, suddenly "actually" intimidating.²⁸⁴ Outside the circle that protects and permits, Jones' speech is not recognized as speech. Rather, it rings in the ears of his critics as pure affect, as "that scary"²⁸⁵ because he is not being on his best behavior. Like *Still/Here*, which Croce "heard"

²⁸¹ Omar Ricks, "White Rage, Black Obama," *The Feminist Wire*, 10/27/12, <http://thefeministwire.com/2012/10/white-rage-black-obama/>.

²⁸² In the mid-1970s, Jones and Zane gained entrée into the downtown New York dance scene together, in romantic and artistic partnership, carrying with them the ideals of the 1960s counterculture—turn on, tune in, drop out, as Jones like to say. When Zane died in 1988, Jones asked himself, "Now that the white man was gone, what did it mean to have an authentic black voice?" (Ozuzu).

²⁸³ Arlene Croce, "Discussing the Undiscussable," 21.

²⁸⁴ With Croce in mind, Randy Martin writes, "The critic's authority resides in an appeal to a system of classification that values dance in terms of where it places choreographers and dancers in that system...When art refuses to accept the boundaries that are intended to separate it from life, the critic can become a self-proclaimed victim, for conventionally, the critic's authority is invested in policing that boundary" (Martin, *Critical Moves Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 83).

²⁸⁵ Jones asked Adrienne Edwards at the YBCA panel, "What scared you so much about me that I was unapproachable?"

as the moan of the victim and saw as a scene of subjection (that Jones tries to convert into subjectification), Jones' angry words are heard as content- and context-less rage.

Jones' words reverberate in the echo chamber of white space, where he is caught between keeping quiet and being overwritten or talking back and being overwritten all the same. Why is Jones still performing angry? I think his monologue at Yerba Buena answers the question; Jones is well aware that when critics work hard to let his choreographic works speak for themselves, they are writing from a modernist concern-cum-standard choreographer-critic contract that consolidates their power to speak for him.

Antiphony Inside and Out

In the late 1990s, Jones told Ann Daly, "I have the uncomfortable sense that speaking about my work could historically overshadow the work itself."²⁸⁶ It is possible that, at that stage in his career, Jones was trying to play by the rules of the choreographer-critic contract, much as he was ostensibly "returning to form" during the same period. But after reviewing the frequency and consistency with which he has been speaking about his work for the past thirty-five years, it is clear that any discomfort Jones may have around the power of his words is outweighed by his insistence that, if his words potentially overshadow those of the critics who are traditionally responsible for how his works are remembered by history, then it's worth the risk of them overshadowing the dances themselves.

Here Jones makes it clear that his call to critics does not burst forth in a spontaneous moment of possession during which emotions overtake reason, but rather that his impulse to call comes from an understanding—wholly reasoned and wholly reasonable—that, as Frank Wilderson teaches us, it's not a question of the definition of purity, but rather that the concept of pure [read: white] form or inquiry is dependent on a notion of impurity [read: black].

In more recent conversations, the question of purity comes up again, with Sacks and Weschler, for example, but now Jones seems to have embraced his pattern. Of course, there can be no purity with human beings, as Wechsler would have it, just like of course "all lives matter."²⁸⁷ But, as Judith Butler explains, "When some people rejoin with 'All Lives Matter' they misunderstand the problem, but not because their message is untrue. It is true that all lives matter, but it is equally true that not all lives are understood to matter which is precisely why it is most important to name the lives that have not mattered, and are struggling to matter in the way they deserve."²⁸⁸ Long before the hashtag, Zane and Jones tried to make dances that screamed "all lives matter." They held onto a race-blind

²⁸⁶ Daly, 70.

²⁸⁷ In conversation with Oliver Sacks and Weschler, Jones has asked about the possibility of pure inquiry in artistic practice. Sacks replied, "Where living beings are concerned you can't have pure inquiry..." to which Weschler followed, "It has to be impure by definition. Human beings are not pure. Human beings don't live in [Robert] Irwin's desert of pure feeling. The wonder is in the body not outside it. Bodies are particular bodies."

