Outstanding Scholarly Research Award 2017: Honoring the Work of Thomas DeFrantz

Susan Leigh Foster, Constance Valis Hill (as read by Nadine George Graves), Susan Manning, and Jasmine Johnson

Abstract: This panel celebrates the contributions of Thomas DeFrantz, the 2017 recipient of the CORD Outstanding Scholarly Research Award.

Introduction to the Panel--Susan Leigh Foster

I am excited and delighted to be chairing this session today, honoring the work of one of our most esteemed and influential scholars. Tommy has distinguished himself through a pioneering set of publications that have opened several new dimensions in the study of dance. He has brought considerations of race and racial identity into our assessment of dance’s significance and history along with an understanding of how race intersects with gender, sexuality, and elite and popular forms of dance. He has equally delivered highly original and illuminating interpretations of the relationship between dance, culture, and the political. He writes with compelling vividness and precision about a range of artists and dance practices, giving the reader a deep sense of the development of the choreography, the feel of the stage, and the dance’s particular engagement with social and aesthetic issues. His writing exemplifies what is, to my mind, one of the strongest abilities to describe physical action and then explain its significance that I have ever read.

Tommy’s book Revelations pioneered in illuminating the work of Alvin Ailey and in its innovative structure. His several anthologies and many rich essays have given us so many insights into dance’s power and potential. I know he also has several projects in the works about which I can hardly wait to read. But let us pause at this moment in his distinguished career to acknowledge what he has accomplished thus far.

On the panel today we have Susan Manning, Jasmine Johnson, and in absentia Constance Vallis Hill, who although unable to attend, has sent along her tribute. It will be delivered by Nadine George-Graves. © 2017, Susan Leigh Foster

Susan Leigh Foster, choreographer and scholar, is Distinguished Professor in the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at UCLA. She is currently at work on a book entitled Valuing Dance: Commodities and Gifts in Motion. Three of her danced lectures can be found at the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage website http://danceworkbook.pcah.us/susan-foster/index.html.

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To my Brother Man, Tommy DeFrantz—Constance Valis Hill

My dearest Tommy, I am sad not to be able to be with you on this momentous and well-deserved tribute by members of the newly joined SDHS and CORD, hoping these words I prepared will be read (with great humor and joy) on your tribute. I am organizing my reflections chronologically and biographically to reflect my experience of you and the revelations I received by standing in your light. Here it goes: Snapshot #1: Waiting for Tommy

January 1991. Newly accepted into the Ph.D. program in Performance Studies at New York University. I arrive on time to my first class, Cynthia Novack’s Anthropology of Dance. A large roundtable of M.A. and Ph.D. students. All seats taken, but for one—Cynthia handing out her generous multi-page syllabus for the course but hesitates to begin the class, saying—“Waiting for Tommy. We must wait for Tommy.” Who is this Tommy, I say to myself that the class cannot begin without him? A few silent minutes pass; suddenly a door opens and in strides a tall and lanky Tommy DeFrantz, with a cute, sly, sweet grin, quickly slipping into his seat. “Now, we can begin,” says a smiling Cynthia. Snapshot #2: Taking on Marcia

Fall 1991: Performance Studies, NYU, in our first class with our adviser, Marcia Siegel, who has returned from sabbatical. The class is Dance Theory, and Marcia has handed out a list of presentations from which each of us will select a topic for an independent report. I peruse the list cautiously, having been totally intimidated by Marcia’s dominating authority, and choose the easiest topic, totally disregarding Philosophy of Dance, which requires the discerning translations of Hegel, Sparshott, DeLeuze, Van Camp, Suzanne Langer, for surely, a poor report would land you in Marcia’s snare! Every student in the room has the same strategy as mine. Until we get to Tommy: “I’ll take Philosophy of Dance,” says Tommy, smiling broadly at Marcia—and even she, behind a stoic face—seemed slightly pleased and surprised. Snapshot #3: Look What I Found in the Ailey Archives

Fall 1993: I return to the Alvin Ailey school, where I had been on a dance scholarship and jazz instructor, to coordinate their Dance History Program, working under the supervision of Denise Jefferson (who had been my Graham teacher). There, in the corner of a disheveled room is a pile, almost four feet high, of notebooks and scrapbooks. Looking through them, each notebook book was a notation by Ailey of many of his choreographies. I call Tommy: “You gotta come down to the Ailey archive,” I tell him. “There’s a pile of notebooks with Ailey’s scribbled notes.” Tommy arrives shortly to discover a goldmine of materials, which eventually helped to materialize his dissertation (“Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s
Embodiment of African American Culture”) and his first Oxford University Press publication, Dancing Revelations:

Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture, with the notation of over 78 choreographies which had never before been accumulated. Snapshot #4: Tommy the Tap Dancer

1998: Preparing a paper presentation entitled “Iconography of the Soft Shoe” for the SDHS Conference in Eugene, Oregon. I spend three weeks, painstakingly reconstructing the choreography in my attic studio at 222 North Pine Avenue in Albany, NY, the tap choreography of Charles Honi Coles’ and Cholly Atkins’ “Taking A Chance on Love,” renown for being the slowest of all tap soft shoe dances on record. I need a partner, a tall partner, and ask Tommy if he could possibly take the time to learn it, knowing it would take days of labor to master the intricate and slow execution of taps. Tommy arrives; we ascend the two flights of stairs to the attic studio. And he learns the choreography in under one hour! I am flabbergasted! And Tommy is cool. “Any other steps you have in the time we have?” he asks! Snapshot #5: Kaiso! From Pamphlet to Book

Tommy and I are both on the Editorial Board of Dance History Scholars and we are in discussion about potential manuscripts. Tommy points to a document we found in the Ailey archives—a copy of Katherine Dunham’s Kaiso! printed in plastic spiral “notebook” form. Tommy points out to members of the Board, with commendable cool and reserve, despite indignant fire, how the document was considered to be a “pamphlet” and much in need of being published as an SDHS volume. The Editorial Board is a bit dubious. Tommy, most diplomatically, persists. The result: Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham, edited by the late VèVè Clark and Sara Johnson, a 700-page volume of collected writings by Ms. Dunham (including an excerpt from her last unpublished work, Minefields) with articles by prominent dance and cultural historians (so proud to be included in this book, which I volume edited.)

Snapshot #6: Tommy the Philanthropist  Tommy, your edited volume, Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance, published in 2002, began your support of emerging black performance scholars and melded the writings of such renown scholars as Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Sterling Stuckey, Sally Banes, and John Szwed with a younger generation—Richard Green, Veta Goler, Nadine George, Marya Annette McQuirter—who today are at the apex of their careers. You also included the essay of which I have been the proudest in my career, “Katherine Dunham’s Southland: Protest in the Face of Repression,” immortalizing it unto eternity, and for that I am so profoundly grateful. And then the book earns the Errol Hill Award, the famed Caribbean scholar who happened to be my uncle by marriage!

And, of course, I shall forever be grateful for your reading of my first draft—some three hundred pages—
of Tap Dancing America, a Cultural History, which you patiently and compassionately read through, encouraging and affirming to me that, indeed, I had in that mess of pages another book!

Your newest co-edited volume with Anita Gonzalez, Black Performance Theory, articulates and formalizes a rich interdisciplinary area of study and critical method that theorizes black bodies in motion. The volume heralds fecund and discerning insights from a now-to-be-heard generation of scholars: Melissa Bianco Borelli writing on the tragic mulata; the fab Alvin- Ailey-dancer-turned-historian Carl Paris materializing “spirit” in the work of Ronald K. Brown; Koritha Mitchell writing about Black-authored lynching dramas as a resistance to theater history; Tavia Nyong’o’s ecstatic treatise on Little Richard’s “sound”; and Jason King’s explication of spectacularity in Michael Jackson’s “This Is It.”

Tommy, you have deeply influenced all of us, peers and elders all. You are our W.E.B. DuBois of Black theoretical performance (yes, you are the sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, and Pan Africanist) who has contributed to our lexicon such terms as “embodiment” of culture and “slippage” to discern the ever-fluid transportations of Africanist manifestations in performance expressions made visible. In addition, you have been blessed with genes from the anthropologist and folklorist Zora Neal Hurston, mining such contemporary black folklorist materials as hip hop and tap dance in ground-breaking articles such as “Being Savion Glover.” You have led the way to a postmodern renaissance of Black modernism, extinguishing the boundaries of performer and theoretician to engage performing artists to speak authoritatively and engagingly in all areas of dance discourses of dance—and at the same time, engaging in the performative capacities of writing. I thank you. We thank you. And in the words of Duke Ellington, “I love you madly.” © 2017, Constance Valis Hill

Constance Valis Hill, Five College Emerita Professor of Dance, has a Ph.D. in Performance Studies from New York University. Her book, Tap Dancing America, a Cultural History, was supported by grants from the John D. Rockefeller and John Simon Guggenheim Foundation; she recently has donated the 2500-record Tap Dance in America: A Twentieth-Century Chronology of Tap Performance on Stage, Film, and Media to the Library of Congress.

