

THST 244: Writing about Movement
Professor Brian Seibert

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. –Holly Taylor

Walking With, Moving Through
by Holly Taylor

On Urban Bush Women's *Walking With 'Trane*
Veteran's Memorial Auditorium
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Who are you?

Well, then I was

: sitting in the audience

: a little frayed at the edges from finding myself sitting in the audience, having been in class just three hours beforehand

: bending over the program

reading (I'll make up) what it said (exactly, because me then only soaked up general meaning with no specific language): Urban Bush Women's *Walking With 'Trane* is a choreographic tribute to the jazz legend John Coltrane's life and an embodiment of his musical identity.

: a semipermeable membrane, only some things were getting through (see above)

: overwhelmed because

Tommy DeFrantz was in the row behind me, I remember blood rushing to my face. I thought about reading the words in his book, "versioning and its sibling, _____," but I couldn't remember the second bit so versioning became an only child and I sank lower in my seat. Tommy DeFrantz! Me of 'the now' can quote for you directly from his book, as if he were reading out loud to you: "Versioning, and its sibling, inversion, allow us to critique, to uncover, to rediscover, to realign, to mark the common as personal, to read (as in "someone's beads"), to make something work." Versioning is the "reworking of aesthetic ideals" over time. And he designates those who version as "generative interpreters...dancers who honor and signify on the

past by renewing it with their own individual version of its memory,"¹ and I think to myself that every time I sit in a chair I am doing a seriously dull kind of versioning. Right now, sitting in a chair writing this, my body is versioning itself sitting in that auditorium seat as the curtain lifted. The body is constantly versioning, making the old new. It is reexperiencing what it knows, what it is, what it remembers being. I'm only a version of myself. My identity, me, I'm plural.

At the opening it is dark. Small specks of yellow and orange, stains from the house lights, bother the eyes as they strain to make out what's onstage. Quietly, a skyline of dancers forms itself in the darkness, moving(?) like the darkened coast seems to move towards one when approaching by water at night. Their backs are to the audience. The darkness is still thick and laps at the edges of their bodies. Their forms fizz into one another and seem to grow and shrink. The walking line emits a dancer who moves and twists and sweats as the rest of the group steadily slips forward.

Walking a mile in another's shoes isn't a metaphor for empathy; it's a reminder that with the self comes a body - you're a body right now, so am I. That string of six words has somehow become cliché and therefore is a taboo of the written world, which means all of the work it does to establish identity's bodily-ness is lost to the wastelands of 'bad writing;' it's garbage. If I want you to connect with me, I mustn't insult your intelligence asking you to be my feet inside my shoes, to do my walking for me.

The dancers, in my memory, they are

: Amanda Castro, running arcs like a child-turned-airplane. She beatboxes, small explosions dropping from her mouth. And with her feet stepping and stomping and digging in with her heels and the pads of her feet it was the sweatiest most emanant I don't know there was energy spilling from her like puddles of sound or pine needles or no it was dustier than that it was like stone and cinnamon and snare drum. Her feet spoke power, soliloquized into the stage floor.

How much sense does it make, anyway, the idea that you could understand me by literally walking in my body? You can't be in my feet, I'm already in them. If you were in them they'd be

yours. That's how identity works with the body, through ownership. What is mine is me. My experiences. My voice. My body. Who's doing all this owning?

: Chanon Judson, who lives in a swaying posture movement, standing still and grooving under her skin at the same time. Her movements have an aggressing quality, as if she is biting down on each one, or shoving each one in the stomach. Confidence and sweat, she wears both.

How would you get into my feet, even? They're already full of flesh and bone-sculptures. Would you try to nestle yourself in between the blood vessels and the nerve endings, or would you scoop the insides out and take up residence in just the skin? If your feet were bigger than mine, would you stretch the curl out of my toes, or flatten down the wrinkles in the underside of my arch? Would your toes poke out the end as if my feet were old beat-up boots? Would you feel the ground against my callouses, the rind of my heel as we walk?

: Courtney Cook, who is rage and invitation. She welcomes power and vulnerability as a single emotion collapsed across her face. Her movements are rounded out; she isn't as long as Chanon; she has a grounded feel. with kicks. She is always kicking in the door.

Walking *with* someone, though, puts your two bodies in conversation. One of my favorite dance scholars, Deidre Sklar, writes that "ways of moving are also ways of thinking,"ⁱⁱ that you can process information by encountering it with your body. This is one way of explaining why and how dance works - the bodies of both the audience member and the performer are giving and receiving information over the course of a performance, and the way that information is integrated into their respective bodies accounts for the feelings one has, whether positive, negative, or nameless, during the performance.

: Stephanie Mas, who is lean, her eyes chinking up light like geode crystals. But the rest of her is smooth taffy, pliant, sugar-and-snap. Her movement has the sweet tang of magnolia flowers. She is almost NYCB, but slightly spiced, slightly smoking at the edges like a graphite pencil line, classical and yet, and yet and yet.

I extrapolate from Sklar's words to say that, insofar as 'identity' is a set of thoughts we have about ourselves, based on how we come into contact and subsequently interact with the world around us, identity is to some extent housed in the body: 'being yourself' is a physical project.

: Tendayi Kuumba, also a vocalist, with muscles like loaves of bread. She hums into the silence between other dancers, the music deep in her throat. The company is pressed against a downstage scrim, a grimy subway window; some are still, looking out at audience, some are moving - Courtney, facing the audience, bent down, moving her feet, pumping her arms, sweating; Tendayi slowly moves to center; it sounds like she's wailing but it's just the humming coming out of her now open mouth; boiling, she scats. It's like the soft of two bellies being ground together. Dig in, take a bite, growl, cry and chew. Amanda's feet join Tendayi in percussion. The two musicians dance sound around each other.

