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Black Male Dancers and the Performance of Masculinity On- and Offstage: Bill T.  
Jones, Desmond Richardson, Dwight Rhoden, and Ronald K. Brown

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Critical Dance Studies

by

Mark Anthony Broomfield

December 2010

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Anthea Kraut, Chairperson

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Dr. Devra Weber

Dr. Keith Harris

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The Dissertation of Mark Anthony Broomfield is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

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To Michael, for it is through him I understand the true meaning of mutuality, patience, and compassion.

## DEDICATION

To those who started this journey long before I arrived, Mr. and Ms. Enid McGibbon and Adassa McKay.

To Evelyn Veronica Broomfield and Eric Dudley Broomfield.

To Dr. Renee Antoinette Simmons.

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Black Male Dancers and the Performance of Masculinity On- and Offstage: Bill T. Jones, Desmond Richardson, Dwight Rhoden, and Ronald K. Brown

by

Mark Anthony Broomfield

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Critical Dance Studies  
University of California, Riverside, December 2010  
Dr. Anthea Kraut, Chairperson

The central premise of this dissertation project is that, contrary to conventional wisdom gay men and their experiences are uniquely situated to tell us about how masculinities are lived in American contemporary culture. With a critique of hegemonic masculinity at its core, this dissertation project shifts the paradigm on how we think about and perceive men in society and culture. Attempting to bridge theoretical perspectives with lived reality, my project aims to show the extent to which marginalization of black gay male identity and the black queer male dancing body is critical to understanding the performance of masculinity and how black male dancers inform us about the performance of identity. Rather than offering gay men's lives as examples of a marginalized identity, my dissertation examines their centrality to understanding men, diverse masculinities, and the performance of gender. Consequently, the fluidity of gay male identity across race, gender, and sexuality poses compelling reasons to



look at gay male lives for unique prescriptions on dealing with and defining masculinities in American contemporary culture.

The dissertation project examines the performance, perception, and representation of masculinity of the black male dancing body. I confront the prejudice against the male dancer within a Western theatrical dance tradition, while revealing how homosexuality and effeminacy make strange bedfellows in the public-private, on- and offstage perception of male dancers. Starting with the black male dancer as the focus, my interdisciplinary analysis combines dance studies, black feminist theory, masculinity studies, queer theory, critical race theory, choreographic analysis, oral history, and ethnography to reveal the broad implications of race, gender, and sexuality for men, masculinity, and manhood in American society and culture. To do so, I examine the work of Bill T. Jones, and the dance companies of co-artistic directors Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson's Complexions Contemporary Ballet, and Ronald K. Brown's Evidence. I surmise, just as black people are the moral conscience of American democracy and freedom, and that no discussion of American history can occur without their presence; I, too, contend that gay men pose a similar relationship to understanding the performance of gender in society and culture.

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## Chapter One:

### Introduction

Men in American contemporary dance have a peculiar anxiety regarding their status as professional dancers; this unease results in shrugging off any evidence that depicts the male dancing body outside of conventional notions of masculinity.<sup>1</sup> The anxiety is further compounded by the stigma attached to male concert dancers, which has the unflattering distinction of being an unworthily masculine pursuit.<sup>2</sup> The anxiety surrounding the male dancer and the stigma attached to the profession serve as points of departure for my dissertation “Black Male Dancers and the Performance of Masculinity On- and Offstage: Bill T. Jones, Desmond Richardson, Dwight Rhoden, and Ronald K. Brown.”<sup>3</sup> Two defining events illustrate the anxiety and stigma at issue.

The first event derives from a moment in popular culture captured in contestant Anthony Bryant’s experience on the television reality competition *So You Think You Can Dance (SYTYCD)*; the second resides in the death of Alvin

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<sup>1</sup> See *Born To Be Wild*.

<sup>2</sup> See Radetsky.

<sup>3</sup> The term “male dancer” explores the concept of men dancing in American contemporary dance of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and coalesces around the idea of him as a “problem.” Regardless of race, gender, and sexuality, prejudice against the male dancer manages to rise above the former categories yet remain complicated by the intersectionality of those systems of power. Using the term, however, does not mean differences between men and male dancing bodies do not exist. The concept is used expressly as a tool to discuss the continued anxiety the male dancer poses in society and culture at large. In addition, my use of the “male dancing body” and the “black queer male dancing” throughout the dissertation similarly approaches the male dancer as a concept.

Ailey, one of the towering figures of American modern dance. These two events frame this dissertation's broader examination of black male dancers in American contemporary dance. The examples illustrate the precarious dilemma facing black men in the tradition of Western theatrical dance and, more importantly, expose the fundamental contradictions of the black male dancing body on- and offstage.<sup>4</sup> My description of these two events serves as a primer from which to conduct a sustained analysis of black men in American contemporary dance. Indeed, through Anthony Bryant's experience on the first season of *SYTYCD* in the summer of 2005, as well as Ailey's death due to complications from AIDS in 1989, I explore three critical areas of analysis for the black male dancing body in society and culture: the performance, perception, and representation of masculinity.

The three critical areas of analysis expound upon the conceptual framework of sociologist Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. For Goffman, everyday social interactions are based on individual performances before others that includes impression management—the ability to project and control information about the self to others—while also recognizing the capacity for performances within these interactions to either fail, contradict, or

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout the dissertation, I use the terms “Western theatrical dance,” “concert dance,” “modern dance,” “ballet,” and “American contemporary dance” all to approach the concept of the male dancer. Though each developed at different periods in American history, these styles share a common narrative regarding the prejudice towards the male dancing body. For this dissertation, however, I most frequently return to American contemporary dance. This umbrella term best captures the combination of ballet and modern dance training required of most concert dancers today; it also reflects the present period in which we live.

be disrupted. Moreover, Goffman discusses the important value placed in our impressions of others when he states:

The individual [performer] tends to treat others present on the basis of the impression they give now about the past and the future.<sup>5</sup> It is here that communicative acts are translated into moral ones. The impressions that the others give tend to be treated as claims and promises they have implicitly made, and claims and promises tend to have a moral character. (249)

The above quote deals with the performance and perception of the individual within society, and yet it is Goffman's claim to the admitted contrivance of theatrical performances as opposed to those in everyday life that is worthy of distinction here. He asserts, "An action staged in a theater is a relatively contrived illusion and an admitted one; unlike ordinary life, nothing real or actual can happen to the performed characters" (254). As such, Goffman places the locus of attention of what matters, not necessarily with the representation onstage, but with offstage performances. To this he suggests the real consequences that exist "with the structure of social encounters...whenever persons enter one another's immediate physical presence" (254). For my purposes, however, both on- and offstage performances matter and often collide,

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<sup>5</sup> By implication, Goffman argues that the individual is divided into two basic parts: one, a performer, which he describes as "a harried fabricator of impressions involved in the all-too-human task of staging a performance"; two, a character, "a figure, typically a fine one, whose spirit, strength, and other sterling attributes the performance was designed to evoke" (252).

particularly in the case of Bryant, exposing the prejudice, suspicion, and anxiety with the male dancing body in society and culture.

The first season of *SYTYCD*, which highlights Anthony Bryant's audition, provides the details for my first exploration into the performance of gender and the male dancing body. The first episode of the season captivated me for one reason alone: a critique by the executive producer and head judge Nigel Lythgoe leveled at Bryant, a black male dancer, for not dancing "masculine."<sup>6</sup> Lythgoe's criticism and the resultant heated exchange between the contestant and judge frame my project's examination of the policing of the male dancing body.

Moreover, their fiery disagreement evinces the fraught construct of masculinity in American contemporary dance that upon close examination has wide implications for society and culture.

Furthermore, the critique leveled at Bryant exposes rigid notions of gender, which carry particular social, cultural, political, and historical relevance for the black male dancing body. Therefore, I examine the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality that heretofore has been largely overlooked in dance studies; I also confront homophobia. Because many gay men find a home in Western theatrical dance, it seems counterintuitive that homophobia would in fact

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<sup>6</sup> Male dancers continue to face criticism for not dancing "masculine" enough. For example, on the July 14, 2010, show in *SYTYCD*'s seventh season, judge Mia Michaels assessed the male dancer Robert Roldan's performance of a disco routine and found him lacking masculinity. She defined masculinity as "bearing weight." Additionally, she attributed her critique to the outfit he wore, which included a white high-waisted pant and vest combination.

need confronting. And yet, my analysis speculates the implications of this study for the black male dancing body. For example, Bryant's experience exhibits one manifestation of what the policing of masculinity looks like in popular culture and American contemporary dance. The description that follows provides the necessary context for analyzing the criticism that Bryant received for his performance and also factors in a detailed examination of the ensuing exchange between him and Lythgoe.

Following on the heels of several auditioners, Bryant, a slender dancer, enters the stage and is dressed in a tight midriff-baring unbuttoned shirt and form-fitting dance shorts that exposes the long lines of his legs. (The shorts leave very little of his legs covered, much like Speedo trunks on a swimmer's body.) Expressing a certain confidence yet also a discernable coyness, Bryant introduces himself to the judges and references the lyrical contemporary piece he will perform. He is tall, thin, and graced with a supple body. His dancing starts with a series of turns in second position. In this movement, the leg is outstretched to the side at waist level and maintained there, with feet pointing, all while revolving around the standing leg that with each revolution his knee bends and straightens. As he performs this move, his feet lower to the ground and rise respectively, to his metatarsals (demi-pointe). It is typically executed by men in traditional ballet variations and invariably rouses the audience to cheer for the performers' high degree of skill.



After six turns, he releases his head, arching into a backward arabesque turn. To maintain this number of turns without allowing the leg in second position to move up or down—or for that matter without adjusting the standing leg, as the desired outcome is to begin and end the movement without budging from the starting position of the standing leg—reveals the dancer’s strength as well as the high degree of training achieved to execute this position in good form. This he achieves—and very well, too. Performing a series of emotive gestures with his arms, he then reaches out towards the audience. The carriage of his arms and upper body shows considerable balletic training. Walking upstage, he continues the expressive use of his arms and throws his head back as if doing a layout.

Next, he takes a deep lunge to the floor with his legs turned out to pick up a ribbon, thereby revealing once again pleasingly beautiful lines and his balletic training. Taking the ribbon in hand, he executes a series of turns, cutting the space with his arms as he crosses the stage, whirling and circling the long ribbon. Keeping the ribbon in constant motion to his side and above his head, Bryant curves his torso forward and backward, all while smiling. Here the camera cuts to Lythgoe, whose grimace expresses confusion. Bryant continues his routine, stretching his body to its extremities as he turns on two straight legs, lunges, leaps, and uses his arms. Another shot cuts to the female judge, who looks on in wonderment. At the end of his presentation, Bryant walks diagonally upstage, keeping the ribbon in motion, and ends sliding into a backward split. His

performance contains emotivity, elements of competitive dancing (which places an emphasis on tricks), and an accentuation of certain movements. Specific parts of the choreography appear for no other reason than to dramatically punctuate movement, such as throwing the head back while leaping with legs fully stretched in the air. Overall, Bryant's dancing demonstrates a high level of virtuosity, athleticism, and artistry.

Upon finishing, the judges proceed to give him feedback on his performance. Analyzing the judge's statements affords an opportunity to understand the experience of the subjects involved. Tellingly, Lythgoe's first statement acknowledges an appraisal of Bryant's abilities. He states:

You have incredible technique. I did not like the Russian, gymnastic, Olympic routine at the end. I didn't find that strong enough. I thought—I've never seen a guy do it to be frank. I didn't need to see that. You were already through with your ballet work. Your extension, your lines were superb. I'm sorry I didn't like the second part of the routine at all, *at all*. I like to keep you strong and I think that softens you. I think it will put guys off voting for you.

Lythgoe's claim of not having seen a man dance with a ribbon does not fully explain his reaction. The audition process by nature exposes the judges to a cast of characters with talents they have not previously experienced; other auditionees walked on stilts and performed death-defying breakdancing moves. A

crucial point to make here is that, rather than conforming to gendered expectations of the male dancing body, Bryant's audition defies these expectations by challenging the conventional notions of masculine performance. By knowingly incorporating into his audition the ribbon, a prop typically identified with female rhythmic gymnasts, Bryant stages a contestation of the restrictive ways in which masculinity is often defined and performed by male dancers.<sup>7</sup> Though Lythgoe expresses reservation about Bryant's dancing with a ribbon, all judges unanimously agree that he should move onto the next section of the audition process, wherein dancers are given choreography and partnering work. Bryant thanks the judges and proceeds to walk off the stage; meanwhile the show's host calls attention to the dramatic narrative of the competition. Lythgoe's comments toward Bryant help set the tone in the show's first season, which clearly establishes the kind of men and male dancing bodies the judge considers acceptable.

The next time we the audience meet up with Bryant is in the choreography component of the audition, the goal of which is further elimination of dancers. In this section, dancers all learn choreography together and then perform it in groups divided by gender. Next, dancers pair up to learn a combination consisting of male–female partnering. This element of the audition and the driving narrative of *SYTYCD*'s competition stress heterosexual partnering, which

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<sup>7</sup> In a personal interview conducted with Bryant on July 15, 2008, he self-identified as gay, which complicates the reading of his body.

characteristically promotes compulsory heterosexuality (Pascoe 86). While dancing with his partner, judges single Bryant out for not dancing strongly enough. Furthermore, they agree that his partner is stronger and a better leader than he. At the end of both these choreographed sections, each dancer stands before the judges to determine whether she or he will move onto the semifinal round in Hollywood (finalists for the show are selected from the last round of auditions here). In the end, the finalists are paired in heterosexual partnerships for the show's duration.

*SYTYCD* regularly features solo dancers on the show. In close-up shots, individual dancers talk to the camera and describe their experiences. These moments in which they share their expectations of the competition help personalize the dancers to the audience. Before we hear of Bryant's fate, the camera narrows in on him, showing his enthusiasm about the possibility of advancing. He highlights his Julliard training and conveys utmost confidence in his abilities as one of the best New York dancers at the auditions.<sup>8</sup> Standing before the judges, all three first provide him with positive and constructive comments about his dancing. For the purposes of my analysis, however, I will specifically draw on the dialogue between Lythgoe and Bryant in order to make a

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<sup>8</sup> In my interview with Anthony Bryant about *So You Think You Can Dance* (2005), he goes into greater detail about the rigor of his training at the Julliard School as well as his training as a rhythmic gymnast.

pointed example of how policing masculinity operates. The following records their exchange:

Lythgoe: That's the good news. The bad news is you are not coming with us to Hollywood. I worried about you when you brought out that [gesturing to the ribbon] and started dancing with it. I need boy dancers to be strong...masculine.

Bryant: [confidently] I am strong.

L: [does not hear] Sorry?

B: I am strong.

L: It did not come across with your partner.

B: Really.

L: You didn't look like a masculine dancer with your partner.

B: Really? [He is emotional at this moment, eyes watering.] That's interesting. I've never gotten that before.

L: Okay, well you've got it now.

B: If you would have asked me to dance more masculine I could have done that. I can still do that.

L: But why didn't you? You're a male. Why should I have to ask you to dance [more masculine...or like a man]?

B: [interrupting and moving with arm strong jazz arm gestures] So you're saying doing this is not masculine.

- L: What...dressed with that shirt with your chest out like that? And with what you're doing?
- B: What do you expect? Look at Hollywood. Look at media. Everyone's dressing like this with their shirt [gesturing to it being open]. What? Do you want me to button it? Will that help?
- L: Do I think you're masculine when you dance. No, I don't.
- B: Well, can you give me a chance to be more masculine?
- L: You were dancing with a partner, young man. You were dancing with a partner. Was that partner male or female?
- B: She was female.
- L: Which one do you think I would want to be masculine then?
- B: Me, and I was.
- L: Well, that's your opinion. Mine was not.
- B: You need to review the tapes a little more I think...Thank you  
[walks off stage].

The camera, ever hungry to expose the dancer's condition, closes in on Bryant after receiving the judge's criticism. He talks to the camera—emotional and crying. He says, "I didn't make it. He said he didn't think I danced masculine. And, it's hard to take. But I definitely disagree with him. I've never heard that before. I've never heard anyone tell me that I don't dance masculine. I've never,

no one has ever told me that I look feminine when I dance with the ribbon.”<sup>9</sup> I knew watching this episode unfold that Lythgoe’s statements, heard by millions of viewers, needed further analysis. Their heated dispute, summarized here, frames this project of examining the ways in which the policing of the male dancing body in American contemporary dance evinces the fraught construct of masculinity in our society and culture.

When placed under critical analysis, Bryant’s audition on *SYTYCD* and his defiance of conventional masculinity are highly instructive for gender performance in dance and culture. His criticism for not dancing “masculine” perked my ears, raising the question of why such blatantly derisive comments were made towards such an obviously talented dancer. I knew I was watching something unfold that at its core exposed fears of the male dancing body not conforming to traditional masculine representations. I also knew it had wider implications for our society and culture. What does not dancing “masculine” mean—or look like? How, in effect, does Lythgoe’s challenge of Bryant’s masculinity compromise the dancer’s manhood and assumed heterosexual status? Or, framed differently, how is a challenge to masculine identity, whether on- or offstage, intimately tied to homophobia as well as to suspicions of effeminacy and homosexuality?

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<sup>9</sup> In the July 15, 2008, personal interview, Bryant revealed that he had never heard these words in relation to his dancing but realized they were in fact directed at him personally while growing up.

Lythgoe's unequivocal denunciation of Bryant's not dancing "masculine" enough raises the specter of homosexuality and effeminacy for male dancers in the tradition of Western theatrical dance and further substantiates suspicions between those associations. Here old prejudices against the male dancer, ever haunting, surface in the mass media environment of popular culture. In so doing, the flash cultural moment distinguishes the male dancing body as a site for contemporary discourse on the body. Moreover, the critique left the masculinity in question wide open for interpretive possibilities.

At this point, addressing these possibilities and their interpretations gives further context for this project. For instance, was Bryant's outfit the source of discontent, or was it the role he was playing, the style of choreography, the choreographer's intention, his movement quality, his height and stature, the ribbon, the rhythmic gymnastic element, or a combination of all these elements? How does Bryant's choice of dancing with a ribbon, a practice commonly associated with female rhythmic gymnasts, offer a commentary on hegemonic masculinity? For, as stated in an interview, he clearly knew what he was doing in making the choice to dance with a ribbon.

The failure of the other judges and the media to critique or hold Lythgoe accountable establishes hegemonic masculinity as an apparatus determining the



relationship between dominant, subordinated, and marginalized masculinities.<sup>10</sup> For gay men who contest conventional masculinity's representation and hierarchical status, the silence takes a toll on individual and collective bases. In addition, the response to Bryant's performance offers a telling glimpse into the ways hegemonic masculinity operates to reinforce dominant notions of how men should think and behave. Therefore, analyzing hegemonic masculinity exposes the complicit nature and power structures that often invisibilize male privilege, dominant and subordinated masculinities and how these in turn work in concert with homophobia to define male behavior, attitudes, and expression. Lythgoe's comments matter. His discriminatory words expose the tensions that lie at the heart of the complex issues that black gay men encounter in the American contemporary dance world.

Bryant's performance presents a visionary expression of masculinity. His actions expose the limitations of democratic ideals that celebrate the individual freedom of expression. On the one hand, individual freedom is touted as a hallmark of American democracy, and yet on the other hand this example shows a curtailment of those freedoms. Nevertheless, his defiance confronts the fear of men dancing outside the norm, particularly in American contemporary dance. A world known all too well for avoiding the unavoidable—gay men in dance—must

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<sup>10</sup> Although no official apology was made, Bryant was invited back to perform on the first season's finale. As is typical of television reality shows, his return was staged dramatically to reveal the original showdown between Lythgoe and Bryant.

now approach the unapproachable—stereotypes, stigmas, and myths attached to men dancing. To continue on the path of avoidance only reinforces much of what we already know. American contemporary dance must incorporate new approaches to advance gender and sexual equality. The dance world comfortably believes in its safety from homophobia, but the experiences of the men in this dissertation will attest otherwise. As long as we silence and hide gay men in dance and deny them a voice that elevates their experiences—not only regarding their sexuality, but inclusive of it—dance will not be free of its prejudices.

The failure of American contemporary dance to confront homophobia shifts attention away from issues of homosexuality and effeminacy and instead onto issues of perception—namely, to the embodiment of a hypermasculine ideal.<sup>11</sup> Rather, American contemporary dance becomes a staged public relations campaign, so to speak, of how to present and represent men in dance. These approaches, however, fail to deal with the unspoken associations of dance and homosexuality. More pointedly, the continued assumption of the inextricability between men dancing, homosexuality, and effeminacy needs thorough debunking. American contemporary dance's eschewal of effeminacy and homosexuality is intimately tied to the perception of how dance is to be received publicly.<sup>12</sup> Continued avoidance of these unavoidable assumptions remains the

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<sup>11</sup> See Shawn 96–98.

<sup>12</sup> See Shawn 96–98.

single greatest impediment toward emancipating stereotypes attached to the perception and representation of the male concert dancer today.

Anthony Bryant's example illustrates one facet of the performance of masculinity onstage. Yet his experience tells only one side of gender performance and its perception and representation for the male dancing body. The case in point alerts us to the relevance of interrogating the aforementioned issues. It also alerts us to another significant aspect that is notably undertheorized within dance studies: the silence surrounding homosexuality and dance and how this silence in turn it takes its toll on individuals, institutions, and society. Indeed, homosexuality continues to be a third-rail issue in wider American culture as it does in dance. As such, American contemporary dance must confront the prejudice against the male dancer. For gay men who dance, this confrontation carries high stakes. The absence of confrontation leaves the performance of masculinity unchallenged and the current social and cultural norms intact.

### **The Toll of Silence**

During the height of the AIDS epidemic in the New York dance scene, silence of those with the disease reigned supreme (Crimp 12). In 1989, Alvin Ailey's death to AIDS spoke to the critical degree of silence surrounding those who died from the disease. As such, the truth about how Ailey died is a

touchstone for this dissertation project and also launches my investigation into the performance, perception, and representation of masculinity with respect to the black queer male dancing body.<sup>13</sup> The focus steers us towards the culture of silence that permeates American contemporary dance treatment of homosexuality and dance, and how the failure to identify it as a problem creates dilemmas for dance practitioners, dance educators, dance audiences, historians, and critics alike.

The silence surrounding Ailey's death to AIDS marked the passing of one of the modern dance world's leading cultural giants, nationally and internationally. Though an open secret among the dance world, Ailey's homosexuality had never officially made it into the public record (DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations* 231). At the time of Ailey's passing, very few obituaries identified AIDS-related deaths (Yoshino 67). The silence surrounding his death, though not uncommon at the time, illustrates just how thorny issues of homosexuality within the contemporary dance world can be, then as now.

Equally telling are the deaths of thirty male dancers from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) at the height of the AIDS epidemic. The lack of knowledge about how many men died during this period is noteworthy in and

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<sup>13</sup> My use of the term "queer" denotes the male dancing body that historically challenges the binary divide of male as subject and female as object. In this case, the black queer male dancing body destabilizes those rigid gender categories, while also expanding the possibilities for what it does include. Further elaboration of this term occurs in the methodology section and in Chapter Two.

of itself and made more poignant by the fact that few current AAADT dancers know of these deaths.<sup>14</sup> Hence, the shroud of secrecy surrounding Ailey's passing and the continued silence around the interrelated nature of homophobia, heterosexism, homosexuality, effeminacy, and masculinity ground my project on the complex and contradictory history of the black male dancing body in the American contemporary dance world that has both embraced and disavowed him.

Moreover, silence—whether due to the power to shame, to stigmatize, or to commit violence against marginalized identities—leads to my examination of gender performance and the interlocking factors of race and sexuality. In addition, it is the performance, perception, and representation of (heterosexual) masculinity that this project interrogates. Also central is the pressure for black gay men to conform to a masculine ideal that is further exacerbated by race. To be sure, (heterosexual) male privilege functions such that, for many gay men, passing—or indeed, the performance of “straight” masculinity—seems the preferable choice (Kleinberg 74). Yet little is understood about the ways the performance of gender and sexual norms works to oppress marginalized identities, especially as it relates to black gay men and the queer male dancing

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<sup>14</sup> Due to the confidential nature of the interviews, names of the subjects cannot be revealed.

body on- and offstage. For Ailey, this silencing required an unusual finesse at performing his identity—at high personal cost.

Ailey's death was a scenario in which silence concerning homosexuality affected a major figure within American contemporary dance world. Indeed, Ailey's life as a black gay man complicates the rubric under which traditional narratives of iconic black figures usually fall (Belton 215). The burden of an iconic status, whether alive or in death, often disallows recognition of the full humanity of a person who might have had human failings or aspects of life deemed unsuitable for wider public knowledge and scrutiny for fear of diminishing a genius status that might otherwise compromise the legacy. With the stigmas attached to AIDS, dance, and homosexuality compounded by issues of race and masculinity, it is no surprise that Ailey's body has difficulty fitting tidily into most narratives. In fact, Ailey's story not only symbolizes the best that American culture has to offer but his vast contributions to the dance world are exported as such, too.

Beneath the tale of Ailey's death lurk other stories waiting to emerge in their own right. Indeed, for black gay male dancers the period of the late 1980s into the 1990s signaled a historical shift in the social and political climate of New York. Whereas Ailey died living a life in the closet, as did many men of the post-World War II generation, the newer generation of dancers benefited from successes of the freedom movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

The astonishing silence surrounding Ailey's death and those of thirty other male dancers from the AAADT haunts my inquiry. According to the late dance historian Robert Tracy, these losses signaled an end of a generation of dancers in the New York dance scene. Tracy's account is further substantiated by Earl Moseley, a noted teacher and choreographer who danced with the Ailey II company at the time of Ailey's passing and who has expressed concern over the lack of role models for young black male dancers today. I confront the silence surrounding Ailey's death because, like no other African American figure, he symbolized, and still does, what is so desperately lacking in the dance world: the confrontation of dance and homosexuality and of the critical ways that they intersect with race and gender.

The power that silences knowledge about Ailey's death and its effects knows no temporal time frame. This point revealed itself in an interview with Bryant. During our interview, I presented Bryant a piece of paper, printed on it was a quotation from Jennifer Dunning's biography recalling Ailey's death. While reading the quote, Bryant seemed confused and did not know what to make of the quote at first. He then confessed not knowing Ailey had died from AIDS. Not insignificant, his admission reinforces the power of silencing. In retrospect, thinking about our interview, I found his disclosure startling especially for a dancer who lived, worked, and trained in New York City (at the Julliard School). It seems almost impossible that something like this could occur in the cultural

capital of the dance world—New York City. He eventually remarked that keeping this information from the public was probably a good thing because, as he said, “I think it was smart not to [disclose Ailey’s true cause of death]. Because I think what it would have been done was scared people (pause) and the company would be very different today.” Bryant’s candor and his reflection upon the issues raise difficult challenges for the Ailey company, its management, and image, especially since many of the male company members are gay.<sup>15</sup> In Chapter Five, I analyze the macro and the micro politics of the AAADT in society and culture, exposing the tensions that lie at the heart of this project—the black queer male dancing body—and what it means for the configuration of this dancing body within the company.

Ailey’s death is a key point of reference for my analysis, which in that sense attempts to realize the call for scholarship suggested by David Gere in *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS*. As he states, “The sole reason for obscuring Ailey’s true cause of death was the stigma associated with the disease...But Ailey’s death represented not just the stigma of HIV but the stigma of homosexuality and, in ways that must be theorized for dance in the AIDS era, blackness as well” (Gere 115). Thus, the

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<sup>15</sup> During my first summer of fieldwork at Ailey in 2005, I interviewed several AAADT dancers; however, this one dancer in particular opined about his experience as heterosexual man within company. In fact, he described his situation a somewhat “queer” in the sense that so many of the men in the company were gay. During the company’s tours he expressed feeling like he did not belong because of his sexuality. In an example, he explained the source of this as when the gay men of the company go out together.



criticism of Anthony Bryant's experience on *So You Think You Can Dance*, joined by the silence of Ailey's homosexuality and death to AIDS, underscores the necessary work needed to confront homophobia, effeminacy, heterosexism and the performance of gender through an interdisciplinary analysis of dance studies, feminist theory, masculinity studies, queer theory, critical race theory, choreographic analysis, oral history, and ethnography to de- and reconstruct perceptions about the black male dancing body in American contemporary dance.

### **Methodology and Research Design**

The methodologies central to my undertaking of this project include ethnography, oral history, and choreographic analysis. Engaging these three methods stems from an overarching concern to center analysis on the dancer's experience as a way of exploring the performance, perception, and representation of masculinity in the American contemporary dance world. The primary focus is on black gay men and the queer male dancing body. The triangulation of these methods supplies the necessary framework for examining the dancer-choreographers of this study to explore the conflicts, tensions, and obstacles faced in their on- and offstage lived realities.

First, ethnography summons the participant-observation model to determine the situatedness of the body within the sociopolitical sphere of the

contemporary dance world while tracking my own positionality in relation to the subjects of study. Second, oral history determines dancers' voices as critical to the enterprise of theorizing the dancing body. And, third, choreographic analysis views representations of the black queer male dancing body and its corporeality in conjunction with a theory of semiotics. Overall, these methods establish the basis for an in-depth, sustained look at the presence of black gay men in contemporary dance history through the axes of race, gender, and sexuality. I chose these three methodologies because together they offer the best opportunity to understand the relationship between these subjects' on- and offstage lives. They provide an opportunity to see the interaction, connection, and relevance of the subjects.

### *Ethnography*

The first methodology consists of an ethnographic approach that underscores the incorporation of my positionality in relation to the subjects, places, and spaces I inhabit. This methodology bridges analyses of the on- and offstage black queer male dancing body. The participant-observation method focuses on fieldwork conducted at the Joan Weill Center for Dance (JWCD—the new Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater headquarters) due to the critical mass of black male dancers who study at the institution. This approach illuminates

factors critical to understanding embodied masculinity, sexuality, and conceptualizations of the black queer male dancing body in society and culture.

Observations at the JWCD included men's ballet and modern dance technique classes. Here I focused on the black male dancing body's execution and the methods of instruction as well as the socialization and interaction among the dancers in class. Additionally, through semistructured one-on-one interviews with dancers, I conducted important research on those who self-identify as gay in order to elucidate the performance of masculinity. The observations, the one-on-one interviews, field notes, and journaling combined the data collected for this study. In order to analyze the copious information, I organized it into the three major subject areas of analysis: race, gender, and sexuality. After dividing this data accordingly, I identified patterns related to the black queer male dancing body in society and culture in order to reveal the subject's life experiences, attitudes, and behaviors. In turn, this information formed the basis for my interpretive analysis in Chapter Four. Overall, these methods establish a framework that explores the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality that will offer further insight into the dancer experience.

The ethnographic endeavor provides a contextualization of my body in relation to the subjects studied (Davies 213). I come to this research with experience after many years as a professional dancer, having also trained at the dance conservatory at Purchase College and at the University of Michigan. My

years of experience in the contemporary dance world offer me an insider's knowledge of the field and anchor my project accordingly. As in any ethnographic endeavor, it is necessary to maintain a positive balance between reflexivity and objectivity. But it is more important to recognize the personal involvement and cultural frame of the researcher. In *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, Charlotte Davies positions reflexivity as central to the ethnographic project. Her argument invokes the myriad ways by which reflexivity should inform research from its inception to the written text, while foregrounding the political nature of anthropological and sociological research.

For this project, I use the term "key actor" as opposed to "informant" due to the stigma attached to the historical application of the latter, which anthropologist David Fetterman discusses (49).<sup>16</sup> The term "key actors" is also interchangeable with what Karen O'Reilly describes as "key participants." She acknowledges that "the more equal relationship we attain between researcher and researched and the way that ethnography is a means of learning together" (136). Throughout my ethnographic practice detailed in Chapter Five, however, I use "key actor" for each of the study's participants. In addition, all names of key actors have been changed to protect the identities of those involved.

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<sup>16</sup> Fetterman distinguishes the term "informant" from "key actor." The former, he argues, "has roots in anthropological work conducted in colonial settings, specifically in African nations formerly within the British Empire" (67). Furthermore, he claims, "The term conjures up images of clandestine activities that are incompatible with an ethnographic approach" (67).

Moreover, this ethnographic study draws on the relationship between the researcher and the researched that engages E. Patrick Johnson's use of Clifford Geertz's concept of "fragile fiction" (10). Johnson argues,

To construe ethnographic practice as, in general, a "fiction" and, more specifically, a practice that is "acted out" or performed, is to liberate it from the assumption that the informant is a fixed object and therefore inferior to the ethnographer. Instead, the informant is recognized as a thinking, theorizing, and culture-processing human being. (10)

This description illuminates the requisite participation of both parties in constructing ethnographic accounts.

Like any other ethnographer, I come to this analysis with my own positionality and multiple identity locations. I grew up black British in 1970s London with parents of Jamaican heritage; we moved to the Bronx when I was nine, making me a first-generation, lower-middle-class immigrant to the United States in the 1980s. All of these experiences inform my identity as someone having lived what Paul Gilroy describes as the syncretic and hybrid makeup of the black Atlantic (4). All these aspects inform the ethnographic practice shaping the process and performance of the researcher and the researched. Exposing my positionality gives visibility to my subjectivity, which might otherwise be taken for granted. Harold Rosen explores positionality and argues for its greater visibility when he claims:

A person's knowledge can only exist by virtue of a vast range of past experiences which have been lived through, often with the most intense feelings. These experiences, including textual experiences (books, lectures, lessons, conversation, etc.), we have been taught to disguise so that our utterances are made to seem as though they emerge from no particular place or time or person but from the fount of knowledge itself.

(30)

By recognizing the important nature of the key actors, this ethnographic study results in a coauthorship of the analysis presented in Chapter Five (10).

### *Oral History*

Events shape history. No exception to this rule, Alvin Ailey's death to AIDS was a significantly life altering event. As I have pointed out earlier, Ailey's death marked a turning point for the dance world. Although members of his company knew he died from AIDS, it was publicly announced that he died from a rare blood disease. The contrast between what was publicly stated and what was privately known drew my interest. Like Bryant's story, Ailey's death captured my imagination because I knew it spoke to something more profound within our society and culture. What I did know was that, as important a figure as Ailey was within the tradition of Western theatrical dance, elements of his story were missing. His death to AIDS revealed the power to silence a fact—publicly.

One major event occurred, yet differing narratives emerged in that context—with one shrouded in silence by the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation (AADF), and the other openly acknowledged among the employees of the Ailey organization. Though the official account of his death was publicly recorded, few dance histories have interrogated the individuals and company members who witnessed the event at the time. Ailey's death and the official narrative that emerged clearly relate to historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot's book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Trouillot examines the production of history and the existence of silences due to "the interplay between inequalities in the historical process and inequalities in the historical narrative...which starts long before the historian (qua collector, narrator, or interpreter comes to the scene" (45). He explores this further when he contends:

Silences are inherent in history because any single event enters history with some of its constituting parts missing. Something is always left out while something else is recorded. There is no perfect closure of any event however one chooses to define the boundaries of that event. Thus whatever becomes fact does so with its own inborn absences, specific to its production. In other words, the very mechanisms that make any historical recording possible also ensure that historical facts are not created equal. They reflect differential control of the means of historical

production at the very first engraving that transform an event into a fact.

(49)

And so from the very beginning, Ailey's death took on two forms: the official record disclosed by AADF and the insider perspective known to his company. Both follow Trouillot's account of history, in which he posits the conflict between "what happened" and "that which is said to have happened" (2). Moreover, Trouillot's analysis engages the overlapping tensions between the "sociohistorical process" and "our knowledge of it" (3). In this statement, he points towards the construction of history. To this end, Trouillot highlights the much-needed expansion of historical production to include neglected sources (49).

Indeed, the primary sources of this dissertation, including Richardson, Rhoden, and Brown, attest to the importance of heretofore overlooked individuals in dance historiography. For the purposes of expanding the inherent inequality of producing history, as suggested by Trouillot, incorporating these dancer-choreographers' voices adds an overall critical dimension—their subjectivity—which is unique to an oral history methodology alone (Portelli 50). Furthermore, oral narratives allow us to observe the subjects' psychological states, identities, and their relationships to history (50).

Three areas are significant to this study: the training of the male dancer, the interaction of his body in society and culture, and the stigmas of homosexuality and dance. Focusing on these three areas of men's lives provides



a window into the tensions that gay men face on- and offstage. The best way by which to access how or why these tensions persist is using oral histories in conjunction with descriptive analysis and ethnography. More than ever, dancers' personal voices examine the agentive potential as artists, performers, and choreographers. Interviewing the subjects supplies one of the best ways to contextualize the dancing body in society. The interview subject—or living archive—possesses essential knowledge from which to analyze the black queer male dancing body.

### *Choreographic Analysis*

In coordination with the previous two methodologies, choreographic analysis offers a semiotic reading of contemporary choreography that helps to underscore the body as a site of cultural constructedness. Drawing on Susan Foster's work *Reading Dancing*, in which she outlines components for interpreting and analyzing dance for its meaning, I analyze the dancers and choreographers of this project using DVDs and an online video archive of their performances. My reading of the dancing body follows Gere's quotation of Marcia Seigel, who asserts, "I've noticed that what I remember about a striking performance is impressionistic...and that I seldom retain enough specific information to back up my impressions or to give me any new thoughts about the work" (27). Gere concludes, "And so, where it is available, she [Seigel] turns to

video and film. These forms of documentation offer a perfect response to the epistemic ephemerality of dance: On tape we can watch a dance again and again, until it has impressed itself firmly upon our retinas and memories” (27).

The subjects of study interviewed and the data analysis performed also informed my choreographic analysis. The themes and patterns that emerged functioned dialogically in coordination with my reading of the choreography. Here, connections made between their on- and offstage performances were incorporated into my analysis of each work studied. Reading the black queer male dancing body this way reflected a more nuanced approach to understanding the body in society and culture. Ultimately, in adopting this approach, theory, practice, and the artist’s voice work in concert to support a multidimensional analysis.

### **Theorizing “the Look”**

At the heart of this project are issues of spectatorship and perception of the black queer male dancing body. The project draws from several theoretical models to analyze the black queer male dancing body in performance. These include black performance theory, masculinity studies, dance studies, and queer theory. Each examines the ways in which spectatorship is circumscribed by an intersectional framework of race, gender, and sexuality. A fundamental aspect of

reading the black queer male dancing body is the concept of multidimensionality and the adaptability of his body to different spaces.

Crucial, then, to the argumentation of the black queer male dancing body are models of spectatorship that demonstrate its ability to embody, resist, or destabilize gendered norms. Spectatorship models also function as a way to uncover the implicit/explicit, public/private, overt/covert discourses that establish the black queer male dancing body in performance. Ramsay Burt provides a lens through which to read the queer male dancing body by focusing on notions of surface and inscription in choreography that often lead to discursive formations.<sup>17</sup> For Burt, dance derives its meaning from visuality and not from psychological interiority. Thus, visual cues offer a map to reading the dancing body that signal the raced, gendered, sexualized body (Burt, "Dissolving" 221). His inquiry questions the location of the spectator in relation to the performance and thereby seeks answers to who is looking and what is being looked at (Mercer, "Welcome" 176).

Another fruitful model for analyzing the black queer male dancing body and its relationship to doubleness is David Gere's concept of "silent speaking." Gere examines gay choreographers' use of queer subtext. For instance, he posits that dance critics downplay the queer subtext in choreography, even though, he argues, it is suggestive of same-sex desire. Analyzing reviews, Gere

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<sup>17</sup> See more on discursive notions of gender in Butler 185, Connerton 96, and Jackson 75.

points to the underlying homophobia and fear in acknowledging demonstrably queer dancing bodies. Approaching two kinds of spectatorship in choreographer Lar Lubovitch's dance *Concerto Six Twenty-Two*, Gere delineates between one that is "secret, clouded, safe, 'chaste'" and "a deeply erotic, highly sexualized homosexual reading" (17). He states, "the fact of two men walking slowly toward one another and gazing directly at one another is, for me, frankly and deliciously homoerotic" (17). With the dance's foundation in homoeroticism, Gere shows how the costumes work to epitomize the idealized gay couple. In this example, then, Gere addresses silent speaking as a strategy for reading choreography, bodily gestures, music, and costuming. These examples provide tools for analyzing the dancers and choreographers of this project.