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Honoring Tommy DeFrantz—Susan Manning

“Thomas DeFrantz”—what an elegant name I thought when first encountering the author’s byline around 1994. In fact, the name conjured up the image of an older man, sophisticated and even somewhat world-weary when I read his review of my first monograph,

Ecstasy and the Demon. Within a few years, however, I had met Tommy DeFrantz, not the older man I
had envisioned but a younger man—smart, outgoing, not at all world-weary, but determined to make a difference.

In the mid- and late-1990s we served together on the Editorial Board of the Society of Dance History Scholars, alongside Constance Valis Hill, and we bonded during those meetings and after-hours drinks and dinners. (Deathly anxious about driving at that time, I was always thrilled when Tommy rented a car during conferences and invited me along to an out-of-the-way place for dinner.) Tommy’s first edited anthology, Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance, came together during those years, drawing from a CORD Special Topics conference that John Perpener had organized at the University of Illinois in 1996. So too did the expanded and updated version of Katherine Dunham’s KALISO!, on which Constance labored so assiduously, and Jane Desmond’s Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On & Off the Stage. Working together on the Editorial Board, Tommy and Constance and I felt like we were making a difference. I’m recalling these years partly out of nostalgia—I miss those times!—and partly as a reminder to you all that volunteer for service within a professional organization can lead to valued collegial and intellectual friendships.

During the years that I served on the SDHS Editorial Board with Tommy and Constance, I was deep into the research for Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion, attempting to understand how social and artistic conceptions of “whiteness” and “blackness” inflected US modern dance at mid-century. Tommy’s research on Alvin Ailey—and the publication of Dancing Many Drums in 2002—hugely impacted my ongoing investigation: I might have been the older scholar in terms of academic cohort, but Tommy quickly became my colleague and, in one sense, my ideal reader as I sought to articulate how conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality shaped the choreography of modern dance from Helen Tamiris to Alvin Ailey. Thus, it seems fitting that Modern Dance, Negro Dance and Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture came out the same year—2004—and were on occasion reviewed together and taught together.

Dancing Revelations, which won the de la Torre Bueno Prize for 2004, was a stand-out for several reasons. First, it explored the wide range of Ailey’s choreography beyond Revelations—the work that had introduced so many of us, myself included, to professional theatre dance. Second, the volume intertwined the story of Ailey as choreographer with the story of Ailey as artistic director and institution builder, not subordinating the myriad tasks of building and running a company to the practice of choreography, as had become common practice in narrating the careers of dance-makers. Third, and most importantly, Dancing Revelations introduced a range of perspectives from African American studies as crucial resources for understanding Ailey. The breaks that Tommy sutured into his study—on, among other topics, black
modernism, official African American culture, versioning, jazz dance, sex, Black Atlantic dance—constituted a text within a text, a catalogue of topics that anticipated the next decade of black dance studies. That the breaks seem self-evident today only shows the extent to which Tommy’s insights have come to define the field.

Since publishing Dancing Revelations, Tommy has accomplished so much on so many fronts. First, his many exquisite essays and book chapters, on a range of genres—from black social dance and tap to blacks in ballet and hip hop—and from an array of perspectives. It is rare that one of his essays does not appear on syllabi for my dance studies courses, and from my perspective his essays that foreground gender and sexuality seem especially significant for the field. Time and again I have taken pleasure in teaching his essays—“Simmering Passivity,” “Black Beat Made Visible,” “Being Savion Glover”—and I look forward to teaching his recently published essay “Black Dance After Race” later this year.

Second, his editorial work: in addition to Dancing Many Drums, awarded the Errol Hill Award by ASTR/American Society of Theatre Research for 2002, he recently co-edited with Anita Gonzalez, Black Performance Theory (2014), with Tara Willis a special issue of Black Scholar titled “Black Moves: New Research in Black Dance Studies” and with Takiyah Nur Amin an issue of Conversations across the Field of Dance Studies titled “Talking Black Dance Inside Out/Outside in,” the latter two in 2016. Compare these three recent publications to Dancing Many Drums and you’ll see an amazing explosion of new research in just over a decade.

This explosion, I contend, would not have happened had Tommy not organized a mentoring group for younger scholars while still a professor at MIT and had not served as the founding director of the Collegium for African Diaspora Dance in 2012 once he moved to Duke. CADD is the acronym for the Collegium, and its conferences bring together artists, educators, writers, and scholars to exchange ideas and practices through workshops, performances, screenings, panels, and roundtables; its third biannual conference will take place in winter 2018 at Duke. Taking a page from Alvin Ailey, Tommy DeFrantz knows that creating institutions where others can thrive is as, if not more, significant than individually-authored work.

