



## The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Ballet

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### CHAPTER

## 33 The Race of Contemporary Ballet: Interpellations of Africanist Aesthetics

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### Abstract

This chapter considers the tripartite formation of who, what, and how in considerations of Africanist aesthetics and Black mobilizations that fuel contemporary ballet. Who dances contemporary ballet, and are they Black? What sorts of Black dance movements are deployed in contemporary ballet? And, most important, how does a Black attitude mark performances within ballet as belonging to a contemporary moment? The chapter presumes that contemporary ballet emerges in direct relationship to Africanist aesthetics. It considers work by William Forsythe, Alonzo King, and Twyla Tharp as a trio of artists whose work continues to circulate with different relationships to questions of Black dancers, dances, dancing, and the contemporary.

**Keywords:** [Black dance](#), [Africanist aesthetics](#), [Alonzo King](#), [William Forsythe](#), [Twyla Tharp](#), [Black mobilizations](#)

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THE proposition: on a global stage, contemporary ballet emerges in direct relationship to Africanist aesthetics. Evidence: the curated use of rhythmic forcefulness as a compositional device; the choreographed individuality of dancer movement laid bare within a group dynamic; unexpected physical attack and extension of form toward surprising performative ends drawing on improvisation in rehearsal and performance; the implicit inclusion of the audience's ability to decode gestural and musical contents that reach well beyond the theatrical moment; and an abiding performance register of "cool," as in a winking knowing from the dancers onstage that "this is hip, contemporary ballet fun." Choreographers of contemporary ballet refer consistently to these sorts of aesthetic devices, whether or not their collaborating artists claim African ancestry.

But what's at stake when Africanist aesthetics are driving creative assembly of contemporary ballet, but few Black dancers are allowed to take roles in these works, or are afforded the opportunity to choreograph in the

most well-resourced institutions of dance? Cultural appropriation rears its impact in this displacement, where Black gesture is referred to and animated by whites and others without any obvious material relationship to Black people. In this unfortunate formation, Black creativity becomes the spectral underpinning of a white-appearing contemporary ballet performing machine, adding insult to the injury of an ongoing disavowal of Black people within professional dance.

This chapter will consider the tripartite formation of who, what, and how in considerations of Africanist aesthetics and Black mobilizations that fuel contemporary ballet. Who dances contemporary ballet, and are they always Black people? What sorts of Black dance movements are deployed in contemporary ballet? And, most important, how does a Black attitude mark performances within ballet as belonging to a contemporary moment? This chapter will consider aspects of work by William Forsythe, Alonzo King, and Twyla Tharp as a trio of artists whose work continues to circulate in 2019 with different relationships to these questions of Black dancers, dances, dancing, and the contemporary.

## We Hail Black

p. 563

We see Black people, and we say, “Hey you, Look! A Negro, look, Black!”

*In this hailing we acknowledge the production of a subject, yes, but a subject that is abject and without. Without agency, produced by the hailing, as its product; there because she has been hailed, and therefore, unable to move. This is the challenge of Black people in ballet. Being hailed thus, we have nothing to do but realize the alternative trajectories suggested by that appellation; we are the Blacks in ballet, and as such are already destined to be that otherness that leads the conversation.*

Philosopher Louis Althusser’s updating of Franz Fanon offers us a structuring logic to comprehend how an interpellation into the condition of professional ballet produces subjects who arrive exquisitely disciplined and assumedly white.<sup>1</sup> Historians of ballet repeatedly refer to the “problem” of Black ballerinas, or the lack of Latinx, Native, or African American dancers in the largest US companies, let alone in any other national circumstances. If there haven’t been many leading dancers of color within a global circulation of ballet, then it becomes that much more difficult to imagine that these dancers will come to be. Althusser’s theory of interpellation, in one rendering, predicts a narrowing of social possibility toward that which has been called forth previously.

Ballet has held fast to its overwhelming whiteness across the last century in the United States. Twenty years ago I worked as a stringer for the *Village Voice*, and Elizabeth Zimmer, the editor, assigned me a “front of the book” assignment about racism in dance in the New York scene. I worked for six or seven months, and turned the piece in, but Zimmer wasn’t satisfied. “Where’s the ballet?” she barked, as she liked to do. I responded with this long introductory gloss, based on two more months of research.

*Call me an affirmative action baby, but I imagine an American ballet which looks like America. Like my friends and family—black, white, Puerto Rican, Asian, Filipino, Indian, European, African—many-hued, diverse, interested in art. But I have a hard time dragging any of them to the ballet. Even though many of them love dance nearly as much as I do, ballet in New York is, well, just too white.*

Currently [NB: in 1996], the *New York City Ballet* (NYCB) has three African American dancers (out of a company of 83); *American Ballet Theatre* (ABT) has none (out of 80). As representatives of New York, these two organizations limp along, despicably out of step with the times. The *Feld Ballets/NY* does better with three men of African descent (out of 20), while the precariously-perched *Dance Theatre of Harlem* (DTH), responding to their latest financial crisis with yet another downsizing, now counts 26 African Americans among its 36 dancers.

Figure 33.1.



Advertisement, *Village Voice*, April 23, 1996.

p. 564 Affirmative action at the School of American Ballet (SAB), teaching wing for the NYCB, got squashed way back in 1933. SAB co-founder Lincoln Kirstein wrote of training an equal number of black and white children then; but it wasn't until 1950, when Louis Johnson became the first dark-skinned Black at the school, that integration came in the flesh. Johnson didn't become the first African American dancer on regular salary at NYCB though; that honor went to Arthur Mitchell in 1955.

p. 565 Forty years later, [NB: in 1996] there are only two advanced African American students at SAB. I asked current SAB director Tom Schoff how they attract students. "Everyone auditions for the school. For the little kids, that means an audition in New York. We advertise in the Amsterdam News, El Diaro and that Russian newspaper. In our ads we show a racially mixed group." What happens next? "Everything thins out. In a beginning class we start with twenty boys and twice as many girls. Of the sixty, only three or four are ever going to go through the school and become professionals. To say that 14% of those first sixty were minorities, and only two or three make it to become professional dancers, well, you can't have a half-person."