Along with Gere's concept of silent speaking, some queer theorists advance the resistive capacity of the body to define gay male identity. In "Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling: Approaching Kevin Aviance," José Muñoz reads gestures of the black queer male dancing body and its ability to summon a queer communal ethos. Aviance's performances trouble signifiers of blackness, masculinity, and femininity by destabilizing and reinventing their power, as alluded to in Stuart Hall's reading of the racialized body (Mercer and Julien 200). The benefit of Muñoz's argument is in his proposing the power of the gesture and its afterlife—expressions unrecognizable, indeed omitted as evidence in society's dominant systems of documentation and knowing—which

also provide an entry point for theorizing what Paul Connerton describes in *How Societies Remember* as “incorporating practice” and “inscribing practice” (72). Regarding the former, Connerton argues bodily practices have been historically neglected in favor of the written word to transmit culture (100). As such, the potential of these analyses not only sutures, as Muñoz says, proof or readings of queerness to ephemera, but also opens up new territories for investigation of this traditionally unknowable space. Muñoz’s theorization provides an access point considered untoward by Western epistemological systems that demands “official” evidence. These notions offer compelling material with which to probe reading doubleness and the in-between status of the queer male dancing body, thus furthering an understanding of the ways in which gender and sexuality add to theorizing of the racialized body.

### **Subjects of This Study**

The project focuses on the work of three black male dancer-choreographers to examine their lived experiences in conjunction with an intersectional analysis of race, gender, and sexuality. First, I will analyze performances by Bill T. Jones, who established himself as one of the first dancers to undo the trappings of the closet as well as politicize issues of race, gender, and sexuality, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In fact, no intersectional analysis of the ways race, gender, and sexuality shape our modern society and

Western theatrical dance would be complete without an appreciation for and contextualization of Bill T. Jones, one of the most important dance artists in the late twentieth century. More than any other figure, Jones has redefined dancing in ways that speak to both examining and explicitly confronting homophobia, racism, and sexism in a society and culture that prefers to avoid these controversial topics. Jones, no stranger to controversy, is a living embodiment of the ways in which black gay men in American contemporary dance live within and out of mainstream culture, contesting, performing and appropriating notions of what it means black, gay, and male in America. I will focus on his work in made for television documentary *Still/Here with Bill Moyers* (1997).<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, my analysis will incorporate Ronald K. Brown's dance company, Evidence, whose work uniquely combines Western African dance and contemporary choreography. His dance *Better Days* (1998), a group work for men, deal with themes of masculinity and sexuality. Brown's aesthetic proves most interesting to study because of the seeming contradiction in being openly gay (and thus untraditional), and at the same time his grounding of philosophical movement style in an Africanist aesthetic rooted in traditional dance. Brown's gay identity troubles an Africanist paradigm that largely considers homosexuality nonexistent in Africa and a construct of the West (Ouzgane and Morrell 50).

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<sup>18</sup> After repeated outreach to his public relations contact, I was unable to interview Bill T. Jones. Thus, this documentary provides oral and visual contextualization for Jones.

In addition to the previous two works, I will examine the trio *Gone* (2000) by Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson's company, Complexions Contemporary Ballet. Rhoden, a former principal dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, builds on Ailey's aesthetic and firmly grafts a neoclassical line onto the "virtuosic" dancing body that relishes the body's form, athleticism, sensuality and sculptural qualities. Rhoden's exploitation of virtuosity and exhibitionism in his choreography signals a defiance of the ravages of AIDS in the dance community (Gere 28).

To do this necessary work, it will be important to contextualize American culture for gay men in the aftermath of the 1960s and what these new freedoms meant for the male dancers in this project. Indeed, the dancer-choreographers of this project are all openly gay and established their companies as AIDS emerged on the American cultural landscape from the early 1980s to the height of the epidemic in the mid-1990s. Bill T. Jones established his company in 1982; Ronald K. Brown, in 1985; Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson, in 1994. Furthermore, their current work continues to expose the devastating consequences of a lack of discourse pertaining to interlocking factors of race, gender, and sexuality in dance and society. The artists' trajectories provide a window onto the individual and collective response of black gay male dancers to the disease. And as such, each speaks to the various challenges of being a professional dancer within American contemporary dance.

## **Dissertation Overview**

The central premise of “Black Male Dancers and the Performance of Masculinity On- and Offstage” is that, contrary to conventional wisdom, gay men and their experiences are uniquely situated to tell us about how masculinities are lived in American contemporary culture. With a critique of hegemonic masculinity at its core, this dissertation project shifts the paradigm of how we think about and perceive men in society and culture. Moreover, the project focuses on the reading of the black queer male dancing body and black gay male subjectivity to ask: what contradictions, obstacles, and tensions are posed for black gay male dancers in Western theatrical dance? What are the roles of race, gender, and sexuality in the construction of dance identities? What role does the policing of masculinity and homophobia play in reading the black queer male dancing body on- and off stage?

Attempting to bridge theoretical perspectives with lived reality, “Black Male Dancers and the Performance of Masculinity On- and Offstage” aims to show the extent to which the marginalization of black gay male identity and the black queer male dancing body is critical to understanding the performance of masculinity and how black male dancers inform us about the performance of identity. Rather than offering gay men's lives as examples of a marginalized identity, this project examines their centrality to understanding men, diverse masculinities, and the



performance of gender. Consequently, each chapter will reveal that the fluidity of gay male identity across race, gender, and sexuality poses compelling reasons to look at gay men's lives for unique prescriptions on dealing with and defining masculinities in contemporary culture.

The central argument outlined above serves as the overarching conceptual framework for this dissertation. Each chapter returns to the main argument as its anchor, but does so while investigating different sites. In Chapter Two, I provide a brief literature review regarding the male dancer throughout the history of Western theatrical dance. Here I examine the male dancer before and after his fall in the West to show the changing attitudes toward men dancing. Next, the literature review charts the path of the black male dancing body and the omissions of race in standard dance historical accounts. This shift focuses on the raced body, the contrasting narrative his body represented historically, and the exclusivist practices of Western theater dance. The following sections of the chapter combine reviews of gender and sexuality that chronicle African American studies' failure to include marginalized sexualities, while in turn examining queer theory's omission of race. The chapter paves the way for studying the black gay men of this dissertation project.

In Chapter Three, I turn attention to the onstage performances of Bill T. Jones; Ronald K. Brown's company, Evidence, and to co-artistic directors Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson's company, Complexions Contemporary

Ballet. Again, building on the main argument of the dissertation, this chapter analyzes the onstage performances of each dancer-artist and explores his multidimensionality. Using choreographic analysis, I discuss the significance of staging the black queer male dancing body to interrogate assumptions about the black (heterosexual) male dancer. I argue that their performance choices challenge conventional masculine representations of the black male dancing body in ways that reveal a more fluid and adaptable male identity at work. I further contend that their multidimensionality envisions diverse masculinities onstage that more fully contrast traditional masculine representations.

Chapter Four builds on the previous chapter to examine the dancer-artists' offstage identity. In three case studies, the focus centers on the offstage performance of masculinity and its intersection with race and sexuality. Using oral history interviews, the purpose shifts attention to the subject's interaction with society and culture to reveal the construction of identity, while at the same time attending to his lived experiences. With analysis extended to incorporate their first-person offstage experiences, I attempt to bridge two sites (i.e., on- and offstage), the combination of which often goes unexamined in dance historiography. Moreover, this strategy observes the importance of dance studies' need to fully address how living archives create a fuller picture of the social, political, and cultural dimensions of the dancing body. Ultimately, this chapter

further establishes the multidimensionality of the subjects interviewed and reveals the black male dancer challenging notions of authenticity.

In Chapter Five, I turn to ethnography in order to examine black gay men and the black queer male dancing body as it moves in two principal sites. The first studies the black queer male dancing body within the institutional setting of the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation (AADF) in order to observe the bureaucratic model in action, as well as the organization's disciplining of the body and behavior. The second site contrasts with the former by revealing the black queer male dancing body's resistance to strict gender norms that regulate the body in society and culture. Whereas the first site exposes the institutional power to silence and police marginalized identities within its midst, the second shows the agency of individual dancers to resist gender norms and the stigma attached to the black queer male dancing body.

Finally, the coda presents an autoethnographic account of my first summer of fieldwork. Called "Poles of Existence and Tensions In-Between," the narrative recounts my actions and movement as I traveled on public transportation from the Northeast Bronx to Midtown Manhattan. The rendering positions my body, its corporeality and experience, as an inextricable component for analyzing the body in society and culture. Furthermore, it vividly recalls the importance and implications of my dissertation project as a whole.

## Chapter Two

### Men Who Danced: Then and Now

Great male dancers of the ballet. How many potential ones in the United States of America were aborted by prejudice? Just as Victorian parents blanched at the very thought of a daughter becoming “an actress on the stage,” and, thereby, the equivalent of “loose woman,” so American fathers forbade their sons to study ballet since it was presumed to provide a direct path to effeminacy at best and, probably, homosexuality at the very worst. The fallacy of such points of view [has] become clear today, even laughable if they had not been so tragic.

Walter Terry  
*Great Male Dancers of the Ballet*

Of course the old myths and prejudices still exist; the very word “ballet” causes some hackles to rise....the art of the male dancer is concerned with physical strength and physical stamina as well as with the refinements that clothe those essential qualities, and that the male dancer must encompass dramatic and emotional powers quite as serious and important as his muscular skills. Perhaps the best reassurance about male dancing for the general public come in a comment from *The Ultimate Athlete* by George Leonard which was quoted by James A. Michener in *Sports in America*. “I can’t say that the dancer is the Ultimate Athlete. I am quite certain, however, that the Ultimate Athlete is a dancer.

Mary Clarke and Clement Crisp  
*Dancer: Men in Dance*

Over the last two centuries, however, it is not that male dancers have quietly absented themselves, but that they have been nervously dismissed. When the male dancer gradually disappeared from the stages of western European theatres during the period of the Romantic ballet, his place in some cases was taken by the female dancer dressed *en travestie*. There is a similar disappearance of the male nude as a subject for painting and sculpture, and male forms of dress underwent what J.C. Frugel has brilliantly characterized as “the great male renunciation”—the adoption of the plain, black, bourgeois suit. What became conflictual and consequently repressed was anything that might draw attention to the spectacle of the male body. That is was the spectacle and not the activity

of dancing which underlay the prejudice against the male dancer becomes clear when one compare ballet and social dance at this time. There was no evident decline in the number of men participating in and enjoying social dance. What one should therefore be looking for to explain this prejudice is the development during this period of modern attitudes to the body and gender. It was these attitudes which brought about a situation in which it seemed “natural” not to look at the male body, and therefore problematic and conflictual for men to enjoy looking at men dancing.

Ramsay Burt

*The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities*

It is clear from the quotations above that anxiety about the male dancer in Western theatrical dance persists. Not only that—these examples, along with those highlighted in Chapter One, reveal the continued challenge facing men who pursue professional careers in American contemporary dance. For example, Terry’s statement, made in 1978, exposes contemporary attitudes and prejudice toward male dancers. In his assertion, he ponders the potentially aborted careers of male dancers, attributing this absence to American fathers. Here his epigraph explicitly refers to the public perception of men dancing with effeminacy and homosexuality as carrying two of the greatest fears to (heterosexual) masculine identity: the threat of emasculation and identification as gay (Pharr 18).

Upon closer examination, Terry’s assertion contains an enduring public-relations dilemma for male dancers in American contemporary dance: attracting wider appeal for a dance form so historically at odds with American masculinity. Moreover, the longstanding prejudices that accompany Western theatrical dance

further exacerbate an already tenuous relationship between men, masculinity, and theater dance. Although Terry declares that “the fallacy of such points of view have become clear today,” the persistent challenges that male dancers face show otherwise. He points to the ludicrous nature of associating theatrical dance with effeminacy and homosexuality, but public perception remains under suspicion. Meanwhile, as the suspicion lurks, the homophobia and sexism that guide and animate those perceptions go unchecked—or, so they have throughout much of dance history (Fisher and Shay 15–16).

Indeed, rarely in the twentieth century has Western theatrical dance confronted homophobia within its ranks.<sup>19</sup> In fact, contrary to popular assumptions made about American contemporary dance, homophobia remains a third-rail issue, much as it does in culture at large. As dancers, men in general, and gay men in particular, suffer from crises of identity and perception because their roles have historically been associated with homosexuality and effeminacy. Whether legitimate or not, these associations have compromised male dancers’ statuses throughout the history of Western theatrical dance, and as such their presence remains a source of “trouble.”<sup>20</sup> This project concerns itself with the performance, perception, and representation of masculinity as they intersect with

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<sup>19</sup> See Desmond, *Dancing Desires* 4.

<sup>20</sup> I borrow the term “trouble” from Ramsay’s definitive account of the male dancer in the Western theatrical dance and used in the title of his first chapter. See Burt, *Male Dancer* 10.

the compromised status of male dancers within a Western tradition of theatrical dance dominated by women and gay men.<sup>21</sup> More pointedly, I choose to examine how homosexuality and effeminacy make strange bedfellows in the public–private perception of male dancers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century lives and works of Bill T. Jones, Dwight Rhoden, and Desmond Richardson’s *Complexions Contemporary Ballet* as well as Ronald K. Brown’s *Evidence*. In conjunction with my overarching argument, I explore two related subjects: the first illuminates the construction of masculinity in dance and society by focusing on the corporeality of the black male dancing body, while the second examines the destructive role that homophobia plays in the policing and silencing of diverse masculinities in representations of the black male dancing body on- and offstage.

Black gay men, the principal subjects of this study, as a rule have not fallen under dominant definitions of men, manhood, or masculinity in Western societies; consequently their presence further complicates the perception of the male dancer.<sup>22</sup> Choosing to highlight these black gay choreographers and dancers, then, underscores the importance of dance scholarship’s need to address the relationship between race, gender, homosexuality, effeminacy, and

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<sup>21</sup> I use the term “compromised masculinity” to refer to assumptions made about male heterosexuality and to the exclusion of gay men from definitions of manhood and masculinity.

<sup>22</sup> Masculinity studies detail the stratification of masculinities, specifying the notion that the concept of a real man has less to do with homosexuality than it does with gender nonconformity. See Kimmel, *Guyland* 76–77.

homophobia. Despite Western dance history's continued prejudice against the male dancer, few scholars have conducted a sustained analysis of black gay men in the field. As such, this project denotes a specific attempt to draw attention to how the dancing body and homosexuality challenge traditional notions of manhood. It also discusses the matter of who represents masculinity and, in fact, what it should look like and on whose bodies. To this end, any effort to contextualize black male dancers in Western theatrical dance requires a consideration of sexuality. Furthermore, the lives and work of Jones, Rhoden, Richardson, and Brown warrant examination of stable notions of identity and of how their dancing bodies further throw definitions of race, gender, and sexuality into flux. For the purposes of this study, then, it will be crucial to describe dance history's treatment of these issues to best frame the present moment for black male dancers.

Chapter Two provides the social, cultural, and historical backdrop that brings greater sustained attention to the black male dancing body in twentieth and twenty-first century American contemporary dance. To do so, the first section establishes the tradition of Western theatrical dance prior to the male dancer's fall during the nineteenth century. Following this, I examine the male dancer's rise during early twentieth-century American modern dance and the anxiety that accompanies men dancing, then and now. Next, I describe the circumstances and conditions facing the black male dancing body throughout Western dance



history that reveal the implications for the racialized dancing body. Lastly, I underscore the importance of approaching the black male dancing body through an intersectional framework of race, gender, and sexuality that lays the groundwork for bringing gay men and the male dancing body to the fore of dance history.

### **The Male Dancer—Before His Fall**

In this section, I briefly examine the male dancer within the European ballet tradition of Western theatrical dance prior his demise during the nineteenth-century Romantic era and twentieth century, the period that saw his gradual ascent. This foregrounding helps contextualize the precursor to American modern dance, and the later incarnation as American contemporary dance of the twentieth century. Here my reading focuses on dance history literature to study the contextual and changing nature of men, masculinity, and the male dancer within society and culture, both past and present. In addition, this section establishes connections between social constructions of gender and the performance of the male dancing body. More importantly, this foundation provides a broader sociocultural perspective that grapples with the implications of gender and dance often unaccounted for in traditional dance histories (Risner 8–9).

Western dance history has traditionally cited the anxiety generated by the male dancer dating back to the early nineteenth century (Burt, "*Male Dancer*" 24). This anxiety has been tied to historical associations of Western theatrical dance with the female body and with femininity.<sup>23</sup> Though this perception largely holds today and although it might appear inequitable or unreasonable to make such associations of dance with women historically, especially after ballet's Romantic era, dance history accounts seek to redress this notion in myriad ways. And, in doing so, modern writers of dance history in both popular accounts and scholarship adhere to one major strategy to restore the male dancer's absence in Western theatrical dance: comparing male dancers to athletes.

On the one hand, this comparison emphasizes the traditional male arena of competitive sports, thus hoping to make dance a legitimate area of pursuit for (heterosexual) men. On the other hand, making this connection attempts to bolster men's dancing as a masculine preserve, albeit by deemphasizing its associations to femininity as well as homosexuality.

This strategy misses a primary component of analysis for the male dancing body: it fails to draw on the social context and implications of men dancing, then and now. Using two examples, I argue that the male dancing body exhibits contrasting masculine ideals that vary according to specific social and cultural contexts across time. The first example elucidates the construction of

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<sup>23</sup> For earlier associations of the male dancer with effeminacy, see Jordan 17.

masculinity and the performance of gender by King Louis XIV during the seventeenth century, whereas the second example expounds upon Clarke and Crisp's epigraph above and a variety of twentieth century contemporary sources that makes continuous references to male dancer's athleticism. Focusing on both the past and present, these two examples reveal the shaping of the male dancer by attitudes, values, and beliefs about masculinity and the male dancing body specific to their historical moments. The two periods examined capture the attitudes toward the male dancer before and after his eclipse due to the reigning achievement and ascendance of the Romantic era: the female dancer en pointe.

The emphasis on these two different periods delineates one major point of analysis: an effort to show the male dancer in Western theatrical dance before and after he became target of suspicion. The period prior to the Romantic era situates the male dancer where, according to Clarke and Crisp, "theatrical dancing was first concerned with the man—the prince, the monarch, the nobleman—as the central figure" (7). Indeed, these authors argue, "The early history of theatre dance is really the history of the danseur" (7). In a similar fashion, Bland and Percival contend:

human instinct probably divided men from women at certain moments, giving special prominence—and so special dance movements—to selected individuals. These were usually men, one reason being that the athletic male body is best equipped for the violent activities thought to be

needed to attract human or divine attention. In the oldest of arts, men held first place. (9)

Furthermore, Terry argues, “Until the advent of Lafontaine and her colleagues, professional dancers were almost always male” (11). And therefore the aforementioned arguments point to men’s participation in ballet with legitimacy and without question. After the male dancer’s demise and the resultant climb of women, dancing men become suspect. Thus, the twentieth-century examples illustrate repeated attempts to regain for male dancers a foothold in a tradition foreign to American masculinity and culture.

In “‘Queering’ the King: A Remedial Approach to Reading Masculinity,” Chris Roebuck compares the male dancing body of the seventeenth-century *ballet de cour* to professional ballet dancers today. Roebuck’s examination underscores the changing social, political, and cultural forces that shaped the dance and how these in turn guided power relationships of Louis XIV as *Le Roi Soleil* (“the Sun King”). Key to understanding the male dancer of both time periods, and the existing tensions of masculine representation, Roebuck observes constructions of masculinity, then and now, to rethink Louis XIV’s identity. Roebuck’s historical analysis serves as a key entry point for comparing and contrasting European and American masculine ideals of the male dancing body.

Roebuck's theorization of the male dancing body articulates one major point for consideration: the significance of Louis's centralization of power in France as *Le Roi Soleil*. In doing so, the King centers attention on himself during performances. According to Roebuck, "If France was the geographic and cultural centre of Europe, Versailles (no longer Paris) was the political centre of France, and the ballet de cour was the symbolic centre of court life, then Louis was the sun around which it all revolved" (49). Quoting Bryson, Roebuck further adds, "The King was no longer 'the reflection of a power located elsewhere, but power's actual locus'" (49).

In the previous example, Roebuck makes several distinctions worth noting. He argues that King Louis XIV—perhaps the most powerful man in Europe during the seventeenth century—danced. That he did so, and used dance as a political tool for reorganizing society from an oligarchy to absolute monarchy, demonstrates an actualization of dance's ability not only to represent but also to enact change itself (Roebuck 49). The significance of this cannot be overstated—in that this centralized authority figure engages in traditional masculine activity, performing as *Le Roi Soleil*. In order to understand the magnitude of using dance as sociopolitical means of structuring society, we might ask the following question: can we imagine a world leader today, or of the twentieth century, that has used or uses dance as a principal medium of communication, persuasion, and power to govern the masses? The answer

notwithstanding, dance scholar Mark Franko attests to Louis XIV use of dance, where he asserts “Having danced in ballets since childhood, Louis knew their ideological potential and intended to exploit it to enhance his monarchical prestige” (109). Franko further elaborates on Louis’s uses of the court ballet and its principal means of social interaction stating, “In order to exert control over the medium of dance, which was indirectly a control over his courtiers, he institutionalized dance by founding a Royal Academy of Dancing” (109). As such, Louis’s performance as the Sun King sets the stage for examining the changing nature of men, masculinity, and manhood of the past and present in Western theatrical dance.

### **After the Fall—The Male Dancer in the Twentieth-Century Western**

#### **Theatrical Dance**

The male dancer emerged in America with quite different circumstances and contexts from those of his European counterpart. Without the benefit of King Louis XIV’s divine right or the noted aristocratic roots of ballet, male dancers in America had to chart an altogether different path. In America, women such as Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis forged the creation of modern dance in the early twentieth century. These early pioneers of modern dance broke with ballet traditions of the past to discover a newly emergent American art form. From the Romantic era to the founding of American modern dance, Western theatrical

dance has been a feminine enterprise—dominated by the white female dancing body.

For the most part, early modern dance and the future development of American contemporary dance have remained areas dominated by the white female dancing body (Fisher and Shay 17). The predominance of women in dance propelled early pioneer Ted Shawn, also known as the father of American modern dance, to start the first all-male dance company, in the 1930s. It was precisely through his recruiting efforts that Shawn attempted to legitimize the male dancer. In doing so, not only did Shawn advance the idea of men dancing as a noble profession but he laid the foundation for gendered perceptions of male dancers.

In Julia Foulkes's "Dance is for American Men: Ted Shawn and the Intersection of Gender, Sexuality, and Nationalism in the 1930s," she unveils the historical foundations for gendered conceptions of American men in modern dance. Her analysis examines Ted Shawn's pivotal role in creating and shaping the predominant image fostered of the male dancing body through his company, Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers, from 1933 to 1940. In her analysis, Foulkes points to several factors constituting Shawn's idealization of the male body, namely his attachment to the Greek ideal of homosexual love between men and his reverence of beauty and brotherhood.

Foulkes's nuanced attention to Shawn's life addresses important historical and social factors that served to construct dance as a male activity that included a distinct division of gender while eschewing any male dancing body's reference to femininity ("Dance" 122). Shawn's strict adherence to gendered behavior both on- and offstage, I argue, must be viewed in conjunction with his homosexuality. Under these conditions, Shawn deflects his homosexuality by performing signifiers of normative heterosexual masculinity that can be construed as passing.<sup>24</sup> Shawn's homosexuality and his anxiety over male dancers' perception as homosexual create the conditions in which he strategized the deflection and appropriation of visual codes concerning implicit heterosexual masculinity (Shea Murphy 127).

In fact, Shawn's staging of the male dancing body laid the beginnings of masculinity as decoupled from heterosexuality (Foulkes, "Dance" 130). According to Shea Murphy, Shawn's appropriation of Native American dance stemmed from his anxiety over the male dancer and the need to democratize men dancing as an American tradition ("Dance" 123). Within Foulkes's examination lies one of the main arguments posed throughout this dissertation project—that, due to the perceived incompatibility of homosexuality and masculinity, gay men are central to understanding the performance of gender on-

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<sup>24</sup> In this context, "passing" refers to sexuality and not the common historical referent of racial passing. See Yoshino 71–72.



and offstage (“Dance” 130). More importantly, however, Shawn’s case demonstrates the uniqueness of staging signifiers of masculinity, albeit on gay men’s bodies. In general, I argue that gay men understand the performance of gender more deeply due to their perceived failure of masculinity and their sociopolitical status. Unlike the embrace of the masculine ideal and the unquestioned norm this represents for heterosexual men, gay men see through the artifice of gendered performance in order to pass (Manning 24).

As a strategy, then, Shawn solidified this gendered performance onstage using traditional signifiers of masculinity, which in turn worked to assuage the anxieties surrounding the male dancer. Dance scholar Susan Foster captures Shawn’s strategy for staging the male dancing body:

Embodying Shawn’s distinctively masculine movement style and set of procedures for moving bodies through space, dancers traveled rapidly across the stage using small rhythmic step patterns while maintaining stiff torso, arms held throughout in order to enhance the musculature of the upper body and to evoke images of brute strength. Never undulating or contracting but sometimes twisting in the manner of classical Greek sculpture, dancers locomoted and then posed, turned and then jumped, ran to a new place and posed again. Each pose was stated emphatically, energy surging through the dancers limbs until they achieved the desired

shape, limbs arresting abruptly yet swelled with tension as they maintained their position. (164)

In this example, Foster builds an argument for Shawn's presentation of the male dancing body that shows he relied on displaying athleticism, virility, and power. Shawn carefully used this representation of masculinity to cover any misreading of these men's bodies as gay or effeminate (Foster, "Closets" 166). Not only this, in relying on the exhibition of male dancers' athleticism, Shawn further acted to normalize associations of modern dance with sports—a move that echoes the sentiments offered by Clarke and Crisp's epigraph above—and that show continuous appeal today in trying to democratize male dancing as a legitimate profession.

Indeed, Clarke and Crisp's statement made in the late twentieth century reveals the continued currency of Shawn's attitudes about the male dancing body. For example, notice the last statement referenced by Clarke and Crisp. They contend:

Perhaps the best reassurance about male dancing for the general public come in a comment from *The Ultimate Athlete* by George Leonard which was quoted by James A. Michener in *Sports in America*. "I can't say that the dancer is the Ultimate Athlete. I am quite certain, however, that the Ultimate Athlete is a dancer." (8)

In this statement, both authors aim to reassure a skeptical public about the presence of men who dance. Their best reassurance for democratizing dance derives from comparisons of dance to sports, as though these comparisons alone eliminate the skepticism for a consuming public.

When stating “the old myths and prejudices still exist” and that “the very word ‘ballet’ causes some hackles to rise,” what authors Clarke and Crisp fail to openly acknowledge about the male dancer is an explicit reference to what those myths and prejudices in fact are.<sup>25</sup> By relying on what the common falsehoods may be, the authors engage in perpetuating associations of Western theatrical dance with effeminacy and homosexuality (Mara 144). Their failure to openly confront these suspicions about the male dancer speaks to the social and psychological anxiety of men dancing. Neither do Clarke and Crisp’s skirting of these issues with analogies to sport address the implications of what these tacit associations continue to spell for men who dance.

Although Shawn went to great lengths to legitimize dancing as a vocation for men, the historical developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries rendered the notion problematic. Unfortunately, for Shawn and other prominent male dancers, such as Eric Hawkins and José Limón, the subject of men dancing

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<sup>25</sup> I realize I move interchangeably between modern dance and ballet as though differences do not exist between their expression and history; however, in the broader context of Western theatrical dance and with the deep-seated notions of American masculinity at work, the perceptions of men dancing remain analogous.

ran counter to the ideals of men and masculinity expressed during the period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>26</sup> Examining the values and construction of masculinity during this period affords a richer outlook on the source of “trouble” with men dancing—then and now.

Inheriting the European traditions of ballet, Western theatrical dance failed to convey the values of, and in fact posed a direct conflict to, the emerging ideals of American masculinity, particularly that of the self-made man. In *Manhood In America: A Cultural History*, Michael Kimmel illustrates how the self-made man dominated the masculine ideal to become the emblematic model of masculinity during America’s rise to power during the nineteenth century. Any vestiges from European royalty or aristocracy were effectively disavowed in the new model of masculinity in America. And in that way, European ballet had virtually nothing in common with the average man in American society. Ancestry may have spoken to a shared cultural and philosophical tradition of Europe, but American men fundamentally shared nothing in common with the typical male representation in ballet (Kimmel “*Manhood*” 26–27).

In fact, at odds with the dominant narrative of the self-made man during this period was the notion of men dancing, especially when American culture acknowledged no inherent reason for it (Hawkins 343–344). Moreover, the

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<sup>26</sup> Both Hawkins and Limón present cases for making Western theatrical dance worthy of American men. They borrow similar notions about the historicity and antiquity of the form dating back to its practice by men. See Hawkins 343 and Limón 85.

concept of a male dancer had to contend with larger mythic constructions, such as rugged individualism and the frontiersman, have proved and arguably still remain largely influential in defining the American masculine ideal.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the male pioneers of modern dance agree that the absence of an American tradition has resulted in the male dancer's suspect status. Thus, this absence becomes a scourge for the male dancer in society. Seriously contemplating the aesthetic beauty of the male form in movement ran counter to notions of men, then, and to their roles performed in society. If the male dancer has no precedent or requisite purpose in society, he is especially vulnerable to the negative stereotypes and prejudices cast against him. Each of the male pioneers discussed advocates for and dreams of a day when American men can project with confidence their rightful place among participants in the most ancient art forms known to humankind.

The early male pioneers of American modern dance all raise a basic strategy for men's success in dance: find a noble, albeit truly American, reason for men to dance, and they will. However, these analyses fail to incorporate a critical study of gender that includes a social, cultural, and political framework for contextualizing reading the male dancing body's corporeality in American culture. Boldly declaring dance as men's work, apart from women's work, in its strict

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<sup>27</sup> For more information about the self-made man, rugged individualism, and the frontiersman, see Kimmel and Aronson 702–703 and Turner 78. The impact religion has on ideas about the body also bears mentioning. See Reed 517 and Shawn 93.

attention to gendered movement qualities does not reduce the continued suspicion of and prejudice against the male dancing body in American culture.

Dance scholar Ramsay Burt's addresses the continued prejudice with men dancing in his book *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, and Sexualities*. According to Burt, the continued anxiety associated with the male dancer has much to do with presenting the male body as an object. Here the masculine ideal and the male dancing body reveal their incompatibility due to blurring subject-object boundaries. Historically, objectification of the body has been tied to the female body and women. These notions, as well as that of the self-made man, continue to reign as the dominant American ideal of masculinity (Kimmel "Manhood" 333). Moreover, Enlightenment philosophy obscured the notion of man as an embodied subject.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the age of the Enlightenment cast rationality and reason as markers of humanity and modernity. In contrast, the body, nature, and emotion posed as enemies of reason.

Elaborating on Enlightenment philosophy, social theorist Victor Seidler states:

So it is that our humanity has been centrally defined by what separates us off from nature, which is supposedly an independent and autonomous faculty of reason. As reason is defined in fundamental opposition to nature within our moral lives, so culture is set up in opposition to nature. This

becomes a defining moment of modernity that has shaped the dominant traditions of philosophy and social theory. (x)

In fact, the Enlightenment yielded contradictory narratives about Western civilization. The West's triumph comprised its advances in science, technology, and the arts. At the center of these advances, men maintained their superiority to Others, who included women, people of color, and animals (x). Fundamentally, the notions of progress embedded within Enlightenment ideals have historically struck a discordant note for blacks. Literary scholar John Gruesser addresses this fundamental ambivalence when he argues:

Residing “in but not necessarily of the modern, Western world” and thus possessing what Gilroy calls a “striking doubleness,” black Atlantic peoples share more than a collective history of victimization; they have an ambivalent perspective on modernism and Western notions of progress that differs significantly from that of the ruling white populations. Seeing slavery and its attendant horrors as connected to rather than divorced from the Enlightenment ideas associated with modernism, black Atlantic peoples constructed what Gilroy calls a “counterculture of modernity”:  
“[The black Atlantic] was shaped by the need to supply a counter-narrative of modernity that could offset the willful innocence of those European theories that ignored the complicity of terror and rationality and in doing so

denied that modern slavery could have anything to do with the sometimes brutal practice of modernization or the conceits of enlightenment.” (17)

The American masculine ideal combined with Enlightenment values reveals the countervailing ethos working against legitimizing the male dancer.<sup>28</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I argue that grasping, understanding, and analyzing the anxiety, suspicion, and fear of the male dancing body in American culture, and in particular of the black male dancing body, requires an intersectional analysis that examines the social, cultural, historical, and political implications of the male dancer in society. Dance scholarship has rarely examined the cultural import of the black male dancing body and the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality.

### **The Black Male Dancing Body in Dance History**

Dance scholarship’s attention to the black male dancing body in Western theatrical dance in any sustained manner is limited at best.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, those

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<sup>28</sup> Scholar Peter Stoneley addresses the impact of Enlightenment thinking of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on the body by pointing to burgeoning scientific and rationalist inquires of the period as well as to the changing perspectives that rejected “aristocratic corporeality” and instead favored masculinity defined as strength and functionality. Here gracefulness came to be seen as a female attribute, and as such he argues, “the refinement of aristocratic posture—in the case of men—was seen as frivolous and effeminate.” See Stoneley 10.

<sup>29</sup> Though articles have been published on several black male dancers and choreographers, a sustained academic inquiry has yet to include an examination of them together. The concentration on issues of race and its social implications focus on work generated by various dancers and choreographers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, these dance histories usually address the Africanist retentions in gestures and the body while revealing the degree to which the severe conditions of the slave trade and plantation life curtailed, hindered, and caused adaptation of the body’s expression. The black body in these situations responded



dance historical accounts rarely focus on the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality of the black male dancing body. Even dance histories involving the black male dancing body, in large part found in African American dance histories, primarily focus on race and the roles that specific dancers and their personalities have played in American contemporary dance.<sup>30</sup> They do this to a great extent without addressing the complicated history the black male dancing body represents. Neither do these histories probe what participating in a tradition that has generally found their bodies incompatible to Western aesthetic ideals ultimately means to black men.

In African American dance histories, the subject of the black male dancing body avoids discussing dance and homosexuality. If dominant dance history narratives find difficulty approaching the subject of homosexuality, which includes narratives of mostly white men, imagine the complexity for black men. Surveys such as *Black Dance In the United States From 1619 to 1970* by Lynn Fauley Emery, *Black Dance* by Edward Thorpe, and *The Black Tradition in American Dance* by Richard Long introduce narratives explaining connections between the

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primarily to the social conditions of its environment, and the creativity was generated out of the deplorable conditions. See Long, Thorpe, and Emery.

<sup>30</sup> Due the wide-ranging analyses of the social construction of race, it is difficult to include a complete discussion on the topic. For the purposes of my argument, I use the definition put forth by Ian Lopez, which positions “race” as “a vast group of people loosely bound together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their morphology and/or ancestry...Race is neither an essence nor an illusion, but rather an ongoing, contradictory, self-reinforcing, plastic process subject to the macro forces of social and political struggle and the micro effects of daily decision,” See Lopez 193.

Old and New World for African Americans and the successive development of traditions, forms, and styles that emerged from various black performers and practitioners. These surveys primarily establish a timeline of black dance contributions to America, without mentioning the negative attitudes toward male dancers in Western theatrical dance.<sup>31</sup>

Dominant narratives within Western dance history are largely shaped by pervasive ideas and attitudes that parallel an American society segregated into black and white worlds. This segregation has in turn fed ideas about the black dancing body, which has often fallen under the trope of primitivism. In the early twentieth century, primitivism fed ideas about the black body. The trope of the primitive reinscribed differing notions about Western and non-Western cultures. These differences applied to black bodies by freezing them in the past, while constructing whiteness as connected to modernity.<sup>32</sup> Any analysis of the black dancing body in America and its failure to appear in a variety of standard dance histories must acknowledge this history. And so prevailing histories of Western theatrical concert dance largely exclude contributions of African Americans, treating them as marginal if not peripheral to major artistic, aesthetic, and philosophical European American advancements of the tradition (Perpener xi).

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<sup>31</sup> Thorpe discusses the professional relationship between Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane by stating that their work emphasized “overt homosexuality, a courageous ‘coming out’ in dance terms.” This reference pursues no other line of inquiry. Knowing the associations between dance and homosexuality, it is a wonder the author does not explore this further. See Thorpe 150–151.

<sup>32</sup> For more about primitivism and the recurring tropes effect on the black dancing body, see Kraut 435.

Although major surveys of dance history suffer from cursory treatment of African Americans, recent scholarship by dance historians shows greater attention to their contributions. Before continuing, I briefly examine some contributions of these scholars.

In *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, Brenda Dixon Gottschild undertakes the task of laying out the rich and variegated history of the black dancing body within the American cultural landscape. The heart of Gottschild's argument traces and frames the oppositional narratives of the racialized black body—in contrast to the unmarked, and normative white body—in order to analyze the ways in which they accrue meaning and identity: politically, socially, and culturally. Mapping the geography of the black body (feet, buttocks, skin, hair, soul, spirit), Gottschild's analysis places a spotlight on rethinking and deconstructing these areas to unhinge spectral notions of what black dance is.

Gotschild's examination applies a multi-methodological approach using interviews, descriptive movement analysis, critical theory, and self-reflection to explore the black dancing body. Her epistemological framework grounds distinctions between Africanist and Europeanist aesthetics to differentiate practices each upholds, meanwhile revealing their intricate interconnectedness within the American cultural fabric. Though she acknowledges the overwhelming evidence revealing the rich amalgamation of cultures in America, she is careful to

draw attention to the operations of racism and white-skin privilege, to expose the unequal power dynamics at work in cultural exchange. Adopting the neologism “Appropriation leads to Approximation leads to Assimilation,” Gottschild theorizes this inequality and hierarchy of appropriation as the route performances undertake, via cultural processes (i.e., styles, trends), before becoming part of society (21–22). Her analysis offers key insights to examine the complex processes at work in the construction of the black dancing body.

Susan Manning’s *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* largely argues for an intercultural historiography of American modern dance dating from 1930 to 1970. Her analysis deeply unfolds intricate layers of meaning behind the binary constructs of Negro dance<sup>33</sup> and modern dance, revealing them to be mutually constitutive categories that advance interdependent representations of blackness and whiteness throughout continually shifting periods between pre- and post World War II. Her work follows the line of interrogating whiteness while complicating blackness in an attempt to consolidate traditional dance history narratives, which previously maintained racially separate and distinct strands. In addition, Manning theorizes cross-viewing as a model for the types of spectatorship ongoing between people of varying social locations and identities, furthering the possibilities of interconnections within the social milieu of dance.

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<sup>33</sup> Manning strategically uses this anachronistic term to further her argument. It is later replaced by use of “black dance” and “African American dance.” See Manning xiv.

Manning's argument illuminates previous scholarship in American modern dance by suturing observable gaps in its divided history. Furthermore, though Manning's analysis incorporates queer theory when addressing Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers, it remained a secondary theme to her concerns of race. Nevertheless, her acknowledgment of queer subtext reading by gay spectators, which eludes many straight audiences, poses implications for future analyses.

In *African American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, John Perpener documents the lives of eight seminal black dance artists from the 1920s to 1940s to provide further contextualization of their significant contributions as artists during this period. His work fleshes out biographical information and the artistic development of these men, whereas scant documentation to historicize their achievements existed previously. In doing so, he lays the foundation for exploring the racial and cultural politics endured by these artists, revealing a connection to the present circumstances of those practicing in the tradition of African American concert dance. Perpener's analysis exposes the syncretism of European American, African American, Caribbean, and African modes of expression and how these artists' efforts changed the landscape of American modern dance. Perpener's scholarship offers a much needed and balanced historiography of the artists studied, detailing and showing the interactions with their white contemporaries and their influence in shaping American concert dance.

The notion of the primitive trope affecting the black dancing body further complicates the received ideas about its inferiority, and the previous brief overview concerning the interconnected histories of modern dance reveals the construction of race on both the white and black dancing body. Much of what is defined as black—and the trope of primitivism affecting the black dancing body, male or female—has roots in scientific racism that serve to buttress white supremacy and the United States' institution of slavery. The laws, ideology, and institution of slavery all shaped the processes constructing the racialized body in America and the surrounding discourse. Crucial to understanding this context is the deployment of the most offensive stereotypes and myths perpetuated about the black body and that these ideas and images increased the racialization of America. The racialized black male body carried with it dual imperatives, one of labor and the other marked by docility, as noted by Thomas DeFrantz in his article "Simmering Passivity: The Black Male Body in Concert Dance" (107). This foundational experience of black men lays the groundwork for the black male body's representation. Arguably, the implications of these racist practices continue to possess wide ramifications for American society and culture.

No history of black dance can be written without drawing on the lived experiences of African Americans. Racist practices have often distinguished Western theatrical dance from African American dance forms by emphasizing distinctions between high and low art. In the former art form, dancing bodies,

primarily white ones, gained legitimacy by pursuing dance-making as a noble activity largely by excluding African Americans (yet appropriating their dance styles). In its African American forms, dance maintained a social, cultural, and political connection to the culture of everyday black people. The social context in which African American dance forms grew reveals an Africanist aesthetic of the inseparable nature of life and art. Western theatrical dance's status as a high art form in the West, however, makes careful distinctions between the separation of art for art's sake, on the one hand, and art connected to the social fabric of society, on the other. Doing so perpetuates the racial markers of so-called high and low art.