The signature mix of art and scholarship at CADD characterizes Tommy’s career as well. From Monk’s Mood: A Performance Meditation on the Life and Music of Thelonius Monk, a solo created in 2002, to Performing Black, a duet presented as part of Parallels in Black at Danspace, and Theory-Ography 4: we queer here, a group work presented as part of the CORD Special Topics conference “Meanings and Makings of Queer Dance” at the University of Michigan—
both in 2012—to CANE, based on Jean Toomer’s novel, a responsive environment dance work, a 2013 work to be reprised at CADD next winter, Tommy embodies his research.

There’s so much more that Tommy has contributed to the field—his co-convening of the Choreography and Corporeality Working Group for the International Federation of Theatre Research, his teaching at the low-res MFA program for returning professional dancers that Hollins established with ADF, his presidency of SDHS from 2011 to 2014. But my time is running short. Briefly stated, Tommy’s career has been simply dazzling.

I remember calling Tommy to encourage him to accept the nomination to serve as SHDS president, telling him that he no longer was a young revolutionary but now an established mid-career scholar and that taking responsibility for an organization like SDHS made sense at his career stage. (Has he forgiven me for that call?) Now Tommy, I have to tell you that with this CORD Outstanding Scholarly Research Award you have moved past mid-career to “distinguished senior scholar.” That doesn’t mean that you don’t have more work to do—more books and essays to publish, more volumes to edit, more younger scholars to mentor, more dances to make—but it does mean that you can look back and realize that the field of dance studies, even if you never publish another word, is richer because of what you have contributed. Congratulations! © 2017, Susan Manning

Susan Manning is an internationally recognized historian of modern dance whose writings have been translated into German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Polish. Currently, she is compiling new and selected essays for publication as Critical Histories of Modern Dance: a Retrospective and co-editing Futures of Dance Studies, a volume that documents the outstanding research of participants in the Mellon-funded initiative Dance Studies in/and the Humanities. She is a Professor of English, Theatre, and Performance Studies at Northwestern University.

Contact: s-manning@northwestern.edu For Tommy—Jasmine Johnson

Good afternoon. It is an honor to be invited to share some remarks on the critical work of Thomas DeFrantz—work to which I am so indebted. What to say about someone who has made your scholarship and career possible? Someone whose language you have had the good fortune of living in; work that has invited you into wider eyes.

During my senior year of my undergraduate program Professor Vèvè Clark handed me two books that would change the direction of my world: Saidiya Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection (1997) and Thomas DeFrantz’s Dancing Revelations (2004). With a single yellow post-it atop the ‘Wade in the Water’ Ailey still that is the book’s cover she wrote: “Jasmine. Read these and let’s talk.” The first part of her clear direction — “read” — was not as straightforward as it seemed, for it felt as though the intellectual house I
had previously mounted was falling apart as I engaged these texts.

I used to be an insecure lover of dance, probably because I was often told that dance was in the sub-basement of Black Studies and black people in the sub-basement of Dance. I was told that directing my research toward literature would make me more competitive as a graduate school applicant, one professor warning me nonchalantly, “you just don’t want to be too focused on dance. Always good to branch out.”

As I reflected on today’s occasion, and what I have inherited from Tommy, it is this: that Black Studies is always already about dance; is a field kited by movement; is, at its foundation, queer.

From Tommy I learned that black movement is black study and Black Studies, an art of talking to your people. There is a refusal in Tommy’s work to translate for whiteness. Instead, he steeps in the ways black folks move. Consider the title alone, Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture. We could imagine other iterations being ‘Alvin Ailey’s performance of African American Culture’ or ‘Alvin Ailey and American Culture.’

Refusing to articulate the contributions of black aesthetics through the rubric of its approximation to European conventions of success, DeFrantz focuses on how Ailey “encoded aspects of African American life and culture in concert dance” instead. Subverting the logic that too often understands the art that people of color make through its resemblance to Eurocentric standards of beauty (and therefore worth), DeFrantz seems to simply and indifferently say “no.” “I do not,” he writes in Dancing Revelations, “compare Ailey’s work to that of Martha Graham, George Balanchine, or Merce Cunningham as if Ailey, like them, had been born into an educated, middle-class white milieu. If Ailey made dances that were important to him, we must be willing to look to the particular cultural processes and social realities that inspired him.” What a wonderful refusal that so immediately names itself it seems to just simply be the weather — so much so that we can almost forget the force of its intervention. What a generous turning to blackness to cull its own vocabulary to understand its own grammars. DeFrantz shows us the logics of black life-worlds which in turn produce distinctly black repertoires. In “Blacking Queer Dance” (2002) he writes that “In Africanist performance theory, moving beyond established norms are how we move toward the beautiful, the inevitable, the profound.” Tommy’s scholarship gets us closer toward this marvel.