²⁸⁸ George Yancy and Judith Butler, "What's Wrong With 'All Lives Matter'?" *The New York Times*, January 12, 2015. http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter/?_r=0.

credo, but Jones always came in with the personal and thus his blackness. It didn't take long for Jones to realize the struggle it is to achieve that universal truth. So, Jones erupts with #blacklivesmatter speech in an #alllivesmatter white postmodern dance context.

But what happens when Jones returns to the circle that protects and permits? At the March 26, 2014 "Bill Chat," Jones performed his back talk in controversial ways in the presence of a panel of black artists, scholars, and critics that he gathered together to discuss the question, "When did the avant-garde become black?" Writing the event, dance critic Eva Yaa Asantewaa complained,

I'll step out in front of this and just say it: It's not a 'chat' if you're hectoring your guests and some of your audience members. It's not a 'chat' if you invite the following extraordinary panelists—Ishmael Houston-Jones, Bebe Miller, Adrienne Edwards, Dianne McIntyre, Charmaine Warren, Ralph Lemon, Brenda Dixon Gottschild—each of whom is a living archive and then get so caught up in your own button-pushing agenda, your own history, and your own sense of being stereotyped or slighted that you rarely take time to tap the considerable knowledge that your guests possess... A chat is also not a performance. A performance is not a chat. In other words, it is so not about you.²⁸⁹

Of course, a Bill Chat is precisely a performance, the latest installment of the long-running performance of Bill T. Jones. But this time, Jones seemed to draw the circle that protects and permits around himself, only to break the rules of call and response by performing bad listening.²⁹⁰

Dixon Gottschild took issue with the way Jones framed the question of when the avant-garde became black. In her introductory comments, she said,²⁹¹

The question posed for this conversation—namely, when did it become acceptable for a person who defines her/himself as black to also say, "I'm avant-garde"—opens up a web of complexities. I believe I know full well what Bill T. is getting at, but bear with me while I trouble the waters a bit and take a wide-angle perspective. He's addressing the avant-garde as a SCENE; I want to address it as a PRINCIPLE. Yes: at a moment in late-20th century history, certain black dancers could acknowledge belonging to the dominant culture's DEFINITION of avant-garde, but it behooves us to also acknowledge the avant-garde history embedded in and integral to AFRICANIST traditions, of which many of us may or may not be aware.

²⁸⁹ Eva Yaa Asantewaa, "How about a little less Bill?," *Infinite Body: Art and Creative Consciousness* (blog), March 26, 2014, http://infinitebody.blogspot.com/2014_03_01_archive.html

²⁹⁰ According to New York Live Arts, there is no transcript or video footage of the panel conversation. By all accounts, however, Jones' behavior was not received well.

²⁹¹ "When did the Avant-Garde Become Black?" *Brenda Dixon Gottschild: Writer on Dance and Culture* (blog), March 29, 2014, <http://bdixongottschild.com/2014/03/29/when-did-the-avant-garde-become-black/>.

It seems to me that Jones fails to speak a black politics at an event designed to speak to black avant-garde performance is in part a function of what Dixon Gottschild recognizes. By keeping his discourse firmly attached to postmodern dance as a *scene* in which he feels he has and has not a place, Jones winds up limiting himself to an argument with the content rather than the fact of canonization. Jones' lament revolves around an irritation with his position in the avant-garde despite being black and an attachment to a colorblind ideology that believes this is as it should be. The combination of his emphasis on his personal experience of racism in the context of the small, insular world of postmodern concert dance overshadows the political potential of his speech despite being part of the personal-as-political rhetoric. Dixon Gottschild shoots straight from the hip: "Thus, it points us back to Bill T.'s question and the fact that it can only be 'THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE'—namely, systemic racism—that invisibilized information like this and made it controversial for a black dancer to claim avant-garde status."²⁹²

Also in 2014, Chloe Bass asked Jones "about the particular weight of presenting the Black male body on stage in the aftermath of Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, Eric Garner's death in Staten Island, and the ongoing devaluation of the Black male body throughout the United States." Jones responded,

My company has a tradition of a circle. It's non-hierarchical. We put all of our energy into that circle: the symbolic circle of New York Live Arts. I'm a black man. I'm a black man who is leading and who is part of that. All of my pain, all of the things that outrage me, they have to find a place symbolically in the place that is that circle. And that's how I deal with it. The world is always changing, and I have to be an agent of change. All of those tragedies are the discourse: they are the time that we as a culture are living through. How do I remain true to myself?²⁹³