As a result of these traditional demarcations, African Americans have employed multiple strategies of survival and resistance for their dances to endure slavery to the present day.<sup>34</sup> For many blacks, surviving in a culture hostile to their presence often took precedence over a privileged life devoted to the pursuit of making art. This, however, did not mean African Americans suffered from a lack of talent or creativity preventing practice of American modern dance in the twentieth century. Rather, discrimination against black dancers entering modern

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<sup>34</sup> I do not mean to say that all black dance forms have endured slavery intact or without change. Rather, the survival is a testament to cultural memory, to the respect contemporary dancers pay to their African American ancestors, and to the path they laid for the traditions to continue.

dance companies often resulted from ongoing stereotypical perceptions that deemed their bodies incapable of promoting Western aesthetic ideals.<sup>35</sup>

African American dance forms evolved out of social and cultural contexts, in contrast to the presentational forms of Western theatrical dance. The dance was not one of abstraction, but conveyed meaning through its connection to the audience. Instead of seeking representation by distancing the audience through the fourth wall (a concept used for proscenium theatres whereby the audience is not acknowledged), African Americans encouraged a more participatory audience. Dance scholar Perpener captures this sentiment when he quotes dance historian Halifu Osumare on the functionality of art for African Americans:

In a similar vein, the dance historian Halifu Osumare refers to an African legacy that compelled black artists to communicate in clear, humanistic terms, to “focus on functionalism in life and therefore in art.” She continues, “It is not about dance for dance’s sake, but it is dance to communicate to people, who in turn are part of the whole process.” (205)

Susan Manning, author of *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, furthers this notion when she states, “I came to see that choreography could not be separated from its sociohistorical circumstances” (ix). Manning’s statement sums up much of the

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<sup>35</sup> For more discussion on this issue, see Perpener 201–203; Alderson’s preface (viii–ix) in Desmond, *Meaning*; and Manning viii. In that preface, Manning states, “I executed the all too common cultural move of associating high art with whiteness and relegating blackness to a lower rung of my aesthetic inquiry.”



African American black dance tradition and why this reading is so important to an analysis of black dance forms.

In effect, the exclusion of the black male dancing body from practicing Western theatrical dance forms had greater political consequences, precisely because of dominant white attitudes about black bodies. For that matter, standard dance histories oftentimes discuss concert dance as a pure art form removed from the politics of its production. I maintain concert dance never could ignore its “sociohistorical circumstances” of production and no longer can in any thorough analysis. The social, political, and cultural implications of African Americans practicing within Western theatrical dance were much higher due ironically to the context of white supremacy, the recurring trope of primitivism, and the failure to recognize African Americans’ humanity. These antagonistic elements make the persistence of African American dance forms all the more powerful.

Recent interdisciplinary dance scholarship, such as Gay Morris’s “What He Called Himself: Issues of Identity in Early Dances by Bill T. Jones” and José Esteban Muñoz’s “Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling: Approaching Kevin Aviance,” examines new approaches that now view concert dance history and the dancing body as having a more interconnected and inseparable relationship than commonly assumed. The field of interdisciplinary dance studies encompasses a number of theoretical underpinnings, which include feminist

theory, gender studies, critical race, and queer theory as well as multi-methodological approaches that consist of ethnography, oral history, and anthropology. These histories offer new paradigm shifts that challenge the received canon of American concert dance. Furthermore, dance scholars routinely question the omission of certain dancers and choreographers from representation while also forging new investigatory paths of epistemology. Their groundbreaking work revisits unquestioned assumptions and biases inherent in many publications and paves the way to unearthing, exploring, and examining new narratives that have been omitted in the past.

The previous paragraphs detail the vexed differences between standard dance histories along the lines of race. Though this is the case, few historians address dance history in relation to race, gender, and sexuality. If dance and race represent marginalized histories, how much more does it do so for black *gay* men within American contemporary dance? As Jane Desmond in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off Stage* queries, “More provocatively, should we ask, given the large presence of gay males in the professional dance world (as dancers, choreographers, critics) if in fact modern dance and ballet in the United States is a gay history?” (25) She raises an important question worth serious consideration for the future of dance studies.

Desmond’s inquiry begets thinking the inevitable: American contemporary dance would not be where it is today without the contribution of these men—gay

men who have participated in all aspects of production, promotion, and performance of American contemporary dance. If race is discussed in relation to the black male dancing body, sexuality is often silenced, fearing the ruination of traditional conceptions of black manhood. The seemingly impenetrable silence between dance and homosexuality remains a controversial issue not just in dominant narratives of Western dance history but in African American history, too. Ostensibly, nothing in American contemporary dance could be more provocative than advancing issues concerning black gay men.

Ironically enough, dance, as the most explicit of art forms dealing with the body, often refrains from expressing any form of sexuality and ignores this aspect in its representation (Foster, "Closets" 150). Frequently it is the work of queer contemporary choreographers and women—those of marginalized identities—that critiques societal mores and strives to disturb, question, and destabilize normative assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality. Due to the intimacy of the body's relationship to others on stage, explicitly representing unconventional sexualities onstage may elicit fear, particularly when performance involves the black male dancing body.

Once again, the taken-for-granted heterosexist assumptions in contemporary dance ignore the sexual diversity that exists within society and among dance practitioners. American contemporary dance welcomes these gay men, we are told. But, following the natural extension of that logic, it would seem

the stage should also welcome representation of queer desires and images. Fundamentally, the relationship of black gay men to concert dance reveals a more complicated history in which a greater distance could not exist between stage personas and personal lives. As such, the topic of the black male dancing body must be broached while keeping these two societies and two histories, both black and white, in mind. The black male dancing body has a very different introduction to America and narrative from those bodies usually configured within Western theatrical dance histories. It is important to understand the narrative of the black male body's relationship in America and its implications for American contemporary dance.

### **The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Sexuality for the Black Male Dancing Body**

A key factor in developing a concept of masculinity for black gay men and the male dancing body is an examination of the diverse cultures of masculinities. R. W. Connell's analysis of hegemonic masculinity differentiates between dominant, subordinated, and marginalized masculinities and is useful in outlaying a structural framework of gendered relationships. However, in its Western, universalist approach to masculinities, his framework fails to account for the differences, tensions, and ambivalences among men, which social theorist Victor Seidler calls "diverse masculinities" (*Transforming Masculinities* 13). Seidler

asserts that diversity is “different generational masculinities” as well as being “racial’, ethnic, and cultural” (Seidler 4). Within the field of critical men’s studies, analyses that pertain to the African American male experience are somewhat rare. As Tim Edwards in *Cultures of Masculinity* argues:

It is at least possibly the case that the complete catalogue of critical men’s studies of masculinity constitutes little more than one extremely extended male, middle-class, straight, Western—and white—complaint. This bad situation is, furthermore, arguably made worse by the lack of attention often given to question of masculinity by many black theorists. (64)

The absence of black theorists in masculinity studies speaks to the entrenched prevailing notions of a patriarchal black manhood invested in positioning itself as the dominant model. Renowned cultural critic bell hooks addresses the absence of black men tackling critiques of gender politics as a failure of progress for gender equality.<sup>36</sup> Critical men’s studies provide an analytical framework to conceptualize the experiences of black gay men and include them in its analyses of gender.

Therefore, the prevailing conceptions of masculinity encountered in dominant society and African American culture are fundamental to studying black gay men in dance. The tensions and contradictions arising from these two sites

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<sup>36</sup> hooks describes waiting for other men to write about gender and their failure to do so. She therefore wrote the book out of a desperate need for critiques of patriarchal black masculinity. See hooks, *We Real Cool* xvi–xvii.

are complicated by homosexuality. If the absence of critical voices offering alternative visions of black masculinity reveals anything, it is just how problematic it is that traditional notions of masculinity fail to change or adapt to the current social climate for black men. A critical masculinity studies lens is essential for grounding analysis of the black male dancing body in the lived experiences of black gay men and the performance of masculinities. In order to advance this theoretical paradigm, critical masculinity studies must include the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality to its analysis.

Crucial to this analysis is an exploration of black masculinity in America and exploring how its tensions hinge on a tenuous construct arising out of black men's historically precarious position in American society. This examination of masculinity unveils resistant strains of black masculinity established in relation to the dominant notions of masculinity not only in white America but also in African American culture (Connell, *Masculinities* 80). These black gay men destabilize constructions of black manhood in ways that further complicate conceptions of masculinity and that have rarely been analyzed. Indeed, conceptualizing black masculinity requires a deep, penetrating look at the ways in which these men challenge conventional notions of blackness, particularly in the contemporary dance world, where involvement in theatrical dance is often seen as compromising male identity. In some estimations, black gay men are not real men and are deemed unworthy of inclusion in the black community (Carbado,

*Black Men* 9). The rhetoric of “real” men often translates into patriarchal conceptions of “race men,” “strong black man,” and phallic black masculinity” (Neal 27).<sup>37</sup>

One of the recurring themes in African American studies at present is the exclusion of gender and sexuality in the debates on race (McBride, “Can” 254). These absences are noticeable; even more problematic are debates that introduce homophobia to analyses of race (Dollimore 20). Kobena Mercer appropriately captures this dilemma in “Decolonization and Disappointment: Reading Fanon’s Sexual Politics”:

Homosexuality is a key issue in black sexual politics: Salman Rushdie once talked about the many rooms in literature and Edward Said has invoked the many rooms in the house of culture; I would add that the closet is one of the most crowded rooms in the house of black diaspora culture. There must be a riot going on in there! If we are to do the right thing, maybe the gesture is to let them out. (128)

This quotation pinpoints one of the most important and troubling aspects towards a progressive discourse in African American Studies. Pressing concerns in recent scholarship—such as Dwight McBride’s in *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch*, E. Patrick Johnson’s *Appropriating Blackness*, Tim’m T. West’s “Faking the Funk?,”

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<sup>37</sup> For various points of view concerning black masculinity see Carby 4; Gilroy 216; Gray 180; Johnson 32; Edwards 65; Harper, *Are We Not Men?* ix; McBride, *Why* 69, Collins, *Black* 7; Gates “Burden” 80; Neal 69; Seidler, *Transforming* 105; and Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 1.

and Henry Louis Gates's "The Black Man's Burden"—all speak to the lack of sustained inquiry about the interconnections of race, gender, and sexuality. Analysis concerning this intersectionality is critical to advancing understanding of their collective impact on the lives of black gay men.

It is not surprising that much of the resistance to talking about or openly discussing progressive views on the interconnections of race, gender, and sexuality stems from homophobia and misogyny in the black community (Wise 14). The black community also views with suspicion and downright distrust any critical paradigm deconstructing an authentic blackness (hooks, "Dialectically" 53). Thus, the site of the black male dancing body allows a reading within African American studies that disempowers mythic and often-monolithic constructions of blackness, while expanding what in fact constitutes them. As a result, expanding what in fact constitutes blackness begins with examining marginalized identities including black LGBT people and the queer male dancing body of this study.

The use of the term "queer," and not "gay," specifically recognizes attempts at subverting conventional paradigms and expectations relating to gender construction and performance. Here, I will define the use of two terms important throughout this project. Though "gay" and "queer" oftentimes overlap in usage, I use the term "gay" to represent a collective social identity among those who have same-sex attraction (Etzkorn 1). For my reading of black male dancing body, I borrow David Savran's definition of queer. He argues:



Queer, in other words, represents an attempt to open up a vista of multiple, shifting, and gloriously polymorphous bodies, pleasures, and resistances and to problematize 1970s-style identity politics and the minoritizing discourses that are associated with lesbian feminism and gay liberation. To this extent, it is part of a new universalizing discourse that includes in its rainbow anyone willing to renounce the claims and prerogatives of heteronormativity. (152)

This quote captures one aspect of defining the term queer; however, for the purposes of this dissertation it is important to recognize the limitations of a universalizing discourse that often excludes those it proposes to also help—people of color. Because there are limitations with the definition provided by Savran, I will draw on dance historian Ramsay Burt’s use of the term queer as outlined in “Dissolving in Pleasure: The Threat of the Queer Male Dancing Body.” Burt’s theorization challenges the dualistic division espoused by the Kantian model of aesthetic judgment, where the Enlightenment mentality separates mind and body and poses the rational unitary subject as unaffected by bodily and sensual pleasures. Here Burt analyzes the queer male dancing body in relation to this divide, advancing a poststructuralist theorization of postmodern gay choreographers. His theorizing addresses the queer male dancing body’s ability to destabilize normative conceptions of gender and sexuality through reading the surface and inscription of the choreography. It is through this critical lens that

Burt examines the production of the queer male dancing body: he draws on the interactive nature of live performance, which, he argues, transmits ways of understanding masculinity and sexuality.

Significantly, then, Burt advances issues concerning the capacity of the queer male dancing body to transgress neat considerations of subject and object, spectator and performer. He asserts, “Within normative thought this subject position is implicitly masculine, because the male body is generally taken as an exemplary, unproblematic, unmarked norm” (211). Here, Burt proposes ways in which the queer male dancing body troubles the masculine norm and thereby opens up—delimits—new areas of knowledge production in performance, particularly as the queer male dancing body resists normative heterosexual sexuality. Fortunately, scholarship like Burt’s has begun to bring awareness to the queer male dancing body—awareness that previous dance histories have ignored, only hinted at, or vaguely suggested.

One of the ways in which scholars have sought to redress the silencing of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in history is through queer theory. Initially deployed as a rejoinder to the invisibility of queer identities, the academic inquiry contests conventional identity categorization, and the normalization of identity formation, particularly as it applies to recuperating histories of those LGBT people who have been largely omitted. For the most part, theorists like Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler argue against the regulatory

and stable binary categories such as male/female and heterosexual/homosexual, which challenge social, cultural, and political systems of domination and heteronormativity. Located with postmodern and poststructuralist thought, queer theory resists essentialist views on gender and sexuality that poses a unitary identity. Instead, queer theory provides analytical framework that views identity as “fluid, mobile, and plural” (Kimmel and Aronson 649).

As a new field of intellectual inquiry, queer theory has also overlooked issues of difference and race in its theorizing of gender and sexuality. For example, in the introduction to *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson both attest to these shortcomings by revealing the lack of critical analysis concerning race in an extensive review of queer theory anthologies (16). What those anthologies fail to do in any concrete way is to interrogate race as a significant factor in shaping the discourse of sexual politics. Indeed, the irony for many queers of color—the principal subjects of my examination—is that although the gay rights movement has continuously drawn inspiration from and likens itself to the civil rights movement, it has yet to show the slightest concerted effort to address their intersection (Mercer and Julien 191). Consequently, the emergent field of black queer studies actively rectifies the historical and cultural record.

As a new intellectual framework and political project, black queer studies contests queer theory’s oftentimes theoretical abstraction of the subjects it claims

to help. Scholars like Johnson argue for the incorporation of materiality and social constructions of race, gender, and sexuality into analyses of marginalized queer identities (“Quare” 5). In doing so, Johnson engages a more substantive examination of a paradigmatic black queer studies analysis. Furthermore, Johnson’s theorization offers marginalized identities useful ways of understanding, resisting, and strategizing modes of survival.<sup>38</sup>

To date, Jane Desmond’s edited anthology *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexuality On and Off Stage* is perhaps the most significant intervention exploring the intersection of dance, sexuality, and queer identities. The anthology addresses long overdue scholarship connecting practices of the dancing body to sexuality in multiple cultural sites while also confronting the hidden status that sexuality has assumed in the presentation of dance performance. In the introduction, Desmond affirms the significance of applying an intersectional analysis of dance and sexuality studies based on two premises. First, dance scholarship needs to centrally consider issues of sexuality, queerness, and heteronormativity in dance history while also analyzing their ability to shape and produce meaning. Second, Desmond promotes viewing the dancing body as a privileged site for sexuality’s semiotics and as an instrument of social signification.

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<sup>38</sup> For a detailed materialist analysis of race, gender, sexuality and class construction, see Ferguson 138–139.

Perhaps most groundbreaking is Desmond's confrontation of homophobia along with other dance scholars' essays that challenge dance studies to finally address the prevalence of homosexuality in Western theatrical dance by calling it "the most remarkably open closets of any profession" (Foster, "Closets" 199). Thus, the high percentage of gay men in dance poses serious challenges for dance scholars who observe dance history's overall silence on the matter. The complex negotiation and apparent contradiction between the presence of gay men and homophobia in dance deserves fuller attention by dance historians. And although Desmond states that the writings of Julia Foulkes and Susan Foster "point to the incalculable power of homophobia in producing what we know as canonical modern dance," their analyses do not provide a platform to access the personal and professional toll exacted on the gay male who dances (15). The absence of dancers' voices in these essays opens the possibility to construct new histories. By offering their own words, perhaps they can shape how dance histories are produced. In fact, a crucial component of reading the dancing body is understanding the professional dancer's relationship to society and how he functions within it as an artist. To understand the often-complex ways in which society strictures marginalize certain identities, it is critical that their agentive potential receive consideration.

Desmond's anthology highlights multiple theoretical approaches that pry open the closet door in twentieth-century American contemporary dance.

Scholars such as Kopelson and Foster illuminate gay men and the male dancing body as sites full of potential strategies for reading queer subtexts and destabilizing normative conceptions of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, their arguments for the queer male dancing body lend credence to the multiple locations gay male subjects occupy in society, and their ability to manipulate signs and signifiers of the body to upend established beliefs about race, gender, and sexuality.

The anthology paves the way for more interdisciplinary analyses of the queer male dancing body. Thus, introducing a critical masculinity studies model to examine the male dancer brings a new level of analysis to dance studies. Oftentimes, stereotypical portrayals view gay men as effeminate and emasculated. However, careful analyses of these performances show gay men challenging the source and foundation of those perceptions. For instance, in Kopelson's analysis of Nijinsky's role as the golden slave in *Schéhérazade*, he argues for the gay male body as a liminal site in its expression of masculinity and femininity along a fluid continuum resisting dominant conventions. This body, unlike what traditional masculine notions of the male body allow, can elicit pleasure and eroticization, without the paranoid concerns of the body as an object of desire, for both men and women. Fluidity, whether in movement or in the identity of the performer on- or offstage, denotes in these performances by gay men and the male dancing body a certain level of openness to ideas that

cross over into prohibitive territories for the male body and masculinity and that arguably permit greater freedom of expression and choices for the performer.

In another example from Desmond's anthology, Susan Foster's "Closet Full of Dances," the closet takes center stage, as well as the effect of homophobia in shaping the male dancing body in concert dance. Here Foster charts the history of the closet and its function within the modern dance tradition over the last century by showing how its construction served as a means to conceal any reference to sexuality, whether heterosexual or homosexual. Offering the possibility for alternative identities, this antisexual space, she argues, at once allowed dancers to be viewed as sexualized identities while actually diverting attention to nonsexual movement. Her argument details a theorization of homosexuality that makes close connections between dancers' subjectivities and corporealities, on one hand, and the simultaneous production of a dichotomous public-private discourse around the male dancing body, on the other.

Desmond's anthology challenges the prevailing conceptions of male dancers in American society, particularly as it applies to the male dancing body, by opening the door to diverse representations. Radically, these readings of the male dancing body invite a rethinking and redefinition of masculinity—its expression—in American contemporary dance and culture. The gay men who perform notions of the queer male dancing body situate the body not only as a

vehicle for expression but as a means to critique the traditional representations of men and the power invested in those meanings. Their performances arguably reframe which bodies legitimize masculinity.

Though dance history has begun to look a little more attentively to issues concerning gay men within American contemporary dance, the necessity to uncover the myriad prejudices, stereotypes, stigmas, and myths around them persists. Indeed, rather than steer clear of the complex issues involving homophobia, effeminacy, and heterosexism in Western dance history, this project confronts them and the implications of an intersectional analysis of race, gender and sexuality for society and culture. The invisibilized presence of black gay men throughout the annals of Western dance history provides the necessary framework for conducting a sustained critical examination of their experiences in American contemporary dance. Focusing on these men thus allows a rare opportunity to elevate their corporeality, subjectivity, and representational concerns to the forefront. Furthermore, their self-identified status as gay men contests traditional notions and representational boundaries of the gendered body. As such, the project examines the policing of masculinity for men in society, particularly black gay men, and in turn the implications for the black male dancing body on- and offstage.

These inquiries arise at a time when the male body and masculinity are increasingly gaining scrutiny in the field of men's studies, as men are drawn into



sharper focus in gender studies scholarship. The past few decades have seen a rise in scholarship concerning men and masculinities. Part of this movement stems from men's long taken-for-granted, unquestioned gender status and the hugely important role of feminist theory (Edwards 2). Feminism has long interrogated false assumptions of traditional sex roles that relegated women to the domestic realm (Kimmel, *Manhood* 181). In doing so, feminist theory has simultaneously opened doors to questioning assumptions about the role of men and masculinity, leading to new theoretical approaches to articulate men's experiences socially and culturally. With most research occurring in the social sciences, men and masculinity studies have expanded to the humanities and other cultural and aesthetic fields (Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 3).

In Chapter Three, I interrogate the constructions of race, gender, and sexuality in the onstage performances of Bill T. Jones, Ronald K. Brown, and Dwight Rhoden. These black male dancers' interactions with society and culture open new territories for redefining masculinity and its performance. Here the black male dancing body reconfigures traditional notions about gender performance by expanding, challenging, and destabilizing previous ideas about who and what bodies perform them.

## Chapter Three

### The Black Queer Male Dancing Body Onstage

By the tenets of black macho, true masculinity admits little or no space for self-interrogation or multiple subjectivities around race. Black macho prescribes an inflexible ideal: Strong black men—“Afrocentric” black men—don’t flinch, don’t weaken, don’t take blame or shit, take charge, step-to when challenged, and defend themselves without pause for self-doubt...Black macho counterpoises this warrior model of masculinity with the emasculated Other: the Other as punk, sissy, Negro faggot, a status which any man, not just those who in fact are gay, can be, and are, branded should one deviate from rigidly prescribed gender codes of hypermasculine conduct.

Marlon Riggs  
Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a SNAP! Queen

Because in many ways *Tongue Untied* was about the fact that black gay men by definition are multicultural people. Because we in fact learn the language of white society and we learn the language of straight society, and then at the same time we create for our survival and our own safety the language of our black gay society, so there’s all these cultures that we learn and we become fluent in all of them, and yet the majority culture whether we are talking about majority black culture, or majority white culture, or majority gay culture, they don’t necessarily learn the different languages.

Phil Wilson, Director of Black AIDS Institute  
in *Tongues Untied*

The body, I believe, has to be theorized in ways that not only describe the ways in which it is brought into being but also what it does once it is constituted and the relationship between it and the other bodies around it. In other words, I desire a rejoinder to performativity that allows a space for subjectivity, for agency, (however momentary and discursively fraught), and ultimately for change.

E. Patrick Johnson  
*Black Queer Studies*

In the second epigraph above, Phil Wilson describes the marginalized status of black gay men in American society, the primary subjects of my study, and the dexterity required to navigate multiple subject positions in society. His insight recognizes the intersectional framework of race, gender, and sexuality necessary for examining the lives of black gay men in American culture. Furthermore, Wilson's assessment reveals the constitutive identity of black gay men and what that multidimensional status actually means for their lived realities. Wilson makes the case that learning several languages is a fundamental part of black gay men's identities and movement in society. The necessary acquisition of these languages facilitates the interaction with society at large. Marginalized with respect to each of the social categories above, these men possess vantage points that each of the dominant cultures do not necessarily learn or, in fact, have to learn.

Hidden in Wilson's statement is recognition of the adaptability required to successfully navigate the various segments of society. For the purposes of this study, black gay men in American contemporary dance offer a fascinating glimpse into the performance of masculinity. Moreover, the movement and interaction of their bodies in society not only suggest wider implications for understanding gender performance, both on- and offstage, but they also construct a new paradigm for defining masculinity. For a long time the fields of dance studies, gender and masculinity studies, African American studies and

queer theory have routinely avoided theorizing the experiences of black gay men or reading what the black queer male dancing body has to tell us about its corporeality in society and culture. To this extent, E. Patrick Johnson's quote reminds us that reading the body is critical and that it is important for black gay male subjectivity to be considered in scholarship.

### **Analyzing The Black Queer Male Dancing Body Onstage**

In Chapter Three, I turn to the black queer male dancing body onstage to support my overarching argument. The central premise of this argument maintains that, contrary to conventional wisdom, gay men and their experiences are uniquely situated to tell us about how masculinities are lived in American contemporary culture. With a critique of hegemonic masculinity at its core, this dissertation project shifts the paradigm on how we think about and perceive men in society and culture. A critical component of supporting this claim is an onstage analysis of multidimensionality demonstrated by the subjects of this dissertation. In part, Wilson's epigraph highlights their unique positionality. As I describe in Chapter Two, historically black gay men rarely, if ever, fall under traditional definitions of men, manhood, and masculinity due to the interlocking factors of race, gender, and sexuality (Wise 13). To understand this argument's full import, Chapter Three analyzes the black queer male dancing body in the following

onstage works: Bill T. Jones's *Still/Here with Bill Moyers*, Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson's *Gone*, and Ronald K. Brown's *Better Days*.

Each of the dancer-choreographers is openly gay. All three established their dance companies as AIDS emerged on the American cultural landscape from the early 1980s to the height of the epidemic in the mid 1990s: Bill T. Jones established his company in 1982, Ronald K. Brown in 1985, Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson in 1994. Their work is significant to the New York contemporary dance scene in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Figuring black gay men centrally in our understandings of masculinity in society arguably finds limited theoretical basis in current masculinity studies, feminist theory, or gender studies scholarship. My attempt to shift the paradigm of how we look at men in society is an attempt to resituate the analysis of gender, combined with necessary complementary analyses of race and sexuality. In addition, this chapter centers on how each subject of the study redefines and redeploys conventional representations of black masculinity in American contemporary dance. It does so by examining the subjects' performances of masculinity onstage. These bodies deploy such strategies in large part by playing with signs and signifiers of masculinity; the strategies also help destabilize rigid ideas of what masculinity looks like and whose bodies perform it. By doing so, each artist offers an entry point to interrogating conventional notions of masculinity, through their onstage experiences as black gay men.

In a world often filled with uncertainty about maleness and masculinity, these black queer male dancing bodies, to a degree, create even more uncertainty by exposing the fictions of masculinity. They confound the popular perceptions and images of black male dancers as effeminate by triggering questions of the incompatibility of masculinity and “gayness.” Integral to their deployment of masculine signs and signifiers is the ability to play with what we look at—and what that perception might therefore suggest or conclude. I thus argue that critical to staging the black queer male dancing body for these gay men is being able to access and work with the duality of masculinity and femininity.

The two themes I explore—(1) the combination of strength and vulnerability and (2) hypermasculinity—apply to the individuals analyzed in this chapter; however, the degrees to which they reveal themselves vary. For the purposes of my reading, I use conventional notions of strength coded as masculine, whereas vulnerability is coded as feminine. What was illustrated in Jones most concretely is the former. For Rhoden, the most concrete representation of these themes falls under the latter rubric. Brown, however illustrates the combination of both the first and second qualities. These themes are relevant to my argument in Chapter Three because they show duality and a vast range of expression, which establishes their multidimensionality. This unique position situates their multidimensionality as critical to understanding gender

performance in society and culture. To this extent, scholar Athena Mutua defines a theory of multidimensionality as “the various and multiple social structures that oppress and constrain the agency of individuals and groups in uniquely distinctive ways” (23). Consequently, I argue that these black gay men are central—not marginal—to defining the performance of masculinity. Therefore, these subjects’ works provide insight into and illustrate a fluid approach to gender construction both on- and offstage.

Each of the subjects interviewed for this study was asked to define strength.<sup>39</sup> I asked this question because so often masculinity is inextricably tied to this definition. Yet the dancer-choreographers’ answers reveal a different story about the conventional ways of understanding strength in our contemporary culture. Indeed, the dancers each responded by defining masculinity as both strength *and* vulnerability; they state that vulnerability is in fact a form of strength. Or more precisely, they argue that definitions of masculinity as strength should also include vulnerability. For the purposes of this study, I define vulnerability as the ability to recognize the perception of weakness as strength in contrast to popular and conventional uses for men (Kierski and Blazina 156). Their answers reveal the coupling of strength and vulnerability to be a core aspect of masculinity’s expression.

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<sup>39</sup> Except Bill T. Jones, who turned down repeated requests for interviews.

Even more pointedly, their answers prompted theoretical exploration. The vast majority of the literature on men in society depicts notions of strength and domination as central to masculinity. Thus, as scholar Athena Mutua aptly contends, “Domination over others is one of the central understandings and practices of masculinity” (17). And yet what makes the documentary *Bill T. Jones: Still/Here with Bill Moyers* all the more compelling is his ability to reveal his vulnerabilities in a way that simultaneously shows strength and weakness, where weakness is often coded or gendered as female, feminine, and passive. In fact, Jones’s performance aligns with notions of vulnerability as defined by bell hooks:

We need a sense that there is no monolithic construction of masculinity, that the whole person is capable of being strong at those moments of life which require a certain assertion of agency and strength but then also to be capable of generosity and quietude and nurturance in other arenas.

This is the crucial work in gender relations which has not been done for us as Black people: to come up with models of Black masculinity that differ from a macho norm. (hooks and West 125)

Although hooks challenges and desires space for greater representations of black masculinity, the black macho still remains the norm, this time, under a different guise: hypermasculinity. In the example provided by Riggs’s epigraph above, black masculinity has two extremes, with no room for variation—the black macho or “the emasculated Other” (257). And although the men of this study



demonstrate a capacity for revealing strength and weakness, the black queer male dancing body also embodies notions of hypermasculinity. Alan Klein provides a definition of the term for use:

Hypermasculinity is an exaggeration of male traits, be they psychological or physical. Psychologists see hypermasculinity as rooted in confusion and/or insecurity about female self-identification, in particular with separating from one's mother. Whether one looks at hypermasculinity through a psychological or sociological lens, there is embedded in it a view or radical opposition to all things feminine. (221)

Whether embracing representations of strength, vulnerability, or hypermasculinity, the black queer male dancing body under analysis challenges conventional performances of masculinity. The breadth of artistry attests to new possibilities for men dancing. The choreography redefines masculinity and its construction, thus laying the foundation for reading the black queer male dancing body in performance. Ramsay Burt's definition of the queer male dancing body observed in Chapter Two challenges the historical relationship of men as subjects and not objects. As such, the spectacle of the queer male dancing body disturbs normative gender divides that primarily perceive women as objects. This reading informs my choreographic analysis throughout this chapter.

## **Bill T. Jones's Performance in the Documentary *Still/Here***

This section focuses on reading Bill T. Jones's narrative dance performance that reveals him in all his multidimensionality. In the PBS documentary *Bill T. Jones: Still/Here with Bill Moyers*, which premiered in 1997, Jones takes his audience on a powerful soul-searching journey to confront the meaning of life and death. Through workshops with terminally ill participants, Jones uses their life experiences to generate movement material. The workshops explore the participants' hopes and fears, as well as life's joys and sorrows, as they approach death. With Jones's overall direction, the movement created becomes a part of choreographed production: *Still/Here*. The documentary testifies to the power of the individual and the human spirit. Like so much of Jones's life and career, his artistry invites us to share in his personal narrative. Jones's presence in *Still/Here* is striking on several levels, and he invites the audience on a journey that unsettles notions of masculinity in American contemporary culture.

Throughout the documentary, we observe Jones asking participants to face tough questions about their life and mortality, often pushing them to unfamiliar areas, especially as they are lay people with no formal dance experience. Bill Moyers follows Jones around and engages him in dialogue about his life and those of the workshop attendees. Shadowing Jones, Moyers's presence acts as a sort of reckoning for the artist to face the very things he asks

of the workshop participants. If through these workshops Jones pushes those he has only just met to the edge to find meaning in their life and death, Moyers similarly pushes Jones. And in this way, Jones fails to escape the very things he requests of his participants.

In the survivor workshop, Jones asks the individual participants to construct their life journeys through dance while narrating to those around them. Following Jones's lead, Moyers asks him to do the same. In an approximately seven-minute dance, Jones leads us through a complex journey exploring his multifaceted persona: a volatile persona famously known for his unflinching portrayals of race, gender, and sexuality at the height of identity politics throughout the mid-1980s to the 1990s (Greenfield-Sanders). Poignant moments distill the dance and provide an entry point for analysis and theorization of black gay male subjectivity, identity formation, and reading of the black queer male dancing body.

In the segment leading up to Jones's narrative solo, he asks each volunteer to describe what their last day would look like and what they would spend that day doing. Each participant proceeds to describe the intimate details particular to their wishes, desires, and needs. It is after these vividly described experiences by the participants that Jones performs his own narrative solo dance.

With the camera fading out on the previous scene, the next shows Moyers sitting on a chair facing Jones to suggest that he “walk a line through your story,” to which Jones responds, “Through a story—literally, walk in this space.” He stands up and proceeds to enter the large studio space. First, Jones walks in a circle while simultaneously talking in the third person about what it felt like to grow up as the tenth of twelve children. Jones describes the circle as tightly sealed by the “architecture of the family” that included his parents, and his sense of being surrounded and feeling safe in a black community. Jones then walks on a diagonal, tangential line, describing it as being afraid to look forward, having nightmares and being a “sissy boy” afraid of his own shadow. Then, carving a curved line with both his arms and hips, Jones draws a circle describing his first encounter with white people. He retraces that circle, telling Moyers about the safeness he felt at home in contrast to the experiences that encountered at school. For Jones, going to school served as a reminder of his desire to be home. At this point, Jones wrestles with his identity and what it meant for him to be the son of a black family raised in poverty, differentiating between the boy who speaks black English at home from the Bill who attends a predominantly white school. Here Jones fundamentally raises the question, who is he? Next Jones quickly strides side to side and walks around in circles describing his state of confusion. He recalls the experiences of the first circle.

Following this identity crisis at such a young age, Jones then narrates experiences with his sexual and gender identities. The fast-paced steps from side to side in a straight line, suggesting extreme polar tensions experienced, as well as the disorienting effects of his circling around, come to a screeching halt. Next, he describes his first sexual encounters. "What does it mean to be a man?" he asks. "Does a man have children? And everything stops," he recalls. As if undergoing a test or trial, Jones ducks his head and torso while stepping forward referring to his experience with women. "Everything stops." Repeating the duck once more, he retards the stoop, bending lower as he steps forward with eyes closed. He states, "The man tries to be normal, everything stops." Having paused, Jones jolts his body with a sideward jump. The jolt announces new clarity about his sexual identity that was brought upon meeting a Jewish homosexual in a club; the jolt signifies a lightning bolt of new energy, rebirth, re-energizing, something new, and a new direction. After the jolt, Jones meanders and recounts being identified as a part of a famous avant-garde dance couple called Bill and Arnie. This is followed by another jolt sideways, in which Jones acknowledges the distance he's traveled from the first circle.

Jones's relationship with Arnie raises new challenges for him as part of an interracial couple. The difficulty is shown by taking large, quick steps backward, forward, and to the side. He contrasts the rapid steps, by walking in a circle with his head inclined inwards, suggesting the tenderness shared between the couple.

Taking another turn around a curve, Jones reveals that Arnie has AIDS and is dying. Walking slowly and gazing into the near distance, Jones acknowledges that he's not leading his own life but following Arnie in an effort to learn from the experience. Jones's cadence punctuates his narration; he says, "Everything stops, the friend dies." His eyes closed, Jones exhales walking in a circle. Directionless, he repeats the circle and asks, "Which way now?"

With the loss of his identity due to Arnie's death, Jones then speaks of starting all over again. Repeating the jolt observed earlier, Jones decides he must reinvent himself, especially now that he is no longer a part of a famous interracial couple. He's a "black man alone." Here Jones boldly steps forward, declaring that his choreography addresses the issues in his life. Next, in a series of walks punctuated by each narrated sentence, he tells of disclosing his HIV-positive status. At this point, he recognizes another change of identity in being HIV positive. Now, he's no longer Bill but an "HIV-positive, black male homosexual." Referring to himself in the third person, Jones boldly steps forward, followed by another step leaning backward. He repeats the phrase, but instead of leaning back a second time, he walks in a circle with his head inclined inwards. While doing so, he states, "The man steps with solid strong footsteps, but he is always a little bit scared. The man steps with solid strong footsteps, but he is always wishing that he were back somewhere more safe."

After a momentary pause, Jones walks and then comes to a halt as he relates the discovery of a survivor workshop. Continuing to talk in the third person, he asks the workshop participants to accompany him on his journey. He then describes their different experiences, recounting how they step and walk “truthfully, weakly, and bravely.” And with each of those words chosen to describe the participants, Jones steps forward, to the side, and forward again. Next, Jones stands still with his focus downward. He acknowledges his fear in contrast to the courage of others stepping into the unknown. Pause. As he speaks, he continues to reference himself in the third person. Acknowledging his good health, he takes another step with eyes focused downwards and in the distance.

As the dance comes to a close, Jones’s cadence changes, alternating between the pause of speaking and a moderate walk in a triplet form. Pauses that sound like metronomic beats punctuate his movement. His eyes look into the distance as the camera slowly follows him. He acknowledges that “his body is strong and he loves it,” followed by recognition of his newfound desirability and love, where “he can still pretend to be normal.” Now contemplative, Jones walks forward. Next, he twists the angle of his body and looks into the distance of a new direction, where he sees the end of his life. The camera closes in on his face. Jones takes two steps with the cadence accentuated by a one-two metronomic beat. He asks, “What will he tell his mother?” Jones pivots while the

camera closely frames his face. In this shot, Jones talks affectionately about his love for his mother.

The camera closes in on Jones's face as he pivots again. He repeats the accented two-step. Now still, with his eyes focused downward, Jones talks about autumn. He describes the light of the sun as dusk approaches, the colors of the leaves and thinks about when Arnie died. Beat, beat. He recounts when Arnie stopped breathing and the breeze he felt go by his head when he died. All this time, Jones remains still, reverent and introspective. Foot stomps in place accentuate Jones's memories as he narrates the moments leading up to Arnie's death. He talks about feeling light and fortunate. Stomping again, he says, "Bed is a river of light. The leaves, the bed, the air, the music, all light. [Beat, pause.] All light. [Beat, pause.]" Then Jones recites the mantra "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama, Rama." The recitation of the mantra ends with a close-up of Jones's face, eyes closed and mouth open on speaking his last words. The camera remains tightly focused on Jones's face for this entire last sequence.

### *Choreographic Analysis of Bill T. Jones' Still/Here*

One of the most illuminating aspects of Jones's narrative dance is his ability to reveal with candor the simultaneous notions of strength and vulnerability. Jones wrestles with his identity in public like few other dance



performers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. His ability to speak about his life experiences in all their complexity, particularly through narrative dance, details the importance of experiential and embodied knowledge. In the following section, I focus on key points of Jones's narrative that address questions related to his identity, its changing nature, and its fluid construction. These include questions about masculinity and sexuality and his desire to grapple with them. The focus is on his approach to addressing these topics and what his exploration says about him. Furthermore, I illuminate the implications of his dance performance for society and culture.

With the crisis of his sexual identity hinging on definitions of masculinity in American culture, Jones asks, "What does it mean to be a man?" and "Does a man have children?" The struggle with his sexual identity reveals tensions with traditional notions of masculinity. Jones exhibits this tension when he discusses two attempts at heterosexist norms while stepping, ducking, and raising his head twice. For Jones, his movement and sense of self critically come to a halt in trying to reconcile his sexual orientation with conventional notions of gender. Jones's fundamental question generates different potential meanings and for black men, and in particular for black gay men in our current sociopolitical climate. With masculinity often tied to biological-reproductive definitions (thus implying heterosexuality), Jones's question takes on further relevance. That Jones relates the definition of masculinity to the question, "Does a man have

children?” again assumes—and, in turn, questions—that in order to be a man and to prove one’s masculinity, he must reproduce. The question presented by Jones exposes the presumed incompatibility of having children and possessing a gay identity.