Following this kind of logic, you also can't have many Black ballet dancers. As SAB and ABT cling to segregation-era theories of self-selection in training and hiring ("it's a matter of who comes to us" an insider at ABT told me), we in the audience suffer the racial consequences. It hurts my heart to see the all-white ABT in the splendor of the Metropolitan Opera House, sailing through Twyla Tharp's jazz-inspired *How Near Heaven*, while next door the overwhelmingly white NYCB rips into Balanchine's jazzy neo-classic works. All this in a theater owned by New York City, the two companies funded in part by grants from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

To be fair, the three dancers at NYCB represent the largest permanent black presence there ever. And ABT has worked with African American choreographers and guest artists, including Judith Jamison in her first New York appearance as a member of the corps in Agnes de Mille's *The Four Marys* (way back in the day, before her stardom with the Ailey company). Black choreographers Alvin Ailey, Ulysses Dove, and Keith Lee all made works for ABT; Twyla Tharp associate Shelley Washington served briefly as Ballet Mistress for that company. But how do these two companies, standard-bearers for American ballet, remain so closed-mouthed about race and rigidly Euro-centric in a city boastfully proud of its racial diversity?

The incredible whiteness of ballet spills off the stage and into the audiences at Lincoln Center, where all too often I've counted myself as one of a very few African Americans in the house. According to senior marketing director Christopher Ramsey, NYCB has recently "embarked on a wide array of initiatives aimed at increasing understanding of ballet as an art throughout the community of New York City," including reduced-price admissions for high-school and college-aged audiences. But these programs all seem oblivious to the racial standoff of ballet and New York City's expanding populace of color. If NYCB and ABT don't aggressively pursue integration onstage, they will continue to be perceived as collaborators in maintaining an increasingly segregated status quo. Unfortunately for us all, the conservative economics of the 90s predict that until these white dance institutions need an audience of color, and that audience insists on its stage reflection, ballet will remain pale.

The Village Voice article went on to note economic challenges for ballet, including the need for a strong audience, preferably subscription, to support live music or the large venues most suitable to their performances. Statistical research confirmed the numbers classical dancers of color contracted at that time in the 1990s: San Francisco had 12 out of 62, Pennsylvania Ballet had 2 out of 35, and Boston Ballet counted 2 out of a company of 44. The gloss on ballet in the mid-1990s ended by noting that a corps member at the New York City Ballet made a base salary of \$750/week. "Add to that the social pressures of representing the race—since there are so few black dancers in ballet today—and you begin to wonder how current NYCB corps member Andrea Long manages. As she told me, 'being the only black woman in a company this size means there are always personal issues to deal with.'"<sup>2</sup>

p. 566

Long reminded me at the time of our interview: we were hailed as Blacks in ballet, not as people or even dancers with personal lives. Thus visible, as Blacks, we arrive already prefigured to do the extra labor of transforming ballet toward its contemporary, modern materialization.

## We Need, and Respond to, Black Attitude

Black attitude might be the thing that is so attractive about Black performance, and so necessary to the feeling of contemporary ballet. This is the relaxed sensibility cultivated by Black people who already know that there will be no justice, and that there will be no reparations, and still we will survive. We will not transform scholarly societies like the Dance Studies Association or institutions like NYCB by our small statistical presence in the United States. We are not in power anywhere on the planet, even if that were a thing we might want, not really, not even on the continent where colonialism continues to drive our social relations. We will always find people against us because of the peculiar ways that race works in global contexts, so we invent style anyway. We relax, and swagger. "Bow down," we say; "I ain't sorry." We work with an approach to motion and its outcome, one that is confident because it is burnished from being pushed back so often, pushed back to strength. Black attitude arrives as coolness; the willingness to take a risk knowing that tomorrow is not promised; that there is no security available to our ideologically laden hailing as Blacks in ballet. Black attitude—the Black sensibility—understands how to back-phrase in order to encourage a possibility of relationship. And to back-phrase we have to be willing and able to relax, to "catch" the gesture and dance outside of its shape. This is that walk toward and away from the center of the stage at the beginning of William Forsythe's *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated* (1987) and the connecting material of his dance *Herman Schmerman* (1992). It is surely the solo that choreographer Kyle Abraham crafted for Taylor Stanley in the 2018 NYCB work *The Runaway*. Sometimes it has been called sass, but more than anything, it is an affect that marks a deeply honed, practiced ability to resist the interpellation that fixes gesture into a fixed thing. It is practiced as a value of craft. "We are not only ballet dancers, following the rules," this Black attitude proclaims, "we are Black ballet dancers, and we enjoy classicism with a difference."<sup>3</sup>

Others who are not Black, but hope to be able to dance like this, engage this style of moving in order to embody some sense of an outside to structures of domination. They move in these ways to resist the

p. 567 repressive state apparatus that demands a containment of forces and fields of energy toward the category of *ballet*. Perhaps contemporary ballet arrives as something that resists the forces of classical ballet, as a moving beyond those forms toward something that might feel weightier, more current, darker in tone (as in, more like everyday Black life), more human and human-as-animal-in-survival than the princesses and sylphs of other modes of dancing ballet.