It is difficult to listen to Jones when he responds to a question about ongoing police brutality against black men with a mixture of evasion and narcissism. As we have seen in his conversations with Dent, Thompson, and Ozuzu, Jones equivocates when it comes to talking about actual "black people." Because it is easy to condemn him for this, I have

²⁹² Dance critic Wendy Perron wrote a particularly tin-eared response to the Bill Chat. Claiming to be "used to his role as provocateur and can take it in stride," Perron went on to say, "I think the combative tone that Bill T set during this panel, the last of three 'Bill Chats,' fostered a kind of reverse racism." <http://wendyperron.com/because-they-were-white/>. Perron exhibits a reaction typical to white dancers of the Judson era, who believed that contact improvisation and the "downtown" dance scene never "excluded anyone who was interested." Perron's assumptions behind what constituted an expression or performance of that interest are what interests me here. Perron is not alone in her resistance to categorize Grand Union, the Judson Dance Theater, and other groups of the downtown avant-garde as white.

²⁹³ Chloë Bass, "Standing Up: Bill T. Jones and Theaster Gates Discuss Their Collaboration," *Hyperallergic*, November 12, 2014, <http://hyperallergic.com/162258/standing-up-bill-t-jones-and-theaster-gates-discuss-their-collaboration/>.

insisted on listening to Jones' speech within an afropessimist framework. Doing so allows us to understand his talk as a (black) performance of (black) agency, "[i]n a world structured by the twin axioms of white superiority and black inferiority, of white existence and black nonexistence, a world structured by a negative categorical imperative—'above all, don't be black' (Gordon 1997: 63)."²⁹⁴ Although the dance tradition in which Jones performs is a hybrid tradition with an "inter-, trans-, and cross-cultural history,"²⁹⁵ Jones has always understood himself as a black dancer performing for a white audience in white public space.²⁹⁶ By repeatedly attempting to draw resistant, sometimes hostile critics into antiphonic relation with himself, Jones chooses, again and again, to be black.²⁹⁷ And when he fails, as he does again and again, Jones performs "the problem of speaking as a black [dancer] in an anti-black world."²⁹⁸

Conclusion: Inside the Circle, The Exception Proves the Rule

And here is where I always find myself falling into a pattern in an interview, wherein I suddenly say, how can I—a person who was a child of slaves, a person who was abducted, brought here, force-fed religion, culture, values, denied education, denied my 'true heritage' as an African person—how can I ever expect to take part in this quest for purity, because the question arises: whose definition of purity?
—Bill T. Jones in conversation with Ann Daly²⁹⁹

The problem of speaking...as a black in an anti-black world, has structured black critical discourse from its earliest moments of articulation.
—Jared Sexton³⁰⁰

In part, this chapter has been my effort to respond to a challenge DeFrantz presented to me after his talk at the Stanford Dance Studies Colloquium. Generously taking time to talk to me during the reception, DeFrantz explained his position on Jones. Thomas DeFrantz regards Jones as an exception to the black choreographers working at the same or similar time such as Bebe Miller and Donald Byrd, who "were committed to

²⁹⁴ Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 23.

²⁹⁵ Gilroy, 15.

²⁹⁶ "I don't know what is not a white theater," Jones tells Onye Ozuzu in conversation at the 2013 Chicago Humanities Festival. Brenda Dixon Gottschild claims that theater is responsible in large part for what she calls the "whitenizing' of the Africanist aesthetic" (Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Dance and Performance*, 31).

²⁹⁷ Critics have had the privileged position of audience-not audience, somehow exempt from the relational exchange.

²⁹⁸ Jared Sexton, "African American Studies" in *A Concise Companion to American Studies*, ed. John Carlos Rowe (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010), 211.

²⁹⁹ Daly, 70.