Jones’s desire for normalcy exposes the pressures to conform to conventional notions of masculinity that define manhood within a heterosexual procreative status. If the only legitimate way for men to have children is through heterosexuality, Jones then considers sexual experimentation with women. Jones admits his sexual experimentation with women served to satisfy society’s gendered expectations for both men and women and the nuclear model of the family. The vulnerability found within his admission is a seemingly small act but a point of great significance—one that deserves further exploration and contextualization. To understand the implications of Jones’s statement, imagine the mirror experience of a heterosexual man revealing that he dabbled sexually with men before admitting his true identity as heterosexual. The examples are few and, furthermore, discouraged in American culture.<sup>40</sup>

Given the general assumption in American culture that all men are heterosexual until proven otherwise, Jones’s narration demonstrates a rare level of vulnerability in his ability to expose the uncertainty of men’s relationship to

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<sup>40</sup> Few men admit in public to their sexual experimentation with other men. As mentioned previously, homosexuality compromises male identity, and therefore any admission of sexual experimentation with other men jeopardizes one’s standing as a man in American culture.

masculinity. In my analysis, vulnerability is understood as a disclosure of personal details about the male psyche or identity; the questioning of gender roles in a society where men are often reluctant to reveal their inadequacies or failure to meet certain models of manhood certainly fits this construction of vulnerability. The public forum for questions raised by Jones falls more in line with feminist critiques of male power and domination and is more frequently associated with the changing role of women in society. Jones questioning aloud “What does it mean to be a man?” unsettles assumed power and privilege inherent in definitions of manhood in ways reminiscent of the shifting definitions of manhood and masculinity proposed by feminist critiques made by bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Christian and Beverley Guy-Sheftall. However, the interrogation of gender and the gendered body are issues that have traditionally been pursuant to women and femininity and thus invisibilize men as having a gender. Jones’s admission gives more visibility to the concerns of men and potentially opens discourse pertaining to male identity in more traditional analyses in gender studies as well as in dance performance.

When placed under additional scrutiny, the seemingly innocent question Jones poses also raises the issues of weakness and its perception as a traditional feminine quality or role. Rarely do men openly and publicly question masculinity unless the perception of the man in question is suspect (Carbado, “Straight” 110). If questioned, it is done so with *heterosexual* masculinity as its

focus. In this respect, Jones's question offers a different vantage point: his self-identification as a homosexual complicates readings of masculinity. Jones's outsider, homosexual status within the hierarchical, dominant and diverse masculinities perspectives potentially confounds traditional definitions of American manhood.

Jones's move shifts focus away from the default association of gender with women to include men—and, more precisely, a *black gay* man. His frequent displays of vulnerability (contrary to traditional masculine expression), expressed with the courage to openly and publicly discuss his complex and fluid identity, challenge conceptions of American manhood, especially for black men. Furthermore, Jones's ability to continually mine facets of his identity in such a public way goes against the norm of male culture and masculine expression for American men (Migliaccio 229). His performance can be compared to the confessional culture of talk shows and gendered as a feminine space wherein women are more likely to talk about their personal experiences while men keep silent (Aldridge 95). Revealing intimate knowledge in a confessional manner, as Jones does, is an unusual occurrence for black men (Migliaccio 229).

Historically, black men have often been denied access to the usual means of defining—and redefining—their own concepts of manhood. Without this ability, they often reinscribe traditional gender roles rather than challenging dominant

notions of masculinity. Black men may offer resistant masculinities as a response to oppressive and dominant ways of defining masculinity, but their privileged status under patriarchy does not question the right to male dominance.

Black men's ambitions to reinscribe dominant notions of patriarchal masculinity leave critical areas of gender politics uninterrogated. Within this purview, black men fail to see the options of diverse masculinities or embodiments of alternative ideals. Rather, their emphasis not only holds onto traditional models of manhood but determines phallogentrism as a central component to defining their masculinity. Here the focus on masculinity shifts to a "dick thing," which animates the stereotypes of black men as hypersexual (Riggs). In *We Real Cool*, bell hooks refers to this hypermasculine sexual persona found in a range of black male images. She quotes Orlando Paterson:

The Afro-American male body—as superathlete, as irresistible entertainer, as fashionable counterculture activists, as sexual outlaw, as gangster, as 'cool pose' rapper, as homeboy fashion icon—is now directly accessible as the nation's Dionysian representation, the man-child of Zeus, playing himself, wearing the ultimate mask, which is the likeness of himself. (79)

hooks contends, "This is the only path to visibility black males are given permission to follow in imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (79). However, her logic suggests implications for black heterosexual men and invisibilizes the paths black gay men often choose to define their manhood.

My focus on Jones's expression of vulnerability is purposeful. My analysis illuminates male identity in order to reveal aspects that otherwise may be considered atypical of many men. They are not typical in the sense that we rarely see images of men, and particularly black men, expressing vulnerability—a characteristic often gendered as female and weak (Kierski and Blazina 157). While diverse images of men do exist, the extent to which masculinities of vulnerability play a role in defining the dominant constructs of masculinity is comparatively low. As a result, dominant representations of masculinity in dominant or African American cultures tend to emphasize traditional or ideal notions of manhood. To some extent, male hegemony often precludes diverse expressions and seeks to consolidate or project a united façade of male invincibility. Oftentimes, definitions of masculinity fall under the parameters of projecting strength. For men, projections of strength or the consistent need to prove manhood, though somehow and contradictorily always intact, show its fragility (Pacholok 474).

The projection of strength, power, and confidence reveals itself in Jones's performance, as when he refers to himself thusly: "The man steps with solid strong footsteps, but he is always a little bit scared. The man steps with solid strong footsteps, but he is always wishing that he were back somewhere more safe." Though a candid statement, his narration demonstrates an inner–outer conflict between projecting strength and recoiling in fear. Such moments display

vulnerability: walking forward with solid steps shows a projection of strength, while his step backwards reveals the contrasting aspects of the inner/outer, internal/external, public/private, on- and offstage persona. Jones's allusion to the navigation between these myriad spaces exposes his self-reflexivity and the subtlety involved in doing so.

The difference between Jones's on- and offstage personas or the internal-external dialogue that he refers to and the conflict he describes demonstrates a capacity for critical self-reflexivity and openness to revealing a fluid identity. At each stage of his life, changes have brought about periods of critical reflection resulting in new identifications and their meanings. Whether staring into the future or the past, Jones demonstrates this throughout the improvised narrative dance he performs. Rather than disavow the gendered construction of vulnerability as weak and feminine (as I have pointed out earlier), Jones stages it for the black queer male dancing body. His concept of masculinity juxtaposes representations of both strength and vulnerability, whereas heterosexual men disavow or avoid such public displays of "weakness," whether onstage or off (Kierski and Blazina 157). In that sense, Jones's representation encompasses notions of the black queer male dancing body that destabilize traditional gender binaries. His embodiment of strength and vulnerability and their ties to gendered conceptions of masculinity and femininity, respectively, gives new possibilities to the construction of masculinity in contemporary American society and culture.

Consequently, Jones's black queer male dancing body redefines the perception and representation of black gay masculinity as crucial to understanding the performance of gender.<sup>41</sup>

### **Ronald K. Brown's *Evidence of Things Seen and Not***

Ronald K. Brown's company Evidence uniquely melds dances of the African diaspora with American contemporary dance. His aesthetic proves most interesting to study because of the seeming contradiction between Brown's gay identity and his philosophical movement style, which is grounded in an Africanist aesthetic rooted in traditional dance. Brown's gay identity troubles an Africanist paradigm that largely considers homosexuality a construct of the West that is nonexistent in Africa (Murray and Roscoe xi).

Brown often choreographs dances that depict journeys taken as individuals and as collectives. His choreography in *Better Days* (1998)—a group work for men dealing with themes of masculinity and sexuality—exemplifies this concept. The title *Better Days* comes from the New York City dance club bearing the same name that catered to a black and Latino gay men from the 1970s

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<sup>41</sup> Jones's dancing body throughout the narrative dance carries typical associations of masculinity in its depiction of muscular strength and a well-defined and sculpted torso. The steely strength of his upper body, shown through the leotard and somewhat loose fitting stretch pants is a constant reminder to the audience that Jones is a man. Moreover, his professed self-identification troubles conventional readings of his body that blur distinctions between the performance of heterosexual and homosexual masculinities. This further erodes hierarchical distinctions between gay and straight men. All told, Jones's use of his black male dancing body in this way registers multiple readings and signals an appropriation of visual codes that never let spectators forget his authoritative masculine presence. See Morris 261.



through the 1990s. The dance delves into the soul of the individual and collective struggles of gay men of color (and black gay men in particular) to live freely and fully without regrets. The dance is an unapologetic expression and embrace of same-gender love. The work also wrestles with the dark side of the AIDS epidemic and what it means to those who faced the ravages it wrought in the dance community and beyond. Divided into four sections, *Better Days* evokes four themes represented in subsections that include struggle, loss, community, and liberation. The dance charts new territory for the black male dancing body and representations of black masculinity, both individually and collectively.

*Better Days* is performed in part to the iconic voices of Tanya Blunt, Lauryn Hill, and Patti LaBelle, exposing the undeniable power and presence of these women; female energy and women play an integral part to the meaning-making of Brown's pieces. Featured in two different sections, the voices of Blunt, Hill, and LaBelle signify identification processes at work in gay male identity that connect to female empowerment.<sup>42</sup> Brown's use of their voices not only serves as narrative backdrop for the choreography: he employs them to excavate the black gay male experience. These musical choices strike a familiar thematic chord to choreographers of this project, in which vulnerability plays a large part in

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<sup>42</sup> For example, Patti LaBelle serves as an iconic figure for black gay men. Her flair for the outrageous in style and voice as well as her over-the-top camp performances make her a standout personality. Perhaps in this sense, then, black gay men identify with the stating one's difference unapologetically. See Douglas, "Last Word" and McCullom, "Patti LaBelle".

exposing the human condition involved in contemporary dance. Brown's choice of female voices to narrate the individual and collective journeys of black gay men signals an alternative rendering of black masculinity.

The following choreographic description of *Better Days* is based on a DVD of Evidence's performance at the Joyce Theater on February 3, 2007, and archived at the Jerome Robbins Archive of the Recorded Moving Image, Dance Division, in the New York Public Library. The performers include Arcell Cabuag, Juel Lane, Keon Thoulouis, Steven Washington and Ronald K. Brown.

#### *Section One of Better Days: Description*

Dancing to "His Eye is On the Sparrow," sung by Tanya Blunt and Lauryn Hill, the soloist Steven Washington begins the dance pleading, knees on the floor, with his arms outstretched and his head tilted upward. The moment reveals high tension in his body and earnest devotion through a prayerful stance. Washington wears baggy drawstring pants with his naked torso revealed. He rises, steps forward while looking down, and performs a backward attitude. Next, standing with his back facing the audience, he takes several steps downstage. Standing, he pauses, lingers, and drops to the floor to crawl backward downstage into a kneeling position with his arms fully splayed back and to the side, stretched to the extreme. Paused in this position, the dancer releases his head back and gazes upward—a gesture that, when coupled with the music playing, signals a

heavenward search. The black male queer dancing body in this image surrenders completely. Washington moves gently, gradually rising from the floor, steps with his focus downward and performs another backward attitude turn. Keeping his hand in second position from the turn, Washington takes several steps left and then downstage. Here, he reaches forward into a lunge, draws a circle with his arms from overhead, and performs a bent leg coupé turn (with the foot pressed near the front shin). He steps into a forward lunge, slowly rising with his arms outstretched while keeping a heavenward focus. The open hands become clenched once he reaches standing position.

In the following sequence, Washington changes direction and walks stage left, stops facing upstage, back exposed, and gestures as if picking up a heavy burden. The musculature of his bare torso and back expose the tension held in the body. Pressing his arms down, he releases the tension as if emerging out of his troubles. Looking to his right arm that slowly rises diagonally, he then reaches both hands downward across his body to the floor. Now bent over, his arms cross over his torso, somewhat shaking, as he gradually rises to a standing position. The soloist releases his arms quickly, walks upstage, and repeats this sequence. With Washington's naked torso exposed during these choreographed phrases, we see both the strength and musculature of the body and, at the same time, his personal struggle.

In the next section, Brown's choreography slowly builds as the music crescendos. Here the dancer stops, back to audience, bent over, arms crossed in front of his body shaking, rising to slowly hug himself. Meanwhile, Washington's head remains bent forward and looking downward. Then he jumps to the side, bursts out of his position and returns to a slow walk upstage while hugging himself. Next, he jumps sideways and performs a stretched leg layout. After this, the soloist touches the floor to execute a small, low double attitude jump. Next he proceeds to walk upstage while rising slowly and hugging himself. Washington then jumps backward, right leg in attitude, touches his right hand to the floor and reaches downstage toward the audience. His arms and feet move through second position. Following these quick series of movements, he lunges upstage and reaches his right arm up while the left stretches on a downstage diagonal. The dancer then transitions, rushing upstage. Once there, he bends low to the ground, feet in second position, with arms stretched to the side. The hands soon clench into fists as he looks up, somewhat overcome by his burdens. He grips his fists and holds them behind his head. His shoulders and head bend forward as he inches upstage with minuscule steps. The dancer's body reveals the musculature of his exposed back throughout the choreography of this entire sequence.

Facing upstage in the final section, the dancer releases his bound fists. He gently bends his knees and swings his arms. Turning around, he stretches his

right leg forward, transitioning to the ground, followed by a double attitude (bent leg) leap. He stands and sharply accents by pulling both elbows back at a right angle. As he moves upstage, he swirls hands overhead, dipping his head left and looking up. At the same time, he gestures as if pushing something away. He performs an arabesque, falls forward, and scoops his right arm down and around. Slowly, his focus turns upstage, where he looks into the distance. Walking slowly, his open hands come together behind his back and rest gently on top of each other. The lights dim and cast a silhouette on his body.

### *Section One of Better Days: Choreographic Analysis*

As in the previous analysis of Jones's work, I apply a reading of Ronald K. Brown's choreography in *Better Days* that delineates the following areas of focus: (1) masculinity defined through strength and vulnerability and (2) hypermasculinity. My analysis applies a queer subtextual reading that acknowledges *Better Days* as a space for black gay men; however, it also considers a cross-reading from an assumed heterosexual standpoint.

Brown's choreography embraces the individual on a spiritual journey desiring freedom from an interior struggle. Furthermore, he mixes moments of vulnerability with strength and resilience to carry on in the face of certain debilitating conditions. Here, the black male dancing body strives to overcome oppressive forces weighing the individual down. Brown's choreography

expresses a certain honesty about the human condition of black gay men and the ability of the black queer male dancing body to bare the soul to a higher spiritual power. Unlike common depictions of black men in contemporary culture, Brown's representation of the black queer male dancing body defies typical notions of strength and exposes the fragile inner process in the search for inner peace.

Brown's choreography offers a glimpse into male identity that is seldom visible. Typical depictions of black men portray invincibility in the face of trouble (Nicholson 170–171). Not here. Brown allows us to experience the dancer's private turmoil and a desire to prevail. Throughout the dance, the soloist often performs with his back facing the audience (exposing the back to the audience has connotations with femininity), kneels, releases his head back with heavenly focus, or throws his head down as though asking for guidance; other times he displays his outstretched arms, chest and hands like an ecstatic cry, with palms up in a vulnerable position of surrender. In my interview with Desmond Richardson, he demonstrated how the outstretched arm and the palm of the hand facing up depict openness and vulnerability in contrast to its inversion. These movements offer a stark contrast to stoic, combative, and confrontational depictions of manhood in which men often deny help from others or prefer conflict to resolution.

Like Bill T. Jones, Brown offers a confessional account that shows a black gay man concerned about his inner relationship to the outer world pleading for

help, mercy, and peace.<sup>43</sup> The dance's confessional nature approaches intimacy. Washington's solo performance—and the frequent repetition of the standing far upstage, back toward the audience, either hugging himself or with clenched fists behind his head—reveals the isolated nature of his private struggle. Contrasted with the previous bound movement, Brown's choreography delights in moments of temporary relief (jumps that burst sideward and lunges with outstretched arms) where we feel the urgency of the dancer's desire for peace. The juxtaposition of bound and free-flowing movements only intensifies the dance's more intimate moments. As such, the dance feels confessional, as Washington searches for inner peace.

Brown's work gently enunciates an alternative vision of the black male experience that is inclusive of femininity and the female voice, as depicted in his use of Blunt and Hill. His choreographic strategy aligns itself with a long tradition of black LGBT people and black feminists who critique notions of black authenticity, black cultural nationalist rhetoric defining the "black community," and traditional notions of gender.<sup>44</sup> Allowing the female voice to chart the journey of a black man—and in this case serve as the backdrop for the black queer male

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<sup>43</sup> See Beam, "Brother" 288. In contrast to the traditions of black women, Beam points to the lack of intimate spaces where black men can assemble and explore their feelings. Rather, the spaces that do exist, usually public, reinforce the performance of male bravado. He contends, "We assemble to do something rather than be with each other" (288). Not surprisingly, Brown's portrayal of this confessional account is a solo dance.

<sup>44</sup> For more critiques by black LGBT people and black feminists, See Pincheon, 121-122; hooks, *Homegrown* 89-90.

dancing body—disrupts notions of who speaks for African Americans. Typically, African American men frown upon black women’s leadership roles within the black community (Savage 10).

For instance, one of the ways this performance of masculinity articulates itself is in an antiracist discourse that privileges the black heterosexual male experience as representative of African American culture. In this performance, definitions of the black community exclude black women and black gays and lesbians. In his essay “Can the Queen Speak? Racial Essentialism, Sexuality, and the Problem of Authority,” Dwight McBride challenges antiracist discourse of African American intellectuals that gives primacy to an essential black community absent black gays and lesbians. For McBride, the politics of black representation hide behind a heterosexist discourse that fails to extend its boundaries to include black sexual minorities, thereby limiting black liberation and the dismantling of racism. McBride’s critique problematizes African American intellectual thought that privileges black heterosexual masculinity as representative of the black community. In this paradigm, the diversity of the black experience is encapsulated under one notion, which he ultimately argues needs to be challenged and to have a more inclusive vision.

Thus, Brown’s choice to use female voices to narrate the black male experience radically changes considerations of who can speak for black men. Indeed, highlighting this choice, as in Jones’s example earlier, reflects Brown’s



careful act of balancing the duality of masculinity and femininity embodied by the black queer male dancing body. The representation offers a counternarrative to popular depictions of black men in contemporary culture (Simmons 198–199). According to black cultural nationalism and patriarchal masculinity in the black community, nothing can impugn black manhood more than being upstaged by or deemed equal to black womanhood. Black male patriarchy's expression ultimately sees the exclusion of black women and the absence their voices in any critical capacity.

*Section Two of Better Days: Description*

In the second section, Brown performs a meditative solo dance. The choreography is accompanied by the poem *Forgiveness*, written and read by G. Winston James. The lines of the poem read as follows:

Gaze upon me  
Long and hard  
And ask yourself  
If you remember the day  
when I called your name  
and then cried  
softly over your questions  
trembled helplessly through your consolations

fell silent  
amidst your pleading  
what I wanted then  
was forgiveness  
not pity  
what I wanted was for you to read my mind  
and share my sin  
to judge me  
then pardon my weakness  
I needed you to love me  
as I could not love myself  
Since it is so often raining in my mind  
And there are so many funerals to be held in my dreams  
I prayed that you would see  
that he made love to me  
Freely  
The way we did in Better Days  
And all that he needed do was ask  
With his hands, his kisses, his frame  
I thought of you, us  
Laughing, writing, planning

And then I asked him to hurt me  
More than I was hurting myself  
To tear me more than I was already torn  
To simply kill me there and then leave  
So that I would not have to face myself in the morning  
Rocking back and forth  
Asking who, when, why and what color is forgiveness  
And does it sound a bit like death  
Will you still hold me friend?  
Even if I tell you that I am afraid  
Will you still teach me lover?  
Because I swear that I'm still trying to love myself and us  
To get through this time of dying

Dressed in baggy drawstring pants and with a bare chest, in uniformity with the previous soloist, Brown enters the stage. He dances to spoken word, with the overheard voice narrating his performance. Circling around himself with one arm outstretched and eventually covering his chest, Brown looks up and swings both arms, bent-elbowed, from side to side. He breaks and bends his knees, keeping his focus up. His dancing is both weighted and low to the ground. He repeats the swinging motion of his hands, walking back and then forward. The repeated swinging of arms suggests the comfort that rocking provides him. His arms

swing, displaying their heaviness and yet their release. He pauses, then performs a burst of percussive movement. With a syncopated two-step, Brown turns with both feet on the floor. As he does so, one arm curves over his head, the other in front of his body. Brown then steps into an attitude and pauses with outstretched arms. Next, facing downstage he scampers with two hands on the floor. He rises, hovering momentarily.

Following the above, Brown repeats walking back, gradually releasing his gaze upward and then forward with his focus shifting downward. He gestures his downstage hand forward before completing two sudden bursts of percussive backward attitudes, with arms that also swing back. After this, Brown slides to the floor, stretching one leg to a half split. He finishes with bent legs in parallel position and the soles of his feet on the floor. His lower back and head arch back, where both remain temporarily, as if dwelling in the ecstasy of lovemaking. As Brown performs, the recited poetry plays:

I prayed that you would see that he made love to me

Freely

The way we did in Better Days

And all that he needed do was ask

Gradually, his legs straighten, suggesting the joy of sexual pleasure released.

Surrendered to the weight of the floor, Brown pauses, body stretched out, as the

following words are spoken: “With his hands, his kisses, his frame / I thought of you.” He rises up slowly.

After Brown rises off the floor, he casts his focus downward. Next, as though pulled apart by opposing forces, Brown lunges backward, with arms outstretched and body pulled in opposite directions. He turns, releases his front leg in attitude, and balances off center. Quickly he scampers with both hands on the floor and stands hovering, looking down, showing concern for an affected body. Again, Brown walks back, swinging his bent arms at right angles side to side, and then retraces his steps, hunching his shoulders forward, gradually yielding the weight of his body to the floor. He also repeats the sudden bursts of percussive backward attitudes characterized by arms that also swing back. Brown finishes bent over and hunched—body hovering and lingering. Slowly he stands up. As he stands, the dancer Steven Washington walks toward him from offstage. Their eyes meet and continue to look at each other until Washington is in front of Brown. Standing close together and in momentary stillness, Washington reaches out to Brown. Both men embrace gently, holding each other until the lights fade out.

### *Section Two of Better Days: Choreographic Analysis*

Brown's dance evokes the love and loss shared by the community of black gay men at the height of New York City's AIDS epidemic during the 1980s and 1990s. Without referring specifically to AIDS, Brown's choreography fulfills David Gere's analysis of an AIDS dance. Gere's considers his three-part definition of an AIDS dance as "a mutually dependent hierarchy" (12). Accordingly, he breaks the definition down by arguing that such a dance (1) represents gayness, (2) portrays male-male eros (not to be mistaken for male homosociality), and (3) shows mourning.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the analysis for this section incorporates this three-part definition as its guide.

For the first definition, the dance represents gayness in the choreography's recollection of the dance club *Better Days*, a source and place of refuge for marginalized black gay men. Brown's choreography meets Gere's second definition of an AIDS dance by depicting homosexual desire. Here Brown dances solo as the other male lover accompanies him in the voice heard in the poetry. Through the poetry's evocative language, the dance embraces the loneliness, fear, pain, mental anguish, loss, joy, tenderness, sweetness, sorrow, and presages of death between two men. The poetry makes explicit references to their lovemaking and relates intimate tender moments shared. While this is

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<sup>45</sup> For more information on this topic, see Gere 12.

overheard, Brown suspends an ecstatic moment. Seated on the floor, his upper torso and head arch back while his legs, wide open and bent, unfurl slowly ending limp (suggesting sexual release and pleasure). The combination of the words and Brown's dancing transmit the image's undeniable rapturous moment.

Brown's choreography captures the third definition of an AIDS dance with themes of mourning that run throughout the solo. From the poem's opening stanzas "If you remember the day," the dance conjures memories of the past—and of loss. Even lines such as "And there are so many funerals to be held in my dreams" speak to height of the AIDS epidemic and its impact on the gay community. Mourning pervades the dance. The solo ends with death making its final entrance and exit with "Will you still teach me lover? Because I swear that I'm still trying to love myself and us to get through this time of dying." At the close, Brown stands as Washington walks towards him. Their eyes meet and stay focused on one another. Recognizing the support needed to endure the losses sustained, the two men tenderly embrace, lingering in each other's arms. This final image further suggests the necessary work of the black gay community to combat the epidemic's scourge.

In addition to defining an AIDS dance, Brown's work challenges standard representations of the black male dancing body by including a confessional (though not necessarily autobiographical) spoken word account in the dance that neither shies away from depictions of male-to-male love nor apologizes for doing

so (Byrd and Guy-Sheftall 287). Not only does Brown's choice destabilize social constructions of black masculinity that pose men as being unable to express emotion, it also radically shifts the perception of how black men relate to one another. To do this, Brown appeals to black men's humanity and notions of vulnerability. In doing so, he opens up a space for black men not only to project simultaneous images of strength and confidence but also to express sides of their humanity often disallowed or repressed.<sup>46</sup>

Brown further pushes the boundaries by daring to express desire between men and its fulfillment in lovemaking. This move radically changes conventional perceptions of how black men interact with each other—which refrain from showing explicit desire for another man—and, more noticeably, alters considerations of what a “real man” is. Conventionally, real men dare not speak of love for another man except possibly as friends. Though the lover is absent throughout the dance, Brown breaks the black community's silence on homosexuality by staging two scenarios that merit further consideration. In the first, Brown pairs the recited poem and the dance together that unquestionably embraces love between two men. And in the second, he shows a long, tender embrace between two black men. For black men and the black community, homosexuality typically represents failed masculinity (Neal 155). Noted writer

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<sup>46</sup> King and McCollum's blog posts report on an image caught of two men hugging on public transportation and the flurry of homophobic activity resulting from the image being posted online. See Douglas, “Normal Looking” and McCollum.



Joseph Beam poignantly portrays the devastating consequences of this failure by narrating his own experience as a black gay man (Byrd and Guy-Sheftall 285). His account details the personal toll and the mask of pain he hides behind.

More perceptively, Beam's account also resonates with Brown's choreography in that how one looks is the best determinant of how he will be received and treated in society. As such, Brown's playing with signs and signifiers of masculinity redirects attention to the ways the performance of masculinity is contextual. For example, though the dance clearly makes reference to Gere's first criteria for an AIDS dance, the movement quality defies typical identification with the gay body. Strength composed in the body's weightedness, nakedness of the bare torso, and muscularity all signify traditional definitions of masculinity. Overall, the groundedness of Brown's movement quality and the Africanist aesthetic that he employs signifies on heterosexual masculinity, in opposition to Western aesthetic in ballet that defies gravity. When asked in our interview about his definition of masculinity and American contemporary dance, Brown responded as follows:

Being down, being grounded, having your feet on the ground, having your crotch down on the ground, right. But in Western dance your pelvis is up, your back is up, everything is erect, right. And so for me those things get in the way of me seeing what I would identify as masculinity in contemporary dance. This—the pelvis being up, this—Even the—I've seen

some giant, giant, giant dudes, oh, man, gorgeous bodies and just as light as [chuckle]—You would just know—I don't know, it's—it's interesting. Because then I see some women with the fire—a fire and a groundedness or a center that—that is somehow allowed. And I'm not going to say that that's masculine, right, but somehow the men, when it's missing in the man I see it as an absence of that masculinity. I see it as an absence of the masculinity. Because I guess I see it as a gift.

From Brown's definition above—that masculinity in the male dancer consists of “being down, being grounded, having your feet on the ground, having your crotch down on the ground”—I contend that the black queer male dancing body reveals normative heterosexual masculinity and yet conceals the subtextual references to a gay male body. In appropriating signifiers of heterosexual masculinity, Brown redirects our attention to what it is, without raising suspicion or possibility of queer subtext. In this guise, the gay male body passes unremarkably, except to those “in the life.”<sup>47</sup>

### *Section Three of Better Days: Description*

Danced to Patti LaBelle's “What Can I Do For You,” the third section of *Better Days* shifts from the previous two solos to imagine a queer future, where

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<sup>47</sup> Historian George Chauncey refers to the subcultural codes developed between homosexual men that made communication possible without the threat of punishment. See Chauncey 7.

liberation of the black queer male dancing body signals its full potential. The entire cast of men—Arcell Cabuag, Juel Lane, Keon Thoulouis, Steven Washington, and Ronald K. Brown—gather at their ritualistic meeting place, a place that offers freedom from the oppressive gaze of a homophobic and heterosexist culture: the dance floor. Characteristic of a club's dance floor, the dance's dimly lit red backdrop and spotty floor patterns resemble a crystal ball turning in space. For these men, occupying this space involves no threat in men dancing with other men. In fact, the black male dancing bodies find pleasure in doing so. Brown's choice of Patti LaBelle, with her exaltation at finding love, happiness, and community, affirms a liberationist aesthetic, calling for individual authenticity and the basic humanity of all people. The dance is jubilant and at moments unrestrained in blending masculinity and femininity on the black queer male dancing body (Paris 159). The dancers' bodies revel in their own beauty and merriment. Moreover, Brown's overall aesthetic approach in the third section combines bouncing and swinging, both elements characteristic of hip hop dancing.

The dancers wear the same baggy drawstring pants worn in previous sections with T-shirts, tank tops, or sleeveless shirts. Dancer Arcell Cabuag begins the dance and, as in an underground club setting, another dancer, Steven Washington, enters dancing a syncopated chassé step, flinging his hands backwards to the rhythm of one-and-two. He rocks back, flexing his front foot and

then sweeps his back foot forward and performs a backward attitude turn. His arms revolve above his head as he continues spinning around with his feet in parallel position. The right arm swings back as he finishes his last turn facing right stage. Walking in a circle, he exits the stage, looking over his shoulder at Cabuag.

Next Juel Lane enters skipping with hands on his hips, bouncing to the beat of the music and dances a duet with Cabuag. Next, both do a double hip-thrust, at the same time, with arms that strike percussively. This gesture repeats throughout the third section. Their movements contrast with each other's—one is more b-boyish and the other, a bit swish.<sup>48</sup> As the latter, Lane intermittently adds gestures understood as effeminate, such as standing with his hands on his hips and shimmying his shoulders. When Lane exits, he sashays offstage (again, with hands on hips). The sashaying male dancing body mimics elements of runway walking. As the b-boyish one, Cabuag stands feet wide apart staring at Lane. His shoulders are relaxed and back. He jumps, striking his left then right foot forward while continuing to bounce the movements. The arms simultaneously swing and strike to the side and back. Then Cabuag performs a signature double-attitude jump. The sequence ends, displaying his center of gravity low to the floor. Now alone, the soloist from the opening dances joyously to the lyrics “Yes, you’ll find it

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<sup>48</sup> “Swish” is a slang term for effeminate behavior.

so hard to live without love, love, love.” Overall, the duet feels spontaneous and improvisatory, performed in call-and-response manner much as it would be on a club floor.

Cabuag remains the central figure throughout the third section. Following his solo, the men gather and dance as a collective and remain so for the entire section. Brown intersperses solos within the group interactions, conveying the intimacies of black gay men dancing as a collective. For instance, Brown passes Cabuag and tilts his head to his hand, gesturing as if to say, give me a call. Cabuag responds by throwing his hands upwards in the air: he seems to be saying, what’s up? In another example, the men dance in close proximity to one another. At one point in their dancing, Lane snakes his crouched body in front Washington. He returns again, stepping into Washington’s personal space and cruising his body.<sup>49</sup> This momentary exchange reveals the proximity of male bodies and an expressed desire between them that throws off conventional displays of masculinity.

As a whole, the dance moves between expressions of masculinity and femininity that signify the black queer male dancing body’s ability to express and embody traditional male and female qualities. Brown captures these moments as the collective ensemble cavorts and repeats certain gestures, such as the double hip-thrust and walking demi-pointe, whereas the dance also balances the

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<sup>49</sup> In gay vernacular, “cruising” refers to the pursuit of sex.

expression of a hip-hop sensibility. Here the black queer male dancing body bounces, swings, strikes percussively, soars through the air jumping, and displays consistent downward placed energy. Rather than reify gender binaries, Brown's choreography suggests that the black queer male dancing body can incorporate both masculine and feminine characteristics instead of masculinity representing traditional masculinity only. As such, Brown extends definitions of masculinity for the black male dancing body.

### *Section Three of Better Days: Choreographic Analysis*

Brown consistently combines masculine and feminine gestures in his choreography; several of these gestures and repeated movement qualities are emphasized in the third section. The former include the crouched and bouncing body with arms swinging side to side or a flying double attitude jump that soars. The latter features the double hip-thrust and sashay. And although Brown's choreography often blurs the boundaries of masculinity and femininity, what stands out more is Brown's use of weight and links to hip-hop culture. Using Brown's definition of masculinity described earlier, his deployment of these two elements works to connote or denote traditional (heterosexual) masculinity. Furthermore, his use of weight and the baggy pants worn create a homeboy sensibility.<sup>50</sup> This homeboy sensibility might also be interpreted as the homo-thug

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<sup>50</sup> In my interview with Ronald K. Brown, he described masculinity as "having weight."

phenomenon. Coleman and Cobb point to an example of the homo-thug persona in gay rapper Caushun. By his own description, Caushun says, “If you’re a man and you’re influenced by hip hop and you’re intimate with another man, you’re a homo-thug” (Coleman and Cobb 90).

One way of characterizing this phenomenon and its performance is the manufacturing of hypermasculinity through hip-hop attire that reveals a muscular physique (Petchauer, Yarhouse, Gallien 7). Noticeable throughout Brown’s choreography, particularly in the first two sections danced with bare torsos, is an awareness of the black male dancing body’s musculature. In effect, exposing the black male dancing body as such reveals a hypermasculine persona and yet conceals any queer reading of that body. Thus, this strategy possibly works to constrain reading the black male dancing body as gay, as well as redefining the possibility of queer identity to incorporate hypermasculinity.

Along with the hypermasculine persona, Brown’s consistent use of weight and bouncing bodies reveals another facet of the dance’s hip-hop sensibility. This sense of weight conveys strength often associated with heterosexual masculinity, where strength coincides with the projection of power (Collins “Telling” 88). The focus on weight differs from Western dance traditions that privilege weightlessness—for instance, ballet—and often connoted with femininity, Brown said in the interview. His construction of the black male dancing body thus rejects the ideal of ballet but works within Western theatrical dance to

promote an alternative vision and embodiment of black masculinity inclusive of gay men.

On the whole, section three moves the black queer male dancing body away from the private journey described in the two previous sections and instead unites them towards a collective journey. Indeed, the earlier burdened body now celebrates exuberantly. The male dancers enact this revelry and flagrant attitude with gestures that connote a queer time and space and, for that matter, an ability to “queen out,” which can read as feminine movement. They do so by engaging in double hip thrusts to the side, sashaying, strutting, shoulder shimmies, and twirling. The use of double hip thrust and tipping (walking high on the metatarsals, as though wearing heels) appropriates elements of runway walking and stages it for the men dancing. Brown incorporates steps that speak to the black gay male experience but also lays out a vision that demonstrates homo-thug sensibility. His choreography asks us to envision a world in which men can embrace each other, work in communion, enjoy each other’s company, and provide support for one another in ways that typical depictions of masculinity resist.

Brown’s choreography affirms black gay men’s stakes in each other’s survival and well-being. His choreography dignifies black gay men’s experiences and the black queer male dancing body, humanizing their concerns and plights in ways that conventional representations of masculinities deny. What does it mean



to show men on stage cruising, supporting, and caring for each other without demonstrating violence and aggression? Brown positions the bodies in a way that pushes the boundaries of non-romantic intimate male relationships. The choreography therefore embraces the possibility of what kinship between black men might look like outside competitive homosocial environments. The black queer male dancing bodies in *Better Days* dare to be free and to live in that freedom. The dance embraces a vision of communal love. To some extent, it demonstrates Joseph Beam's invocation: "Black men loving black men is the revolutionary act" (189).<sup>51</sup>

#### *Section Four of Better Days: Description*

Section four of *Better Days* guides the black male dancing body ever closer to the queer dancing body. At this stage of the dance, the black male dancing body more fully blurs the boundaries between conventional representations of masculinity and sexuality, especially as the men pursue sex and love. In all previous sections, songs or poems have accompanied the dance. Now, however, an instrumental club soundtrack serves as the backdrop for the group's journey. As the dance opens, the tone shifts, revealing the ensemble showing mutual support by touching one another and holding hands. This

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<sup>51</sup> See also Riggs, *Tongues Untied*.

depiction alone clearly sets the stage for an alternative vision of black masculinity. Reading section four thus focuses on the subversive potential of one scene in particular—the reference to men gathered around a public urinal—and the sequence of events that follow.

This fleeting moment within Brown's choreography challenges orthodox male behavior in a way that opens up new meanings and implications for analyzing the black queer male dancing body. The music for the last section starts with house music characterized by its four-on-the-floor beat.<sup>52</sup> The ensemble walks in a straight line together downstage then circle around to stage right. Next, they walk diagonally toward downstage left. As they do, the men begin cruising and passing glances at each other. Thoulouis touches Washingtons's back as the group finishes, traveling downstage left. The men stop in a horizontal line with their backs facing the audience. As if standing at a urinal, the men gesture unzipping their pants and constantly cruise and check each other out while doing so. After finishing their business, the men tap each other and begin to dance together.<sup>53</sup> I call attention to Brown's imagery here because of its significant subversive potential regarding the black male dancing body.

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<sup>52</sup> "Four-on-the-floor" refers to the dance rhythm of disco or electronic dance music.

<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, the camera pulls away to a wide shot as if to disguise, or not capture, the detail of what the men are doing.

Following the brief urinal section, the four men break into two couples. Next, the couples partner each other in a similar manner to a heterosexual couple. Both couples execute lifts, spinning and twirling their partners, suggesting the bliss of happiness shared.<sup>54</sup> The male couples convey the exultation of finding that special connection with someone you've just met on the dance floor. Lane exits the stage while carrying Cabuag in an arabesque lift, and Brown and Thoulouis end in a shared embrace. After their embrace, they look at each other, which solidifies their experience. Smiling, they take each other's hands and exit. The instrumental house mix changes to a song with the lyrics "nothing is the same ever since you came, my baby." The dancers reenter the stage and find community amongst one another on the dance floor again. Brown's choreography balances the individual within the collective as he and Thoulouis dance solos. Cabuag, Lane, and Washington dance a trio. All perform versions of the same choreography but at different times. They include repeated hops on one leg while the other kicks back. At the same time, both arms swing in a circular fashion rhythmically. At other times, they quickly step, turning in place with their feet in a narrow parallel position while simultaneously swinging their arms open and closed as they step around. The lights gradually fade to black with them jamming close together.

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<sup>54</sup> The audience claps during the lift section.

#### *Section Four of Better Days: Choreographic Analysis*

In a few short gestures and movements, Brown summons imagery of gay men's restroom activity and the all-important place of the urinal within it. The urinal as the hotbed of sexual activity invokes familiar scenes in gay dance clubs and public restrooms with heavy cruising. The brief moment enacted speaks to the queer subtext in Brown's choreography and those audience members who know the resonance of such moments. It is a moment equally filled with subversive potential. Depending on the clientele, entering a men's bathroom at a gay club always has potential for much mischief. Whether an individual uses the bathroom for its intended purpose or not, the opportunity for cruising exists at all times.

As demonstrated by Brown's choreography, the men stand side by side and glance downward when each gestures to unzip his pants. Such glances are usually unwelcome in heterosexually defined spaces. Even friendly rapport between men standing next to each other can be frowned upon in public toilets. What drives this moment created by Brown is the suspense oftentimes motivated by the anonymity of the person standing next to you. It offers a chance to size up those on either side, while other questions might arise. *Is he good looking? Does he have a nice dick? How big is it? Is he fuckable? Will there be some action now*

*or later on tonight?*<sup>55</sup> This fleeting moment in the dance offers identification with the queer subtext in a world unknown to majority heterosexual culture.

Brown's use of the black queer male dancing body to signify gay male desire in such an unlikely place unsettles black male heterosexuality.<sup>56</sup> His direction of the audience's focus towards desire between men and the objectification of the male body upsets boundaries between heterosexual and homosexual masculinity and the potential for homoeroticism in any male homosocial environment. Heterosexual men tend to avoid eye contact that penetrates or lingers (the kind found when cruising in gay spaces) when occupying a male homosocial environment—for example, the close confines of sports locker rooms (Ahmed 77–78). Men avoid looking below eye level at all costs. Any slip of the eye leaves room for suspicion with the potential for social punishment, such as name-calling, making it highly undesirable for male heterosexuals to get caught breaking this social rule (Ahmed 77–78). Checking out other men's penises' presumes and thus signifies a sexual desire for someone else's penis, which transgresses the social rules of heterosexual

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<sup>55</sup> See Leap 15–16. The author discusses the terminology used to describe ethnographic accounts of “male-centered sexual activity” and whether scientific language or other forms of vernacular may be used. He argues, “The scientific language is more elegant and less abrasive, but does little to convey the realities of the participant voice. The vernacular coincides with the lived experience of the erotic moment, but the bluntness of such usage is likely to alienate readers.”

<sup>56</sup> Brown's work resonates with DV8 Physical Theatre's “Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men,” which also turns the male gaze on men as objects of desire.

homosocial spaces. Checking out other men's penises' transgresses; desiring someone else's penis more fully accomplishes that transgression.