The *contemporary* in contemporary ballet is, of course, an affect engendered by modernism. And modernism is born of the afterlives of slavery, of the mass enslavement to produce capital that surrounds chattel incarceration.<sup>4</sup> In that action of willful disavowal, of denying people any aspect of personhood, the conditions toward a *modern* were set by commerce. The modern produced *Black* in the disavowal of people; but Black people continued to create approaches to music and movement that combine toward the now-familiar Black affect. Black as a category of being is produced in the crucible of slavery and its aftermaths; Black affect and performative attitude emerge as crystallizations of creative resistance and embodied play.

In this mapping, Black affect becomes a personalized alignment with a collective resonance, realized through an approach to gesture. A moving through position toward a momentary possibility of social justice; dancing beyond ballet toward a capacity of demonstrated (Black) excellence. Black affect becomes the charging of stage gesture with a willingness to reference life outside of the structures called forth by form. Black attitude in contemporary ballet tends to remind the dancers and their audiences that we are all people here, finding our way, and aware of the structures of domination that hail us into our roles within the theater.

## We Live in Black Aesthetics

In the United States, Black people make up 12.2 percent of the population, or so, but I and others contend that most of the ways that we understand entertainment, and especially performance, to function in the United States as American expression emanates from Africanist aesthetics.<sup>5</sup> This is the history that cites “jazz” as an American invention, built out from Black creativities. These are formal structures and approaches: the percussive attack; the “get down” posture; the multiple centers of movement activity; the complex meter; the metaphorical and subjectifying intersectionalities that contain and release in their complexity, designed to mirror contemporary life in every era.<sup>6</sup> Black creative product changes in every generation, from the Charleston to voguing, and we find aspects of these Black dance forms in ballet contemporary to the moment of these practices. We see the Charleston in dances by the Ballets Suedois (think, *La Création du Monde* of 1923); voguing in works created by the Joffrey Ballet (think, *Billboards*, 1993). Few might deny that Black artistry shapes American life, or deny that it is an artistry born of aesthetic strategies intertwined with political location. The aesthetic strategies and the political location of Black as an interpellated identity interlock, and it can be hard for others to understand how that works. But it does work, and Black dance emerges from its location as a political mode of expression embedded among aesthetic strategies of people in social motion. Ballet struggles in this formation because its political modes of expression are extremely narrow; it’s fairly inaccessible as a mode of practice, and very specific in terms of its sites of execution. We tend to see contemporary ballet—if we know what that is—in theater or museum spaces. There aren’t so many of those sorts of places on the planet, compared with where people dance alongside each other, for all sorts of reasons, and when we are not involved in contemporary ballet.

p. 568

What this means for tracing genealogies of contemporary ballet is that the Blackness of its forms is overdetermined and inevitable. Black will be interpellated into the contemporary willy-nilly; inevitably, we will be seeing the Black that had been excluded before the contemporary cohered. This Blackness arrives in the deeply rooted desire to achieve Black attitude, as well as the framing aesthetic rhetorics of Africanist

approaches to rhythm, to asymmetry, to revealing the suturing of disparate elements, and to leaning into a political resistance that might be demonstrated through performance.

The irony of “who” performs the contemporary deserves attention here. If Africanist aesthetics provide a foundational text—a “how” of physical approach for the dancing—mightn’t there be many, many Black ballet artists demonstrating how this suturing operates? Unfortunately, this isn’t so, and there are not all that many Black artists of ballet sharing their expertise on professional stages. Worse, there are extremely few Black choreographers or dancemakers in global circulation.

In other words, we live in an American aesthetic born of jazz, which contains scores of Black, white, Latinx, Asian, and Native practitioners. But our contemporary ballet—if it is similarly born of a jazz-like approach to weightiness of the moment, fluidity and technical proficiency, an embodied cool, and improvisation as method—suffers mightily as it is rarely performed by Black artists or rarely supported by Black choreographers. Over the years, we’ve heard many reasons for why this remains so. I want to suggest here, though, that Black presence in ballet shifts conversations about the capacities of the form in ways that make many people uncomfortable.

## Black Dancers Foreground Political Possibilities

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When Black ballerinas gather, they remind us that for them, ballet might be rendered entirely political in its very practice. This truth is contained, of course, in the hailing of Black ballerinas: artists whose artistry is born of the enormous pressures of microaggressions, macroaggressions, blank racisms, and continual disavowal. We will not find a Black ballerina on the planet who has not endured the discomfort of being accused of being outside of her place in life by the fact of her pursuit of ballet as a professional vocation. Black men in ballet have a smoother road. Mitchell and Louis Johnson, among many others, found their way to national stages and celebrity in the 1950s; hundreds of Black men have enjoyed professional careers in ballet, surely augmented by work in musical theater, modern dance, or television/film. Of course, men in ballet can move more easily to other modes of physical address and creative expression; ballet training becomes a background for a clarity of line and organization of energy that can be useful in many other modes of theatrical dance.

p. 569

So Black ballerinas hold a special place in thinking through the Black foundations of contemporary ballet. When we witness Black women dancing in contemporary work, and dancing well, we begin to understand what had been missing before: an alignment of gesture with agency that is at once personal to the artist and demonstrative of the collective’s need and desire. Francesca Harper, dancing in Ballett Frankfurt, Adji Cissoko of Alonzo King LINES Ballet, Michaela DePrince in DTH and Het Nationale Ballet (Dutch National Ballet), and (of course) Misty Copeland in ABT remind us that moving through these works is also moving through a life in contention, one constantly pushed back to strength.<sup>7</sup> Part of this knowing comes from our assumptions surrounding the unlikely spectacle of Black women treated as semisacrificial artists whose physical capacities are completely defined by dedication to a technical practice that demands approximately ten years of continuous daily engagement. With the world as it is—as we’ve made it—we wonder, how could this be possible? What sorts of accommodations could have been made to allow a Black girl or young woman to practice daily across half of her lifetime? Black and white alike in the audience, we wonder at this unlikeliness and marvel at the achievements and expertise onstage.