³⁰⁰ Sexton, "African American Studies," 211.

developing black audiences.”³⁰¹ Jones’ mainstream success implies that he had ample audience in the white theater-going community. Due to that exceptional status as a wildly successful black choreographer in the white concert dance milieu, DeFrantz expressed doubt around whether Jones can help us “talk about blackness in performance, to stabilize a center.” While he admitted that Jones is a complex case, DeFrantz nevertheless maintained, “He can only help you theorize him.”³⁰²

DeFrantz is not the only black scholar and cultural critic to wonder about Jones’ relationship to black performance. As the reflections on the black avant-garde Bill Chat attest, Jones’ solo speech acts appear to have become more and more fixated on his individual experience, seeming to lose their political resonance and relevance along the way. And yet, I argue that this is largely because of the years of trying to talk with white critics, to draw them into antiphonic relationship with him, and meeting with resistance that ran from the benign to the bellicose.

Maybe DeFrantz is right. Perhaps Jones’ ego takes up too much space for any critique of structural racism to occur. Perhaps any analysis of Jones’ work inevitably takes place in relation to whiteness and, therefore, cannot be about stabilizing blackness as a center. Indeed, he is the black choreographer in a dissertation written by a white woman critic that features other artists who are white. In other words, Jones the exception in black performance becomes the rule in a project that reads Jones as part of a white center. Further, Jones’ own refusal to directly, explicitly, and consistently place blackness at the center of his own discourse—blame it on his generation, his continuing desire to live in a colorblind society, or his fear of losing audiences and funding—testifies to DeFrantz’s point

³⁰¹ Indeed, Jones is conspicuously absent from Ishmael Houston-Jones’ 1982 *Parallels* event, as well as from Houston-Jones’ *Platform 2012: Parallels*. In 1982, Houston-Jones put Jones in the same camp as Ailey, who was deeply committed to developing black audiences for his work, as representative of “the mainstream of traditional modern dance”: “I feel and often express this isolation from blacks who expect me to be Ailey and dance audiences who either also expect me to be a little-avant-garde-Ailey or ‘another Bill T. Jones’ or devoid of any racial expression.” Quoted in Burke, Siobhan and Christine Shan Shan Hou, “On Black Dance: Shifting Movement, Words, Identities.” Dixon Gottschild, like other scholars of her generation, does include Jones among other “African American postmodernists” such as Blondell Cummings, Donald Byrd, David Rousseve, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, who have “deconstructed, refashioned, and preserved European American concert dance aesthetics in their own image” (Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*, 57). It comes down, in part, to the difference between approaching race in the era of identity politics versus 21st century New Jim Crow.

³⁰² DeFrantz continued: “Like Dunham he’s been so incredibly prolific, he has the huge intellectual curiosity, but unlike Dunham he doesn’t have the kind of distancing ability. So when he says things they tend to be about him. Someone like Dunham can talk about black people or the people of Haiti. She could offer really cogent helpful ways to think about black life in the South in the 1920s. That’s just a different sort and level of expertise and they’re both making these incredible dances and having this impact on the world. I think that maybe his exceptionalism is about certain kinds of limitations.”

of view.³⁰³ Jones entire oeuvre, choreographic and oratorical, since before and after Zane's death, has been addressed to white audiences.³⁰⁴

Jones has always railed against what Ricks calls "the coolness demanded by Black life in America," a coolness demanded of him by the critics at the Dance Critics Association meeting. Jones is an angry black person read by his critics as a stereotype of the "angry black man." Sometimes it seems that "the signifiers of blackness" in Jones' speech are "ones of style (the rhetorical tropes he used, the energy with which he spoke) and not substance"; "caught up in the chains of white affective interests"; spoken by someone who believes "she or he somehow exists outside of a racist social structure."³⁰⁵

And yet blackness is at the center of Jones' discourse. Jones finds a place in Gilroy's introduction to *Let's Get It On*, and thus in a volume about the politics of black performance. And Dixon Gottschild includes Jones among other black concert dance artists who engage Africanist aesthetics in their work. "To know the mainstream culture and play its game, but also to remember and keep one's own—that is and has always been the task."³⁰⁶ Each time he insists that he is heir to Euro-American postmodernism, he affirms his roots in the black church and around the jukebox. Further, as Onye Ozuzu attests, he is an artist who "empowered and entitled" later generations of black choreographers "to make our own choices," to, "without flinching," create hybrid forms of "contemporary, modern dance" that include African and African American dance forms as "just movement on stage in the contemporary moment."³⁰⁷ I have tried to show that it is

³⁰³ Dent claims that "...while both Jones and Baraka constantly operate as border-crossers, Jones has never been willing (or able) to relinquish his footing on either side of the color or gender line. This has angered many in both worlds" (Dent, "Checking the Time," 36).