Brown's enactment of men relieving themselves at a urinal brings attention to the male body, the male gaze, and desire between men that break conventional boundaries of masculine behavior and male culture. Despite this, Brown's choreography and the dancers' performance appropriate and blur conventional masculine representation. While the men stand and ogle each other, one dancer, Lane, exaggerates and spreads his legs wider, gesturing toward how men take up or occupies more public space. His legs are at ease, as if to suggest he needs the space to take care of business. Perhaps the taking up more space equates to needing more room—which can be perceived as due to having a bigger dick. Brown blurs readings of the black male dancing body by appropriating behaviors of orthodox heterosexual black men and inscribing it on the black queer male dancing body.

The subversive potential in Brown's choreographic strategy plays on desire between men in homosocial environments. His choreography recognizes homosexual desire among black men, which some men consider an affront to their male identities. This juxtaposition reveals the potential instability and insecurity surrounding the performance of masculinity. Although *Better Days* may be a gay space, it is unclear whether the audience knows this fact. Nonetheless, it is a radical departure to show representations of men in close proximity,

engaged in what William Leap describes as “male-centered sexual activity” (15–16). Brown’s choice to represent this behavior of men without adding humor or camp to soften its effect risks punishment. What matters here is not sexual identification of the subjects per se but of the activity in which they are engaged. Brown’s choreography intimates the sexual culture of gay nightlife and suggests that pleasure knows no identity.

Interestingly, though, Brown approaches the subjects of masculinity, sexuality, and male-to-male desire while blurring the reading of the black male dancing body. Although his choreography incorporates gestures of both masculinity and femininity, he does so while achieving an overall “homeboy” sensibility that depicts a hypermasculine persona for the entire dance. With the dancers wearing baggy drawstring pants and dressed in an assortment of tops, the dance moves away from the first two sections’ exposure of the naked torso. The looseness of the clothes conveys a relatable, cool image of urban black men. The dancer’s weight, lower center of gravity, and downward-directed movement in Brown’s choreography contrast with the effete stereotypical image of gay men—a look that is usually tall and slender and prefers form-fitting clothes that reveal the silhouette and lines of the body, the obviousness of which makes the body desirable to other gay men.

However, Brown’s strategy shifts focus away from the effete or stereotypically effeminate gay man to that of the homo-thug, where the black

male dancing body clothed in hip-hop gear shields it from associations of homosexuality. Similarly, scholars Coleman and Cobb analyze black gay rapper Caushun and direct attention to the ways he confounds notions of authenticity as well as categories of race, gender, and sexuality. Caushun's persona straddles the extremes of "thug masculinity" and "queeny femininity," both strategies employed by Brown in *Better Days*. Hence, Brown's deployment of the homo-thug destabilizes clear distinctions between heterosexual and homosexual masculinities and in fact poses the question, do such boundaries exist?

### **Dwight Rhoden's Ballet *Gone***

Co-artistic director and choreographer of Complexions Contemporary Ballet, Dwight Rhoden defines a new level of expression for the contemporary black queer male dancing body in *Gone* (2000). As he does in all of his works, Rhoden grounds his movement vocabulary in a classically trained body.<sup>57</sup> Working in a contemporary neoclassical style, Rhoden's choreography deconstructs ballet and instead develops a movement quality hovering in its extremity. The corporeality of the dancing body evident in his work often exceeds the traditional lines practiced in ballet. As do Rhoden's other works, *Gone* reveals an affinity for the lines, virtuosity, and the centeredness of ballet while taking

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<sup>57</sup> Dancers for Complexions Contemporary Ballet privilege the ballet-trained body.



liberties to push the body to its maximum. His choreographic signature might best be described as dancing on the precipice. Extremity, as well as the exceptionalism required of his dancers' technique, also finds expression in his aesthetic. Importantly, Rhoden's choreography requires significant ballet training, as the bodies reveal an affinity for the lines in American contemporary ballet.

Rhoden's tenure with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre (AAADT) underpins his philosophy's rootedness in a classically trained body. With this preference, Rhoden continues the legacy of Ailey, who also believed in grounding his company in ballet. To this point Ailey stated, "I think...dancers have to be basically ballet trained. I think ideally they should have two-thirds in their ballet training for the sake of the discipline and line, and one-third modern for all those contractions and releases and, of course, the intensity" (DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations* 52). Rhoden extends Ailey's vision, where dancers train in a range of techniques to suture the white or black dancing body.<sup>58</sup> In doing so, Ailey demonstrated what DeFrantz, referring to Houston A. Baker, calls "'mastery of form,' a politically motivated accomplishment of precision designed to subvert essentialist critiques of black performance" (15). Two things proved important in Ailey's aesthetic: (1) African American themes and (2) the audience accessibility of his choreography. Rhoden, however, departs by featuring mostly abstract,

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<sup>58</sup> See DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations* 19–22. DeFrantz describes in greater detail the essentialist critiques leveled at black dancers due to the trope of primitivism. The black dancing body embodied all that was exotic, wild, and natural.

plotless works. Indeed, Rhoden's central focus on the classically trained body and the extent to which he focuses on virtuosic performances reveals his adherence to the concept "mastery of form."

Rhoden's choreography in *Gone* continues a long historical tradition established by Donald McKayle in his masterpiece *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* (1959). McKayle was a contemporary of Alvin Ailey and other early black modern dancers whose artistry exposed the inhumanity and social injustice suffered by African Americans. In this case, Rhoden draws on the symbolism represented in McKayle's dramatic narrative, which takes a sympathetic though unsentimental outlook on the men's plights. In *Rainbow Round My Shoulder*, McKayle captures the universal appeal for freedom symbolized in the African American experience that humanizes and shows the beauty of the black male dancing body. The structure of the dance pivots around the inextricable link between race and masculinity in ways that often position the plight of African American men as central to determining a black liberatory politic.

Rhoden's choreographic strategy references McKayle by using the same song, "Another Man Done Gone," yet both choreographers offer very different versions of it. Rhoden references the historical context and the cultural legacy of McKayle's choreography in the concert dance tradition. He capitalizes on McKayle's work, forgoing the narrative structure described above and instead places attention on the black queer male dancing body and its performance of

masculinity. To achieve this, Rhoden abstracts the relationships between the men onstage and emphasizes the prowess and the effort behind the extremely demanding physical movement. Indeed, Rhoden's choreography benefits from the historical precedent of McKayle's dramatic narrative and its representation of black masculinity. To this end, Rhoden's contemporary account abstracts the historical and cultural symbolism found in McKayle's *Rainbow* and focuses attention on the black male dancing body itself.

#### *Description of Gone*

The dance opens with three men standing onstage swinging their arms.<sup>59</sup> In order of appearance, the three dancers are Clifford Williams, Gideon Poirier, and Leyland Simmons. The song accompanying the dance is Odetta's "Another Man Done Gone"—a traditional folk song that speaks to human injustice of men on chain gangs. Sung a cappella, Odetta's stark and powerful voice illuminates the depth of human suffering experienced by black men. While I contextualize the overarching aesthetic of *Gone*, my reading of the dance will focus on Clifford Williams's opening solo.

The three dancers begin facing downstage, swinging their arms with tension. A sea of swampy green hue covers the stage, casting shadows on their

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<sup>59</sup> The reading of this dance is taken from a video of a performance at the LG Arts Center, Seoul, Korea, in 2005 and was accessed from the company's online video archive.

bodies while at the same time highlighting their musculature. Williams stands center stage, with Simmons upstage right and Poirier upstage left. Williams suddenly contracts and bends his torso side as he fully extends his flexed right hand. The left hand presses against his head, while his knees bend in fourth position parallel (a wide-open stance). He moves to a parallel position facing downstage, rises on relevé (metatarsals), and pulls both hands up by his shoulders. At this moment, he releases his hands downward as he bends into a contracted position, curved over his legs. From parallel position first (feet side by side), Williams jumps twice, reaching with urgency. At the jump's height, the left foot reaches to a passé as the left arm reaches upward and the right arm to the side.

Facing downstage after the jumps, Williams contracts his torso to the left, reaches his hands through second position, tilts to the side, and performs a remarkable extension of his leg as though completing a straight line. The extension shows his steely strength. In the tilt, Williams shifts his hips and weight off-center to the right. His left leg is solidly rooted and offers a counterbalance to the unfolding extension. At the extension's peak, his arms open through second position as he transfers his weight and throws his torso, falling into a right lunge. From the lunge, he completes two attitude swings right and left and ends by lunging left. Upon completion, he executes a double-attitude turn rising on his relevé. He finishes in a wide lunging position, facing stage right with one arm

reaching up and the other side. Next, Williams circles his leg around, crossing his body. Ending downstage left, he then turns upstage and diagonally extends his leg, pushing his weight off-center to create a singular, dynamic straight line (dance vernacular refers to it as a “six o’clock extension”).

From the extension, Williams turns stage left while simultaneously dragging his feet and clenching his fists. The fists punch in a forward motion with alternating arms. Williams then stops in profile, feet in parallel first, and faces stage left. With sharp articulation, he flicks his upstage leg back, points it forward, and flexes the foot, stretching it above his head. Simultaneously, he clenches his fist and throws his torso to the right. Again, Williams creates a singular moment by revealing his extraordinary flexibility and pulling his straightened leg toward his torso. He does this while the downstage leg is bent and in forced arch (the foot staying in relevé as the knee bends). Here Williams jumps with both knees in the air, his feet tucked under, as his arms pulled behind his back.

Once Williams lands, still facing profile, he flexes his torso back in bent knee parallel fourth (feet are parallel although one foot faces forward and the other, back) reaching his punched fists in opposite directions (one up, one down). At the same, and from his bent position, the upstage leg dashes in and out behind him quickly back to a slightly open parallel first. All at once, Williams looks down, reaches his upstage hand diagonally in the same direction, and extends his leg to an arabesque line (leg in straight line behind the torso). From there, he

stretches his leg to a ninety-degree angle with bent knee, parallel to the floor. As he rises to relevé, his upstage hand reaches out and up as the arabesque stretches higher.

Next, he returns the arabesque to passé position (foot placed next to knee) and performs a flat back extension, with arms and leg to the side. Williams emphasizes his remarkable flexibility by pressing deeper into his plié (bent knees) and raising his leg on a high diagonal upward. He then jumps on one leg with the other in arabesque (suspended in air and fully straightened) with arms reaching across his torso. After the jump, Williams performs a backward double coupé turn (foot pressed against the ankle), with his arms in first position (as if holding a beach ball) and then reverses its direction. The turn ends with him in a suspended layout attitude upstage and his arms extending up and sideways (the back faces the audience, and the head releases towards the floor). He ends by swiping his left and right leg to the sides and jumping off into the distance upstage left. While upstage, Williams looks back and walks stage left. As he does, his arms swing tensely by his side. The tension reveals itself through the musculature of the torso.

### *Choreographic Analysis of Gone*

The black male dancing body in *Gone* labors. The laboring bodies—and, in this analysis, Williams's body—depict the Herculean efforts required to perform

Rhoden's choreography. These black male dancing bodies perform astonishing feats without the usual balletic effort to conceal their difficulty.<sup>60</sup> The swift pacing of Rhoden's choreography, the emphasis on lines, the laser-like precision of the attack, and the density of movement he musters into one phrase all reveals the labor required for the black male dancing body. For example, in the opening sequence described above, Williams performs at a breathtakingly fast speed, fulfilling a range of movements that encompasses taking up both large and small amounts of space. The effort needed to move with this lightning pace performing such movement shows complete skill and mastery of technique.

For the spectator, Rhoden's choreography offers plentiful opportunities to marvel at the breathtaking accomplishments that Williams's body performs. As an abstract dance, *Gone* exploits the virtuosity of ballet while deconstructing the form with its high velocity and freneticism—highly visible through his use of off-centeredness.

The laboring black male dancing body also draws attention to the hypermasculine ideal. Here the performance of masculinity and the dancing body aligns itself with sheer physical power—aggressively—and brings to mind earlier

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<sup>60</sup> The classically trained ballet body principally hides the effort behind movement by defying gravity. Ballet choreographers and dancers working within this medium strive to conceal the body's work. Here the dancing body that labors can carry race specific connotations. Whereas European ballet (i.e., white dance) is supposed to show no effort in its execution, African dance (black dance) always labors. With this dichotomy, the trope of primitivism and essentialism reappear to mark specific bodies and aesthetics.

evocations of the laboring body.<sup>61</sup> Matched with this ideal are expressions of the dancing body's athletic, sculptural, and sensual abilities that revel in its corporeality. Beauty and spectacle form the core of Rhoden's attention to the dancing body. Here the performance of masculinity, with its pronounced musculature, unfolds simultaneously with the nearly naked body at its center. These expressive qualities and a heavy reliance on showing skin denote a hedonistic element in his style. Describing his own dances, Rhoden says, "It's very sensual work. Though there is no full-on nudity on the program, there's a lot of body exposure. I really like the body, seeing the body move" (Glackin 1). In this context, the black male dancing body on the surface reads as a conventionally masculine body, but the exhibitionist flare and appeal suggests otherwise. Specifically, the flare refers to visually attractive bodies in motion that appeal to both men and women.

As my analysis of Brown's homo-thug element explored earlier, Rhoden achieves the hypermasculine ideal that constructs masculinity as demonstrative, powerful, and in control—which really signifies traditional heterosexual

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<sup>61</sup> See Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*. In her book, Foulkes studies the life and work of Ted Shawn and his all male dance company (1933–1940). Notably, she describes Shawn's emphasis on the male form and the romanticization of Greek ideal for constructing the male dancing body in modern dance. The hypermasculine ideal can be traced back to Shawn's invoking of it to deflect associations of dance being a sissy activity and not for men. Here, performances of the laboring body connote images of strength, virility, and power concocted to some degree as a public relations gambit to project dancing as a masculine endeavor.



masculinity. The physical daringness of Rhoden's choreography displays common notions attached to the performance of masculinity. Social theorist Seidler describes these notions as the relentless need to prove and defend one's masculinity (*Unreasonable Men* 116). The virtuosic performances of the black male dancing body in *Gone* are distinguishable for their athletic power and prowess. In some instances, working harder also demonstrates ultimate desire of achieving the masculine ideal. Again, like Brown, Rhoden reinscribes traditional notions of masculinity, while accessing a new dimension of expressivity for the black queer male dancing body. Rhoden also uses the female voice to accompany the performance of hypermasculinity of black male dancing body, which exposes a multidimensional quality at work.<sup>62</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Chapter three builds on addressing my overarching argument. It does so by supplying evidence that these dancers and choreographers possess a fluid relationship to masculinity and its performance onstage, revealing a flexible male identity at work. Rather than remaining confined to typical notions of masculinity, that are often limited and restrictive in its expression, the black queer male

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<sup>62</sup> In an interview with Ron Simmons, Marlon Riggs discusses his use of a woman's voice to narrate his documentary *Ethnic Notions*. Riggs contends, "I don't know if as a straight man I would have heard that voice; or if hearing it I would have accepted and embraced it. I think I might have responded in sort of—"No, I need to be much tougher. I need to be firmer. I need a male voice to do the narration, to speak with authority" (Simmons 198–199).

dancing body contests these traditional representations and offers new ways of seeing. Jones, Brown, and Rhoden expand and redefine the performance of masculinity that includes relationships to strength and vulnerability atypical of heterosexual male identity. Moreover, even when staging hypermasculinity, the dancers do so attendant to the expression of the female voice and femininity, as seen in Brown and Rhoden's work. The choreographic choices of these men, strategic or not, reveal their multidimensionality and situated knowledge about the performance of masculinity in conjunction with race and gender. As black gay men, their marginalized status within society and culture tells us much about gender performance. Contrary to convention, any discussions of masculinity and its performance remain incomplete without figuring their bodies as central.

## Chapter Four

### The Black Queer Male Dancing Body Offstage

A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course. There are, of course, many characteristic functions of such places. It is here that the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly fabricated; it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed...Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character.

Erving Goffman

*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

We humans are first and foremost social creatures with brains that quickly learn to perform in socially acceptable ways. By adulthood most men and women have learned to behave in a gender—appropriate manner.

Louann Brizendine

*The Male Brain*

### **Making the Man in American Contemporary Dance: Eschewals of Effeminacy**

In Chapter Three, I used analyses of onstage performances to argue that black gay men are central—not marginal—to understanding the performance of gender in contemporary society. In this chapter, I argue that the black gay men of this study have fluid relationships to their identities without investing in rigid notions of gender. The lived experiences of Desmond Richardson, Dwight Rhoden, and Ronald K. Brown, as told through in-depth interviews, reveal identification and disidentification with traditional ideas of masculinity that assert

a “situated knowledge” base, a term borrowed from Donna Haraway (Hay 347).<sup>63</sup> Their knowledge base presents alternative readings of these men’s bodies in relationship to masculinity and shifts the paradigm for analyzing gender performance in society and culture. This study’s analyses define new ways of articulating diverse masculinities and illuminate the multidimensionality of the subjects under study.

Chapter Four builds on Chapter Three’s arguments that confront the prevailing misconceptions about black male dancers in order to advance new analyses of male identity and the black queer male dancing body offstage. The subjects interviewed in this chapter are distanced from the perceived masculine ideal, making them ideal for examining performances of masculinity. The common perception of gay men as models of failed or subordinate masculinity contributes to the lack of analysis concerning the ways in which (homo)sexuality complicates reading the gendered body (Connell, *Masculinities* 78–79). This chapter aims to illuminate the lives of these black male dancers; furthermore, this study brings their bodies under closer examination to reveal the multifaceted challenges they face in our contemporary society as they negotiate their status as self-identified black gay men.

The dancers’ lived experiences serve as an entry point for studying the performance of gender and its intersections with race and sexuality because they

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<sup>63</sup> See Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 4-5.

self-identify as black gay men and because they are able to destabilize “authentic” notions of race, gender, and sexuality. I argue that black gay men are inclined to have fluid relationships to their identity without investing in rigid notions of gender. The distance between the perceived masculine ideal and these men’s lived experiences thus creates a sense of non-belonging in the black community—their primary identity group affiliation—and often prompts them to prove their authenticity within this group. More importantly, even though the men of this study experience oppression as racialized, gendered, and sexualized subjects, this experience in fact shapes their multidimensionality, allowing for greater insight into their performance of gender. Indeed, their situated knowledge, both fluid and flexible, poses new possibilities for understanding the nature and construction of identity for black gay men.

Radically positioning black gay men as central to the performance of masculinity highlights the contingent, contextual, and changing nature of masculinity and the fact that it is not based on heterosexual male bodies. The black gay men interviewed for this dissertation engage, consciously or not, in gender performance as a survival strategy for navigating and countering oppressive ideals. Their remove from the masculine ideal positions them to alternately construct, play, identify, and disidentify with gender norms. This position, too, creates greater depth of perception and, to an even greater extent, a more incisive critique of hegemonic masculinity, as explored in Chapter Two.

As a result, the men of this study often share their ambivalence toward traditional concepts of gender yet also paradoxically reveal an adherence to them. The subjective space from which these men operate in society reveals their inclination to see gender performance in less circumscribed ways.

Using Goffman's concept of a front region and back region (or front and back stage) where performance is divided between public and private personas and actions, I examine the differences between on- and offstage performance with the men of this study. Often, the back stage reality is deemed unimportant to the representation of masculinity on stage. The interviews in this study, however, expose facets of identity that bridge the back and front stages.

Although the public may not witness the processes in American contemporary culture that shape these men, I argue their offstage personas reveal critical dimensions of the performance of gender for the black queer male dancing body. How do lived experiences inform the representation of the black queer male dancing body? In certain respects, the offstage performances of male dancers are shielded due to longstanding associations of homosexuality and effeminacy with Western theatrical dance traditions, as Richardson explained in our interview. Attempting to construct new heroic images of the male dancer—always with the subtext of making it “safe” for (hetero)sexual men—public relations, advertising, and management of mainstream American contemporary dance companies diligently construct images that not only rebuff old stereotypes

but create space that neuters any connection to the demonstrably queer body.<sup>64</sup>

With such careful crafting of male dancers' public images, who in fact exists behind the men dancing on proscenium stages? Who and what factors shape them as individual artists? Chapter Four examines the dance artists Richardson, Rhoden, and Brown to lend greater significance to the offstage personas.

Contrary to popular discourse on masculinities, gay men—and black gay men in particular—have rarely represented or defined the masculine ideal (Kimmel “Masculinity” 57). Some consider masculinity and homosexuality as completely incompatible (Wise 14). Popular depictions, discourse, and writings on masculinities eschew associations between masculinity and black gay men. However, looking at the lives of these dancers through an oral history methodology complicates perceptions of who and what defines masculinities. More revealingly, the dancers' answers decidedly tell a complex tale of gender animating itself offstage and in society. Grounded in their lived experiences, these oral history accounts describe the performance of masculinity and the degrees to which notions of race and sexuality are intimately tied to the black male body's perception and reception.

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<sup>64</sup> See Shawn 87–97. Here, Shawn discusses the use of public relations to sway the public regarding the legitimacy of men in dance. I argue this is an early example of media alternatively constructing a positive image of men in dance and society, an image that continues today.

## **Formative Experiences of Gender and the Social Construction of Masculinity**

Each of the dancers interviewed relayed a story of his entry into dancing. In this section, their early experiences illustrate the difficulty of choosing to dance, and their choices reveal much about masculinity and dance in our contemporary culture. One of the key points addressed by all the interviewees revolved around dance being stereotyped as a feminine activity. They each describe dealing with being perceived as a girl, dancing “soft,” and being afraid of dance classes because they represent female-dominated space. In their own way, their stories tell of claiming dance as a space for men to participate amidst the social anxiety male dancers experience in American society. Their stories speak to the construction of masculinity on the black queer male dancing body.

Due to societal gender norms, choosing to dance can register as gender nonconforming behavior for boys and men. The perceptions of dance as a feminine activity are well-documented (Risner 44–45). Without the support lent to other childhood interests (e.g., sports such as football, baseball, and soccer), dance carries a prejudice that results in consistently low participation among males (Baker 33–34). In addition, the lack of familial and community support often further hinders male participation, with most men or families of boys choosing other preferred, male-centered activities (Baker 35). Inevitably, those men who choose to dance have to deal with some form of prejudice against the



decision to dance. The stories of all of the dancers interviewed in this chapter illustrate the fragility of masculinity and its performance offstage.

*Case Study: Desmond Richardson*

When I interviewed Desmond Richardson, he talked about his experiences as a young boy learning to dance and offered insights into those early years of his training. These early years illuminate his relationship to the female influence in his life. This influence and his pursuit of dance within a female-dominated space underscored Richardson's relationship to dance and made it a space for the male dancing body. Furthermore, Richardson's adolescence provides context for learning to dance in a culture heavily prejudicial against boys and men dancing. I argue that his early experiences, in conjunction with the stigma against male dancers, together provide an entry point for theorizing the construction of the black queer male dancing body. These formative experiences lay the groundwork for Richardson's career as a dancer.

One of the central components of defining masculinity in American culture involves the ability to prove one's masculinity. It is this key feature of gender performance that distinguishes the respect men show or give each other. Proving one's masculinity amounts to a disavowal of women and femininity (Kimmel, *Gendered Society* 11). Indeed, the overriding definition of masculinity constructs itself in direct opposition, contrast, and disdain towards femininity. Here Kimmel

states, "Masculine identity is born in the renunciation of the feminine, not in the direct affirmation of the masculine, which leaves masculine gender identity tenuous and fragile" (Kimmel, "Masculinity" 60). With this pressure, and the prejudice attending dance, boys must demonstrate a strong capacity to be or appear manly if they are to be accepted as masculine. Even to the untrained eye, the black queer male dancing body can reveal the elegance of line that might distinguish it as too effete for an average American male, making dance an unsuitable choice for male activity.

Richardson addresses the prejudice against male dancers when he describes his encounters with those who stereotype dance. He reflects on the words of his mother, saying, "Don't listen to what people have to say. This one is talking about, 'Oh, you dancing,' and 'You this person.' That's not you. That's something that they're placing on you because they don't understand and it's okay that they don't understand but they'll understand a little bit but you need to keep going and doing what you got to do."

Richardson further elaborates on his early experiences in junior high school when asked about being teased about dancing. His statement reveals the obvious need to distance himself from the association of dancing with girls and women's work. By doing so, he counters the stereotype and falsehood by refuting the claims made against him:

MB: Even at that point were you ever teased or made fun of because of this, making a choice to dance.

DR: Actually, yeah. You know, kids can be cruel. In my junior high school more so than in the High School of Performing Arts cause, i.e., there were so many individuals in my high school of all different—they were transgendered, they were this, they were that. I mean it was the gamut. So it did not dawn on me in high school but in junior high school, coming from Queens where, you know, there's one set thing. You're either going to work at the post office or you're going to go to school. You know, there's things so outside of the norm they're like, "Oh, dude, why you doing that? Huh-hm. You must be like a girl or something." I'm like, "No, clearly not, but I really want to do this." This is something that I'm really passionate about.

In this exchange, Richardson highlights the difference between his junior high school experience and high school. It is the junior high experience—a time when boys feel pressure to conform to socially-acceptable behavior—that captures the tension of dealing with dance and masculinity during adolescence. In "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," Kimmel addresses the socialization of boys, the effects of policing gender, and the need to prove one's masculinity when he states, "As

adolescents, we learn that our peers are a kind of gender police, constantly threatening to unmask us as feminine, as sissies” (65). Thus, for Richardson, daring to dance during this time exposes the prejudice male dancers encounter while confronting the stereotype that dance is for sissies.

The desire of some men to pursue American contemporary dance intensifies fears about stereotypical associations of male dancers as effeminate or gay. As a result, this creates greater obstacles for American contemporary dance to flourish for young male participants. At a time when adolescent boys spurn all things feminine, those boys who continue to dance risk being called sissies and persevere, all while withstanding the social pressure to conform. Kimmel’s work defers to psychologist Robert Brannon’s definition of manhood: “No Sissy Stuff! One may never do anything that even remotely suggests femininity. Masculinity is the relentless repudiation of the feminine” (58). Given that manhood and the training for it start at such an early age, it is no wonder adolescent boys who dance face difficulty challenging preconceptions about the male dancer.

Significantly, Richardson’s early years of dance training reveal a close kinship to girls and his mother.<sup>65</sup> For young boys, their introduction and learning to dance often coincides with some exposure to girls who dance. That he

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<sup>65</sup> Throughout Richardson’s interview, he frequently discussed the importance of his mother and the significance of this relationship to his career.

expresses such relationships is not surprising.<sup>66</sup> Richardson's desire to dance started around the age of eleven. As evidenced in his statement above, he clearly had a desire and passion to pursue dancing despite the cruelty of the students in his junior high school at the time. In an effort to distance himself from the notion of dancing as a feminine activity, Richardson developed a response that eschewed dancing as feminine and affirmed his rightful place and participation as a male dancer. Though he mentions his early experiences as a street dancer—learning popping and locking from three girls—he positions watching Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn on *Great Performances* as the encounter that ignited his love and passion for ballet.<sup>67</sup>

Richardson's description of his junior high school experiences illuminates a ripe moment of fostering a strong male identity in response to dancing understood as girlish. For Richardson, the relationship with his mother and the girls he began dancing with expose tensions with a possible need to distance

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<sup>66</sup> My early experiences with dance were formed by close relationships with the girls I grew up with in the Bronx and by my sister. At the time, I did not identify dance as a female activity; all I knew is that I was attracted to it and gained admiration, support, and encouragement for doing it well. Like Richardson, I maintained a close connection to my mother during adolescence. In our August 24, 2008, interview, he fully addressed the strong presence, guidance, and continued involvement of his mother in his career today. See also the film *Billy Elliot*.

<sup>67</sup> Richardson details his first experiences with dance learning popping and locking from three girls on his block growing up in Queens, New York. Although he started as a street dancer, his love of ballet and training began at eleven years old. He discusses watching Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn on *Great Performances*, which aired on PBS. So although he started as a street dancer, he describes falling in love with ballet and desiring to perform simply from watching that performance. Nureyev, who defected from Russia, completely reinvigorated the notion of men dancing ballet during the twentieth century. His performances raised the level of virtuosity and technical achievements for men in ballet. Nureyev's raw, animalistic power, theatricality, dynamism, and style influenced generations of male dancers.

dance as a feminine activity. Indeed, his future development as a male dancer with a highly muscular and sculptural physique might reveal several phenomena: (1) demarcation of the male body that approaches hypermasculine expressivity, (2) difference from the female body and form, and (3) separation from the notion of the male body as effeminate. Richardson's development as a dancer enunciates multiple meanings of what and how the black queer male dancing body performs.

While the black queer male dancing body visibly represents conventional masculinity, appearing strong, virile, and powerful, it does so at the expense of downplaying and outright avoiding any movement that could possibly construe it as other than masculine. Establishing legitimacy for the black queer male dancing body in Western theatrical dance therefore appropriates signifiers of masculinity, performing notions of what it "is." Fundamentally, the black queer male dancing body embraces the contradiction of being refined, fluid, and elegant (coded as too effeminate), yet at the same time, deploys hypermasculinity to demonstrate the masculine ideal. Thus, Richardson's early experiences denote a period for adolescent boys and later for men who pursue a career in Western theatrical dance that seemingly employs overcompensatory measures to disidentify the male dancing body with femininity and with gay men.

*Case Study: Ronald K. Brown*

With an experience similar to Richardson, Ronald K. Brown characterizes dance as a female-dominated space when he discusses his introduction to the field. In this section, I continue to make connections between male adolescent experiences with dance and masculinity and the construction of identity. Brown's descriptions of his early experiences with dance and his mother's encouragement to take classes demonstrate the terror he felt then and his long-term avoidance:

I think I was in second grade, I went to see the company on a school trip and I saw—probably saw Revelations because I went home and choreographed the dance to a chair...with a chair to Nikki Giovanni's My Father's House. Right, second grade, really terrified to take dance class. My mommy would drag me but I was like "Mommy, there's ninety girls." But—that sticks out in my head.

Brown's earliest memories of dance define it as a space populated with women. The thought of taking dance class continued to terrify him, and so he refrained. He goes on to say, "And so this idea of me being a dancer was always in there somewhere but the fear was greater, right?" For Brown, his memory of dancing and his desire to do so reflect the experience of dancing as a boy from Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. As an adolescent, his affinity for dance overcame the fear of participating in an art form he associated with girls.

Brown's memory highlights his ambivalence toward dancing and his struggle to embrace it. He describes his full-fledged entry into dancing in the following manner:

So then for me I started—the same way I started dancing by might, right—I started choreographing by might. So I danced—I mean I choreographed—like a dude from Brooklyn in sneakers and clothes. And probably the remnants of whatever was in my body and what I had learned up to that point and has continually evolved from that.

Brown's word choice to start dancing by might conveys three meanings that require further consideration. First, his will to dance becomes a metaphor for overcoming his fear of it and his assessment of dancing as something for girls. This use creates a sense of prevailing over his fear to participate in an art form gendered as female. Second, Brown's response reveals the time, setting, and context in which he began to dance. Brown's growing up in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn affected his outlook on choosing dance, especially given the connotations he associated with it. Brown's own response to growing up in Bedford Stuyvesant attests to this sentiment: "A young boy from BedStuy did not take dancing lesson[s]" (Paris 166). And third, it relates to notions of strength—not only physical but also the psychological strength to endure the possible ridicule aimed at an adolescent boy choosing to dance.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> See Paris 166.



Even at the age of twelve, Brown's description of his early experiences reveals the perception of dance as something boys do not do. Dance scholar Carl Paris captures Brown's choice not to dance in a story related to his mother: "Brown recounts that, when, at age 12, he was about to audition for Dance Theatre of Harlem, his mother went into labor. This instilled in him a sense of responsibility, which argued against dancing, because it was not considered a manly thing to do" (166). Clearly, Brown ties masculinity to traditional notions of manhood that conform to society's expectations of men.

*Case Study: Dwight Rhoden*

In the above narratives of Richardson and Brown, I discuss their first experiences of dance and how those shaped their formative ideas about dance and gender. Dwight Rhoden, on the other hand, came to dance at the relatively late age of seventeen. Rhoden's narrative describes stereotypical perceptions of male dancers and his failure to conform to traditional notions of what they were:

Now here we're getting to something, I really couldn't get the parts that were set out for the men because I was one of those guys who didn't typically look masculine, whatever that is. I was very skinny, very slight, not a lot of muscle. And, I think that I was put off to the side and used more as a soloist, as somebody who could do certain types of things but maybe wouldn't get to do the lift, working with the girl in a duet or a pas de

deux or something like that, partly because I wasn't strong enough to do any of that.

Rhoden further elaborates on the theme of not representing the typical "masculine" male dancer in his recollection of dancing with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre: "Well, there was a big thing. I mean I was in Ailey and I wasn't the look. I mean look at me. I mean look at me, I'm very light-skinned, I was very thin and the typical Ailey man was a huge, gorgeous strapping black man." Thomas DeFrantz depicts Alvin Ailey's aesthetic for the black male dancing body by stating,

To be sure a large portion of the association of masculinity and guarded stoicism in Ailey's work stemmed from the choreographer's need to deflect his audience's potentially negative connotations of male homosexuality from modern dance...Ailey and Williams, both gay men deeply concerned with mainstream reputation of the Ailey enterprise, felt compelled to perpetuate conventionally masculine stage personae. (*Dancing Revelations* 188)

Rhoden's description of male dancers in the Ailey company also corresponds with DeFrantz's choreographic analysis of Blues Suite: "Although the dance is about the men's longing for a lover that the train has taken away, sexuality is buried deeply beneath a brawny veneer" ("Simmering" 116).

In this description, DeFrantz suggests Ailey's staging of masculinity hid beneath a brawny veneer likened to the strapping black man of Rhoden's account. In some sense, both of these descriptions observe the muscularity of the black male dancing body to deflect associations of black male dancers with homosexuality. DeFrantz continues his observation above while suggesting how a subtext lies hidden beneath signifiers of physical representations of strength and power:

Ailey studiously avoided homoeroticism here through blockish phrasing, constant explosive movement, and a fierce abstention from physical or emotional contact by the men. The result is a strangely harsh depiction of black men as unable to relate to each other. The latent homophobia of the staging is made more strange by Ailey's own homosexuality. Ailey performed this dance in the 1960s, his heterosexual stage persona far removed from his offstage reality. In this dance, the desirous black male body is overtly heterosexual, single mindedly in pursuit of an offstage woman. ("Simmering" 116)

In effect, the hypermasculine persona of the black male dancing body on stage, with its musculature and robustness, signifies conventional heterosexual masculinity. In essence, a heightened, brimming muscular corporeality stands in for heterosexual masculinity.

Rhoden's reference to his untypical, "masculine" black dancing body that was "very skinny, very slight, not a lot of muscle" involves another component of the construction of masculinity in American culture—the need to prove one's masculinity. Kimmel refers to the restless need for men to prove their masculinity and how it uniquely defines American manhood. He argues that the performance of masculinity is inextricably linked to proving one's manhood. Desiring to conform the black male dancing body to the expectations of the AAADT, Rhoden expresses, "When I got into the company I actually had to work a lot harder...I had to really, really prove myself and show that I could do it." In the background of this statement was Ailey's frequent reminder to him, "Dwight, you've got to gain weight." From this statement, it appears Ailey placed high importance on the need to project physical power through his male dancers. But for those men like Rhoden, who did not have the typical look of the Ailey dancer, the effort to succeed was paved with the burden of further proving their masculinity. This example illustrates Rhoden's initial inability to conform to the conventional male dancing body depicted in AAADT, which changed only as further steps were taken to improve his "masculinity."

## **Social and Cultural Patterns: Internal and External Responses to Homophobia and Effeminophobia**

Common themes that emerged from my interviews with the dancers expound upon the intersection of masculinity and sexuality, in addition to their personal experiences and descriptions of homophobia. In my interviews, I directly asked the dancers whether homophobia exists in the dance community. Their responses conveyed two noteworthy aspects of the black queer male dancing body. First, homophobia manifests itself in different spaces, and as a result the body accommodates and resists expectations related to traditional notions of masculinity. Second, homophobia has the potential for both external and internal responses, which result in modifying behaviors of individual bodies.

The responses by Richardson, Rhoden, and Brown all attest to the presence of homophobia in American contemporary dance. Contrary to the popular perception of dance as a welcoming profession for gay men, these men's responses detail adverse conditions that demonstrate the inseparable attitudes and behaviors that exist between larger culture and the dance world concerning homophobia. At core, the subjects of this study illustrate the adaptability of the black queer male dancing body. In the first case study, Richardson describes the various settings that stage the performance of the black queer male dancing body and the possibility that homophobia informs his behavior. In the second, Rhoden reveals reactions to a demonstrably queer body and the discomfort it can cause for an unfamiliar audience. And in the third case, Brown offers critical

insight regarding the reception of the black queer male dancing body when it deviates from gendered norms.

*Case Study: Desmond Richardson*

Overall, Richardson's answer to homophobia in the dance community (primarily the New York City dance establishment) reveals the adaptability of the black queer male dancing body and the resulting awareness, or consciousness, of his behavior and movement within society. When asked about homophobia in the dance community, Richardson offers examples of two spaces—board meetings and a generalized view of the “dance world”—to distinguish contrasting behaviors of his body. However, it is Richardson's highlighting of his body in board meetings, which results in changing external behaviors, that deserves greater attention. Richardson states,

Sure. Homophobia does exist in the dance world in ways of...relating to myself, I know in board meetings, being one of the artistic directors of the company, in board meetings there's a way, there's a presentation, there's a businesslike manner, there is all of those things that need to come into play. Any of the vernacular that we use in the dance world where, you know, we cut up with each other. "Hey, you know, how"— No. And once that is viewed in a board setting it's off-putting. Again, there's that whole emasculating thing. To me, I think I'm my experience—and not necessarily

for myself but actually looking at some others—it's off-putting. And you go, "Oh, not serious. Don't know how to switch over." Blah-blah-blah. All of those things. And the switchover does not go back into the whole passing thing, it's more—So you just need to know how to change your hat because everybody doesn't react the same way and you need to know how to do that. Thank God I learned that early. [chuckle] How to change your hat, change it around.

For the interests of this section, Richardson's outline of altering his behavior in a boardroom meeting—potentially as a response to homophobia—indicates his awareness of the appropriateness of certain behaviors in certain spaces. He recognizes that some behaviors and familiarity conveyed between gay men in other settings (e.g., a dance studio or club) might serve as distractions. His response details a self-regulation of the body as a means of preempting any behaviors that might be considered off-putting to the board members. This shows a particular relationship of Richardson to his board, one based primarily on conducting business without distractions. When I suggest that his behavior reflects a code of conduct or a level of professionalism within a board meeting, he agrees, saying, "It is the code of conduct in a board meeting. Everybody has to be precise. The agendas, all the minutes, everything has to be...so there isn't any room for any 'letting down the hair,' as we say...But I do

think that it's a code of conduct and there's a professional protocol that needs to be maintained.”

More importantly, Richardson's response to the question tells us that he is aware of self-regulating and managing the performance of his body according to the spaces he inhabits. The moment, or the extent to which, those behaviors veer into gay vernacular or reveal the penchant of gay men in dance to “cut up with each other” or “let the hair down” contradicts the intended goal of the board meeting, a situation in which those behaviors are to be sublimated.

Richardson's answer features another component that describes the familiarity and intimacy of how gay men in dance who “cut up with each other” can be perceived as effeminate. To him, the intimate exchange between gay men in dance must be reserved for settings outside the boardroom for fear of introducing, as Richardson describes, “the whole emasculating thing.” Here Richardson makes a connection between the shared intimacy and knowledge of the black queer male dancing body and the perception of it as unwarranted behavior for black men specifically.<sup>69</sup> The presentation of the black queer male dancing body in the context of the board meeting resists the appearance of anything that might limit the perception of its power.

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<sup>69</sup> Black men have contended with notions of emasculation, particularly regarding patriarchal masculinity that denote relationships of power between other men and women and eschew expressions of anything feminine. The exhibition of gender nonconforming behavior is perceived as feminine. Some might argue that these are the social or cultural processes that make black men incapable of being “real” men. For more on this issue, see Morris 243–245.



The different spaces the black queer male dancing body inhabits necessitate awareness and adaptability. In the last section of Richardson's answer to homophobia and the dance community, he describes the black queer male dancing body's ability to "switch over" or "change your hat," which conveys the importance of being able to do so. I argue that Richardson's awareness of this need to "switch over" and "change your hat" reveals his perceptiveness regarding the behaviors and performance of his queer body. In an earlier question, I ask him whether passing is an issue for gay men. To this, he responds more specifically and discusses issues of homophobia and dance. He observes needing to know how to interact in different situations and settings because "everybody doesn't react the same way." For Richardson, the awareness of his body in space recognizes the consequences of not being able to adapt, which might result in punishment, violence, shame, and exclusion. In this context, Richardson bears the onus of learning how to manage and maneuver his body in society, fearful of the possible repercussion or reprisals his actions—and inactions—engender. For Richardson, the awareness, knowledge, and strategizing the "hats" he wears is imperative to his survival, not only in the dance world but in society at large.