DeFrantz’s work does not open a single door to say that blackness exists in this room and then leave for another. Instead he sits in that space, feels along its porous walls, and refuses to mistake what others have seen for what there is. He shows us that this room is actually a house, is actually a world, is actually a constellation. It is an altar.

Challenging heterosocial standards in Black Studies, DeFrantz confronts the uninvestigated intersections
of Black Studies and Queer Studies. He asks: “What about dance studies and black studies? Why do these areas consistently disconnect? And why is queer dance too often sidestepping theoretical paradigms established in black studies?” This is work that honors the black diaspora precisely through the articulation of the “power in queer” and the “power in black.” This is scholarship that invites in.

I have been thinking a lot about the texture of Tommy’s writing, which is, for me, distinct. It reads like the summoning of a rhythm just before the break. Swelling in sonic and embodied information, setting a rhythmic pattern. And then, the break comes which is the publication — which of course is not an ending or a final word but an opening for the dancer/reader to come, move with, add to. How generous DeFrantz’s writing is because he does not patronize or underestimate us. He forces us to grow because, it seems, he trusts we will do the work of understanding blackness on its own terms.

Finally, I should say that for you, Tommy, scholarship is being in community. Black Performance Theory, the Collegium for African Diaspora Dance (and so many other gatherings) are also interventions in the field of Dance Studies. They widen the field’s possibilities and create space to imagine black futures while tending to the changing and yet persistent fact of marginalization. These are spaces in which we can come as we are, advance questions within the collective/embodied wisdom of the group, make worlds together and be honest about the ways we might be clipped/claustrophobic/sometimes scared. Joy is always there.

I did not know then the beautiful coupling of books Professor Clark delivered: a double dutch game of Black Studies entry. For when I heard Hartman report, in writing about black pain, that “If this pain has been largely unspoken and unrecognized, it is due to the sheer denial of black sentience rather than the inexpressibility of pain,” I saw Dancing Revelations and Dancing Many Drums as a call to tend to black living, to listen to its own fleshy language for its own animation. DeFrantz has always taken dance seriously without romanticizing its operations.

“There can be a great power in queer dance,” he writes, “drawing from and in relationship to black studies and African American dance histories. But [...] not until we can articulate a liberatory theory of aesthetics; until modern dance histories begin in the crucible of the marketplace and its articulation of the modern enabled by the slave trade; until tap dance is allowed to be conceived as a gay male prerogative and not a hyper masculine alternative to ballet...” Through Tommy (and so many others in this room) I would learn that inside the weather of antiblackness black bodies churn joy and technique through enduring racial and gendered violence.

And so I’ll say that it is through Tommy’s work that I learned the gravity and caliber of Black Studies.
Learned that dance was not just present and interesting but consequential. Learned the graceful art of recognizing the overwhelming whiteness of black life and the power of refusing to fix our attentions there. This is a confrontation with white supremacy that taught me a different iteration of rigor, the importance of saving my breath, and the urgency of tending to the work that is most in need of our attentions. Why not spend our energies in the life worlds that black folk, black queer folk, make for themselves? Like Ailey, Tommy speaks from an African American ethos, not simply about it.

This is work that invited one black girl, fellow Bay Arean, into the notion that she could not only write about black dance but write as black dance. Be right with black dance. That scholarship is honoring the ancestors, not ignoring their steeping presence. That black dance is not a “subject” but a world, an imperfect gospel, a hush harbor. I know I speak with so many others when I say Thank you, Tommy. You are our danced revelation. © 2017, Jasmine Johnson

Jasmine Elizabeth Johnson is an Assistant Professor of Theater Arts and Performance Studies at Brown University. Her work examines the politics of black movement including dance, diasporic travel, and gentrification. Johnson’s work has been published in Dance Research Journal, Aster(ix), Gawker, Colorlines, Africa and Black Diaspora: An International Journal (Routledge), and the Center for Black Studies Research. Her forthcoming book, Rhythm Nation: West African Dance and the Politics of Diaspora, is a transnational ethnography on the industry of West African dance.

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Title of paper: Amandla! Agency and Dance-Activism in South Africa
Author’s name: Gerard M. Samuel

Abstract: Since the 2010s, some contemporary dance in South Africa has shifted notions of marginality rendering (in)stability, power, and agency as figures on a continuum. My position as an Othered dancing body offers a contextual and methodological frame from which to illuminate a notion of alterity. I trace the “Dehumanizing signs [that] remind these Othered bodies of the territory that is marked out for their community because of the defined socio-cultural difference” (Samuel, GM. 2016: 82). Mamela Nyamza’s De-Apart Hate (2017), and Jacki Jobs’ Of Dreams and Dragons (2017) offer a partial window into black and female voices in Cape Town.