³⁰⁴ In an interview with Kweli Washington, Jones said, "So there was a belligerence that was I dare you to look at me and now suddenly without knowing it, I thought I was colorblind, but suddenly I began to feel like a black man, because often let's face it most of the audiences particularly the avant-garde world, the modern dance world, were white audiences, there was something about them looking at me that was exciting but also a provocation."

³⁰⁵ These are the words Omar Ricks uses to describe Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick's speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2012.

³⁰⁶ Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*, 57.

³⁰⁷ Jones responded to Ozuzu with his usual mixture of pride in and discomfort with being labeled a trailblazer for younger black artists: "Where I thought that was coming from was, yes, there is the black voice that gets up and testifies to the community, but you realize most people around me were white people so I thought it was coming from 'be as crazy as you like, flip the script.'" In other words, Jones recognizes that his blackness comes through, but he thought of it as one possibility among many other interruptive, defamiliarizing, (post)modern strategies. "The best artists in the 'modernist' tradition is what I thought were the ones who were always faster than the critics, always actually leading the audience, and informed by a certain type of alienation. I thought alienation was the thing that united artists, people. So I'm glad that it was speaking to you about race but I was talking to you, 'As a rebellious young woman, don't let anyone tell you what you should or should not be doing. If you want to be a classical ballerina, you can still be a

not the content of his discourse—which gives with one hand and takes with the other—nor the mere fact of talking back to his critics that stabilizes a center for black performance. Rather, it is Jones’ relentless repetition, binary play, and signifying on angry black man stereotypes that performs black life.

Refusing to keep silent in the face of his critical reception and canonization, the “loud, insistent, and angry” Jones does not go gracefully into the twilight (perhaps because he’s still in the limelight), but pushes back against the way his black performance is constantly being recuperated (read: canonized) as a form of legible whiteness. I hope to have shown how Jones’ b(l)ack talk disforms the field of American dance history, disrupting its choreocentric, bodily writing integrity. Jones performatively uses the signs of white, Euro-American dance languages—movement vocabularies, formal structures—to choreograph himself into dancer being.³⁰⁸

It is hard to say whether Jones changes his critics’ minds about how to write about his work. But by inflecting his speech with black oratorical style, while speaking about the history of dance (post)modernism in the United States, he does manage to disrupt his critics’ efforts to recuperate his dances as part of a generalized “universalized-as-white”³⁰⁹

down sister and be a classical ballerina...’ ‘52 handsome nudes’: it never occurred to us that it would be homoerotic...we always thought it should look like the world...we were a motley crew and proud of it...counterculture...I love Mr. Ailey but I was told men have to look like men on Ailey’s stage and a lot of guys were gay but we just got up here, we gotta act right and we gotta have the right bodies, technique...what are you guys doing, you’re rolling around on the floor, you’re acting like those white kids, they had the freedom to do that, that’s not what you should be doing, and what is black dance, for many years I thought black dance was anything on stage when black people talk about what Thelma Golden calls the trauma narrative of slavery...and I said black dance was anything a person who calls himself black chooses to call dance. How’s that working these days?”

³⁰⁸ Omar Ricks writes, “Ronald Judy points out that the performative use of signs—graphemes, written characters—were privileged because they were in European languages. Hence, they were not associated with Black people, and few Black people ordinarily had access to them” (Omar Ricks, “On Jubilee: The Performance of Black Leadership in the Afterlife of Slavery,” (Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2014), 26). Fred Moten points to a “necessary repression—rather than some naturalized absence—of phonic substance in a general semiotics” in Barthes’ reflections on photography.³⁰⁸ The (post)modern dance scholarship and criticism that privileges choreography as a legible system of bodily signs may be added to Moten’s list that includes language, photography, and performance when he says, “the universalities these names would mark exist only in the singularities of a language, a photograph, a performance, singularities that cannot live in the absence of sound” (Moten, *In the Break*, 205). “[T]he semiotic desire for universality, which excludes the difference of accent by excluding sound in the search for a universal language and a universal science of language, is manifest in Barthes [and in modern dance ideology] as the exclusion of the sound/shout of the photograph [mute dance]” (Ibid, 205).