*Case Study: Dwight Rhoden*

For Dwight Rhoden, the experience of homophobia within the dance world reveals itself in multiple ways. Rhoden's response presents three scenarios for consideration. Similarities exist between his answer and Richardson's in the sense that they do not describe personal experiences of homophobia directed towards them but have observed it in others.<sup>70</sup> The following dialogue captures our exchange:

DWR: Well, you're always going to run into [people who are] homophobic because they're either— homosexual inside [chuckle] and don't know it yet and are having trouble with dealing with it or sometimes it's just that they haven't had an experience with a gay person. It could be someone who is straight who's just never had that exchange. So, you know, phobia is because...phobia comes from never having the experience or not knowing how to deal with something or something being brand-new or uncomfortable. So it does exist but I haven't really experienced it myself except for maybe, you know...No, not really in the dance world as...me as a dancer. But I definitely see it around. I've seen it.

MB: And it's around—

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<sup>70</sup> Rhoden and Richardson's descriptions of homophobia do not include choreography. In Chapter Three, I analyze the implications of the artistic direction of their company that possibly reinforces or deviates from traditional conceptions of the black male dancing body.

DWR: Within companies, within directors and dancers, sometimes with...in the dancers themselves, the straight dancers and the gay dancers.

MB: Okay.

DWR: You'll see an uncomfortability with maybe someone who's outwardly very gay—very outwardly gay and comfortable with himself in that way—and then the others around aren't quite sure how to take it if they haven't been around it enough or a lot.

Rhoden discusses several topics worth analyzing. First, he addresses the possible homophobia of individuals who do not recognize their own sexual orientations. These individuals then project the very things they fear most about themselves onto others. The projection safely shields from possible scrutiny and suspicion about one's own sexuality by denying it vehemently in other people. Second, he provides an example of some individuals' inexperience with gay persons, which can lead to homophobia. Most importantly, though, is Rhoden's statement that homophobia does exist—he has observed it in other dance spaces and personalities—and yet he says he has not experienced it himself. This apparent contradiction also requires further analysis. Rhoden's example of the demonstrably queer body and the reaction to it is the final illuminating aspect of our exchange.

What I would like to concentrate on, however, is the fact that Rhoden easily observed homophobia “within companies, within directors and dancers, sometimes within the dancers themselves, the straight and the gay dancers,” but he did not observe it affecting him on a personal level. How could the prevalence of homophobia he described in the dance world not affect him? The reasoning Rhoden applies deserves greater attention. More importantly, his response fails to make a wider connection between homophobia in dance culture at large and the implications of this for the individual in society. Here Rhoden’s observations fail to incorporate personal experiences; instead he does observe the manifestation of homophobia externalized on the body.

The externalization of homophobia characterized by Rhoden’s previous response leads us to his next example, which serves to illustrate the outward manifestation or display of homophobia. Here the “very outwardly gay” body exposes an uncomfortable response by individuals unaccustomed to such overt expressions of “gayness.” Though Rhoden did not convey what the discomfort registered as, it is clear from his statement the general (dis)ease the demonstrably queer body causes. Does his explanation of homophobia in the dance community stop merely because of exposure to the demonstrably queer body? Whether by choice or not, the demonstrably queer body represents the inability of the body to pass unnoticed. And that gender nonconforming behavior makes the queer male dancing body an open target for punishment. In Rhoden’s

illustration, the demonstrable queer body elicits a general unease for members of society. Like Richardson's example, both responses of the demonstrably queer body create anxiety around actions deemed gender inappropriate. In Richardson's case, it warranted a curtailment of behavior, relegating it to another space, while in Rhoden's case, we observe what might occur when the demonstrably queer body is not repressed.

Although Rhoden describes the reception of the demonstrably queer body, his overall response instead appears to address what happens when the gendered body fails to meet conventional expectations of masculinity. The general anxiety caused by the performance of gender nonconformity results in a situation where "the others around aren't quite sure how to take it." This anxiety can create a situation that may challenge preconceived notions of the male body. Without actual description of the demonstrable queer body, it is hard to distinguish the cause of the anxiety. For men, the demonstrably queer body makes "gay" synonymous with effeminacy. However, such a reading fails to understand the performance or reception of the gay male-gendered body without the presence of femininity. The reliance upon or requirement of effeminacy to denote the demonstrably queer body bears no direct relationship to an individual's sexual orientation as gay and, as such, requires thorough debunking. What the performance of gender nonconformity does do, however, is challenge the preconceptions of society's traditional expectations of the gendered body—

hence the discomfort that arises in social situations because the individual unfamiliar with such presentation of the body has to question who or what they are dealing with. Thus, general assumptions made about particular bodies are challenged and require that the individual faces his own gender ideology. The anxiety experienced may thus manifest in the form of homophobia.

The demonstrable queer body deserves attention for another reason: not “covering.” Kenji Yoshino describes covering as, for those who are out of the closet to friends and family, choosing not to bring attention to the fact they are gay—for any number of reasons (77–79). Yoshino’s analysis extends the work of Goffman and presents contemporary examples of the phenomenon for study. In Rhoden’s description of the “very outwardly gay” man, he acknowledges the individual being “comfortable with himself” in way that makes others around him anxious. His description is a clear example of choosing not to cover his actions or behavior to make others feel comfortable. Rather than passing for straight or feeling shame toward the demonstrably queer male body, the performance of gender nonconformity in Rhoden’s example disturbs conventional boundaries between masculinity and femininity.

*Case Study: Ronald K. Brown*

The issue of homophobia and dance expresses itself differently in Ronald K. Brown’s interview. His descriptions detail the performance of masculinity, or

lack thereof, on the black queer male dancing body that raises suspicions about the expression of any such thing as authentic masculinity. In addition, he supplies insights that illuminate the intersection of masculinity and homophobia, providing context for a wider analysis of the connection between gender performance and sexuality. The previous two case studies share a common factor with Brown's insight—the apparent contradiction of American contemporary dance and homophobia. What connects the three case studies might more accurately be described as effeminophobia. Though homophobia correlates all three case studies, it is the continued anxiety associated with the black queer male dancing body exhibiting characteristics apprehended as feminine that garners attention.

Specifically, Brown discusses two situations. First, he addresses the phenomenon of men marrying women to disguise to the public one's identification as homosexual while maintaining an offstage identity as gay.<sup>71</sup> Second, Brown addresses the increased criticisms of some male dancers who are seen as dancing like women. His examples stage an intersectional analysis for dance, gender performance, and sexuality. Our exchange included the following:

MB: Does homophobia exist in the dance community?

RKB: Yeah, I mean – in – how many ballet companies where the men are getting married left and right and you're like "Oh, he's getting down,"

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<sup>71</sup> See Terry 13 and Manning 77.

right. And the whole thing about "Dance like a man, dance like a man, dance like a man," and you hire nothing but men who dance like women.

MB: Which companies are you talking about? Ballet companies?

RKB: Ballet companies and modern dance companies where they are "Why are they dancing like women?"

MB: Where have you been hearing this?

RKB: I'm not telling you but in modern dance companies where they hire big men, right, and then they say, "Can you talk to them? They dance like women." You hired them. Just because they're six feet, just because they have big muscles does not mean that they're going to dance like you want them to dance.

MB: That's interesting.

RKB: And why do you even say they're dancing like women? That's homophobia. So I can say I'm homophobic too because I will say that same thing. "Why are they dancing like women? Why are they dancing like the women?" [chuckle]

Brown's first answer in response to homophobia and dance depicts a world of contrasts between Goffman's concepts of front stage and back stage performances. The increased participation of men in American contemporary dance has resulted in a public relations campaign strategy to make dance more



acceptable and safe for all—in other words, *heterosexual*—men. Strategies often rely on overcompensatory measures such as hypermasculinity to reassure an anxious public that the men dancing are indeed “real” men. In this case, hypermasculinity and the phrase “real men” are code for heterosexual masculinity, with all the signifiers of traditional manhood deployed (i.e., strength, athleticism, and power). The front stage presentation of the male dancing body—which includes publicity material, public engagements, and onstage performances—intently focuses on hypermasculinity. The public relations strategy relies on a consistent message, a continued insistent emphasis on male dancers’ hypermasculinity. This front stage emphasis plays on assuaging any possible anxiety regarding male dancers’ stereotypical association with femininity. This strategy attempts to deny the stereotypical perception of male dancers as effeminate and gay.

Brown’s response also indicated a back stage performance of male dancers hidden from the public perception of the individual. Alternatively, sometimes the back stage performance can fall in the category of an open secret within dance circles. Here the public perception and persona of the dancer, particularly within mainstream ballet companies, closely guard that secret (if it in fact is an open secret). Indeed, the dancer’s onstage performance cannot (and should not) conflict with his offstage life. In this sense, ballet companies protect the image of their dancers, much as the old Hollywood studio system did,

managing individual artists' careers and maintaining clearly divisible lines between onscreen performances and their offstage lives.<sup>72</sup>

Homophobia and dance are not clearly articulated in Brown's example. The intersection reveals itself more through the subtext of his answer and the fact that he refers to another strategy deployed to offset suspicion of male dancers' gayness: heterosexual marriage. Whether true or not, Brown's response alludes to a strategy of containment for managing the perceptions of male dancers—all for fear of their homosexuality. Not only did Brown allude to men's offstage identities: he also suggested the ever-present interest in guessing the sexual orientations of particular dancers often occurs in dance companies.

Next, Brown distinguishes another component of homophobia and American contemporary dance that manifests itself in the critique of gender performance. Again, Brown's answer confirms the perception conflating "men who dance like women" with homophobia. Kimmel substantiates this, arguing,

As young men we are constantly riding those gender boundaries, checking the fences we have constructed on the perimeter, making sure that nothing even remotely feminine might show through. The possibilities of being unmasked are everywhere. Even the most seemingly insignificant thing can pose a threat or activate that haunting terror. ("Masculinity" 65)

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<sup>72</sup> For more information on this topic, see Ehrenstein 11–14.

This perception and its manifestation in the black male dancing bodies to which Brown refers make the notions of “correction” all the more important for dance company’s audiences. The resultant “correction” alleviates anxiety surrounding gender nonconformity of the black male dancing body. Indeed, the public perception of “men who dance like women” can potentially devastate a dance company’s promotion of hypermasculinity and the persona of its male dancers who embody traditional masculine ideals. On several levels, this perception complicates the historical association accompanying the prejudice and stereotype of male dancers as effeminate and gay. For example, the request for Brown to “talk to them”—gender nonconforming male dancers—illustrates this point. In other words, he was told to “tell the male dancers there’s no room for such display on stage” and then actively work toward removing identifiers of femininity on the male dancing body for fear of the repercussions not only for the dance companies involved but for how those identifiers compromise masculinity in contemporary culture and society.

Brown’s answer conveys the premium of hiring and training male dancers to fit the conventional model of masculinity. These men have the requisite signifiers of traditional masculinity—they are tall and muscular. Although the dancers Brown describes do fit this profile, he maintains that this does not necessarily mean dance companies will draw the desired gender performances from them. Hiring these male dancers challenges the notion that possessing

signifiers of traditional masculinity actually correlate to their *performance*. It reveals the distance between the masculine ideal and the real, and the actual construction of the male dancing body. The onstage performance registers the dual ability to change and conform offstage in preparation for its tasks onstage. These efforts all underline the parameters of delivering a male dancing body for consumption without questioning the masculinity of the performer. As I argue in Chapter One, the implicit challenge to manhood and masculinity renders the male dancer's (hetero)sexuality suspect.

Brown also implicates himself when illustrating the reach of homophobia. The response reveals his own awareness regarding homophobia and dance as well as his contribution to maintaining the power it inscribes on the male dancing body. Rather than challenge the homophobia contained within such a statement, Brown acknowledges his complicity in furthering this oppressive masculine ideal. Brown's revelation attests to the interests at stake in perpetuating the high premium on masculinity. In this case, the clearest exercise of homophobia and the male dancing body is evidenced in firm eschewals of femininity.

In spite of Brown's own admission of homophobia, his revelation deserves greater scrutiny. What kind of perceptions shape his responses that define "men who dance like women"? How, in fact, do the men dance like women? Rather than this being a potential weakness, depending on who the spectator or audience is, might it in fact realize a discernible expansion of gender beyond the

binary of masculine and feminine? What does it mean to attribute femininity to the male dancing body? I argue the potential to express this duality on the male dancing body invites a more nuanced depiction of gender performance. Rather than disavow femininity, the male dancing body can incorporate it, thus expanding rigid notions of gender. Kimmel has argued that many heterosexual men fear doing so because it is perceived to lessen their status and power among other men and in society (“Masculinity” 71). In other words, the men who stage, whether consciously or not, the duality of gender for the male dancing body do so at a great cost.

Furthermore, I contend that placing the mere association with femininity on the male dancing body is so contrary to traditional representations of masculinity that heterosexual men avoid such connotations at all costs. In addition, I maintain the standards and expectations for training the male dancer have changed greatly over past several decades.<sup>73</sup> This change has blurred traditional attributes of the female dancing body such that the male dancing body now accomplishes feats once thought to be the province of women only. This equally

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<sup>73</sup> In Desmond Richardson’s interview, he discusses the critique of men as dancing like women. He likens this perception to the fact that technical standards for men have increased now and some men aspire for features that were typically associated with women, including flexibility, nice feet, and beautiful lines. In Richardson’s assessment, some male dancers may emulate these aforementioned qualities, but it is up to them to investigate and interpret what that movement quality means on the male dancing body: “Because all of that is a lot of emulating and wanting to be like your favorite person sometimes. It’s really usually about that, it’s not even like being like a girl but oftentimes it comes off like that because what they see what’s working is the natural beauty of feminine quality—the arch of their back, the beauty of the nape of the neck, the way that legs arch, just the way women stand, it’s a beautiful thing. There’s an appreciation there but it gets a little twisted because you don’t want to fall into that place because then your individuality is clouded.”

and all-important factor deserves more scholarly attention in American contemporary dance studies. Therefore, the men who choose to move in this way help define the demonstrably black queer male dancing body. In this context, the demonstrably black queer male dancing body accepts gender nonconformity as means to express his individuality. To demonstrate the individual agency of male dancers that conform and resist traditional representations of masculinity, Chapter Four advances the construction of the male dancing body in greater detail.

### **Racial Belonging?**

In various ways, each of the men interviewed for this project describes his experiences as a racialized subject and the ways the body challenges “authentic” notions of blackness. For the most part, their responses indicate taking measures to “prove” themselves, such as amassing incomparable bodies of work that go unrecognized within the black community or the contradiction faced when the black community fails to embrace its own even as he strives to belong. In this way, the subjects internalize oppressive ideals found within the black community in order to prove they belong. The notion of proving blackness defies a common perception of a monolithic black community, despite differences in these men’s lived experiences. Why is proof a necessary standard for inclusion? Why can’t one just *be*? The second question harkens back to Goffman’s theory that part of

our daily interactions with others now confers *acting* rather than *being* the part (9). Given these dancers' prodigious talents and contributions to American culture, what more proof is necessary for them to have a sense of belonging?

The sense of belonging, or lack thereof, hovered over the dancers interviewed, and each dancer ultimately revealed the obstacles he faced and the tension this lack of belonging has created in his life. Much of the tension that lies at the heart of their stories relates to their marginalization as black gay men and how these experiences complicate even progressive discourses about race. Within this section on race and the black queer male dancing body, I examine the dancers' notions of belonging to community, a concept that was introduced in Chapter One. In many respects, the failure of their bodies to conform to conventional notions of blackness troubles their reception among the black community.

*Case Study: Desmond Richardson*

This sense of belonging, or its absence, haunts the interviewed subjects. In captivating moments toward the end of a three-and-a-half-hour interview with Desmond Richardson, he conveyed his ultimate sense of disillusionment with the black community, as well as the gay community and dominant culture in general. I often closed interviews by asking whether there was anything else the interviewee would like to discuss. This question was an attempt to give the

dancer a chance to respond to any aspect of our exchange or to bring attention to an area not covered within the parameters of my questions. In response to this question, Richardson asserted:

No, I think, one of the things that I'd like to discuss, one of the reasons why as a black gay African American man who has an extensive career in so many different genres that its...why that it's [not] pushed out as often. Even from the community. Like I've never been contacted by Ebony, never been contacted by Essence, never been contacted by Jet. Never. And I've sent them—so much stuff, it's crazy. Never have they ever put me in anything. Well that's a slap. Well, I've been in *Black Enterprise* and I've been in *Essence* magazine as One to Watch, like back in '99 or something like that when I was doing *Fosse*. But never as a story or never anything like that. And I'm wondering like I see that happening to many things. Not just dance. But *always* with dance. *Always* with dance. It's never anywhere around. And then they're wondering, oh well I didn't know about you. And I'm like, well, the press release was sent. So I don't know what happened. But it's that, I think it goes to that whole stigma thing again of they'd rather, prefer to write about, as an analogy, Carlos Acosta coming from Cuba having this, they were on the boat, they were out in the middle of the ocean trying to get over to Miami. You know all of this other stuff, all of this drama. And here is a kid from Queens that just, trust me I had a lot of



drama. Trying to do this whole thing and actually persevering and kinda getting to the top of the game and...but yet and still not having an opportunity to get that notoriety like that, that quickly. So that would be my question, how is it possible in a place where there is so much freedom and access and all of that but still be a non-entity almost, in the community?

I focus my analysis of Richardson's response on the following themes: (1) his raced body and self-identification as a black gay man, (2) his perceptions as to the reasons for the lack of media coverage, and (3) how belonging to a community eludes his grasp despite his significant and historical achievements. Each of these areas shows his body's difficulty in tidily fitting into preconceived notions about black male dancers.

Richardson's discussion of his self-identification as both black and as an African American gay man illustrates the tension between these two identities.<sup>74</sup> Richardson reveals his black identity as primary. He lists the three foremost magazines of the black community, representing African American life and culture. For him, the fact that they omit his career as a story—even after being provided with materials—conveys a lack of value and appreciation. That he has sent them “so much stuff” is particularly concerning to him, as an accomplished artist. With Richardson's long and stellar career, how can these black magazines claim to represent the highest accomplishments of outstanding black individuals

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<sup>74</sup> For more information on this topic, see DeFrantz, *Dancing Many* 4.

without including him? The brief mentions in *Black Enterprise* and *Essence* do no justice to the height he has achieved in his career. His disappointment stems not just from a lack of coverage but from the fact that his life and career do not amount to a cover or feature story in the magazines, even after relentless pursuit.

Next, he discerns two reasons for non-coverage. First, he describes the stigma against male dancers and dance's associations with effeminacy and homosexuality, which I analyze in Chapter's One and Two. Second, he relates how his story somehow lacks the dramatic narrative of Carlos Acosta, a black male dancer from Cuba and a guest principal artist with the Royal Ballet. The first point involves the magazines' management of the public perception of male dancers. Richardson's case emphasizes the difficult task of changing these perceptions about male dancers. For the publishers of these magazines, the question possibly arises: Would Richardson's story confirm or reinforce the stereotype of male dancers as gay? To evade this issue, a feature or cover story could simply refrain from addressing his personal life. Or, more to the point, a personal feature or cover story should be a chance to humanize the individual and perhaps identify with his career triumphs and personal struggles. To some degree, the stigma of male dancers prevents this necessary type of coverage from occurring, which in turn typifies a homophobic response to the stigma affecting male dancers.

If Richardson's case serves as a guide to the changing perceptions of male dancers and the stereotype of male dancers as effeminate, it appears they have not changed that much at all. To illuminate Richardson's point further, I turn to Dwight Rhoden's response when asked if he thinks male dancers are stereotyped in American contemporary dance:

I think they can be but—it depends on what stigma you're talking about. If you're talking about stigmatized with that stereotype of being feminine just because you dance, I think less and less. I think—thank goodness less and less. I mean there's so much more—there's so much more to the male dancer than his sexuality. And he's there as an artist to communicate something to you, that's not what he's there for.

On one hand, Rhoden's response informs us that the stereotype of male dancers as effeminate has lessened. He does not impose heterosexuality or homosexuality on the male dancing body; Rhoden argues that male dancers have more to offer with their artistry than bringing their suspect status and the associations of male dancers with homosexuality to the fore. Rhoden's statement contrasts with Richardson's, above remark. If Rhoden's assertion holds, then why the apparent lack of interest in covering Richardson's success? On some level, Richardson's characterization typifies a problem experienced by male dancers. His versatile career includes concert dance, ballet, film, video, and Broadway. These are no small accomplishments for any artist. And yet

Richardson struggles to gain wider recognition. If his career were in mainstream sports, maybe he would gain greater renown.<sup>75</sup>

Richardson's second point also directs attention to the means by which stories gain traction in the media. For all intents and purposes, Richardson's story as a homegrown talent pales in comparison to the dramatic narrative found in Carlos Acosta's story. The events that underlie Acosta's story reveal the politics that cast a favorable light on America, particularly in its strained relationship with Cuba and the number of exiles residing in Miami. These tensions make for a richer narrative, but they do so at the expense of other dramatic stories, such as Richardson's. To Richardson, Acosta's story displaces his because it is a story that combines political intrigue and crossing borders, as opposed to Richardson's experiences as an American. Acosta's account emphasizes the politics of nation-states, de-emphasizing the all-too-suspect question about homosexuality and effeminacy (White).<sup>76</sup>

Third, Richardson's final point hints at his success as an artist and the individual fortitude he has displayed in spite of his own struggles to reach such

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<sup>75</sup> I believe part of the lack of coverage stems from the fears black male dancers have about being perceived as role models to young boys and men. Though anecdotal, I asked several men in my dance class whether, if their sons decided to dance, would they have a problem with it. The four black men responded no. However, when I asked if would they choose dance as an alternative to sports, each expressed their reservations and doubt. So on one side, these men seem to say they would support their sons' decisions to dance, yet they would not seek out that opportunity for them.

<sup>76</sup> Lesley White's article on Carlos Acosta introduces his girlfriend into the narrative of the story. How many self-identified gay men have an opportunity to share similar information about their boyfriends?

heights of success. Ultimately, Richardson raises the most poignant and devastating critique in his last question, “How is it possible that I can be in a place where there’s so much freedom and access and all of that but still be a non-entity almost in the community?” This last thought more than any other captures Richardson’s disenchantment with what he perceives as American notions of freedom and access. His statement reflects a critique of American notions of democracy, equal opportunity, and access to all and the failure to recognize an individual worthy of his prodigious talent. Not only is Richardson’s stellar career testimony to his achievements and perseverance but critics and dancers alike testify to his talent, inspiration, and influence in the dance community.<sup>77</sup> How can a dancer of his gifts and prominence fail to gain the visibility accorded to his peer from Cuba?

Part of Richardson’s answer discloses another area of insight into the notion of belonging; Richardson unearthed another facet to his “persevering and kind of getting to the top of the game” that merits further examination. Though Richardson attests to his own perseverance, he stops short of saying he made it to the top and instead qualifies his success. His statement could reflect humility

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<sup>77</sup> Critics testify to Desmond Richardson’s brilliance and talent as a performer. These include the former chief dance critic of the New York Times, Anna Kisselgoff, who stated, “Richardson is everybody’s dream of a dancer, perfect in form and technique with an individual presence that makes him an immediate standout in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre.” Jennifer Dunning also claims, “Desmond Richardson, a modern dancer whose power and charisma have defied definition since his days with Alvin Ailey’s company... was as usual his magnificent self.” These are only few of the accolades Richardson has received throughout this career. Numerous dancers interviewed for this project also mentioned Richardson as one of the most influential black male dancers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

when referring to a request made by then-President George W. Bush to perform at a presidential conference in Israel. Richardson insists on his desire to work and not seek fame. His answer illustrates a career not in pursuit of fame but in the art and craft of dance. Here he adds, “For me, because I’m not that type of person to be like, Hey, you should look [gestures contrarily to downplay receiving attention]—Hey, can’t you see [repeats previous gestures].” I wonder if his response is in part resignation, reflecting doubts about the importance of what he has achieved. Although he expresses a frustration with not being embraced by the black press, Richardson survives because of wider recognition of who he is and what he has achieved.

Knowing that he has done so much and received little attention speaks to being silenced and his feeling like a “non-entity, almost, in the community.” When I asked Richardson to clarify the community to which he referred, he responded, “Both: the gay community and the straight community.” In general, male dancers face prejudice in their profession; however Richardson must contend not only with the stigma against male dancers but also the multiple oppressions of race, gender, and sexuality that his body represents. Richardson alludes to his erasure from both communities and the implicit reference to both dominant white culture and African American culture’s regarding heterosexuality. His attempt to find validation in these communities goes unmet, hence his feeling almost invisible.

This rejection complicates Richardson's narrative and makes his acceptance within both communities he describes that much more elusive.

*Case Study: Dwight Rhoden*

In another example of belonging, Dwight Rhoden discussed the difficulties faced as a light-skinned black person in the AAADT. Rhoden's experience illuminates the problem of colorism, by which preference for lighter skin denotes one's worth.<sup>78</sup> However, Rhoden argues that in his case he found the reverse to be true while dancing for the Ailey company: his black male dancing body became suspect because it raised questions about authenticity. For this section, I address the policing of blackness and the implications for his body and belonging to the black community.

Rhoden's description of his experiences as a dancer with AAADT centers on convincing others at AAADT that he was African American. Part of this entailed showing those in question that he in fact understood African American culture:

So some of the typical pieces that were made in the African American experience, that is my experience but I don't necessarily look that way typically. So I would have to work harder at convincing them that I

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<sup>78</sup> For more information on this topic, see Hunter 48–49.

understood and to show them that my voice in this work is also a necessary voice because every African American male is not brown and rolling with muscles. I eventually got some muscles though. [chuckle] I worked hard. [laughter] But, I had to work—I had to really let them see that I understood this experience; I was this experience even though I do have sort of a multiracial background.

Rhoden's first statement casts doubt on the notion of blackness by recognizing that he may not look like the stereotypical African American. So although he identifies the African American experience as his own, he argues that his looks defy expectations of embodied knowledge. Rhoden had to bridge his lived experience of race and the potential gap in perception to convince others at the AAADT accordingly. To this end, Rhoden worked hard to show them he did belong, that his voice mattered. By doing so, he challenged perceptions of black masculinity for which darker skin connotes authenticity, and thus he made a space for his black male dancing body. Moreover, Rhoden's experience also highlights AAADT investment in presenting traditional images of "strong" and darker-skinned black men. In this way, there is no observable question to one's authentic blackness.



*Case Study: Ronald K. Brown*

In Ronald K. Brown's case, notions of belonging reveal themselves in two different ways. In one instance, Brown describes a story about a group of gay men who decided to confront the black church on its demonization of black gay people. In the second, he speaks about the discourse concerning homosexuality in Africa. The examination of Brown's response offers vivid insight into the lived contradictions often faced by black gay men.

The marginalization of gays and lesbians within the black community continues to be a source of tension. The examples provided by Brown unearth the tensions surrounding the politics of race and homosexuality in the black community and in Africa. The black church denounces homosexuality and considers it irreconcilable with the church's participation in the long struggle for civil rights, and many raise the question of whether or not homosexuality exists in Africa. If so, black LGBT people are viewed as a result of Western colonization, imperialism, and lost histories (Murray and Roscoe xii). For example, Brown connects the black church's homophobia to the lack of empowerment among black gays and lesbians in the wider black community. Such politics of representation stems from addressing critiques of black masculinity and the representative power of heterosexual black men to speak on the behalf of all black men and women while ignoring the diversity within the black community, including black gay men and lesbians (Harper, *Are We* 53).

The representational power of blacks (mostly men) that often excludes black LGBT people finds illustration through an example Brown recounted from the anthology *Spirited*. The point drawn in his illustration addresses homophobia of the black church and bears evidence of the perception that gay men are not real men, exposing the heart of the tension in the ongoing debate between homosexuality and the church. His story addresses a primary sense of black gay men belonging to the black community and their literal and rhetorical removal from it:

And so that whole process of it's not going to happen overnight but we have to bring people to task or take them to task in a way that can make a change, right. So I don't think that we can say—oh, demand to be at the table when they can't really hear you because they think you're going to hell or they think you're not a man because you're loving another man, right. The same way that they don't want you at the table because a woman is loving another woman or you're loving a white person, whatever—whatever stops you from coming to the table that can't stop you from doing the work and making a space to empower the people who need the strength to live.

Brown's generic use of "they" can be interpreted in this context as not only the black church: it can stand in for the black community at large, since so many black people participate in it. His summarizing "their" thinking as "you're not a

man because you're loving a man" is important because it squarely suggests the perception that many in the black community possess about manhood. This perception offers evidence of why gay men supposedly fail at manhood and at performing masculinity, and thus why they are often not called upon to represent black masculinity. Brown used the story as a chance to delegitimize the black church's power to refuse any group or individual and instead reframed this source of tension as the potential for black LGBT people to create spaces that empower the marginalized.

Brown's acknowledgement of homophobia in the black church and its failure to meet with, discuss, or attend to the needs of black gays and lesbians speaks to the larger failure of the black community to include the marginalized and oppressed in their midst. It also speaks to the internalized homophobia that can cause distress and feelings of isolation within the very space of belonging for the black LGBT community. Brown's statement "whatever stops you from coming to the table" perceptively captures the ambivalent relationship many marginalized black gays and lesbians have with the black church. Though many may struggle for recognition the primary affiliation groups—in this case, the black community—he exhorts, "That can't stop you from doing the work and making a space" for what is important. Despite those that would deny LGBT humanity, he affirmed the value of creating alternative spaces and the empowerment that can come from doing so.

In the prior scenario, Brown used the church to illustrate the lack of belonging felt among gays and lesbians in the black community. His narration offered a stark example of the incompatibility of black manhood with homosexuality. Overall, the church represents the tensions felt within the wider black community on this topic. For the most part, denying black LGBT individuals places at the table reveals the difficulty of finding voice or representational power within the institutionalized power of the church. This continued effort to thwart, deny, and resist efforts to recognize homosexuality or same-gender loving in the black community appeared in Brown's discussion of homosexuality in Africa.

The African diaspora serves as Brown's choreographic and philosophic base for his company, as well as his own worldview. Brown draws on "social contemporary traditional dances from Africa, Cuba [and] Haiti" to create his aesthetic. For Brown, traveling and working in the African diaspora afford him greater insights into a cross-cultural perspective of dance and culture. Because of this perspective and the commonplace denials of homosexuality in Africa, in his interview I made sure to ask about the connections between the two. This question also provided a context for Brown to explain how he reconciled self-identification as a black gay man, on one hand, with working in a geographical and psychological space that eschews notions of homosexuality altogether, on the other.

Any discussion of Brown's identity as a black gay man must take into account the discourse on African homosexuality. To do so in the context of the prevailing attitudes about homosexuality among African Americans is an attempt to challenge notions of black authenticity. When it comes to the discourse on Africa and homosexuality, scholar Bill Stanford Pincheon states, "Africa is referred to as a kind of cultural, social, and political unity, and also a kind of unity in relation to homosexuality" (41). Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins contends in *Black Sexual Politics* that

the possibility of distinctive and worthwhile African-influenced worldviews on anything, including sexuality, as well as the heterogeneity of African societies expressing such views, was collapsed into an imagined, pathologized Western discourse of what was thought to be essentially African. (98)

For that reason, asking Brown about homosexuality in Africa was an acknowledgement of notions of its absence on the continent of Africa and was designed to bring to bear his knowledge of the different countries he has visited on the continent. It also was an opportunity to locate Brown within the African diaspora from which he draws inspiration. Thus, analyzing Brown's response exposes the multiple meanings of belonging to community, especially in relation to the African diaspora.

While in the previous example Brown tackles the homophobia of the black church, here regarding Africa and the rhetoric on homosexuality he refrains from doing so as forcefully. The following details our exchange:

MB: How do you respond to someone saying that homosexuality does not exist in Africa?

RKB: Well, it's not true. So I would say they don't know what they're talking about.

MB: But you know there is much black nationalistic rhetoric espouses or talks about [that].

RKB: Yeah. They don't what they're talking about. It's all right. People have been mistaken for eons.

The ambiguity of Brown's response deserves further analysis. In some respects, the ambiguity of his response leaves it open to interpretation, and tellingly his statement might entail what Goffman refers to as impression management (248–251). Brown's performance redirects attention away from the issue at hand and instead attends to shaping the perception of his audience. Rather than directly challenge the very idea that homosexuality does not exist in Africa, Brown resorts to categorically denouncing it as untrue. Notions of belonging to community provide a deep sense of connection and worth (Bailey 148). The very thought that he could possibly be rejected by the same tradition in which he is rooted appeared inconceivable. Asking Brown about this topic offered him an

opportunity to clarify his position regarding misinformation on a heated topic. Quick and abrupt denunciations by Brown perhaps speak to what it means to be a black gay man working in the Africanist tradition. Earlier, his account of men loving men was offered as an example of not being considered a man by some people. However, in this account, Brown's manhood seems challenged by those who would question his existence at all. Even more so, the threat of non-existence under this paradigm positions him, and other black gays and lesbians, as not "authentically" black.

If homosexuality finds no home in Africa, where does that leave questions of authenticity, given Brown's identity and Africanist aesthetic? Although he may not provide a full explanation of the highly contentious issue, the relationship of Brown's identity to homophobic rhetoric requires further examination. In the following section, I examine the source of tension this creates for Brown and the challenge it presents for notions of belonging to the black community,

No conversation about sexuality in Africa can occur without reference to colonization and myths fostered by Europeans about its native population (Murray and Roscoe xi). In her book *Black Sexual Politics*, Collins describes how Europeans created the myth of homosexuality's absence in Africa and the purpose it advanced towards constructing heterosexuality as most "natural" for primitive black Africans. Collins claims:

Among the myths Europeans have created about Africa, the myth that homosexuality is absent or incidental is the oldest and most enduring. For Europeans, black Africans—of all the native peoples of the world—most epitomized “primitive man.” Since primitive man is supposed to be close to nature, ruled by instinct, and culturally unsophisticated, he had to be heterosexual, his sexual energies and outlets demoted exclusively to their “natural” purpose: biological reproduction. If black Africans were the most primitive people in all humanity—if they were indeed human, which some debated—then they had to be the most heterosexual. (105)

The perpetuation of this myth by many African Americans affirms the introduction of homosexuality to Africa as a result of European colonization, thus serving to whiten homosexuality. Collins tackles this myth and explores the resulting discourse that assumes black people are naturally heterosexual. She explains that African Americans’ internalization of these racist attitudes coheres around “Black hyper-heterosexuality with racial authenticity” (106).

Collins thereby critiques this rationalization as posing serious problems and consequences for black people:

Such beliefs generate strategies designed to regulate tightly the sexual practices of Black people as the fundamental task of Black sexual politics. This position inadvertently accepts racist views of Blackness and advocates an antiracist politics that advocates copying the heterosexist



norms associated with White normality. Such beliefs also foster perceptions of LGBT Black people as being less authentically Black. If authentic Black people (according to the legacy of scientific racism) are heterosexual, then LGBT Black people are less authentically Black because they engage in allegedly “White” sexual practices. (106)

Collins’s critique exposes a common belief among African Americans that homosexuality is unnatural and that advocating for black LGBT human rights will only forestall advancing a progressive political agenda on black sexuality. Moreover, her argument reveals the perception of black LGBT people as insufficiently “authentic.” Fundamentally, Collins’s argument illustrates the tension that exists for many black gay men like Brown. Careful not to attribute the absence of homosexuality among African Americans due to mythic notions that reproduce racist ideologies, on the one hand, and yet self-identifying as gay, on the other, Brown is left facing the profound cognitive dissonance of not being black enough to fit into his community. Scholar Beverly Greene comments on this contradictory stance experienced by black gay men when she asserts, “The presence of multiple oppressions can contribute to the development of special coping strategies and resilience just as their ‘patterned injustice’ can provide challenges that can undermine healthy development” (382).

For Brown, confronting the realities of the exclusionary practices of the church, as well as the black cultural nationalism that refutes the presence of

homosexuality in Africa, carries a special burden of representation for someone espousing an African diasporic philosophy of life and culture. Brown's statements reveal the importance and careful attention needed to manage his identity. Indeed, the contradiction is found within his advocacy for an Africanist aesthetic in his work, and yet the disavowal maintained by the larger black community attests to the continued struggle to create a meaningful space for LGBT African Americans. Although black LGBT people are marginalized within the politics of racial representation, Brown wields considerable success with his company. For the most part, Brown's work has been highly acclaimed among critics for advancing contemporary African diasporic dance. In fact, to many, Brown is the face of contemporary dance that blends African American traditions with those of the African diaspora. At once heralded as the central purveyor of this new dance aesthetic, Brown's offstage identity remains marginalized and mired in the politics of authenticity.

## **Conclusion**

In summation, the three case studies above examine the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality for the subjects of this study. The responses provided by Richardson, Rhoden, and Brown uniquely reveal their interaction with and navigation of their bodies in society and culture. The offstage lived experiences presented here further illuminate their relationship to the performance,

perception, and representation of masculinity within a social, cultural, and historical context. More importantly, however, analysis of their oral narratives helps ground otherwise theoretical and discursive formations about the marginalized status of these black gay men and the black queer male dancing body. Furthermore, Chapter Four contextualizes the black queer male dancing body such that our reading of its corporeality does not occur without an examination of the offstage lived experience. Ultimately, the examination of the subjects illuminates a crucial characteristic about their subjectivity, bodies, and movement in society—their multidimensionality.

The case studies presented here build on Chapter Three to introduce a more nuanced analysis showing a dialogical relationship between the on- and offstage performances of masculinity, combined with race and sexuality. Indeed, the oral narratives of their offstage experiences reveal several things worth pointing out: (1) each of the men in some way “fail” at the masculine ideal or notions of authenticity regarding the performance of race, gender, and sexuality; (2) external factors and societal norms shape and influence these men’s lives; and (3) they develop survival strategies and coping mechanisms to resist marginalization. As stated earlier, these men’s experiences and removal from the perceived masculine ideal make them ideal subjects for studying the performances of gender. Their offstage personas reveal the adaptability and multifaceted performances required of their bodies to negotiate and navigate their

worlds. Moreover, their bodies illuminate the fragile construction of masculinity. Indeed, the black queer male dancing body's ability to adapt in different social and cultural contexts, whether conscious or not, reveals an acquisition of skills necessary to combat assumptions about who they are and what they represent. Richardson, Rhoden, and Brown's narratives and offstage lived experiences attest to their bodies' central significance in defining the performance of masculinity.

## Chapter Five

### **Institutional Power and the Fluid Performances of Race, Gender, and Sexuality**

But even if we doubt Abernathy's motives...we can still endorse his belief that the more honestly we confront King's moral lapses, the more we are able to extract from his failings a sense of his authentic humanity and a fuller grasp of his towering achievements. To avoid exploring King's weaknesses is to deny him the careful consideration that should be devoted to any historic figure. And to pretend King didn't sin is to subvert the healthy critical distance we should maintain on all personages, the lack of which leads to charges of uncritical black hero worship.

We need not idolize King to appreciate his worth; neither do we do honor to him by refusing to confront his weaknesses and his limitations. In assessing King's life, it would be immoral to value the abstract good of human perfection.

Michael Eric Dyson

*I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*

This is a glimpse of a living circle of souls, longing to find their voice in a material based culture that worships the individual but still fears those who are different.

Keri Pickett

*Fairies*

### **Iconic Legacy Contested**

Alvin Ailey's life and contributions to the dance world serve as inspiration for this project in many ways, as I have noted earlier in the Introduction. I return to Ailey in this chapter because of his closeted homosexuality and his death to AIDS. These two aspects of his life instigate the critical inquiry of Chapter Five. Toward that end, Michael Eric Dyson's comment reminds us of the difficulty of remembering iconic figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., who oftentimes in death

achieve a level of deification that does not recognize the individuals' full humanity. Indeed, Dyson's quote alludes to how difficult it is for the public to negotiate King's private persona when discussing his legacy. Similar issues arise when addressing the life and legacy of Alvin Ailey and the division between the public/private individual. Moreover, the epigraph captures the debate over how we choose to remember extraordinary individuals throughout American history and what is at stake when doing so, particularly as they apply to a black gay man from the South such as Alvin Ailey (DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations* 230).

Alvin Ailey's far-reaching achievements, including the establishment of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre (AAADT) company, encompass one of the single greatest contradictions of American contemporary dance: the simultaneous embrace and disavowal of gay men. Though black gay men enjoy careers as professional male dancers, they often do so at a great personal toll. Though twenty years have passed since Alvin Ailey died to AIDS-related complications, the issues surrounding his death remain ever present not only for black male dancers but for the black community at large. Statistics by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention state that although blacks represent approximately twelve percent of the population, they account for approximately fifty percent of new cases of AIDS (CDC website).