When the Black ballerinas work through contemporary ballets—those works that move well beyond classical positions or physical narratives of feminine frailty to be solved by a stabilizing male presence—we begin to understand how Black dancing can transform the contemporary. In realizing the possibility of balancing off-center, or moving beyond the position toward an irrefutable angle or along a physical trajectory toward ecstasy, Black ballerinas confirm the fact of the contemporary: an identity forged against

its disavowal and vibrating toward an unconsidered realization. Black ballerinas in contemporary ballet can point toward the implication of the Middle Passage and the arrival of the modern by dancing well beyond the choreography at hand, infusing movement with the preciousness of Black attitude.

And there are so many, many amazing Black ballerinas! A few names, then: Endalyn Taylor; Dr. Joselli Audien-Deans; Theara Ward; Theresa Ruth Howard; Nena Gilreath; Anjali Austin; Christina Johnson; Tanya Wideman-Davis; ballet historian and theorist Kimberleigh Jordan. These women gathered to speak at a recent conference of dance; we all marveled at their interwoven and still diverse commentary, and their willingness to take space on the dais and prove their worth yet again as living archivists of experiential knowledges of contemporary ballet, and to enlarge possibilities for public diversities of Black femininity in dance.<sup>8</sup> At another Ballerina's Breakfast, hosted by DTH in 2016, dozens more accomplished and experienced artists gathered. More names, then: Gabrielle Salvatto; Kellye Saunders; Christiane Cristo-Esewoko; Maria Phegan; Judith Rotardier; Marcia Sells, Esquire; Tai Jimenez; Sandra Fortune Green; Lorraine Graves; Denise Nix Thompson; Virginia Johnson; Valencia Yearwood; Terri Tompkins; Christina Cottman-Pierangeli; Kareen Pauld-Carmargo; Charmaine Hunter; Karen Brown; Paunika Jones; Karlya Shelton Benjamin; Judy Tyrus; Lauren Anderson; Lydia Abarca-Mitchell; Debra Austin-Boieru; Carmen de Lavallade; Dr. Glory Van Scott; Raven Wilkinson; Delores Brown; Joan Myers Brown; Gayle McKinney-Griffith. These moments of affirmation and assembly are of the current moment's concerns with social justice and ethical dimensions of considering race, gender, sexuality, disability, class, age, and religion as we prepare theatrical dance. As in pop star Beyoncé's "Lemonade," the ladies get in formation to confirm possibilities, including within ballet in the contemporary moment of Black feminist enlivenment.

p. 570

**Figure 33.2.**



Ballerina's Breakfast 2016. **Top Row, L-R:** Theara Ward; Gabrielle Salvatto; Kellye Saunders; Christiane Cristo-Esewoko; Maria Phegan; Judith Rotardier; Theresa Ruth Howard; Marcia Sells, Esquire; Tai Jimenez; Sandra Fortune Green; Lorraine Graves; Denise Nix Thompson. **Middle Row, L-R:** Virginia Johnson; Endalyn Taylor; Christina Johnson; Valencia Yearwood; Dr. Joselli Audain-Deans; Terri Tompkins; Christina Cottman-Pierangeli; Kareen Pauld-Carmargo; Charmaine Hunter; Karen Brown; Paunika Jones; Karlya Shelton Benjamin; Judy Tyrus; Lauren Anderson. **Seated, L-R:** Lydia Abarca-Mitchell; Debra Austin-Boieru; Carmen de Lavallade; Dr. Glory Van Scott; Raven Wilkinson; Delores Brown; Joan Myers Brown; Gayle McKinney-Griffith.

Photo by Tony Turner, courtesy of Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Ballet offers its audience the scrutiny of the abilities of a dancing body; for many Black dancers, ballet can allow for a moment's release from the pressures of the everyday. But these terms are contradictory: Black women are regularly scrutinized for their bodies and their "place" in social orders; onstage, and dancing in

contemporary works, they might shift the terms of that scrutiny toward their own initiative. We note that in the peculiar circumstance of Black life, that release from the everyday is entirely contingent, assumedly precarious, and emphatically unsustainable. We are stared at because we are visible in these spaces like the ballet stage. A Black connection to body means an always-ready consciousness to being viewed and evaluated. We are physically hailed by audiences who see us; we are aesthetically hailed by artists who want our movement strategies, and we are politically hailed, by each other, as in the video for “Lemonade,” to come correct, to dance as if we have no choice. This is part of our inheritance, of course, from the Middle Passage: to dance as if we have no choice, as on the slave ships. Our dancing makes possibility manifest personally, politically—socially and aesthetically. Our dancing is saturated by experience, even in its most naive demonstrations, say, of toddlers imitating Beyoncé, and certainly present within our engagements with ballet.

## Black Audiences and Cultural Appropriation

For a different 1996 writing assignment, I wondered at the obvious rise of a “contemporary ballet repertory” that was “undisputably Afro-based, vividly realized in works by American choreographers Gerald Arpino, William Forsythe, Jerome Robbins, and Twyla Tharp.” In that essay, I observed:

Ironically, core Afro-American dance styles, which value subversive invention, participatory interaction, and an overwhelming sense of bodily presence, diverge neatly from ballet’s conception of strictly codified body line, a silenced and motionless audience, and movement as metaphoric abstraction. The process of building an African-American audience base responsive to ballet, an action begun by DTH, is necessary to ensure the continued presence of Blacks in ballet for generations to come.<sup>9</sup>

Some of this has changed, of course: in some contemporary ballet, the body line is not so strictly codified; and even though an audience might generally be largely still and motionless, we’ve seen some ballet experiments in gallery installations that allow the audience to position itself around the dancers as it will. I suggest that this predicts a future for ballet that allows for more Black audience participation, especially as we will not be required to sit in seats to receive the information of ballet, silent and motionless. But I still assert that formalist abstraction will interest Black people only occasionally and briefly. Given a choice, I would suggest that Black audiences tend to be much more interested in story and the creation of relationship that performance might make possible, than in formal lines deployed seemingly without reference to our political circumstance as people on the planet.