³⁰⁹ Yutian Wong, *Choreographing Asian America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 22.

postmodern strategy of bricolage. Jones' speech both transforms his choreography into black cultural production and radically recasts the submissive role of the choreographer in relation to the critic as an equal partner in dialogue. His words are forever hooked onto his dances, how we see, write, and read about them. Jones turns the problem of speaking into a problem for his white critics writing in an anti-black world.

Post-Script

In many ways, the introduction to this dissertation is its conclusion. If the nature of a linear text could accommodate it, the introduction would wrap around the chapters, folding them in a loose embrace. This would reflect the recursivity and circularity of my thinking and writing process as well as the dialectical and dialogic nature of the project of dance writing. Round and round we would go as we reach across: this is the movement of the work, the dance, and the writing.

It sounds a bit like square dancing, a communal dance form that looks easier than it is. Partners swing and cross to the sounds of the caller, who shouts suggestions in the form of instructions. Dancers have to look at one another and listen, but the dance works even in the absence of sight and hearing. Vibration, touch, smell, all the senses keep us in the room together. If you lose your way, there is always a raised eyebrow or an extended hand, ready for you to grasp. When you lose your way, time slows down and, in the midst of panic, you can see all things.

Between the dancer, the dance, and the dance writer; between objectified subjects and subjectified objects; between seeing, hearing, touching, and being seen, heard, touched: what happens in the in between, the yawning chasm made palpable every time we attempt to reach across? We depend on the interstice to keep us at a safe distance, to give us the space to move, to see what's before us. To bridge or to narrow the gap: is that really the goal? And if it is, how can we proceed?

First, we need to become aware of the gap. An injured or aging dancer becomes aware of the joint as gap, and wishes it back into automaticity. The school-aged child becomes aware of her difference as gap, and wishes it back to invisibility. The dancer and the child are told to embrace the gap. After all, there is no going back.

The introduction to this dissertation wound down with Merleau-Ponty's reflections on the visible and the invisible—audible and inaudible, palpable and imperceptible—because he offers a technique for inhabiting the chiasm: talk. Talk is the basis of all Western concert dance techniques whether in the form of a codified language (ballet's *pas de chat*, Laban's effort-shape, Humphrey's fall and recovery) or of everyday speech that dance teachers and choreographers develop over time, finding the words to best support their dancers' learning.

Technique talk, like all talk, is a multisensory endeavor. It forms part of the interaction ritual that is dance training. The teacher speaks and the dancers respond. The dancers dance and the teacher responds. Dance training is a privileged site to experience and witness the act and action of responsiveness.

Joe Goode, Bill T. Jones, and the women of Wallflower Order create works that point to the spaces in between and invite us to swim in them. Although we laugh with

them and feel surges of pleasure as we witness their dancing, singing, shouting selves, we find that swimming in synovial fluid is no lazy river ride. It is a disorienting place. It is the space of breakdown. To be broken and disoriented is to be in a position to become alive to what had once felt whole and in place, to mourn it, and to make a new home in what feels wrong.

If, as I have argued in this dissertation, the dance writer must approach dance performance as a call from dance artists to respond in thoughtful, multimodal, and ethical ways, would a sustained analysis of the training techniques that undergird these performances help cultivate this responsiveness? Would it help writers to see the sort of physical and ideological labor that goes into the making of a dance? Would it invite us to check our habits of thinking, watching, and writing in order to enter without drowning the space between?

These questions preceded the development of this dissertation and they have returned here, at the end that is really a beginning. I have discussed the public face of dance theater, the politics of performance and critical reception. Now, as I look toward future writing, I ask: What are the politics of training? Training is where the ideological and practical components of technique become visible. On stage, even efforts to make visible the building blocks of choreography and to underscore dance as material labor slip into an effortless virtuosity. After all, these events are practiced and practice makes perfect.