How could the Urban Bush Women 'walk' with John Coltrane, then, in the way I've been talking about walking? How could their identities engage without his physical presence? And where does that leave me, a person who was in the audience but is no longer and who never knew Coltrane to walk with him? When I first began writing this piece, I did so listening to Coltrane's music, in particular 'Love Supreme,' just to have something relevant dancing in the background of my ears. Even though *Walking with 'Trane* was set to a Coltrane-inspired score, not any of his actual work, and even though the major soundscapes were Tendayi's vocals, an extended piano riff, and the stomps and skids of the dancers' feet, 'Love Supreme' still pulled at something in me that made my body feel itself back in the audience. When I found myself re-situated there, I could write. My body needed some sort of reminder in order for the words to come, and I found that reminder not in videos of the movements but in their sonic inspiration. You might want to throw on a little Coltrane now before continuing on, I don't know.

The pianist is in all white linen, and he is sweating profusely on his gently bald head. He keeps wiping it with a cloth. There's a spotlight on him, downstage right. He riffs Coltrane, drips Coltrane. Furious sound, that's Coltrane. Furious soul, that's Love Supreme. White linen and sweat and spotlight re-rendering the fury.

The dancers, as they researched and experimented and choreographed and then performed, walked with the Coltrane that was contained in his music - they eventually embodied this encounter with Coltrane to such an extent that I saw them dancing when I listened to him play. They took their interactions with his musical identity up physically into their own, versioning him until he was something their bodies knew because they knew the choreography.

They thunder through a unison section, the same story rolling across each dancer's body but spoken in a different accent. If everyone looks the same dancing then the unison fails. This arm swung upwards on the diagonal, Courtney colors it turquoise but Stephanie, seafoam green. Chanon's palms are open, Amanda holds them in fists. Tendayi's silhouette is not the pianist's. The leg bent behind, the flexed foot, the turn and roll, the wave of the hand with the wave of the body, a large and a small flame, both flickering - these are not dissimilar parts sanded down into uniformity, but autonomous parts assembled into unity. The story is slightly different depending on who you ask.

The individualized, improvisational voice of the jazz canon, present in the Coltrane-inspired accompaniment, worried the unison in the choreography like a rope. Unison in dance is a dangerous dip into conformity, especially when the rest of the choreography is specifically generated by and for a dancer's body or personality. There looms always the risk of losing what makes the dancers themselves. In *'Trane* there were only small sections of unison, the whole two-act piece was mostly ins and outs of dancers and solos-turned-ensemble sections only because more bodies came onstage, not because the choreography became more relational. But I felt relief watching what I knew to be unison choreography and seeing the ways movement resided uniquely within each dancer's body. I was still watching *people*, not shapes.

Stephanie, Courtney, and Chanon trio around themselves wearing white - Coltrane's essence careens through the air and they jam and fret and chill and play to his sound. There is constant newness of shape, to the point of fatigue. But what remains constant is the three bodies, the Chanon chomp, the Courtney kick, the Stephanie smooth. It is less what they do and more that they are the ones doing. Chanon returns again and again to her flickering, swaggering stance. Stephanie tips her chin upwards and rubs her shoulders down her back, showered in warm rain. Courtney rolls, punches up onto Stephanie's

back. Courtney Chanon Stephanie Chanon Stephanie Stephanie Courtney and Amanda and Tendayi storm in from the wings - the dancers are bigger than their movement; they themselves fill the stage.

Watching the dancers then set me rolling in waves of temperature, landscape, texture, hue, anything that presented itself in the moment. Now, in my memory, I am awash in a sea of sensation. For the second act of *Trane*, Coltrane's notes on Love Supreme, his handwriting, his annotations to the score, were projected onto a screen behind the dancers. The notes were vivid analogies that kneaded the brain: 'rising harmonies to a level of blissful stability at the end;' 'attempt to reach transcendent level;' 'horn ends on thank you god.' This was his artistic identity embodied not in dancers, but in text. Words can be like bodies, sometimes, you can walk with them, understand them through moving. Maybe the only way to read and write about dance is to treat words as embodiments. Otherwise the body disappears from the dance altogether and the thing is no longer a dance at all, just lines of letters on a page: only paper and ink, fleshless, and still. The body is versioned out of the dance.

Who are you?

Right now, I am

: in a different room

: still a body, but a body with new muscles, new weaknesses, new fatigues that I am failing to camouflage

: hung up on Coltrane's words again, 'horn ends on thank you god'

: imagining that I am in a glass of water, floating

: imagining that I am in the middle of the ocean, deep underwater, suspended.

Have you wondered what that feels like? I feel it to be a lot of pressure about the ears, like listening to Coltrane

: imagining God as a saxophone solo

: imagining 'Love Supreme' as a whale

At the talkback after the performance, Amanda wears a pastel sweater and jeans that come to her calves. Tendayi ices her ankle in Courtney's lap. Stephanie explains laughingly that she finds it difficult to talk on the spot. Chanon explains versioning, that one movement can have many iterations within one individual, let alone across a whole group. The enraged version of this move looks different than the

labored version, and different from another person's enraged version, but all are valid forms of the movement, all are possibilities, all are

: bodily understandings of identity

ⁱ DeFrantz, Thomas. *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. Print. p. 82-84.

ⁱⁱ Sklar, Deidre. *Dancing with the Virgin: Body and Faith in the Fiesta of Tortugas, New Mexico*. Berkeley: U of California, 2001. Print. p. 4.