A call to action

Amandla! This call for freedom in isiZulu stirs so many memories for someone like me who has lived on both sides of apartheid, pre- and post-. As a brown dancing body, I have been celebrated for my exotic roots in India and clever ascendance to classical ballet (I carry the burden of being arguably the first professional ballet dancer to emerge from an Indian community in the messy four hundred-year-old colonial history of racial division and oppression in South Africa). I am ambivalent about my claim to oppression as I was part of an all-White Performing Arts Council of the time, with its fully funded ballet companies (Friedman, Mapping an historical context for theatre dance in South Africa 2012) but it is also here that the birthplace of my own choreo-activism against such oppression can be traced. My entry into a ballet company happened at the height of the scourge that was apartheid in the 1980s with its State of Emergency, separate school systems, neighborhoods and other draconian laws all firmly in place. In summary, my dance heritage is complicated. But, what does this complexity have to do with the subject of my paper, agency and Dance-activism and specifically, choreo-activism, a term which I will attempt to briefly define and contextualize given my location in Cape Town, South Africa; gender; category of age and sexual orientation, amongst many other social constructs.

This paper asks: How do societal mores such as national protest and unrest resurface in dance performances? Is artistic mediation an affective and/or transformative tool for dancers, choreographers, and audiences? What aesthetic traces are subsumed in gendered performances particularly by black South Africans? By whom and for whom, are rallying calls for social justice heard and announced when multiple audiences ingest dance through vacillating positions: touristic and activist gazes?

I have chosen a phenomenologic reading (Fraleigh 1987; Kozel 2007) of the works of Mamela Nyamza and Jacki Job for the ways in which these two sculptors of African dance offer a rendering of contemporary dance in South Africa albeit from differing frames - one choreographic and the other
pedagogic and artistic. I begin by problematizing some of the aesthetic and socio-historic traces that have been hybridized by black South Africans choreographers, acknowledging my etic perspective from these strong female voices (Samuel 2016). South African choreographer and academic, Lliane Loots (Loots, Memories Against Forgetting 2017) had cautioned,

In the lure of developmental and the commodification and corporatization of ourselves, our learning spaces and art spaces, we no longer encounter the layering of history and memory, of acknowledging artists and activists who have built the bridges we stand on. (Loots, 2017)

I hope to highlight the layering of memories and forgetting that continue to haunt the body and its performance and acknowledge the agency and attempts at erasure by some dance activists in South Africa.

Aesthetic and Historical Traces

Earlier this year, one of my students attempted to argue how works of the iconic German choreographer, Pina Bausch were a feminist response to the aesthetic traces of ballet which include an effortlessness and quiet composure. For Anriette (not her real name), Bauschian works with their profoundly troubling questioning of the human condition were the ultimate expression of anguished dancers who are female. Other students in that same class argued that Bausch’s works were not Modern dances but deeply balletic, as for the most part they presented White dancing bodies. Furthermore, Bausch’s earlier roots in the Metropolitan Ballet must mean that her ballet could not be erased. These claims intrigued me and opened many vexing questions around an inescapability from certain notions of dancing bodies and the problematics associated with patterns of behavior that become ingrained under the disguise of Dance pedagogic praxis.

It is in this context, that I begin to examine the ontologies of Nyamza and Job who in this paper I suggest are choreo-activists responding to each of their socio-historic and aesthetic pathways in dance. Both these artists were born in Cape Town, both have lived half apartheid lives as I have noted above. So, the questions that surface for me include: to what extent is a geopolitical location responsible for shifting the ways in which we can offer a transmission of our worlds, told in dance? Job had resided for almost a decade in Japan retuning to South Africa in 2010, and Nyamza has been based largely in Cape Town in her lifetime. Both have performed from Dakar to New York, Paris to Johannesburg... the list goes on. Having studied classical ballet with Arlene Westergard in Gugulethu’s Moravian Church in the Cape, Nyamza bears the onerous title of South Africa’s first black ballerina. It is apparent to me that ballet and its associated trappings continue to haunt her. Many of Nyamza’s works such as The Meal (2012) reference the tutu, albeit in an exaggerated form.
In comparison, Job’s formative years were spent in the oldest multi-racial dance company in South Africa, Jazzart Dance Theatre Company whose rejection of all things ballet was legendary. More firmly established by the late 1980s, Jazzart under the leadership of Alfred Hinkel, positioned Afro-fusion, and works with politically charged narratives as a brand for this company. Job’s departure and subsequent journey with butoh as her artistic and pedagogic paradigm is noteworthy in a context of South Africa’s eleven official languages, multiple religions and ethnicities. Why chose butoh as her preferred tool to address such cultural diversity?