All dance training is multimodal, multisensory, ideological, political, complex, difficult, liberating, and constraining. But there are particular methods in which contemporary concert dancers train that emphasize the coming to awareness of one's movement habits in order to draw those habits into a space of analysis. To break down a movement habit is to liberate it from its automaticity and make it a choice among others. Breakdown can precede awareness—be the stimulus for it—or it can follow upon it. In either case, we notice what we've never noticed because it has been too close to us and because we largely seek to narrow any and all gaps. Of course, we are grateful for this automaticity; it keeps us in flow. If we have to think through our every step when we run to catch the bus, we likely miss the bus.

Contemporary concert dancers value the cultivation of multimodal awareness for different reasons—to remain strong, to maintain flexibility, to be versatile movers, to exhibit a particular aesthetic—and they have multiple training methods from which to choose to guide their explorations. These methods that focus on awareness-building are loosely grouped under the term “somatics.” Somatics is a field of what one might call “body-consciousness-raising.” In the context of dance, somatic practices are often miracle vehicles not only for healing from injury, but also for evacuating the self of idiosyncratic movement habits in order to become the versatile dancer of the twenty-first century. And yet again, they also offer the dancer's idiosyncrasies back to her, a movement option to be selected at will.

The prevalent methods in contemporary concert dance training in the West include The Alexander Technique (traditionally a one-on-one practice), the Feldenkrais Method (comprised of Awareness Through Movement classes and Fundamental Integration one-on-one sessions), Body-Mind Centering, Pilates, and yoga (Iyengar, Hatha, Vinyasa, Ashtanga, Bikram, the list goes on and on). Each of these methods are grounded

in practitioner-student relationships that involve a combination of talk, touch, and, sometimes, visual demonstration. Their discourses privilege notions of “the center (or core),” “the neutral (spine, pelvis),” “the breath,” and value efficiency, mobility, and self-awareness. Practitioners navigate the rocky terrain between individual habits and universal (and universalizing) principles based on unstable conceptions of anatomy and physiology.

Because of the need for legible discourse and the diversity of human experience, and because of the (functional, often performative) gap between what is said, what is done, and what is felt, somatics discourse is notoriously difficult to discuss critically. Dance scholar and Feldenkrais practitioner Isabelle Ginot points to the difficulties of addressing “the epistemological status of somatics” and “the discursive production characteristic of its methods and practices” (Ginot 2010: 12). She illustrates how somatics discourse resists critical unpacking because of its tendency to “situate itself on a suprahuman scale—beyond the reach of history and politics—paradoxically disengaged from all contingencies” (Ginot 15). The historical, the political, and the contingent, however, emerge in the intimate relation between practitioner and student as they engage in productive “back talk.” The generative moment of any somatic practice emerges in the interplay between the canonical (core principles such as Alexander’s primary control or Body-Mind Centering’s cellular breathing) and the non-canonical (the individual’s phenomenological accounting). If, as Ginot warns, somatic values such as slowness, mildness, and attention to the self, can become ideology when “detached from the context of the session of somatic practice” (Ginot 21), how can a scholarly project honor somatics’ practical achievements while subjecting the discourses to social critique? What would a *critical somatics* look like?

For now, these questions only engender others: How do we develop awareness of our bodily habits for the sake of an ethical responsiveness? How do we become responsive to the myriad calls that surround us and that elicit from us? How do we learn to respond quickly, when there is no time to think? What are the politics of awareness? How can we develop somatics discourses and practices that are adequate to our contemporary context? How can we allow our personal engagements with somatics to privilege “the reorganization of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of that which we call the body” (Ginot 25)?

This is a critical moment to reiterate Ginot’s question: “What conditions need to be in place in order for introspection and the recognition of physical sensation to be capable of suspending, of even interrupting, the violence of racist aggression?” (Ginot, 25). As I write this post-script, it is late April 2015. Baltimore is in “a state of emergency” after the murder of black 25-year-old Freddie Gray at the hands of city police officers. The mainstream media were quick to call the protesters rioters and to focus on the approximately 1% of the over 10,000 protesters, who caused trouble. City officials continue to call for calm.