Black people produce discernible dances, including sacred forms, as in the dances of the Orishas; social forms, as in “the Dougie” or krumping; theatrical forms, as in the cakewalk or voguing; as well as techniques of dancing, as in the Dunham technique. Any of these dances might arrive as contents in a contemporary ballet. Unfortunately, though, as established, the dancers performing these movements onstage are rarely experts in these practices. Audiences witnessing these movements in contemporary ballets might be titillated by their presence, but disappointed at the tepid effect of movement ported in to confirm a contemporary effect.

As an example, the Joffrey Ballet famously engaged some forms of Black social and theatrical dance in its anthology project *Billboards* (1993), set to recorded music by Prince.<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding that Joffrey has often hired artists of color, in leading roles in all manner of dance works, *Billboards* arrived flat and confusing as white artists attempted to vogue (sort of) or achieve basic six-step combinations borrowed from b-boying and b-girling. By way of contrast, works by Johnson for DTH, including *Forces of Rhythm* (1972) and *Fontessa and Friends* (created for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, 1981), mobilized Black

social dance to great effect in surprisingly comedic and poignant works that considered ballet as an element among several manner of Black dance artistry.<sup>11</sup>

Too often, when ballets try to incorporate Black dances among other choreographic elements, the results seem opportunistic and bound up with appropriation. The model of cultural appropriation that I prefer acknowledges a power dynamic between a stronger agent and a weaker agent that allows the stronger agent to misuse and profit from cultural activities created and practiced by the weaker agent. In this model, it matters that there is a material or cultural capital gain for the stronger agent that is denied to the people whose creativity is being displaced; it also matters that the activity is misused, and realized in a setting decidedly out of place. Arriving within a differentiated world of cultural imagination, the creative practice stutters and stares, doing something in this other context, but uncomfortably acknowledged as a performative alterity and “special feature” now available to those in the new context. In this model, appropriation is not reversible, as the terms of stronger and weaker agent remain unidirectional at the moment of their articulation.

Ballet tends to be the stronger agent in most conversations about dance, whether we are to consider theatrical, social, or spiritual forms. Ballet takes up so much cultural space on the planet that it seems to incorporate other idioms into its contents without effort. Classical ballet has a long tradition of “character dancing” that is built from ethnic and gender/sexuality stereotyping and the mining of “folk” dances for recalibration among ballet steps. Ballet as a form takes up prime real estate in most major cities; numerous fiscal resources in the shape of civic, national, and private funding in the context of the United States; and expansive cultural capital as a highly desirable activity for young girls and some boys eager to participate in a respectable expressive practice. Ballet “matters more” than social dance, liturgical dance, modern dance, or jazz dance, directing many choreographers toward its imprimatur as a way toward respectability.

p. 573

The work of choreographer Twyla Tharp offers fine examples of deploying Black dance activities, toward an articulation of Black affect, in the service of contemporary ballet. Tharp has enjoyed a career combining popular music (Billy Joel, Frank Sinatra, Bob Dylan) with her own jazzy hybrid styles of moving that draw directly on Black dance methods and ballet at its foundation.<sup>12</sup> Tharp’s first work designed explicitly for the proscenium stage, *Eight Jelly Rolls* (1971), placed an ensemble of mostly white women in relationship to a decidedly Black masculine musicality by Jelly Roll Morton and the Red Hot Peppers. The effect of the work startles, in its seeming parody of improvised jazz dancing, transformed here into a self-absorbed, shaking and stumbling sort of exercise. Tharp and her collaborating dancers create a skipping, fast-stepping romp that doesn’t actually function alongside or within the music, but rather seems to make fun of its playful qualities with a sloppy, rag doll physicality. Tharp made many of these incontrovertibly white (as in, apolitical explorations of moving around explicitly for the pleasure of the dancers and their audience), release-technique, sweeping dance works to early ragtime and jazz music throughout the 1970s; her 1979 work *Baker’s Dozen* was adapted and accepted into the ABT repertory in 2007. *Baker’s Dozen*, with music by Willie “the Lion” Smith, continues a trend of emphatically silly, childish behavior turned into dance to accompany ragtime and stride piano inventions; the dancing infantilizes the music by aligning it with a sort of inconsequentiality of comic gesture.

In one reading, Tharp’s choreography takes on a quality of physicalized blackface minstrelsy. When she and her collaborators reduce their responses to Black music to a sort of shaking grotesquerie, we begin to see the movements as a novelty rendering of an unhuman form. As in US traditions of blackface, the characters that Tharp’s collaborators take on become weird cyphers of uncontrolled impulse.<sup>13</sup> As in blackface, the whiteness of the performers adds a dynamic of power asymmetry that renders the dancing irrelevant to social concerns. Blackface operated in part by asserting a dominance of white privilege through the performed disdain of Black creativity. Physical timing, elaborations of rhythmic possibility, embodied wit, and demonstrations of individuality within a diasporic social context are all embedded within Black dancing. Blackface minstrelsy and Tharp’s “jazz” choreographies perform the outward shapes and

rhythmic impulses of these types of dancing, but without Black performers or, more important, a connection to the possibilities of Black social life enabled by this performance. For Tharp, these movements are silly fun, harmless inventions of a curious choreographer who expresses her apolitical fascination with Black music and modes of moving.