The *nature vs nurture* debate of what shapes a cultural identity has raged in psychological journals since 1960s (Ridley 2003). In both Job and Nyamza’s cases various searing if not traumatic events have shaped their world view: from a catastrophic tsunami, to the tragic murder and rape of Nyamza’s mother in 2009. If, we recognize that such scarification becomes visible in choreographic subject matter, as a kind of “thinking in movement” (Sheets-Johnstone 1981, 400) and in our approaches to Dance teaching, then the space of Dance needs to pay close attention to various attempts to sift through the residue of such an embodied furnace. What is the Dance praxis that will arise or becomes visible? My colleagues in South Africa, Friedman and Triegaardt (2000) had critiqued post-apartheid Dance and concluded that artists were dancing on the ashes of apartheid. I extend their metaphor here to suggest that in 2017, many South African choreographers and dance teachers are desirous of a more fluid and unstable platform, one that acknowledges the complexity and incompleteness of attempts to frame complex issues such as multiple cultural diversity, migration and diaspora, and body itself. I would argue that a kind of thirst for contemporary dance works has arisen because of, and continues despite, the past. The new South African contemporary dances move as it were, through these ashes which I suggest could be more easily read through what I am beginning to describe as a ‘body-space’ reading. My

Dance phenomenologic thesis invites an application of the dual tools of ‘the politics of body’ and ‘politics of space’ for such nuanced readings of contemporary dance.

Such analysis has revealed in works by Nyamza, Job, Dada Masilo, Desire Davids and others a lynch play epistemology that is being retold through dance. It is noteworthy that they are offered in potent performance sites such as Main Station rooftops, and in front of colonial remnants of a Slave Lodge loudly articulating absent and marginal bodies. These pioneer choreo-activists simultaneously champion their right to make work as ‘art for art’s sake’ and, confront political catastrophes such as the hideousness of racial re-classification. Davids’ *The ColouRED Chameleon* (2014) is a prime example of the latter. For these artists, the task of continually seeking any funding for their work is mired by an environment where international agencies and festival organizers need to attract paying audiences. In many cases, it is the representation of a ravaged Africa (the continent and not country) that is attractive to such touristic
audiences (and arguably festival producers). Such performances frequently are presented outside of the socio-cultural genesis and have the potential to dilute contemporary African dance works.

**Just who becomes transformed through the arts: dancers or audiences?**

The answer for me is both but, exactly how does such change matter? For whom? As dance scholars we have recognized that Dance holds a power to effect social change but with power comes greater responsibility. What happens when you disturb deeply held religious values and trample holy cows? What is the line drawn in the proverbial sand or the call to action for artists when young males in the Cape die each year as they undertake a journey to manhood that is part of a Xhosa cultural practice? Should such sacred practices be made visible by choreographers on stage and to whom? How do we begin to engage dance students on these cultural sensitive issues? Why is an image of a bible that is fixed in Nyamza’s crotch as she licks her fingers careful turning each page important for various audiences to unpack? Nyamza’s powerful and disturbing work – a critic of homosexuality and the Church begged further reading. What, if anything, does such shocking performances achieve? For whom?

At my second viewing of *De-apart-hate*, at the 19th JOMBA Dance Experience, a major annual contemporary dance festival, held in Durban in August 2017, as we entered the performance space we were handed a pamphlet with what seemed like a hymn sheet. The doors to the auditorium on either side displayed printed sheets announcing a series of bible texts. These verses were instantly recognizable to me, given my Catholic upbringing and subsequent fight for Gay rights and anti-homophobia issues. My mind raced at the similarity of the performance space of the theatre and a church. I began to wonder to what extent I will be preached to. Are the values of the church with its rigid rows, wooden pews, stirrings sermons and impermeable laws being unintentionally re-enforced as normative by Nyamza? Is a hyper-sexualized, black, openly lesbian choreographer not once again being framed as an exotic other? Just who is licking their lips?

As a former altar boy, the church as a space of performance with its high ritualized behavior and practices has suggested high drama, but what intrigued me was the way in which an African evangelical Church was easily rendered. In my first encounter with this work, which was during Cape Town’s Live Arts festival in 2016, Nyamza was already in the space, chanting audibly whilst she slowly shuffled towards the stage. Her hip movements now veered into a kind of overtly sexual gyrating/twerking returning to a more sedate procession while her form fitting tight, black dress held her thighs and legs firmly together. This made the revelation of the Holy Book from a cavity disturbing for many as I also heard gasps amidst the performers in between Nyamza’s praises to Jehovah. We also heard loud Hallelujahs and replies of
Amen! in what I recognized as isiXhosa.