The Baltimore protests follow on the heels of repeated instances of white police officers killing unarmed black males—Michael Brown, Oscar Grant, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner to name just four.³¹⁰ This is not a situation that calls for calm. In the absence of

³¹⁰ Aleksander Chan and Rich Juzwiak, “Unarmed People of Color Killed by Police, 1999-2014,” *Gawker*, <http://gawker.com/unarmed-people-of-color-killed-by-police-1999-2014-1666672349>.

calm, in a context of wholly reasonable turbulence, what is the value of becoming aware of one's bodily sensations? Is there time for this? Is it worth making time for this?

There is a place for nonviolence and a place for direct action. Nonviolent calm does not appear to be an appropriate response to state-sanctioned violence against black people. Can somatic awareness offer anything at all to the fight against systemic racism? In a recent essay, blogger Radical Faggot incisively defends the strategic use of direct and militant action by black communities.³¹¹ He describes the historical efficacy of such action and the hypocrisy behind calls for nonviolence in the face of state-sanctioned violence against black people. He defines militant direct action as an effort to “meet the political goals of our communities in the moment, and deal with the repercussions as they come.” Radical Faggot emphasizes the momentary and moment-to-moment nature of direct action; it requires on the spot assessment of a situation, and the ability to react with precision and clarity. He stresses the reasonableness of these responses to institutionalized violence against accusations of mindless reactivity. He then offers three categories of questions to be asked in advance of future militant actions:

Are we harming state and private property, or are we harming people, communities and natural resources?
Who is in the vicinity?
Who is involved in the action?

I would like to take a moment to focus on Radical Faggot's second question, “Who is in the vicinity?” He elaborates, “Are we doing harm to people around us as we act? Is there a possibility of violence for those who are not the intended targets of our action? Are we forcing people to be involved in an action who may not want to be, or who are not ready?” These are questions that have to be answered in the moment, when an action is perhaps already underway. How to cultivate that sort of awareness? Can we become curious about the encounter between “tranquility, slowness, or sensory retention [and] extreme sensations” (Ginot 25), and “equip these practices with a social conscience” (Ginot 26)?

I began this dissertation with a brief investigation into the different temporalities of journalistic and academic writing. I said the difficulty writing dancing is not about having too much or too little space and time, but rather about knowing how to look and listen. We have to be able to respond, quickly or slowly. To respond well means to step off the shore of familiarity and habit and enter the muddy waters that separate us from the Other's shore. Whether we decamp for the night or a lifetime on the other side is not necessarily the goal. What matters is being open to seeing everything.

Seeing everything is a destabilizing proposition. In a recent dance class, Bay Area choreographer and teacher Randee Pauvfe taught us a turning phrase that made some of us dizzy. She told us that, in order to not get dizzy, we had to see everything and see nothing.

³¹¹ Radical Faggot, “In Support of Baltimore: Or, Smashing Police Cars Is Logical Political Strategy,” blog post, April 26, 2015. <https://radfag.wordpress.com/2015/04/26/in-support-of-baltimore-or-smashing-police-cars-is-logical-political-strategy/>.

She mentioned that this is a principle of the Whirling Dervishes, who spin without developing a debilitating vertigo. The principle sounds like so many platitudes we hear these days: be here now, stay present, know thyself. The frustrating thing about these admonitions is that we don't know how to do it.

Paufve went on to say, "Practice seeing everything first." This is the technique behind the philosophy. Practice seeing everything first. Let that throw you off. Let it be too much.

Somatic practices are simultaneously practices of close reading (of bodily sensation) and deconstruction (mistrusting the meaning of those sensations). As such they pave the way for immanent critique, an analysis of somatic discourse that engages the criticality of that discourse while subjecting it to other forms of critique. For example, the Alexander Technique is a specific technique of the body-self that must by necessity discipline bodies (and this is what his discourse denies). What sort of body does the Alexander Technique produce? And as a critical practice, how does it offer potential spaces to resist that discipline? How does the principle of freedom become a command to be free in a particular way? How are choreographies and bodies marked by practices that are meant to unmark them? These are the questions that move us from this dissertation's investigation of a politics of performance to a future examination of a politics of training.

In the absence of talk, touch speaks; in the absence of touch, talk touches. Thought is action; non-doing is doing. There is no ideal way to connect with self and other. Let the context show us the way.

To end: Let's begin, again.

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