This study complicates the public persona of Alvin Ailey and his accomplishments in the American dance scene by asking some critical

questions. How can thirty dancers from the AAADT die because of AIDS without a critical response by the organization?<sup>79</sup> Does the organization have a social responsibility to the high percentage of gay men who have danced or continue to dance with the company? These are difficult questions with no easy answers. In light of Dyson's observation, Ailey's offstage persona is not easily reconciled with the public enterprise he created, and the tensions between the two are vital in negotiating his legacy.

The questions above form the central analysis of Chapter Five. In it I argue that institutions such as the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Incorporated (AADF) operate under principles of a bureaucratic model in which an authoritarian management style governs the organization.<sup>80</sup> For purposes of this analysis, I use Max Weber's theory of how bureaucracies work to describe the

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<sup>79</sup> During my first summer doing research at the Ailey (2005), a key actor told me of this number of men who had died from AIDS in the company. The key actor was convinced the numbers were disproportionately high for the Ailey organization in comparison to peer companies such as the American Ballet Theatre or the New York City Ballet, which also experienced the ravages to the AIDS epidemic. The key actor showed me a small commemorative plaque that is placed outside the library of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center that lists names of those company members who were deceased. The plaque bears no indication the men listed died from AIDS. The key actor also relayed this knowledge in such a manner that it was clear that this is not common knowledge within the organization. In my interview with Dwight Rhoden, on May 27, 2009, he discussed the silence regarding Ailey's death to AIDS and cited the fact that company members knew about it. More important were his reflections on the silence and the lack of opportunity to grieve then and how Ailey's death is still not discussed today due to the stigma of AIDS. Upon my questioning, Rhoden also addressed the death of the thirty men in AAADT who, he says, "were dropping left and right," and that their deaths to AIDS also remained silent. Indeed, one key actor, Deborah, talked about the height of the AIDS epidemic and having felt as if she was "death watcher."

<sup>80</sup> See Miner. In discussing Max Weber, Miner differentiates between classical management theory, which he argues focuses on problems of managerial practice, as opposed to Weber's view of bureaucratic theory, which observes its historical development of society and its organizational forms (256).

structure of the company. According to one interpretation of Weber's work, a bureaucracy is a "particular type of social relationship that is either closed to outsiders or limits their admission and has its regulations enforced by a chief, usually with the assistance of an administrative staff" (Miner 256). Under this arrangement, relationships are structured according to a hierarchy, in which power is centralized and subordinates are required to conform to specific rules and expectations. In the case of AADF, these rules and expectations apply to disciplining processes of the body and behavior, particularly as these institutional norms apply to the black queer male dancing body.

With the bureaucratic model at the center of my analysis, I contend that this model serves as the primary organizing principle streamlining all endeavors and energies within AADF toward maintaining their products, which include the AAADT, Ailey II, the Ailey School, Ailey Arts in Education and Community Programs, and the Ailey Extension.<sup>81</sup> In addition, I argue that any variance from this bureaucratic model and the conformity required disrupts the pursuit of the end goals and objectives outlined by the company.<sup>82</sup> As a result, I argue that a culture of silence exists within this model due to the way that the overall

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<sup>81</sup> The Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation lists its mission on the company's website as "The mission of the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation is to further the pioneering work of Alvin Ailey by establishing an extended cultural community which provides dance performances, training, and community programs for all people. As important as its artistic and educational mission, this performing arts community plays a social role, using the beauty and humanity of the African-American heritage and other cultures to unite people of all races, ages and backgrounds."

<sup>82</sup> See DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*. DeFrantz quotes Ailey discussing the company: "So the fact that the company has become so structured has, in a way, become a hindrance. There isn't the freedom to do whatever I feel like doing" (230).



objectives minimize anything outside the established bureaucracy. Lastly, I maintain that alternative spaces display the black queer male dancing body in resistance to governing structures that regulate the body in society and culture. To make this last point, I examine a key event sponsored by the AADF.

In Chapters Three and Four, I discussed the ways in which the artists of this study address the contradictions, obstacles, and tensions of gender performance onstage and in everyday life; I also discussed how the interlocking factors of race and sexuality complicate these issues for analysis. These men demonstrate the delicate dance of remaining complicit to and conforming to traditional representations of a number of performed identities (e.g., black men, black gay men, and the black queer male dancing body) for survival.

Chapter Five begins with the silencing of black male dancers' lived experiences and concerns within dance historiography. As I argued in Chapter Two, these men's stories and concerns have been routinely marginalized to larger narratives that overpower or superimpose themselves onto the cultural imagination and imperatives that have often guided other written historical accounts. As such, Black male dancers form the central component of this ethnographic study, as well as key actors that also form a part AADF. These marginalized voices within dance history form the basis of my analysis in Chapter Five.

Additionally, Chapter Five places black male dancers within contemporary culture at large using an ethnographic methodology to gain greater insights into the performance of masculinity and the lived experience of being a black male dancer. This study focuses on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over the summers 2005, 2006, and 2008 at the Joan Weill Center for Dance (JWCD, the home of the AAADT) and details the black queer male dancing body's interaction in multiple sites to ask the following questions: What is the relationship between the different spaces black male dancers inhabit (e.g., the dance studio and offstage) and their bodies? What does the policing of masculinity look like on the black queer male dancing body in the studio setting and offstage? Observing these two different locations presented an opportunity to detail masculinity as a socially constructed process as well as to examine how the dancer understands his relationship to the specific spaces inhabited. Furthermore, this study examines the implications of the bureaucratic model employed by AADF and the contradictions, obstacles, and tensions it poses for black male dancers of the organization.

Throughout this project I explore the widespread association of male dancers with effeminacy and how this, in turn, troubles received ideas about heterosexual masculinity and its performance in society and culture. As such, this ethnographic study examines two interrelated phenomena: the corporeality of the black queer male dancing body and the performance of masculinity in different

spaces. In short, this ethnographic study tries to understand the performance of masculinity for the black queer male dancing body as it relates to notions of hegemonic masculinity and the policing of masculinity of male dancers.

Five key factors influenced my choice to use AADF as the site for my research. First, I was relatively familiar with the space as a result of having studied there in the past. Geographically, I chose to locate my research in New York City because all the artists of my study maintain their companies there. Furthermore, New York City has been one of the major areas hit hard by the AIDS epidemic, both in the dance community and beyond. Fourth, the space was home to a critical mass of black male dancers. And finally, having grown up in New York City and participated in the dance community there, I had close connections already established. Some of these professional relationships formed the basis for key interactions and exchanges in the New York City dance scene. Two individuals provided the necessary formative contacts to make this ethnographic study possible; without the participation of these key actors, this study would not have been possible.

### **Brief Historical Overview of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre**

In order to analyze the questions posed above and the tensions that arise from them, it is important to situate the AAADT in American contemporary dance and culture over the more than fifty years of its existence. As “Cultural

Ambassador to the World,” the AAADT enjoys a level of success setting it apart from all other contemporary dance companies (Ailey website). Nothing demonstrates the new heights of AAADT’s success and institutionalization better than the move to their relatively new headquarters, the Joan Weill Center for Dance, in 2004. The new building houses all operations of the Ailey organization under the artistic direction of Judith Jamison; Ailey II artistic director, Sylvia Waters; acting directors of the Ailey School (which encompasses a B.F.A. program and junior- to professional-level training programs), Tracy Inman and Melanie Person; Ailey Arts in Education and Community Programs co-directors, Nasha Thomas-Schmitt and Heather McCartney; and the Ailey Extension director, Yvette Campbell. The JWCD is the only building of its kind dedicated to dance in the United States (Ailey website).

The source and vision of the AAADT and its rise to national and international success all began with one individual: Alvin Ailey. Born in Rogers, Texas, in 1931, Ailey’s life story and rise to fame inform my investigation and research of the black queer male dancing body. Moreover, his life serves as a springboard for asking the questions of this chapter, as well as bridging the on- and offstage realities for black male dancers covered in Chapters Three and Four.<sup>83</sup> Dance historian Thomas DeFrantz captures Ailey’s struggle to lead his company and the enormous pressures he faced to survive in an inherently racist

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<sup>83</sup> For more history about the Ailey company, see <http://www.alvinailey.org/>; Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*; and DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*.

society and concert dance medium (*Dancing Revelations* 229–230). Although this was the case, Ailey successfully produced a substantial body of work, though it was not always well received by the New York dance community, then or now. That notwithstanding, the AAADT today enjoys unparalleled national and international popularity for a modern dance company (Sulcas). Indeed, DeFrantz muses about the company's success:

Even as audiences grew steadily for Ailey company performances, and the Alvin Ailey Foundation operations expanded steadily, a suspicion that Ailey was not worthy of his own success hovered nearby. The unasked question, implicit in dozens of feature articles and reviews, seemed to be: How could a gay black man from dirt-poor, rural, Depression-era Texas, with limited dance training and no college degree, found and run the most successful modern dance company in the idiom's history? (*Dancing Revelations* 230)

And even though Ailey achieved tremendous honors throughout his life, he did so while contending with and experiencing a turbulent relationship between his on- and offstage personas and the demands, conflicts, obstacles, and tensions navigating the hostile worlds of dance and society.

Prior to his passing in 1989, Ailey designated Judith Jamison as his successor for directing the AAADT. With Jamison at the helm, the Ailey company has become a dominant cultural force and brand. The success of the company

can also be attributed to two additional personalities: Sylvia Waters, director of Ailey II, and the recently deceased Denise Jefferson, director of the Ailey School. The triumvirate leadership of these women has led AADF to significantly new heights. Even as the company enjoys mass appeal and popularity, with sold-out engagements at their annual City Center season and continuous touring, the company suffers from a lack of strong artistic vision (Macaulay).

It is important to note that though the company enjoys enormous success, is beloved, and boasts an enviable dance audience that any company would enjoy, it does so in the midst of a dance world often reluctant to give the AAADT its proper due. Some of this reluctance stems from the aforementioned quote relating to the ambivalence around Ailey's origins and the space the company now occupies. Unlike its peer dance companies, such as the New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, or the Martha Graham Dance Company, the AAADT struggled to find its footing and had to consistently prove its worth (DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations* 229). The burden of Ailey's race and the civil rights movement, which the company's development paralleled, marked a different set of issues for the company than for most other dance organizations. Indeed, Ailey's creation of AAADT, though multicultural from its inception, was in some ways an answer to finding a home for talented black dancers who could not find work in white concert dance world. And so the burden of representation for Ailey was high, and that equally meshed with his desire to create beautiful

images of African Americans in a dominant culture that often portrayed blacks by the worst stereotypes. In a fundamental way, this underlying tension still resides in the company today. Known for their grace, beauty, and elegance, the dancers of AAADT and Jamison, as artistic director, in some respects continue to carry this burden. As a company based in the more conservative uptown New York dance milieu (as opposed to the more experimental downtown scene), the AAADT, like its peers has to manage balancing tradition with the new. In some sense, its huge popularity and mainstream accessibility prevent its taking the kind of risks necessary to spur the choreographic innovation that the company lacks at the moment (Tobias).

Now financially solvent, the pressures of the AAADT reside in finding a comfortable medium between its historical legacy and the future. Faced with this backdrop, Jamison's succession as artistic director for the past twenty-one years propels the Ailey company to new heights with branding, marketing, and creating of new audiences.<sup>84</sup>

### **Institutional Power and the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation**

The core theme that developed out of my fieldwork at the JWCD revolves around the organization's managerial and leadership style and the culture that

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<sup>84</sup> Judith Jamison will step down as artistic director of AAADT in June 2011 and be succeeded by Robert Battle, former David Parson's dancer and choreographer of his own company, Battleworks. Battle has created numerous works for the company and joins the AADF as an outsider not having danced with AAADT.

developed as a result of those practices. This pattern seemed to stem from the fear on behalf of some faculty and staff of criticizing the organization. Often their critiques were directed toward operating and managing an organization of its size and structure. Additionally, some lamented the trade-off between the old and new Ailey home. The new building's New York City location at 55th and 9th Avenue offers greater visibility and establishes it as a global beacon of dance for the twenty-first century. Whereas the old home, located at 61st and 10th Avenue, generated a greater level of warmth and intimacy, the new building's corporate look and feel situate the Ailey organization as the juggernaut of the dance world.

The central theme reveals how key actors critical of the organization's policies and operations experience the management of the institution. Their experiences illustrate the difficulty that individuals within the organization experience in giving voice to their legitimate critiques as employees. Moreover, their stories speak of their frustrated attempts to be heard, only to feel resigned, overpowered, and silenced when management's decisions and operational procedures did not change to address their voiced concerns. Without feeling direct ownership or any stake in the collective, the key actors and those observed performed their perfunctory roles. The key actors with whom I came into contact who did critique the organization held a general respect for the establishment amid possible fear of reprisal.



The longstanding working relationship of some of the key actors presents a unique opportunity to observe their interactions at the Ailey Institution. The key actors' views by no means capture all the possibilities of relationships within the hierarchy of the Ailey organization, nor are they meant to be generalized across the entire institution. This chapter aims to provide greater insight into various performances and events through individual stories and the participant-observation model. The stories and events chronicled provide access to a marginalized community of black gay men in dance and society.

I return to AADF because of Ailey's contested public/private persona and the fact his death to AIDS remains outside public discourse.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, conducting my fieldwork at Ailey is therefore in part an attempt to observe black queer male dancing culture in a way that meets the critical need for additional scholarly research. To some, the notion that Western theatrical dance is homophobic comes as a surprise and even seems contradictory.<sup>86</sup> However, this ethnographic study exposes the complicated intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in the New York City's dance community and shows that dance both provides a safe space for black gay men and, at the same time, disavows their lived experiences.

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<sup>85</sup> In my interview with Bryant, he revealed not knowing that Ailey died of AIDS. I think it highly significant that a young dancer graduating from Julliard, one of the most prestigious conservatories for dance training in America did not know this fact.

<sup>86</sup> Oftentimes during conversations with dancers and those in the general public, I came across people's surprise of finding homophobia in the dance world. Their expressed confusion often relied on thinking about the high number of gay men in Western theatrical dance.

## Spaces of Masculinities in Performance

The first summer of my site work, I felt like an interloper, arriving daily to meet with the primary key actor for this study, Patrick.<sup>87</sup> I'd sit with him in his office as he read the *New York Times* and pored over various articles and interviews he was working on for publication. With so much going on during the summer session, my presence was almost missed within the heavy traffic of bodies in the building. Patrick was crucial to my initial fieldwork during my first two summers at the JWCD. Even though he wielded little power in the day-to-day operations of the institution, his introducing me to staff, faculty, and dancers laid the foundation and provided the familiarity for me to conduct interviews. Patrick encouraged me to interview as many people as possible; however, he was deeply suspicious of academia and preferred to keep a distance from the theoretical concerns of my research and its focus on sexuality. This may have been understandable during my first year of fieldwork, in which the questions of my interview were overdetermined and too narrowly focused. In my second year, however, the area of focus on my human subject form changed to reflect a broader topic of addressing the concerns of professional male dancers, without any mention of homosexuality; this shift in focus was also reflected in a new interview protocol.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> In this chapter, all names of key actors have been changed to protect their identity.

<sup>88</sup> See appendix.

A recurring theme to develop out of my observations, conversations, and interviews is the level of unquestioned authority maintained by the senior levels of management and how these relationships affect the lower levels of management and employees. In the summer of 2005, I interviewed several dancers, staff, and instructors at the JWCD, as well as students in the summer intensive. Each person interviewed received a human subject form informing interviewees of their rights and of my responsibilities as an interviewer. On top of the nineteen interviews I conducted during my first summer of fieldwork, only two people declined my request to be interviewed—which any subject has the right to do. Of the two subjects who declined to be interviewed, one individual's story stood out.<sup>89</sup> I choose Drew's story to tell here because of his close role within the hierarchy of the AADF bureaucracy and the fact that most of the other subjects interviewed did not question either the human subject form presented to them or me.

When scheduling interviews, I described the nature of my project and asked if the potential interviewee would agree to meet with me. Once agreed, I would arrange a time for an interview. While setting up the interview, I would hand the individual the human subject form informing them of their rights and my

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<sup>89</sup> In the summer of 2005 while I conducted many interviews, one dancer within the AAADT declined to be further interviewed once the individual understood the project discussed homosexuality. This was done in due to religious beliefs.

responsibilities.<sup>90</sup> After showing Drew the release form to be signed, he decided to check with public relations for clearance, which made me nervous. What if he showed them the human subject form I'd given him, I thought. At that moment, I thought I was surely going to be discovered by management and my project shut down. I imagined being asked to leave the premises for conducting interviews with dancers and employees of AAADT without "official" permission by the Ailey organization. In part, my fear stemmed from the fact I was researching male dancers and homosexuality—terms that were clearly spelled out on the human subject form.

When I asked the subject who declined to be interviewed to take part in the study, I almost jeopardized my project by making myself known to the public relations department and possibly other officials within the organization. Indeed, after describing the incident during an interview with a former dancer of the AAADT, who now works for the organization, he responded by saying, "I should have known better than to ask that person for an interview. He's a little uptight." This first brush with authority had me greatly concerned, and thus I tried to remain as unobtrusive as possible in future site visits.

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<sup>90</sup> The human subject form that I used received clearance from the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Riverside to conduct my interviews the summer of 2005. The form briefly describes the project, informs the interviewee of his or her rights and details my responsibilities as researcher and interviewer. At any time the interviewee could chose to withdraw from the interview or decline the interview's use.

This story stands out not for its unusualness, *per se*, but because most dancers who signed the human subject form decided the topic expressed was inconsequential to being interviewed. Not only that—Drew was the only person to seek permission of public relations. No other interviewee considered such a request. In part, I tell this story to illuminate the fear I had conducting this research on the AADF premises. In fact, it was due to this experience that I later changed the human subject form to avoid such conflicts.<sup>91</sup> Although the form caused no controversy with most interviewees, it was Drew's position within the hierarchy of the institution and my fear of exposure that caused great anxiety that day and for the remainder of my fieldwork that summer.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> I continued to use the same forms for the remainder of the first summer of research. Upon my return during the summer of 2006, I changed the human subject form's purpose of study to reflect a more general statement concerning my research topic.

<sup>92</sup> My relationship with key actor Patrick was hugely influential in gaining interviews with dancers of the AAADT, of Ailey II, and other staff and personnel. Meeting and interacting with Patrick daily provided essential familiarization with the AADF. Patrick understood the importance of the work I was doing and thoroughly encouraged me to interview as many people as possible. In telling Patrick about the incident with Drew, he shrugged it off as if to say, we'll just have to wait and see.

Indeed, sitting with Patrick in his office, we often discussed his opinion that I focused too much on sexuality in my overall project. Yet I challenged his statements. Because issues of sexuality are rarely addressed openly in dance, as I have argued, it of course seems out of context for discussion. In fact, male dancers' sexuality and the stereotype of gay men in dance contribute greatly to the prejudice against all male dancers regardless of one's sexual identity. Prying this door open with the dancers was my intention. I did, however, reflect upon the nature of his comments and thought about ways to more broadly address my research. And though nothing occurred, it did not stem my anxiety about pursuing and conducting interviews, due to the sensitive nature of the topic for some.

## **The Individual and Collective Silence**

In previous sections I have introduced the organizational structure and management style of the Ailey organization. In this section, I will detail the extent to which staff members reported feeling silenced and unable to say anything that could be construed as casting the organization in an unfavorable light. The significance of these experiences illuminates the discipline and conformity required of those who work for the AADF and the silencing that accompanies such behavior. It also illustrates the individuals' experiences within a large organization that often leaves its employees feeling isolated and powerless.

Though employees appear genuinely happy to work at the AADF, my observations revealed that they were fearful of speaking out. Site visits often included time with key actors who exhibited circumspect behavior, such as watching over their shoulders, looking to see who is around, making sure no one of authority was in sight, and leaving the premises to engage in critical conversations about the organization in order to feel able to talk freely.

For example, my conversations with Jesse often focused on the theme of silence. As a primary key actor, Jesse played a critical role in my gaining access to the institution. In these regular conversations, Jesse told of how subordinates felt constrained from exercising independent thought and judgment about matters affecting their jobs and responsibilities. His stories and observations of this silencing at the Ailey organization detailed how the management produces

efficient workers capable of advancing the product without questioning or interfering with its delivery to the consumer or audience. Workers at Ailey do their jobs and are sure to keep criticisms out of management's purview. As a premiere organization of dance training, the AADF wields great prestige and power; those seen publicly criticizing the institution can appear ungrateful for the opportunity to work for it. In Jesse's experience, the freedom to speak one's mind was curtailed by management, which left him frustrated.

The frustrations of various employees of Ailey give voice to legitimate critiques of the experience; they believe their working conditions could be made better if the organization allowed its staff to feel like their voices mattered. More than anything, it is the perception that their voices cannot or will not contribute to the overall growth of the organization, regardless of the actual validity of their criticisms, that causes frustration and silence to persist. The hierarchy of the organization makes it difficult to adequately address the criticisms and concerns of its employees.

Circumspect behaviors at JWCD were regular occurrences during my fieldwork. The people who worked there maintained an awareness of their surroundings and were careful not to share information that might observably challenge the authority of the institution. Moreover, questioning or critiquing this authority squarely placed those that do against the authoritative management style of the organization. In this way, subordinates were sure to maintain

behaviors that ensured the continued chain of command's success. The fear exhibited by subordinates at JWCD seems to stem from the possibility of being overheard criticizing the AADF, which could also be interpreted as ingratitude in ways that could make its way through the channels to management.

For example, I met with a faculty member, Carl, and a staff member, Deborah, after viewing student performances in Ailey's Summer Sizzler. These events draw large crowds with incredibly high energy. Principally, the excitement about the program is generated by an interest in seeing the students dance: performances in the Summer Sizzler encapsulate all the rigorous training that occurs over a period of six weeks and unveil the talents and promise of both the students and choreographers alike. These performances are a source of pride for the organization and offer a chance to see and reflect on the achievement of the individual dancers and the mission of the program. It is also a showcase for various choreographers, who are invited guest teachers for the summer and sometimes housed with Ailey school faculty. Carl and Deborah maintained a level of circumspection, leaned in to talk, maintained low voices, and looked around before making any criticisms of the performances. One performer in particular held great promise as a dancer. Deborah conveyed that he was sought after by Ailey II, but she suggested that it was better for him to finish his training before working professionally with the Ailey organization. Praise for the dancers and choreographer's efforts were made openly, whereas criticisms were not.



The key actors in the above example again illustrate behaviors of those under the authoritative management style at the AADF, which was observed during my fieldwork at the institution. It was clear from their behavior that Carl and Deborah believed themselves to be under surveillance by staff and management at the event. Indeed, both discussed having respect and fear for one upper level manager in particular. For instance, the same key actors held a conversation in a cubicle near an official's office. During our conversation, Carl talked about a former dancer with the AAADT and thought the official overheard him. He asked if he thought this official heard him and did so repeatedly, even suggesting that this person actually did. Though the official in question was nearby, Carl desired comfort in knowing nothing was overheard. These key actors' behaviors were the actions of individuals fearful of reprimand. In no uncertain terms, working for AADF carried privilege and prestige. My interactions with both Carl and Deborah demonstrate their careful attention to not upsetting the powers that be.

Additional examination of Deborah and Carl's behavior exposed the authoritative management style through strict adherence to the rules, procedures, and protocols of the organization. The surveillance of their bodies, or at least the perception that they were being watched, kept these workers in line and within bounds. Furthermore, Deborah and Carl understood their place within the hierarchy of the organization and did their best not to draw attention to their acts

of criticism. Their careful dance of hushed criticism illustrates one feature of the culture at AADF. The two key actors in this example reveal where power in the institution ultimately resides—in management—and that this power compels the body to comply with institutional measures.

Another example of how silence operates at AADF involves key actor Jason, who regularly taught Horton classes at Ailey.<sup>93</sup> On occasion, I took Jason's class and maintained contact with him throughout this study. He possessed an intimate knowledge of the AADF's history and talked candidly about the changing nature of the institution. On one occasion, we met up in the men's locker room and he talked about the conflict he feels teaching for an institution that churns out dancers like a factory. He reflected on a period in the organization's history where artistry and inquiry received greater attention than it does now. He also mourned a generation of men lost to the AIDS epidemic. In an interview with Jason, he reflected how this generation of men represented a significant loss to the New York dance community, the repercussions of which are still felt today. One of the ways this impact is most keenly felt is the lack of mentorship toward the next generation of dancers. In essence, the span includes

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<sup>93</sup> The Horton technique is one of the principle techniques taught at the JWCD and is incorporated into the AAADT repertoire. Alvin Ailey inherited the technique from his mentor Lester Horton. The technique uses "the widest possible range of motion, with an emphasis on large, full movements done to musical phrases of varying lengths and dynamics" (Ailey website).

a gap from Donald McKayle and other contemporaries of Alvin Ailey to the men studying dance today.<sup>94</sup>

### **The Male Dancing Body in the Studio**

Previously, I illustrated the ways in which the authoritative management style of the AADF disciplines the corpus of the organization as well as the behaviors that such management produces. In large part, this regulation ensures that these bodies will not veer from their roles and obligations to the institution. The bureaucratic model described reveals another critical area of this study: the reinforcement and reproduction of masculinity through training the male dancing body. Here, outlining spaces of masculinities provides multiple sites for reading the black male dancing body in society and culture. Though masculinity oftentimes appears monolithic, especially for black men in popular culture, diverse expressions do exist, as do hierarchies among them (Ouzgane and Coleman 3–4). Observing the regulatory processes involved in disciplining the black male dancing body exposes the extent to which that body is socially constructed.

The body responds according to the circumstances called upon it and the spaces in which the body finds itself. In this section, I describe aspects of the training of male dancers through my observations at the JWCD that adhere to

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<sup>94</sup> Dwight Rhoden intimated this in our personal interview on May 27, 2009.

conventional depictions of masculinity, which include archetypal notions of strength, power, and athleticism. In this way, I focus on the performance of masculinity and the construction of the male dancing body developed in the studio. Centering the analysis on this area shows the reinforcement of traditional conceptions of masculinity at the Ailey school.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, I argue that strict conformity to conventional masculinity is enforced, and deviating from it is met with punishment. This has serious consequences for those men pursuing a career in dance as well as for the individual within society.

For this section, I give four examples of the male dancing body and its construction at the JWCD. The first examines a pre-professional dance student in a men's class in which the student demonstrated the inscription of tradition on the male dancing body as well as an individual's resistance to it. The second reveals an encounter between pre-professional male dancers and their instructor in a men's class in which the instructor uses the class as an opportunity to discipline the male dancing body to reinforce and achieve the masculine ideal. In the third example, a key actor describes what she observes as male dancers "dancing like girls." For her, the failure to perform "masculinity" on the male dancing body has direct consequences and ramifications for those men pursuing a professional

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<sup>95</sup> Junior division classes at the Ailey school, for boys aged 4–6 and 7–10 are called Bounding Boys and Ailey Athletic Boys Dance, respectively. The names given to these two classes reveal the anxiety of boys dancing and the circumscribed expectations of their bodies. It is no coincidence that "bounding" and "athletic" are in the titles; they reassure parents and the public alike that dancing for boys is a safe activity. Again, this illustrates a public relations attempt by the Ailey organization to legitimize male dancers in our society. See <http://www.alvinailey.org>.

dance career. Lastly, a discussion between two key actors describes the gradual transformation of one male dancer from having “feminine” to “masculine” qualities in his dancing; these key actors observe the conditioning process at work in producing the conventional male dancing body.

Throughout the summer of 2008, I participated and observed men’s ballet and modern (Horton technique) classes.<sup>96</sup> In the following description, male dancing bodies (which include those from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds) inhabit the dance studio for a men’s class. Men’s classes require a critical mass of male dancing bodies, making them opportune sites for observing patterns across larger samples of dancers. Ballet classes can be divided by gender, with dancers performing the same technique but differentiating certain movements based on traditional gendered expressions of the art form. In these classes men typically focus on turns, jumps, and leaps. A fundamental aspect of men’s class is the gendered performance of masculinity during the execution of traditional ballet vocabulary ascribed to the male dancing body. In modern classes, however, both genders participate and are not singled out in any particular fashion (although men occasionally hang out in the back line when performing exercises across the floor or decide to go in the last group of dancers performing a combination). Though these matters may sometimes depend on the instructor

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<sup>96</sup> For more information on the Horton technique, see <http://www.alvinailey.org/>.

present, there was no specific mention of separating the dancers based on gender in the modern classes I observed.

In the men's ballet classes observed, the male dancers were serious, intently focused, disciplined, and competitive about taking classes. No conversations occurred during class. The men focused heavily on achieving clarity and detail in their movement. The instructor did not focus on details of the combinations that he gave, and he quickly demonstrated each one in succession after the men completed them at the barre. After demonstrating the barre exercises, the instructor walked around the room periodically, saying the names of the steps and accentuating the timing and phrasing to which the dancers should pay attention. The class had a mixture of levels and all were capable of executing the steps, although some were more proficient than others. I observed that some men had clear lines and good articulation while others demonstrated weaker arms and torso and insufficient oppositional elongation of the spine.

In general the pre-professional male dancers taking men's class paid strict attention to detail: they maintained focus on achieving a higher level of technique. There was attention to detail of the arms, feet, legs, and torso. The dancers worked on clarity of expression and performance that informs the reception of the movement as masculine or feminine.<sup>97</sup> Here, labor of the dancing body and

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<sup>97</sup> In my interview with Rhoden, he described clarity as what the audience or society perceives as traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Clarity refers to not blurring, subverting, or disguising the gendered body in performance according to conventional expectations.

repetition of certain ballet vocabulary assure the performances deliver actions coded as masculine. These actions usually included turns, jumps, and leaps. Primarily, the instruction in men's class reinforces traditional concepts of masculinity and reveals its construction on the male dancing body.

An interview with a pre-professional male student called John at the JWCD revealed the degree to which the construction of masculinity on the male dancing body occurs in studio classes. I asked John to demonstrate a masculine movement or gesture in dance. It took him a while to respond to my question. It was clear from the length of time it took him to respond that it was something he had not really given much thought about. In a brief lag of time he expressed "Wow," before he eventually stated:

I don't actually think there's a move that's defined as masculine unless you are talking about double tours and rivoltades and things like that that only men do but women can do they just don't. I can always take it back to that whole brisé volé thing. I guess the way they want you to do it, like I said stiff arms (he demonstrates the arms). Not stiff arms. To me they're stiff arms. I should stop saying that cause that's not what they are. But to me they're stiff arms.

John then began his demonstration, showing the placement of the arms when performing the jump called brisé volé (though he only showed the arms, the feet are characterized by a diagonal outstretched leg with an inclined torso

leaning toward the front leg). The arms are in fourth position with one arm placed in second position side while the other is curved frontward. His demonstration revealed how the exercise is traditionally taught and performed to male dancers. In contrast to the “correct” execution, John provided his alternative to the arms. In his version, rather than solidly holding the fourth position, he introduced more fluidity and breath into the arms. Observing the juxtaposition of the two versions illuminated several things. First, it was a clear example of how the construction of male dancing body in American contemporary dance occurs. Second, it showed the agency of the individual dancer to interpret and challenge conventions. Third, it serves as a metaphor for rigid notions of gender performance. The construction of the male dancing body is usually thought to be a natural process; however, the so-called natural performance occurs after much repetition and clearly instantiates Butler’s theory of performativity, in which she contends:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body, and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to



one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted *social temporality*. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. (191–192)

Training the male dancing body over time substantially conditions its appearance and reveals the blurred distinction between the performance of (heterosexual) masculinity and the assumption of a “gay” male dancing body. Furthermore, John’s agency reveals a contrarian view toward accepted ballet tradition and the execution of the *brisé volé*. Lastly, the example not only illustrates the rigidity and conformity required of the male dancing body but it also demonstrates John’s ability to question convention and its “correctness,” and what the freedom to change that movement means. Hence, John’s awareness and actions both show a physically and metaphorically flexible approach to gender performance.

The next example includes my participation in a men’s class in which the instructor chided us by asking, “Is this not a men’s class?” while we performed a traditional men’s jump called *double tours en l’air*. The step should begin and end in the same position and requires two revolutions in the air with feet in fifth position (the straightened legs appear as one). This chiding reflected his

frustration with our inadequate performance of the exercise with respect to the expectations of his men's class. However, the subtext of his question reflects the conditioning of the male dancing body and the standards required of it. His comment illustrates the need to perform to the expectations of the ballet tradition and a distinctly recognizable masculinity for the spectator. But even more so, the weight of his words implied the failure at performing masculinity, which in this case, leads to equivocations of not being a man. The statement is important on multiple levels, particularly in a ballet class. More than does modern dance technique, ballet constructs the male body to fit a traditional mold and its conventions. The focus on jumps, leaps, and turns emphasizes ballet's inherited customs and societal conventions; these conventions are enforced and disciplined through the body in the class setting. Especially in ballet, the dance studio and the instruction within it act as a laboratory for refining the technical requirements achieved to construct the gendered body.

More than in any other dance setting, men's class reinforces what it is to be a man. Not only does the instructor's comment reveal the conditioning of the male body, it also reveals its construction in contrast to the commonly-held belief that dancing is "natural." John's statement above offers further evidence to support that the dancing body in ballet is gendered. For instance, his statement about *rivoltades* in which he stated, "Women can do [them]; they just don't," reveals gendered technique. In classical ballet, women typically focus on intricate

footwork and small jumps. The preoccupation with the male codes, deportment, and gestures of the male dancing body in ballet denote a specific interest in maintaining its aristocratic lineage and air of nobility. The sense of achievement and pride gained by performing difficult combinations and executing them assures the dancer that he has attained a certain level of mastery of “masculinity.” Though this structure exists in other forms of dance, it is most pronounced in ballet.

The Horton technique, on the other hand, is gender neutral.<sup>98</sup> The gender divide occurred in the technical performance—specifically, in the way men use their bodies. Overall, the muscularity of the male dancer’s body lends a sculptural quality to its dancing. Furthermore, this musculature and its density project onto men typical associations of strength that tend to be more visible on men than on women. In my time taking dance classes at Ailey, discussions of gender were largely absent from the modern technique, which was Horton-based. In my observation, gender did not present itself in any distinguishable way. Depending on the class and the time of day, men were also always in the minority (with the obvious exception of men’s classes).

The third case, which has two examples, explores the performance of masculinity and the failure of the male dancing body under construction. During

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<sup>98</sup> I have trained in the Horton technique throughout my professional career. The technique itself is not constructed based on gender. Neither does the technique favor a male body or female body in its execution. Unlike the Graham technique, which favors the female body for its wide-open hips, the Horton technique does not.

my summers researching at the JWCD in 2005, 2006, and 2008, conversations with key actors involved discussions of male dancers' behaviors and dance performance. What drew the attention of these key actors—and heightened my interest to the training of the male dancing body—were criticisms of “men dancing like girls.”<sup>99</sup> This comment came from discussions with key actors at the AADF. This phrase gained some currency—primarily used to describe some of the male dancers at Ailey. In particular, Deborah, who has been with the Ailey organization for many years and with whom I frequently engaged in conversations, described strong feelings about it, stating, “They won’t get hired if they swish.” Indeed, my discussions with Deborah proved helpful in understanding her attitude toward this topic. Deborah and I maintained conversations on numerous occasions that occurred in a variety of spaces, whether in the office, the dance library, or in taking a break outside of the building, which afforded the ability to speak more freely and without feeling observed or overheard.

In this context, “swish” connotes a negative stereotype directed toward an effeminate gay man. This observation and criticism illustrates several points

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<sup>99</sup> In my August 24, 2008, interview with him, Desmond Richardson made distinctions as to why men “dance like girls” and offered possible reasons as to why. Here he distinguished male and female attributes in contemporary dance, and noted that long lines, high arches, and high extensions have traditionally been associated with female dancers. He explains male dancers wanting to “dance like girls” and not “be” female by making an important distinction. With the increased technical proficiency of male dancers during their training now, more men desire to achieve those qualities traditionally associated with the female body in American contemporary dance. It is not that they want to “be” women; they want to train the body to make it serviceable to choreographers needs.

worth considering. First, the criticism collapses male dancers with effeminacy and homosexuality: male dancers continue to be suspected of homosexuality until circumstances are proved otherwise. Second, it raises issues about gender performance and gender nonconformity. For instance, how and where does the male dancer “swish?” Very little of my observation of men taking dance classes at Ailey showed men “swishing.”<sup>100</sup> In this context, swishing would connote gestures, movement, or behavior that could be construed as flamboyant (e.g., sashaying). In effect, it would connote the demonstrably queer body. Neither have I observed this “swish” behavior among the male dancers on stage.<sup>101</sup> If the suggestion is that men be penalized for *offstage* behavior, that is another matter for consideration. Notably, this statement directs attention to the implicit homophobia involved in suggesting a policing of the male body subject to societal enforcement. The message is that men who fail to conform to dominant perceptions of masculine behavior are punished. Hence, Deborah warns that male dancers who “swish” will not be able to find work.<sup>102</sup> Third, this comment

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<sup>100</sup> My observations of men’s ballet and Horton technique classes did not coincide with the criticism mentioned.

<sup>101</sup> At the end of the Ailey Summer Intensive, participating dancers have an opportunity to perform in the Summer Sizzler. The event is hugely popular, carrying much buzz and high energy for the dancers involved, and is always a sold out affair. During the two summers I conducted research at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center in 2005 and 2006, the men generally performed within the usual expectations of the Ailey tradition.

<sup>102</sup> In my August 18, 2008, interview with him, Ronald K. Brown discussed his own homophobia and criticism of a male dancer within his company Evidence for not dancing “masculine” enough. The dancer as a result left the company.

brings up issues of perception and the malleability of gender performance depending upon the space and context of the male body.

Even more, the perception of male dancers who “swish” revisits the anxiety surrounding male dancers who defy gender norms. Those who do resist conforming to traditional notions of masculinity by appearing “feminine” or “homosexual” (i.e., flamboyant) fail to attain employment as professional dancers.<sup>103</sup> In essence, finding work as a male dancer requires removing any trace or hint that might cause suspicion of homosexuality. In my conversation with Deborah, I tried to explain the prejudice of her statement; however she strongly disagreed and believed “men should be men” onstage. Deborah’s line of thinking reflects the conventional ideal of men dancing and to a degree makes sense for Ailey: the organization is characteristically traditional in its approach to gender roles for both men and women in concert dance.

The second example concerning the male dancing body under construction concerns a conversation I had with Deborah and Carl, who spoke about one male dancer in particular. Each observed how his dancing body changed over time. They both described this man’s dancing as being “very feminine” when he began at Ailey but ultimately “masculine” in presence after he worked on his technique. They said the performance of masculinity was largely achieved by his brilliant virtuosity as a dancer. Deborah and Carl both remarked

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<sup>103</sup> An interview with a male dancer described navigating the dance world and the need to downplay personal choices or actions in behavior due to survival.

that they observed the gradual change of this male dancing body from “very feminine” to “masculine” through a process of “cleaning up.”

For me, the significance of Deborah and Carl’s statements resides in their perceptions about the male dancer in question, regardless of actual descriptions of how his body moved. To them, his dancing was “feminine,” not “masculine” enough, and thus in need of changing (which occurred on their watch). Moreover, their responses conveyed the extent to which the male dancing body had to change in order to find employment as a professional dancer.

What also fascinates me about this story is the idea that masculinity is, in fact, constructed and is, in fact, *learned*. It speaks to the process of unlearning and learning skills or behaviors in order to fit a specific idea of masculinity that is to be projected. The episode also proves that the body adapts to what is expected of it. Masculinity can therefore be considered a malleable, depending on context and purpose: through conditioning, whatever is present can be changed to suit the purposes of whatever an expressed ideal entails.

### **Black Male Dancers and the Performance of Masculinity Offstage**

In the preceding section, the dance studio provided a key site for observing the black male dancing body under construction. Taken out of the studio and off the proscenium stage, the body carries potential for different expressions. This section examines one space of offstage performance in order

to illustrate the collective experiences of black male dancers. This observation of black male dancers collectively argues for the liberatory potential of their bodies in queer spaces through a key event. Ethnographer David Fetterman argues the purpose of using key events for examination of culture:

Key events serve as extraordinarily useful for analysis. Not only do they help the fieldworker understand a social group, but the fieldworker in turn can use them to explain the culture to others. The key event thus becomes a metaphor for the culture. Key events also illustrate how participation, observation and analysis are inextricably bound together during fieldwork.

(102)

Importantly, I observed the black male dancing body in settings in- and outside the boundaries where usual policing of the male dancing body occurs. A key site for my observation was the collective experience of black male dancers on the dance floor at the Ailey Gala.