This conjuring act transported most in her audience to familiar daily scenes on trains, under trees and at roadside intersections of traditional Christian based African religious practices.

As a body of work, *De-apart-hate* has emerged amidst multiple calls for de-colonization and what some have anxiously predicted as a dramatic rejection of all things Western in university curricula including in Dance curricula. At the University of Cape Town where I teach, I have interpreted such calls, as urgent appeals to re-engage with the colonial past. At UCT’s *Confluences 9 - Deciphering Decolonization in Dance Pedagogy in the 21st Century* delegates sought and argued for new and appropriate ways in which to respond to diverse and often contradictory twenty-first century needs and concerns of Dance.

Nyangza’s evocation of the painful memory of a ‘Whites only’ bench is even more poignant as a teetering see-saw that is now painted in the rainbow colors of the Gay flag. Not only are we confronted with the imbalance of power and gendered dynamics which the bench suggests but its death as the bench becomes coffin over her male performer, Mihlali Gwatyu. For me, many subtleties such as her wide white pleated collar and soft pointed cap seem to be lost on the mostly black, young South African audience. Her nod to *commedia del arte* and *Pierrot* in my view, felt unnoticed.

**Lest we forget.**

We dare not overlook or forget. We dare not look away from the exotic and marginalized, and the icons such as Josephine Baker with her dazzling string of pearls. As we re-look and research dance works such as *De-apart-hate* we can become seduced by the strong rejection of discrimination. But, we need to guard against a re-exoticization of black women as sexual object.

Perhaps Job’s by gulping down the grotesque associated with Butoh offers an alternative rendering of the black voice where the excruciating stillness associated with of butoh compels us to stare

into the blank spaces created by her preferred choreographic tool. Job’s newest incarnation as lecturer at the University of Cape Town and now a PhD candidate has spawned, *Of dreams and Dragons* (2017). Job and Kudo Taketeru took over the performance space of the Arena theatre in Cape Town to process their imaginations. There are a few hard, black painted long blocks in the space, and a single rope hanging from the ceiling downstage left. A shaft of mustard light emerges from the very rear of the performance space through a heavy door where Job dressed in a gauze like black jacket with wide sleeves, and make up that is pale grey with pronounced eyes hesitatingly seeks out the corridor of light. The packed audience marvels at her angular body, fingers that have become lizard pads and slender limbs and feet that slither, creep and unexpectedly pounce. Kudo, in a fantastically wrapped kimono comprising shredded rags
hovers behind us. He is also painted, marked as either gods or dragons, and occasionally we see glimpses of his finely tuned musculature. The interaction between the performers is electric. Will they devour one another? What, if any, is their sexual tension? Who is the monster? Just as he bares himself she disappears, now he re-appears. More conjuring. These highly skilled artists with increasing agility and speed suddenly disappear and muffled grunts rise from underneath our seats. They are in the heavily darkened audience space. So, when is a performance happening or not happening? Now re-appearing these half-human creatures manifest and resist definition. Can butoh in this South African context be read as its own form of Dance-activism, one that responds not only to dominant classical ballet, but to traditional African dances and other concert theatre formats? As a last stand against the onslaught of the over split jeté, the acrobatic twirl and mostly for female dancing bodies that have been conditioned to gyrate or twerk, I suggest that Job offers a counterargument and defiant response to the above phenomena.

Nyamza, Job and others articulate that which we may have heard before, but their message and its newness may be less important than the vital need for a repeated emphasis of marginal voices: including black and female. Just as we learn about new walls that are being planned to be built in America, we must not forget that some in South Africa have taken over forty-seven years to tear down. What can be learnt from such frontiers of resistance? Maybe the time has come for artists and dance pedagogues to once again heed the clarion for freedom from discrimination and cry out ‘Amandla!’.

Notes

i Gugulethu is a township in Cape Town that is almost exclusively populated by black, poor and working class, people. It emerges because of the infamous Group Areas Act (1950), which divided where South Africans could live and work based on their predetermined race. ii Jazzart was formed in a Long Street studio, in Cape Town in 1974. It began as a dance studio led by South African born, Sonje Mayo (who had previously trained in the US) and later Sue Parker. Most of the original group of dancers were White women dancing with Coloured men which at the time was technically illegal. Ignorance of the law or a disregard for the power of dance may have resulted in their work slipping under the radar of the authorities. iii Job has evolved from pioneer dancer with the acclaimed Jazzart dance company, based in Cape Town since 1974 to her own brand of Butoh-choreographer. She was integral to the development of Jazzart - the first multiracial, professional contemporary dance company in South Africa. Job later co-founded the independent Jagged Dance Company. iv I maintain the Japanese custom of Surname / Family name first before the individual’s name.

Works cited


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