As recently as 2015 in *Yowzie*, Tharp continued this line of slapstick entertainment via an unaware Blackface-minstrelsy-like cultural appropriation. In rendering improvisational methodologies as the stuff of physical comedy, Tharp asserts the stronger-agent ability of ballet and its (white) agents to use and misuse Black dancing. It's worth noting that Tharp's affiliation with ABT began amid her friendship and collaboration with Mikhail Baryshnikov and grew as the public enjoyed the ways that Tharp brought Baryshnikov a pop-culture veneer. Baryshnikov's cool dancing, emphatically drawing on a certain Black affect, moved ABT toward something recognizably contemporary. Under an agreement, the company absorbed several of Tharp's dancers into its ranks, including African American dancer Shelley Washington. In this arrangement, Washington, who danced with Tharp for much of her early career and still stages her ballets around the world, became the first Black woman soloist with ABT, from 1988 to 1992.

p. 574

In contrast to the unwitting sorts of appropriation that seem to surround Tharp's deployment of Black dances and affect toward her own ends, we consider the methods of William Forsythe in his improvisation technologies. Forsythe claims improvisation as a foundational aspect of technique to build an approach to performance, one rooted in the address familiar to jazz musicians who craft musicianship and phrases based on imaginative lines of flight and intuitive associations. Like Balanchine, Forsythe has expressed direct interest in Black dance and asserted that the combination of breakdancing and ballet could produce the sorts of dancing that contemporary audiences would most like to witness. Forsythe's work in improvisation technologies draws directly on a Black dance imperative to become the thing that is danced, to reveal the always-changing individual self within a group dynamic. Forsythe and his collaborators' innovations in ballet toward the contemporary are rooted in a dancerly willingness to accommodate the vagaries of existence in order to imagine a technique of performance. This is, of course, a willingness to recognize the fugitivity of experience, always a moving target tempered by social possibilities. In improvising, collaborating artists are encouraged to work through the myriad levels of association that emerge within the body and its imagination. Improvisers move through imagery and physical information to construct forces and flows of energy all the while referring to a shared context for the development of ideas and their usefulness.

Improvisation has suited African American creativity across all approaches to performance, as it centers a willful not-knowingness that aligns with the shifting social and political tides of Black disavowal in the United States. Improvising within Black culture builds from understanding an ever-expanding archive of materials available for consideration. The best improvisers are those with the most experience in the area that they work from. Improvisers craft performances from the deft selection and shaping of materials toward an end of surprising the moment.

Disavowal contributed to the terms for an urgency of improvisatory elegance practiced within Black performance. But, of course, this approach to creativity must not be theorized to somehow line up with a pathology of post-traumatic stress. Disavowal arrives as a term of Black life in the twenty-first century, whether the person in question labors as a ballerina, a healthcare professional, or the former president of the United States. Dancing ballet, Black artists engage an urgency of hopefulness in the moment that allows for an effervescence that reaches beyond the terms of any single choreography, to be realized through the performance of movement and gesture. This may surely be one aspect of how Black dancing has been dismissed in the context of ballet performances, as ballet might be concerned with a predictability of line and energetic release. Black structures of improvisation reach beyond what the dancer or the form itself knows about capacity, to realize an unexpected confluence of motion and affect. It's very difficult to parse

out Black affect or Black attitude, or to contain its energetic fields. When recognized, Black affect reaches beyond what's being done toward a "something else" bound up by its own provocation.

p. 575 Forsythe's work often builds through Black affect and content toward its impressive achievements. *Impressing the Czar* (1988), Forsythe's inventive four-act spectacle, takes Africanist manipulation of ballet as its mode of address. Each of its four acts trades in Africanist invention: from the unlikely juxtapositions of time-space and contradictory ↴ movement idioms of the first act, through the volcanic cool attitude of the second act, through the irony of a literal auction of culture in the third act, to a hip-hop line dance in the fourth act. In this, the work expresses deep communion with Black modes of being. In its "aesthetic of perfect disorder," *Impressing the Czar* offers vivid embodiment of the chaotic dissembly that circumscribes Black life and might contribute to a realization of contemporary ballet.<sup>14</sup>

The first act of *Czar*, titled "Potemkin's Signature," deploys incomprehensible, citation-laden references in movement and text (performed in English and German) amid an asymmetrically bifurcated stage space. A Mr. Pnut character moves through all four acts of the work; like a minstrel-era surrogate, or a Halloween or Carnival reveler, he directly references popular culture and the implications of global commerce on the entire enterprise of ballet performance. As if it were a freestyle emcee oration or a twenty-first century mixtape riff, the act unfolds in dizzying disarray, but somehow coherent in its particularity of assembly. The act suggests an incommensurability to the fact of historical performance (ballet) and a modern world strewn with contemporary concerns.

p. 576 The second act of *Czar* deploys Black affect most vividly in the structuring. Titled *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated*, in this act dancers prowl about and test each other even as they engage emphatic execution of dancing within the rhythmic attack of a percussive musical score. This work has been taken into the repertory of dozens of ballet companies precisely because it engages the ineffable "Black cool" that marks the contemporary ↴ of ballet, from its crashing, rhythmic score, to its nonchalant manipulations of line and attack toward a circumstance of urgency.

The third act of *Czar* features an auction of culture that includes a golden slave; the reference to Black life in the context of ballet could hardly be more blatant. In the fourth act, the dancers all arrive in a sort of Japanese anime/Catholic schoolgirl drag; working in anonymous, interchangeable groups, some of them perform an odd, awkward, and ironic hip-hop line dance. By the time that Mr. Pnut ends the ballet with a short coda, its audience has experienced palpable Black presence by way of implication in terms of contents, contexts, compositional approach, and mode of assembly. Unfortunately, the work, featuring more than forty performers, is seldom performed by Black artists.