The Ailey Gala brings all levels of the AADF—including the AAADT, Ailey II, the pre-professional division, and the junior company—together to perform onstage. These events usually bring out the artistic and political elite, who celebrate the company's ongoing growth and success. After the performance, invited guests and other celebrants join for an after-party inside a tent with an opulent decor. Normally a huge empty playground, the space is transformed into an extravagant setting.



Following the show, I entered the long queue for the party. Lifted spirits and lively conversation ensued as gatherers inched forward in the line. Moving past the checkpoint, I soon entered a lavish atmosphere that seduced the senses. Reserved tables and large crowds filled the tent for half of a city block. Among all this, people ate, drank, and shared effervescent laughter and conversation as DJs played music in the background. It was within this context, with the DJs mixing records throughout the night, that the young crowd took its cue.

The young crowd consisted mainly of the young pre-professional dancers of the JWCD. Although the dancers varied in racial and ethnic make-up, the spirit beholden to the space could still be best described as queer—though admittedly not all readings that occur in this section are of the black queer male dancing body. Most of the action on the dance floor was composed of the younger pre-professional students. It was here where the queer element existed most. These dancers exhibited freedom with their bodies as they took the dance floor. One by one, in duets, and in groups, the dancers occupied the space as they would at any nightclub. This space, like that of a club, allowed them to let their guards down and reveal a side of themselves usually sanctioned against during the formal training process that occurs in the dance studio and the professional environment of the rehearsal space. However, these dancers brought all of their expertise and knowledge—including their formal training—to the floor, displaying

mastery of their bodies and commentary for those gathered around. In dancer's parlance, as well as black gay male vernacular, those on the dance floor engaged in "carrying on."

"Carrying on" mixes elements of maintaining a carefree attitude to life, abandonment of social conventions, and a critique of normative behaviors. The black queer male dancing body marginalized in other spaces now takes center stage. Here the body lets its guard down, shows off, and upstages others on the dance floor. "Carrying on" can occur in any space but most often occurs in private spaces and gay spaces without the heterosexist and homophobic gaze of larger society. "Carrying on" speaks to the ways certain black gay men manufacture identities in order to survive in hostile environments that critique or even parody certain conventions about the body, including mannerisms, expressions, and both physical and verbal gestures. To some extent my observations of the dancers that night—a large contingent of men with a few women—evidenced "carrying on" at its fullest. The bodies in close proximity to each other, the conversation between mannerisms of the hands, and the sashaying all relayed a shared intimacy between the men and women gathered. People of all backgrounds attended; however, I maintained a focus on the male dancing bodies that "read" as gay, and, more specifically, the black queer male dancing body.

One remarkable aspect of this queer space among the dancers was the open flaunting of gay sexuality and its staging on the dance floor in such proximity to establishment elite who pay hundreds of dollars to attend.<sup>104</sup> Notably, the spring Ailey Gala draws some of the most powerful and influential people together for a night of celebration.<sup>105</sup> This juxtaposition of the most powerful against some of the most marginalized identities that flaunt their cultural, political, and social capital to shape things makes it worthy of further analysis here. Although often removed from sight, the black queer male dancing bodies in this space and other queer identities that fill it resisted erasure and silence by demonstrating their uncanny ability to keep the dance floor buzzing with energy. It was interesting to watch those who gathered around to marvel and delight in the unique performances of the dancers. Their faces recorded pleasure, admiration, affirmation, and surprise at these young bodies taking to the fancies that their bodies expressed.

Of considerable note was the ability of black queer male dancing bodies to “carry on” in a context where establishment figures were all gathered in attendance. In fact, as the dance circle opened up, I and others gathered around the dancers, who took to the dance floor to battle. For the most part, the dancers

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<sup>104</sup> For more on this issue, see Gere 14–19.

<sup>105</sup> In the previous year of 2008, I saw Martha Stewart in attendance at the Spring Ailey Gala. I have never attended the Fall Ailey Gala, but it appears to be a heavier showstopper of celebrities, elites, and the wealthy. Some of this might be the fact the fall gala also kicks off the annual AAADT season at City Center.

vogued to R&B and house music. The proximity of the marginalized identities and the establishment elite revealed an unusual closeness. Dancers' access to wealth, power, and privilege often eludes their grasp with a career in dance. It is their hobnobbing with the connected and powerful that offers a chance to change their access to wealth and the prestige it brings—or at least provides the illusion of doing so.

Examining the proximity of these two different classes is important in order to show the noticeable difference between various spaces and how the black queer male dancing body performs outside the boundaries where “proper” conduct is expected. The Ailey Gala staged an opportunity for these bodies, otherwise chastised for not dancing “masculine” enough, to dance with all the panache, abandon, and verve they could. It is one of the few spaces, it seems, that these bodies can contribute knowledge on the dance floor that is otherwise missing from dance classes and studio rehearsals. Moreover, the voguing gestures that read as gay disturb conventional constructions of heterosexual masculinity's performance and thus challenge hegemonic masculinity's power to police the male dancing body.

The male dancers lived for the moment to vogue, cut up, and dance with each other by parodying, mimicking, giving face, and runway-walking. The pre-professional female dancers participated, too, but not to the extent that the men did. Indeed, the space opened up for them—or rather, they opened up the space

in order to consider other possibilities of selfhood and expression. They released, had fun, and presented the body in a way that is not normally expected of them in a conventionally staged performance or in the dance studio. However, in some respects, the dancers were, in fact, on stage, for an audience of many stood on the sides watching with sheer pleasure and amusement at these bodies taking off in flight.

The dancers captured the grandeur of the moment and evoked it in their dancing bodies. Conversations held between dancers, spoken and gestural, tipping, head tilts, waving of hands and flexing wrists in the air, and shimmying the torso all demonstrated the overstepped boundaries for the conventional black male dancing body. Unlike in conventional contexts, these black queer male dancing bodies seized the opportunity to articulate the bodily knowledge acquired for expression at the dance club. All it takes is the DJ playing the perfect song to set the dance floor off. Dancers careened and pranced about, inhabiting their moves with vengeful fun. Their bodies exhibited a confidence quite different from the personas usually witnessed in the conventional stage and studio settings.

The confidence and power projected by these black queer male dancing bodies marked the gala in queer time and space: they demarcated the space and owned it—temporarily. The queer time and space operated simultaneously within the gala's conventional parameters that defined normative behaviors of the respectable bourgeois body.

The above example describes the liberation that the dance floor invites. The liberated body shows a particular abandon of the black queer male dancing body discouraged and frowned upon in traditional marked spaces of learning and performing (i.e., the dance studio and the proscenium stage). Indeed, this space is significant for marking territory out for expertise that is rarely shown conventionally. Offstage spaces offer bodies the opportunity to stage their location and their *positionality* in a way that is often silenced or deemed irrelevant during dancemaking. Through gestures and facial expressions, these performances stage the dancers' personas in ways that are often masked or silenced in the traditional depictions of the black queer male dancing body. The personas on the dance floor evince comfort voguing, prancing, and sashaying that would be held in contempt in the studio. And, as such, their performances rebuff policing of the male dancing body despite the dancers' knowledge of its relation and performance to certain circumscribed spaces.

The queer time and space of the Ailey Gala's dance floor and the male dancing bodies that inhabited it revealed spaces that allowed for certain parts of dancers' identities to be expressed without fear of being coded or denounced as behaving wrongly. It is certainly reasonable to expect different behavior in different contexts; however, the *sanctioning* of certain behavior or its being coded as "wrong" or "unmanly" speaks to the need for the black queer male dancing body to pass in some contexts and not in others. Indeed, the notion of passing,

ascribed historically to the raced body, finds relevance to sexual orientation and the ability of gay men to pass as heterosexual for survival purposes. The ability to pass successfully for some gay men (i.e., to imitate the performance of heterosexual masculinity), due to extreme societal pressures to conform, in fact makes those gay men who do pass invisible to most people.

The liberated space of the Ailey Gala's dance floor provides another context for examination. One of the most poignant moments that night occurred between two members of the AAADT called Marcy and David and then a resulting exchange between Marcy and a pre-professional student named Bart. Marcy wore a pink silk chiffon dress and held a little clutch purse as she danced circles around those who were up for the challenge; her power and intensity brought the circle of those standing around to a heightened interest. The crowd cheered the salacious exchange between the dancers. In one striking moment of many, Marcy held her dress up high on her thighs (careful not to reveal too much) while maintaining an intensely playful focus on her partner. Her single determination was to out-dance, upstage, and crucify her dance opponent.

The dynamic exchange between Marcy and David was both tantalizing and fun, capturing the joyous energy of those in the circle and bystanders. Though David held his own, his dancing felt more inhibited compared to the freedom Marcy exhibited. He was no match for Marcy's beauty, freedom, and ability to serve. "Serving," a term used in black gay vernacular, denotes a

masterful ability to improvise and serve the dancing opponent gestures, facial expressions, and movements that requires a response. Characteristically, serving may be deployed in any context, but in the dance club or on the dance floor it is used to recognize the person with the greatest skill for improvisation and insulting opponents in the moment. The combative spirit of the dance remains playful and evocative.

Having vanquished one male dancer, another entered to challenge Marcy. Thus, the showdown between Bart, a pre-professional dancer, and Marcy began. Unafraid of who she was, even after witnessing her previous triumph, he took to the dance floor for an all-out battle. I admired his gumption for he, too, exhibited incredible skills in his own right, with a brilliance for voguing. In black gay vernacular or club subculture, Bart's actions might be read as "he came for her," which translates as follows: despite knowing the "legendary" status of his competitor (in this case, Marcy—a principal dancer with AAADT and talented force of nature), Bart boldly challenged the legendary dancer knowing full well what the humiliating repercussions were if he failed. Each dancer pushed the other, demonstrating each of their specialties. Bart preferred sharp, precise angular arm gestures and prancing, all while voguing. Marcy's specialty consisted in a number of tricks that left the crowd awed after she finished. At one point, she jutted her backside out, shimmying fast and hard with complete abandon, similar to a stripper dancing.



Marcy's performance pushed the edge of respectability for a principal dancer with the AAADT, but what made this altogether different was the context in which the dance was being done. Ultimately, she gave Bart a lesson for daring to do battle with her. The competitive spirit reminded spectators, who stood in awe of her unmatched skill. Indeed, Marcy's ability to rein in her dance partners showed spectators how one is to take to the dance floor. That night Marcy killed her opponent with unmatched sass and presence. Bart did not stand a chance against her, though he made a strong impression.

Though many from various age groups take to the dance floor at the Ailey Gala, young pre-professional student dancers mainly fuel the inevitable draw of spectators. They maintain the circle's liveliness, its ebb and flow. Depending on the song played, attention is given to specific personalities in performance and the person "acting a fool." I remember that at times I moved away from the dance scene, milled around, and talked to other people gathered and observing the surrounding area. All of a sudden, the energy on the dance floor would change and bodies would suddenly huddle to observe the new performances taking place. After a period of time, the performances would dissolve, causing the mass of bodies to dissipate. This initial buildup could be a response to a performer taking to the floor grandly or it could be someone feeling the moment and the music with onlookers screaming, shouting, whooping, and hollering for the dancer in the spotlight. At moments, dancers take turns showing their best

improvisations to the DJs pumping classic and contemporary R&B and house music. Meanwhile, other attendees groove unphased by the happenings in the circle and continue their love affair for the music with friends and loved ones.

The dance floor offered many opportunities for breaking boundaries, protocols, and hierarchical formalities. As such, the policing of masculinity—normally constructed as being heterosexual and without signs of effeminacy or homosexuality (exactly how does one read homosexuality that does not include supposed effeminacy?)—had no bearing on the black queer male dancing bodies on the gala’s dance floor. The liberation of the male dancing body in this example shows what Jafari Allen calls the “courage to imagine a grace that would transcend stultifying hegemonies and abstractions that pretend to tell us who we are” (322).

The exchange performed between Marcy and Bart revealed a temporary suspension of the formality found at the JWCD. Neither dancer, one an AAADT member and the other a pre-professional student, would normally engage in such behavior in the dance studio. Quite frankly, it would be out of character for the JWCD. Nevertheless, the suspension of time, space, and boundaries were evident that night. In actuality, the simultaneity of queer and “straight” time existed on the dance floor together. Discussing queer time, Allen states, “Queer time for me is the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away...a theory of queerness as a way of being in the world and a critique of the careful social scripts that

usher even the most queer among us through major markers of individual development and into normativity” (312). Without question, social scripts were turned on their head on the gala’s dance floor and through the audience’s response.

At the same time, the freedom evidenced by Bart’s dancing body illustrates the contradiction of both the embrace and disavowal of gay men by the AADF. In one location—the gala dance floor—the black queer male dancing body and its identity were affirmed (although in this case Bart was white, I gesture to the potential and possibilities of queer time and space); yet at the JWCD, this freedom of embodied identity is denied full expression. The demarcation of the two spaces denotes the bifurcated relationship between the black queer male dancing body and the high numbers of black gay men who have danced with the AAADT. Of critical note, the Ailey Gala’s purpose is to raise funds for the organization. Though an Ailey function, the annual event is not characteristic of the organization as a whole. As such, the black queer male dancing body functions within the space much like dancing bodies at Carnival, in which social norms are briefly suspended for participants and street revelers.

Thus, the studio performances of masculinity can often go unquestioned, whereas the offstage black queer male dancing body at the gala can be read as a failed performance of masculinity. This failure, under traditional standards, marks the gay, queer, or effeminate body as being incompatible with

conventional masculinity. Thus, these bodies are marginalized—and yet the black queer male dancing bodies at the gala expressed a power different from that assumed during their studio presentations. The studio and offstage performances of masculinity reveal that diverse masculinities do in fact exist.

However, studio and offstage performances of masculinity also expose a hierarchical relationship between them. The privileged status of the black male dancing body accompanied the traditional notions of strength, power, and athleticism in the former space, whereas the offstage performances of masculinity (e.g., at the gala) showed the presence of queer masculinities in proliferation. The construction of the male dancing body in the studio greatly contrasts—and even contradicts—the construction of the male dancing body on the Gala dance floor: one was mainstream (performances for the proscenium main stage); the other an alternative space (the gala). Only in the marginal location did the black queer male dancing body receive attention and high praise as such.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown the relationship between the black queer male dancing body and its positioning within the institutional setting of the AADF. On various levels, the independent examples provided illustrate the organization's disciplining of the body and the silencing of individuals through the

management. These measures relay the power of the institution to crush dissent and any perspectives critical of the organization. On the one hand, although the AADF maintains a financially viable enterprise, the inability of its staff and personnel to effectively voice their concerns or critique the organization presents major limitations for its artistic growth and development, on the other.

In another context, the AADF reveals the degree to which the black male dancing body is, in fact, constructed; attention is turned toward the disciplinary protocols of the body's training and men's class. In one scenario, the male dancing body responds to methods of "cleaning up" from "very feminine" to "masculine." Yet, in another example, the male dancer defies the conventional mold required and reveals his agency to construct an alternative for his dancing body. These examples illustrate tensions between dominant and subordinated definitions of masculinity and their expression in the studio setting.

Once removed from the studio, however, and into Ailey Gala, the black queer male dancing body contested the rigid and restrictive boundaries placed upon it and revealed its expressive and liberatory potential. The uniqueness of the gala, a key event, clearly exemplifies the difference between the official onstage proscenium performances and their offstage counterpart. The two remain separate and distinct from one another although performed by the same black queer male dancing bodies. The former is sanctioned, while the other is acceptable only within a marginalized setting as a sort of exotic figure. In either

case, the black queer male dancing body shows an adaptable relationship to masculinity depending on the space it inhabits. It defied conventions at the gala and yet embodies the ideal representation of masculinity for the Ailey brand.

## Coda

### Poles of Existence and Tensions In-Between

The performance of traditionally-defined masculinity is often met with failure, particularly for certain bodies (Kendall and Martino 14). The “failure” of this performance is often read in ways that mark an individual as suspect. Indeed, proving oneself frequently requires performing and signifying conventional masculinity. For purposes of this autoethnography, I argue that men tend to adhere to notions of hegemonic masculinity, even as they often “fail” to achieve the ideal or fall within its parameters. To attain this masculine ideal, (heterosexual) men often assume a specific relationship to their bodies’ behavior. Indeed, the need to perform masculinity without suspicion regarding their heterosexual status is highly observed, checked, and managed. This performance of masculinity is not *necessarily* tied to the (heterosexual) male body, but is nonetheless most often associated with it (Edwards 140). However, despite this fallacious correspondence between masculinity and heterosexuality alone, some bodies are still perceived as failing to perform masculinity convincingly enough (Bergling 30). I contend that what some read as the “failure” of my body in fact can be interpreted as gender nonconformity; homophobia can therefore be understood as punishment for defying certain social expectations of the body.

To this extent, the embodiment of masculinity—or, rather, the “failure” to do so—is the foundation of my autoethnographic account. As in the examples described in Chapter Five, spaces of masculinities matter for the body’s performance. Where the body is in space and its relationship to others make a profound difference in its expression. Sometimes my recognition of this is conscious; sometimes not. This coda examines the corporeality of my black male body as it travels between two poles—the Northeast Bronx and Midtown Manhattan. It also introduces an interrogation of the body often neglected within social theory. More importantly, analyzing the body, and the subjectivity of the individual within society attempts to suture theory and praxis—a conceptual framework for which I have consistently argued throughout this dissertation (Edwards 150–151).

The body, in this case my own, serves as the basis for recounting the conscious process of performing traditionally-defined masculinity and the contrasting “failure” of it for others. The narrative depicts my body as it moves in public spaces in everyday life and the consequences of “failing” to perform masculinity “correctly.” It also records the tension and anxiety residing in public travel between two poles of New York City. This account occurs during the first summer of my fieldwork in 2005. Writing this narrative account consciously inscribes what the performance of masculinity in everyday life feels and looks like for myself as black gay man, which allows me to examine the possibilities and



implications of gender performance in society and culture. To that end, I explore the lack of belonging to several communities and bridge lived experience with theory to account for the body in time, space, and place.

### ***Why I walk in fear...***

I can't help but think I should not be having these thoughts, but the truth of the matter is, I am. Every time I come home from some extended trip back to the Bronx I am always faced with questions: Will I fit in? Can I walk around disguised enough to pass my fellow brothers on the street? I am careful about what I wear—cautious not to wear anything that might give me away as gay. Why should I choose to live in the community in which I was raised for the better part of my life and give back to that community when I cannot even feel comfortable enough to walk safely down the street? Is it me? Am I too sensitive? Am I giving off cues that read too feminine? How can I avoid looking feminine? Obsessed with thoughts of not being too overtly effeminate or gay in how I dress and walk, I chose my clothes for the day. Now I'm sure for many people, the idea of dressing up to leave the house for work or play is not usually consumed by thoughts about whether it will read in the wrong way. Careful not to give off the “wrong” cues, I set out of my sister's house where I am staying in the Northeast Bronx, an area heavily populated by West Indians—and many Jamaicans, in particular. Being in an area heavily populated by Jamaicans carries its own issues: Jamaicans are not particularly known to be the most kind and loving toward gay people. I know all too well from being raised in a Jamaican household that the culture spews one of the most highly virulent manifestations of homophobia of all the Caribbean islands. In fact, Jamaica has even gained the reputation of being the most homophobic country in the Western hemisphere.<sup>106</sup>

As I set off walking, I am constantly aware of my surroundings—those ahead of me and those behind me—though the area is not too busy. I guess it may be the dancer in me that brings out a heightened sense of awareness for my surroundings—that and the conservative nature of the residential black middle class neighborhood. In any event, I am circumspect in demeanor, and any and all men look suspicious to me. Yes I know, I probably should not have these thoughts, but like I said—I do. If we are about truth-telling, then I must commit myself to doing just this: I wish I did not feel this way. It is not an awfully nice way

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<sup>106</sup> See Padgett.

to be in society, but many factors contribute to this feeling. I know everyone should be judged individually and given a chance to prove himself before being so judged. I believe this in theory, but somehow when I am walking in the streets of the Bronx or Harlem, amongst my own as they say, I do not feel quite as comfortable as I would like. Yes, blame it on my own neuroses; blame it on racism; blame it on the mass media culture that connotes instant pleasure, gratification, and the bombardment of subtle cues that say self-worth is based in things rather than your humanity. Whatever it is, I do not feel at home here anymore and, quite frankly, never really did. I am tired of all this rhetoric about loving each other and keeping our communities intact, especially from black folks. What community—when I cannot even walk down the street without feeling threatened? I have wondered many times, exactly which community do I belong to?

Let's take a case in point. One day I chose to wear my black, fitted, straight leg pants and black oxford shoes with a tight tank top (to reveal my musculature of course) and a messenger cap. These wardrobe decisions made me wonder, is this outfit too "gay"? To wear this was not necessarily a choice, in that all my other clothes in which I could presumably pass were dirty. After all, it should not matter, right? But the answer to that question was not too far off.

Before leaving the house, I asked my sister what she thought of my ensemble. Under any other circumstances, I would not think twice about putting on this outfit. With my sister's smile and approval (although she did give me an "are you sure?" look), I set out for my day in Midtown Manhattan, walking confidently to the train station. Arriving at the new Columbus Circle at 59 Street erases any notion of being overly self-conscious about my attire. Why should I be?

And so it was for the rest of the day in Midtown Manhattan. When it came time to get on the No. 2 train to head back uptown to the Bronx after working at Ailey, I became anxious and once again acutely aware of what I was wearing. Thoughts passed my mind wondering whether I would make it home at this rush hour time without any verbal harassment—doing so would be an achievement. Four blocks from my sister's house a car came roving by as I crossed a main intersection and the words "batty bwoy" rang out. I turned and glanced back to see a car filled with several black men as the car sped by, unaffected by the cruel reality those words inflicted upon me. Everything changed in that instant. I didn't feel as safe (not that I ever really did): they could return for more verbal insults or possibly more—an attack. "Batty bwoy" and "battyman" are the most commonly used derogatory words used by Jamaican men when referring to their hatred of gay men. Some part of me wanted to think that I could have made it home without some verbal

assault that day. Although I suspected anything was possible, it is different when a verbal assault actually occurs.

How ridiculous! The freedom to wear what you like possibly curtailed all because of some insensitive, rambunctious and gay-hating idiots. It is not like I was being excessively “flamboyant” and therefore posing a threat to their ideas of masculinity. I was doing just enough to out me to the fools I guess.

I don’t need any permission to stay in that kind of a neighborhood, nor any other where I feel threatened to be who I am. As a fully contributing member of society with talents and gifts to share, I strive to make something of my life so that I may return opportunities afforded myself in this life. I refuse to be in a community where homophobic attitudes towards gays and lesbians are condoned.

So I consider those to whom I might feel a closest alliance: the black community, the Caribbean community, the gay community? My ideas and life as a black person don’t fit any of the widely accepted models and they never will. The black community has yet to wrest itself from the stagnating discussion of race. How much longer will issues of race dominate the discourse among the black community? When will we set a new agenda that goes beyond the lines of race to reflect intersectional analysis, including race, gender and sexuality—issues that need addressing? As far as I’m concerned, I’m not beholden to anyone and I will continuously call out folks who don’t advocate a politics of inclusivity.

The story above illustrates the policing of masculinity and the consequences of not conforming to societal expectations of gender performance. In this case the reading of my body determined its status as gay. As is often the case, the failure to perform traditionally-defined masculinity involved the inextricable link between gender and sexuality and the prospect of punishment as a result. For analysis of my narrative, I grant that my body carried signs that signified my identity as gay. Although this may be the case, I contest the reading of my body to offer alternative possibilities for individual freedom of expression in society and its implications.

First, I ask: why should it even matter what I choose to wear on any given day? Unfortunately, the day in question, some men displayed their reluctance to accept diverse expressions of masculinity, preferring instead for the male body to conform to their traditional notions of manhood. The summer of 2005 was the first time I stayed in the Bronx without my car in years. In the past, the car served as insulation from the public whenever I traveled to downtown Manhattan or elsewhere in the city. Driving my car carried a degree of freedom from the public gaze of others, particularly heterosexual men. That summer without my car, no such protections were available.<sup>107</sup> I was acutely aware of my environment and what it meant to travel on public transportation: I left the house that morning knowing the potential for harassment, but I wanted to believe that it didn't and shouldn't matter.

Rather than pass that day, as I had in previous days that summer (where no harassment occurred), I dared to see the liberatory potential of my body in the Bronx. In previous trips downtown, I usually wore loose fitting clothes. I played down wearing anything that might construe my body as gay.<sup>108</sup> The daily effort to

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<sup>107</sup> See Collins, *Black*. Collins points to the murder of Sakia Gunn, a lesbian, as an example of both the effects of racism and heterosexism. Collins argues, "Sakia Gunn's murder illustrates the connections among class, race, gender, sexuality, and age. Sakia lacked the protection of social class privilege. She and her friends were waiting for the bus in the first place because none had access to private automobiles that offer protection for those who are more affluent" (115).

<sup>108</sup> In our August 15, 2008, interview, Brown discussed what reads as "gay" apparel, which includes certain colors and how form-fitting clothes fit that description. However, he states this understanding that how one chooses to present oneself to others says something about who one is and one's identity.

pass reflected a choice not to bring attention to my body. Although it can be argued that this choice curtailed my freedom of expression—and I concede that it did—any repercussions for not doing so took greater precedence. Indeed, even though I am a black gay man confident in my identity and expression of it, survival and safety in the Bronx are always paramount.

Once I reached Midtown Manhattan, my anxiety subsided. The two poles of daily travel between the Northeast Bronx and Midtown represent the extremes of my lived existence. Even as I “passed,” I wondered if something else on my body—a gesture or my walk—might out me. The spaces my body passed through and inhabited consciously informed my decisions and behaviors. I might not have been aware of it at all times, but it was sufficient to bring awareness as I moved from uptown (the Bronx) to downtown (Manhattan). Once in Midtown, I had no concerns for the safety of my body that day. The perception of difference uptown faded as I entered a multicultural milieu. With diversity of expression at its apex, I comfortably slipped into the throngs of people moving about their business. Whatever distinguished me uptown was irrelevant downtown.

How does wearing black, fitted, straight-leg pants, black oxford shoes, a form fitting tank top, and a messenger cap signify my body as gay? Upon closer examination, the derogatory remark at my perceived difference fails to hold up under comparison with other representations of black male bodies. Or perhaps, had I not been so slender and had a stockier build, maybe the perceived

incongruity of gayness and hypermasculinity might have been a paradox for the offending party. For instance, representations of hypermasculinity in popular culture attest to images that share similar tastes between “straight” and “gay” men.<sup>109</sup> Take, for example, the average homeboy wearing sagging jeans that expose his ass and underwear. During my fieldwork in New York City, I observed more men with sagging pants and asses exposed than men wearing form-fitted clothes. How is it he can proudly, if not defiantly, as a “straight” black man, expose one of the most erogenous sites for gay men and not face queer bashing? If it is understood that the male rectum is the point of sexual contact for gay men, and presumably where the fear of male homosexuality resides for straight men, then why expose one’s ass to the general public for fetishistic consumption? In this respect, the signifiers of gayness do not hold up under scrutiny.

The above example illustrates the performance of gender and the appropriation of signs and signifiers of gay or straight masculinities that expose the fluidity of gender construction. There is no evidence to show that appropriating signifiers of hypermasculinity exhibited by rappers like Lil Wayne

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<sup>109</sup> Men’s magazines, with covers depicting sculpted and chiseled male bodies for presumably heterosexual male audiences, such as *Men’s Fitness* and *Men’s Health* appeal to both straight and gay men alike. In part, gay men find appeal in these magazines objectification of the male body, and yet they also embrace the masculine ideal and what it means to attain a successfully “masculine” body. On the other hand, heterosexual men supposedly find appeal in achieving the masculine ideal of a perfectly toned body, with content often related to sports and relationships with women so as to neutralize the more homoerotic overtones of its content. For more information on these issues and the construction of masculinities regarding the consumption of gender, see Draper 357–375.

and 50 Cent certifiably assure heterosexuality (Petchauer, Yarhouse, Gallien 10). As evidenced in Ronald K. Brown's dance *Better Days*, the homo-thug persona answers back to the homophobia among mainstream hip hop to decry its supposed co-optation of heterosexuality. The loudest denunciations of homosexuality in hip hop and its supposed incompatibility with hypermasculinity work to assuage one's own anxiety (Coleman and Cobb 96). Indeed, the homophobic slur directed at me failed. If the performance of masculinity is any guide in popular culture, appropriating signs and signifiers of it do not bear any direct correlation to heterosexuality or homosexuality (Petchauer, Yarhouse, Gallien 10–11). Yet, in the context of popular culture and everyday life, my body and identity are marginalized and penalized for daring freedom of expression.

The rhetoric of finding and building community emerges in the context of this marginalization. Where do I belong? Which community will claim me? Part of the anger expressed in questioning community stems from listening to calls for community on a black Caribbean radio station in New York City that summer. The host exhorted the need for the black community to come together. Then I stopped to think, was he talking to me, too? Am I a part of this black community-building project? And then my focus turned toward the experience of being harassed earlier that day, suggesting that I was not. Although it was only one bad experience for the entire summer, it rekindled thoughts on just exactly why I left the predominantly West Indian section of the Northeast Bronx.

The exhortation of the black community in theory amid the punishment directed against me—one of its own—felt incongruent to defining the first chapter of the twenty-first century. Finding community amid the tensions of being black, gay, and male continues to be a source of peril and pleasure. I have described the perils associated with my identity in this narrative, yet pleasures call to mind a previous reference to Phil Wilson’s response to *Tongues Untied* in Chapter Three. Wilson sees black gay men’s marginalization within black culture, majority white culture, and majority gay culture as its strength because multiculturalism and multidimensionality afford black gay men insights none of the dominant cultures possess. Wilson gestures towards a peripheral identity, oftentimes invisible to all three populations; he describes an understanding in marginalized people, whether consciously or not, of their relationships to dominant cultures and the performance of race, gender, and sexuality. Learning the different languages of each dominant culture while negotiating and navigating these terrains reveals the necessary creation of a language and acquisition of skills for black gay men’s survival.

For black gay men, the rhetoric of community underscores a more complicated relationship within each of the communities that Wilson addresses. Various studies attest to the difficulties and struggles that black gay men encounter when negotiating their identities and the desire to have each constituent part of their identity recognized as equally important. Ideally, I belong



to many communities; in reality, I experience a full connectedness to none. As a result, I am left longing for community. Negotiating and navigating my identity makes for a nimble and adept observer of life and my place within it.

## Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation I have argued that black gay men and the black queer male dancing body are central to understanding gender performance. Thus, I shift the paradigm on gender theory that usually reserves gay men's experiences as relatively unimportant to the theorization of masculinities. I have shown through various sites, both on- and offstage, the marginalization of black gay men and what this poses for their bodies as they negotiate and navigate their positions in American contemporary society and culture. From the dissertation project's inception with examples provided by Anthony Bryant and Alvin Ailey, I have set about confronting homophobia, heterosexism, effeminophobia, rigid gender norms, and notions of authenticity. Both Bryant and Ailey's narratives serve to highlight just how contested the categories of race, gender, and sexuality are for black gay men (especially in their relationships to heterosexual men) and as such form the basis for investigating the contradictory embrace and disavowal of black male dancers within the Western theatrical dance tradition. Moreover, their stories only tell one component of a complicated phenomenon affecting the subjects of this study.

Shifting between their on- and offstage lived realities, the subjects of study—including Bill T. Jones, Desmond Richardson, Dwight Rhoden, and Ronald K. Brown—reveal how their bodies serve as ideal sites for examining the performance of gender due to their remove from dominant notions of hegemonic

masculinity. In fact, it is precisely through their remove from the masculine ideal that we observe their multidimensionality in action. Each of the men demonstrates an acquisition of necessary survival skills to perceptively and adeptly move in a society that marginalizes them (akin to passing that denotes finding a passage out or through, but also in a way that relates to overcoming barriers). Furthermore, whether through choreography or their lived experiences, these men show a more fluid relationship to male identity—its construction—and how this relationship informs the black queer male dancing body.

Indeed, scholar Randy Martin refers to “allegories of passing” in his analysis of Bill T. Jones’s *Chapel/Chapter* and suggests a different orientation to familiar ways of understanding passing when he states, “The dance points to the ways in which our ways of inscribing ourselves in history, in the social, might be reordered. Hence, this is one among the many allegories of passing—moving through and beyond blockages and impossibilities, foreclosures and occlusions that clot the old byways of assimilationist citizenship” (85). Martin’s analysis underscores how the subjects of my study—Jones, Richardson, Rhoden, and Brown—employ strategies to challenge our ways of seeing and being in the world. Challenges that point to the contradictions, obstacles, and tensions that the black queer male dancing body faces on- and offstage and what it means to navigate and negotiate its place in the world.

The conditioning of the black queer male dancing body for the stage, the spaces it inhabits, and the interaction of that body with society reveal the contextual nature of gender performance. Indeed, the social construction of masculinity in everyday life and culture moves from real life to the proscenium stage where conditioning of the black queer male dancing body oftentimes rules out difference and conforms the body to ideal notions of masculinity. For the conventional staging of the black queer male dancing body, applying the codes of dominant heterosexual masculinity assures the viewing audience that the performance witnessed maintains the strict social script of heterosexual masculine behavior (because masculinity is assumed to be heterosexual and associated with the biologically male body). However, what happens when black gay men appropriate the performance of heterosexual masculinity and move beyond the proscenium stage?

The sexual orientation of the individual performing the conventional masculinity bears no one-to-one correlation to the performance of masculinity. More than anything, these performances reveal the construction of the black queer male dancing body and its ability to pass as straight with careful attention to the appropriate signs and signifiers in different spaces, whether on- or off-stage. For instance, and depending upon the space and context, appropriating the performance of heterosexual masculinity offstage enables some black gay

men to pass, whether by choice, by strategy, or for survival. And as such, this body often goes unrecognized among society and culture (Greene 390).

The conformity required of the black queer male dancing body to pass illustrates other factors—the fluid construction of identity and the measures taken to navigate space. The performance of these queered bodies reveals the connection between on- and offstage performances and the façade often required to maintain strict social scripts. This façade oftentimes reifies the notion of what an assumed heterosexual masculinity looks like. It stifles difference and conveys the only acceptable model of masculinity as an oppressive one. In conjunction, the façade reveals that performance of these scripts assures the “straightness” of the men we see on- or offstage.

Homophobia, heterosexism, and fear of gender nonconforming behavior stifle diverse expressions of masculinities. For example, the spaces of masculinities in Chapter Five detail nuances of gender performance by the black queer male dancing body. This body’s presentation exposes a fundamental contradiction: the embrace and disavowal of the masculine ideal. On one hand, the black queer male dancing body internalizes the oppressive masculine ideal, consciously or not, and gives these notions greater credibility by their performances on the proscenium stage or in everyday life often as a means of survival. On the other hand, the Ailey Gala dance floor reveals how the practices of the black queer male dancing body critiques the oppressive masculine ideal in

alternative spaces where black gay men “carry on” (which also serves as a metaphor for perseverance). These alternative spaces supply temporary relief from gender conformity and the constant need to play into the predictable roles often assumed in society and culture.

The labor required to maintain the façade of the masculine ideal ensures that the black queer male dancing body finds work in a profession riddled with traditional notions of manhood. Again, nothing further confuses spectatorship than conflating male heterosexuality, as opposed to male homosexuality, with signifiers of strength, power, and athleticism. Though performances of the black queer male dancing body are often staged for an audience, the lived experiences of black gay men remain an offstage reality. The offstage lived experiences remain largely unobserved—out of view—and thus construct an image of black men without difference and diversity.

Not only are the offstage performances of the black queer male dancing body off the record, but these exclude an appreciation of their full humanity. The careful scripts the black queer male dancing body plays out onstage face alternative constructions offstage. Black male dancers, and the gay men who experience the distance between the masculine ideal and real, make themselves perfect subjects for gender nonconformity and critiques of normativity. These men’s mockery of gender and their insight into its construction reveal that gender can be played with and be playful. Most distinctly, though, gay men’s ability to

play with gender and its performance in society and culture, I argue, in large part separates heterosexual and homosexual men's thinking about masculinity. For many reasons, and due to heterosexual male privilege, heterosexual men rarely discuss gender privilege (Carbado, "Straight" 94–95). Heterosexual men tend to perceive the ideal as the measure of a "real" man and manhood. However, gay men's "failed" masculinity reveals their observation of the variability of gender and its performance on the body.

The black queer male dancing body that abides by traditional heterosexual masculinity in society and culture, for multiple reasons, can elude us and thus remains undetectable. The persistence of this oppressive masculine ideal has devastating consequences. It links manhood, masculinity, and all black men under the same rubric. It severs the lived experience of many black gay men from the onstage performance, for which they are asked to draw upon as part of the creative process. The performances of these black gay men in alternative spaces expose the artifice of gender performance in society and culture. Yet they also attest to the stakes of those who fail to aptly adapt to circumscribed spaces. The performances of the black queer male dancing body uniquely demonstrate its ability to adapt under prescribed social conditions. As discussed in previous chapters, Western theatrical dance privileges the performance of heterosexual masculinity to its detriment; and in doing so, American contemporary dance

continually lives out contradictory states where black gay men are embraced and still disavowed.

Ultimately, though, the black male dancer-choreographers of this dissertation, Bill T. Jones, Desmond Richardson, Dwight Rhoden, and Ronald K. Brown offer much-needed new definitions of black masculinity that are in short supply. Moreover, in making black gay men—central—rather than marginal to our understandings of masculinity, we arrive at a more complex, more nuanced, more fluid, less problematic and fraught construction of masculinity not blinded by hierarchies that determine who and which bodies matter. Indeed, it is my firm belief that, just as black people are the moral conscience of American democracy and freedom and that no discussion of American history can occur without their presence, I, too, believe that gay men play a similar role in understanding the performance of gender in society and culture.



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### ***Interviews***

Brown, Ronald K. Personal interview. 18 August 2008.

Bryant, Anthony. Personal interview. 15 July 2008.

Mosley, Earl. Telephone interview. 15 September 2007.

Richardson, Desmond. Personal interview. 24 August 2008.

Rhoden, Dwight. Personal interview. 27 May 2009.

## **Appendix**

These questions formed the basis of my semi-structured interviews with the subjects of study.

### **Masculinity and The Black Male Dancing Body**

Preface interview with brief introduction and background of my topic.

Given this topic, is there any thing you would like to talk about?

What do you think I should know about you?

How do you define masculinity in American culture? Who or what embodies these notions?

How would you characterize or define masculinity and its representation in American contemporary dance? Can you talk about what American contemporary dance means to you?

Why do you think men have to constantly prove or “perform” their masculinity in our contemporary culture?

Do you think male dancers are stereotyped in American contemporary dance?

Male dancers are sometimes critiqued for not dancing masculine. Can you tell me what that statement means? How would you respond to a critique by a choreographer or dancer observing your dancing as not masculine enough?

Which late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century black male dancers/choreographers have greatly influenced American contemporary dance? Whose work has made a critical difference in how we look at the black male dancing body? Whose work has expanded representations of the black male dancing body?

Which black male dancers/choreographers have influenced your dancing? Why? How?

## **Identity Politics and Defining Terminology**

Can you talk about your experience of masculinity in relation to heterosexual masculinity?

What does the term “gay” mean to you? Can you define the term?

How do you define yourself?

As a gay man, how do you define masculinity?

Do you identify with the use of the term gay? (replace gay with queer)

Do you think passing is an issue for gay men?

Do you think covering is an issue for gay men?

Can you say a few words about each topic in relation to American contemporary dance?

- Homosexuality
- Masculinity
- Gender
- Sex
- Queer
- Gay
- Straight/Heterosexuality
- Blackness/Whiteness
- AIDS
- The closet
- Hypermasculinity
- Internal/external policing of the body

Can you describe movement, behavior, or choreography that is:

- Masculine
- Feminine
- Gay
- Queer
- Black/White

How does gender or sexuality complicate each category?

## **Confronting Homophobia in American Contemporary Dance**

Do you think male dancers are stigmatized in American contemporary dance?

Why do you think the stigma and the stereotype of male dancers persist? How can this perception of male dancers change?

Does homophobia exist in the dance community? If so, can you describe experiences with it?

## **Black Sexual Politics**

Subjects were asked to read these quotes aloud and comment on them:

“Alvin had asked the doctor not to disclose that he had had AIDS, which troubled many young company members and friends...’My answer to them was that everyone is entitled to privacy.’...Complicating the issue was the fact Alvin dearly loved his mother and did not want her to be embarrassed by the social stigma of the disease.”

Jennifer Dunning, *Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance*

The sole reason for obscuring Ailey’s true cause of death was the stigma associated with the disease...But Ailey’s death represented not just the stigma of HIV but the stigma of homosexuality and, in ways that must be theorized for dance in the AIDS era, blackness as well.”

David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS*

## **Closing Questions**

Why do you dance?

Are there any questions I should have asked? What have I overlooked?

Is there anything else you would like to discuss?