Figure 33.3.



*Impressing the Czar*, Semperoper Ballett, act 4, 2019.

Photo © Ian Whalen Photography, courtesy of the *Semperoper Ballett* and Forsythe Productions.

## Sally Banes’s “Balanchine and Black Dance”

Dance historian Sally Banes set a standard of discourse surrounding Black presence in neoclassical ballet with her essay “Balanchine and Black Dance.”<sup>15</sup> Banes felt the need to take up a challenge posed by more and more dance researchers then and now about the debts American ballet owed to Black American innovations in sound and gesture. At issue was the amount of unacknowledged thievery of physical methodology that companies like NYCB took from Black American social dance idioms in order to infuse their operations with a “contemporary vibe.” At the moment of Banes’s writing, in the early 1990s, audiences could appreciate the depth of change that Black dancing had brought to ballet, but very few researchers in dance had found ways to document and theorize through the changes that artists like Balanchine had wrought. Banes discussed the stuff of jazziness and jazz music and the Black people who influenced Balanchine as he made his jazz ballets; she also reminded us of his intentions to embed Black people within the dance company he wanted to direct in the United States.<sup>16</sup> But Banes stopped well short of discussing why and how Black performance creates contingent relationships that extend form. This might be the Black affect discussed earlier in this chapter, that always knows more than the current task at hand; the affect that bends, or *pliés*, somewhere in the ruins of colonial encounter and slavery.

Banes was not equipped to discuss the actual approaches to movement that might constitute terms of Africanist performance bound up with social relations and an aesthetic concerned with progressive politics. And, indeed, Black dance, if it is a coherent mode of dancing, arrives concerned with the possibilities of group encounter and the unexpected arrivals of spirit and wit that mark the best improvisations. Instead, Banes wrote about particular stances in some Balanchine ballets, with the whole directed to a conclusion that while Balanchine may have borrowed some small gestures, his choreography was wholly “his.”

p. 577 Again and again, Banes carefully explains to the reader that Balanchine used Black dance as one influence among many; that his interests in the dancing of African Americans was somehow temporary and detachable from his larger project to build an aesthetically diverse American ballet. Presumably, this sort of argumentation would allow Banes to be respected by the balletomanes and white supremacist dance historians and critics who could not brook African American intrusion into ballet. In actuality, though, Africanist influences cannot be turned on and off according to anyone’s whim; in the context of the United

States, we are all involved in Black life and Africanist aesthetics. Banes's fragmentary assertions that Black dance influences became only a part of how Balanchine worked reinforce a racist rhetoric that disavows how Black people continually shape public discourse and artmaking. A youthful Balanchine worked alongside many seasoned Black American artists, including Katherine Dunham, Josephine Baker, Herbert Harper, the Nicholas Brothers, Buddy Bradley, and too many others to name; the affective influence of their creative address was inevitably bound up with decisions that he made years later—and not limited to his decision to join the first board of directors of DTH.

## The Challenge of Recognizing Race in Ballet

*Post-black, or mixed race, creole or poly-gender, we resist category in our lives moment to moment in order to survive, and surely in our choices to work as performing artists in ballet. This “both-and”ness is part of how Black cool and Black affect distribute themselves through beauties that are fierce and politically conscious; this is what we see in Black dance engagements of ballet.*

The challenge for ballet and contemporary ballet, then, is how to include the Black people who are its inspiration, and how to make space for political engagement as a presupposition for public performance. As an example of a young Black dance personality being embraced by a ballet establishment, the eccentric dancer Lil Buck has become an offering as a recent source of Black embodied imagination, beloved by some white critics and presenters. But as he is interpellated into the available offerings for performance as a ballet-like jook dancer, or as a street dancer who has done well, he is restored to a marginal, temporary space that could never be sustained within contemporary ballet.<sup>17</sup> He is not a ballet dancer, and can never be that. His materialization within ballet, again, raises the question: Can Black people be ballet artists? Are these identities truly contradictory? Must a Black person dancing ballet become an unmarked (white) ballerina, to inevitably lose access to her status and creative concerns as a Black person? Alonzo King offers a counternarrative of sorts.

p. 578 King has crafted an original approach to ballet as a creative contemporary activity in his company Alonzo King LINES Ballet (AKLB), based in San Francisco.<sup>18</sup> Many audience members and dance researchers understand that King's childhood was rooted in civil rights activism that his parents undertook, and that his achievements in ballet have come alongside his emergence into Black American adulthood. In forming AKLB as a late twentieth-century experiment in contemporary ballet, King affirms a creative possibility for Black presence in ballet collaboration, as King choreographs work himself and invariably includes a number of Black women ballerinas and men of color in his company. Unlike Forsythe or other choreographers, King rarely works with elements of Black social dance as if to visibly bind his dances to an abiding Black presence. Rather, he has crafted an improvisational strategy that allows for the making of passages of movement within a practice of ballet: a mode of creative address that speaks back toward flows of energy and the possibilities of Black life.

King's vision of contemporary ballet pours outward from an exploration of flow and energy toward physical invention. In rehearsals and dance classes, King and his collaborators work through questions of energetic and physical possibility with movement improvisations. Following flows of energy encourages dancers to wonder at movement as a quality of becoming, or as an emergence among people; in this, the practice of ballet can be part of a holistic moving-through to suit the terms of the political day and the physical moment. In this rendering, King asks his collaborators to bring their memory-based understandings of political life into the practice of ballet.

King's company has been typically described as a singularity, wrought into presence by its charismatic director's agility and without clear relationship to Black life in contemporary ballet. While he is hailed as a

Black choreographer, his company has never been “majority Black.” Its works rarely address “issues of social justice” in an overt, didactic manner, and its musical choices often involve religious classical music from a Western canon, “Eastern” music, or Mahgreb sound scores. In some analyses, AKLB defies an interpellation as Black ballet. And yet. The foundations for the company’s explorations of individual flow within a group dynamic, the valuing of religious or spiritual sounds as suitable to an ongoing exploration of a contemporary balletic possibility, and the deployment of improvisation as a method of inquiry—these aspects of AKLB’s process all speak to terms of a recognizable Black address.

A recognizable Black address, one apparent, but not revealed in any single aspect. In this layered assembly, we move toward something not quite interpellation—something more like a Black presence realized in affirmation toward a future shared legacy of contemporary ballet. In this subtle rendering of Black possibility, ballet remains stabilized as an exclusive form of theatrical dance built upon the compromises and sacrifices of daily technique classes that preclude anything like a “normal” social life for the dancer-in-training. Ballet persists as a remnant of French court structures, sustained so that a particularity of physical address could be extended and capitalized upon across centuries. But now, perhaps, a contemporary ballet could emerge, one infused with and enlivened by Black modes of creative address, the presence of Black people, and a guiding assumption of diversity as a strengthening agent for dancing and audiences.

p. 579 So perhaps Black people enter the space of contemporary ballet at the point when we stop being interpellated as Black. That said, on our best days, and most of the time, we love our Blackness unambiguously. We might not want to inhabit a hybrid space that doesn’t trade in Blackness as its central possibilities. We might only want Black ballet. And this Black ballet might be where my contemporary ballet emerges: in its Blackness, politically engaged, concerned with family, creating relationship among.

## Notes

1. Franz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness,” *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952 (London: Pluto Press, 1986. Althusser explores these concepts in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).
2. Thomas F. DeFrantz, “The Black Body in Question,” *Village Voice*, 1996. The article for the *Voice* was not concerned with the presence of dancers who might pass for white in the largest ballet companies; there have always been mixed-race artists who might be Latinx but operate outside of the terms of racial discriminations that produce Black subjects.
3. “Classicism with a Difference” became a DTH promotional catchphrase, quoted by Clive Barnes as early as 1982.
4. Many scholars have commented on an alignment of modernism with practices of chattel slavery. See Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944).
5. Brenda Dixon Gottschild has written extensively about Africanist foundations for American creative address. See Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).
6. See Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence*; Robert Farris Thompson, “Dance and Culture: An Aesthetic of the Cool,” *African Forum* 2 (Fall 1966); Thomas F. 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, 2002), 3–35; Dolores Kirton Cayou, *Modern Jazz Dance* (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 1971).
7. Francesca Harper, Ballett Frankfurt (1994–1999); Adji Cissoko, Alonzo King LINES Ballet (2014–); Michaela DePrince, Dance Theatre of Harlem (2012–2013) and Het Nationale Ballet (Dutch National Ballet, 2014–2020—when she would take a leave of absence); Misty Copeland, American Ballet Theatre (2001–).
8. Collegium for African Diaspora Dance conference, “Embodying the AfroFuture,” Durham, NC, February 19–21, 2016,

[https://www.cadd-online.org/uploads/5/1/7/4/51749093/cadd\\_2016\\_program:booklet.pdf](https://www.cadd-online.org/uploads/5/1/7/4/51749093/cadd_2016_program:booklet.pdf).

- p. 580
9. Thomas F. DeFrantz, "Ballet," in *Encyclopedia of African American History and Culture* (Detroit, MI: Gale, 2016), 183.
  10. *Billboards*, commissioned by Gerald Arpino for the Joffrey Ballet, with choreography by Laura Dean, Charles Moulton, Margo Sappington, and Peter Pucci, premiered in January 1993.
  11. See Thomas F. DeFrantz, "Ballet in Black: Louis Johnson and Vernacular Humor," in *Dancing Bodies, Living Histories: New Writings about Dance and Culture*, ed. Lisa Doolittle and Anne Flynn (Banff, AB: Banff Press, 2000), 178–195.
  12. Tharp conceived and choreographed three Broadway shows in this idiom: *Movin' Out* to the music of Billy Joel in 2001, *The Times They Are a-Changin'* to the music of Bob Dylan in 2005, and *Come Fly with Me* to the music of Frank Sinatra in 2009.
  13. Voluminous contemporary scholarship on the remains of blackface minstrelsy includes Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), and Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).
  14. *Impressing the Czar*, choreographed by William Forsythe to music by Thom Willems, Leslie Stuck, Eva Crossman-Hecht, and Ludwig van Beethoven, Ballett Frankfurt, 1988.
  15. Sally Banes, "Balanchine and Black Dance," *Choreography and Dance* 3, pt. 3 (1993): 59–77.
  16. This is the apocryphal story of eight "negro" dancers who would lead his new ballet company of sixteen, if he had his way. Banes refers to a letter from Lincoln Kirstein to A. Everett Austin, director of the Wadsworth Atheneum, in 1933: "For the first he would take 4 white girls and 4 white boys, about sixteen yrs. old, and 8 of the same, *negros*...the negro part of it would be amazingly supple, the combination of suppleness and sense of time superb." Quoted in *I Remember Balanchine: Recollections of the Ballet Master by Those Who Knew Him*, comp. Francis Mason (London: Anchor Books, 1991): 116.
  17. For demonstrations of Lil Buck dancing alongside balletic protocols, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZumgHLSW10> or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xP7W2mSkDQM>.
  18. See "Tracing Lines" for an overview of King's philosophy; <https://vimeo.com/80495612>.