

## THEM

*Recombinant Aesthetics of Restaging Experimental Performance*

*Them*, a work created in 1985 by choreographer Ishmael Houston-Jones with collaborators Dennis Cooper (text) and Chris Cochrane (music) and restaged in 2010, offers a compelling case study for the consideration of the body as archive. This essay explores the unusually rich nodule of information contained by *Them* to consider queer theory, critical race theory, and shifts in the creative biographies and public profiles of experimental performance artists in collaboration across thirty years of making work. The essay suggests new ways to think about the under-documented experimental dance performance communities operating in New York City in the 1980s; the myriad ways that race, sexuality, and masculinities circulated in those communities; and the political economies that made way for the immensely successful restaging of this work in 2010.

*Them* occupies an important, small space as a remnant of experimental dance performance from New York in the 1980s. The work was created by three “outsider” gay artists, men whose separate efforts held notable, but circumscribed, currency in their areas of expertise at the time. The work expressed volitional force as an exemplar of experimental creativity at once multidisciplinary and enlivened by live performing bodies improvising together. It demonstrated an awkward community of tenuous masculine connection. *Them* came and went fairly quickly after its original string of engagements, disappearing like other improvised works of the era that seemed to hold little value for audiences outside a tight circle of connoisseurs.

The reconstruction of *Them* in 2010, and its continued touring through 2014, limns a different picture of how experimental work matters across time and its attendant audiences, performances, and locations. Buoyed by the aggressive and corporately modeled publicity machine of New York-centric performance art of the twenty-first century, *Them* received wide publicity in 2010 before and after its re-premiere. Journalistic dance writing centered on its process, historical resonance, and achievement as an AIDS-era work concerned with identity and the body. The work toured internationally on a vibrant itinerary at notable venues, including Paris, Berlin, and Utrecht. The displacement of *Them* from a string of small, gala-styled performances in the 1980s to international touring in recognized venues in the 2010s demonstrates the most obvious shift in scale surrounding experimental performance work. By 2010 the reconstruction of a lost work of art from twenty-five years before satisfied curiosity about its content and form, even as it proposed older strategies of performance that held shifting streams of relevance in the context of later social and political circumstances.

## THE BODY REMEMBERS, AND IT REMINDS

A grainy film of the first workshop of *Them* from 1985 suggests a do-it-yourself experiment with men’s bodies, contact improvisation (CI), velocity, noise, and indeterminacy.<sup>1</sup> Its opening images vibrate in murky black-and-white oscillation. The sound of distortion threatens to overwhelm an electric guitar riff struggling to come into sonic clarity. Someone—a youngish man dressed in a T-shirt and loose pants, in casual, everyday clothes someone might wear at home—walks in circles, searching for what to do next. He seems to wonder *how* to do that next thing. Distortion wins out, and the sound disassembles as the dancer heaves and careens into awkward movements of distress. The archival film itself oscillates more, and the image dissolves and recovers periodically. Watching this early film, we can’t really see the dance. As if to reveal the fractured quality of any reconstruction project, it seems important to note that we can’t really see what happens in the studio space at PS 122, where the first performance of *Them* took place.

A film from 1987 of the larger ensemble version of *Them* confirms the dance theater aspirations of its development. Performing in Toronto, Canada, now eight performers inhabit the work: six dancers, the musician, and the poet-narrator. The work feels more grand and expansive. It takes up more space in the theater, and the archival film of this version allows us to see more of its compositional strategies. Now the dancers seem to respond more to the tone of the stories told by Cooper, suggesting the harsh, fleeting encounters of men seeking sexual contact. These men find violence and indeterminacy along the way. The wages of being *Them* bring casual death and disappointment in the act of trying to be with someone else. But even with a better filmed referent, *Them* confounds. Even here, in this incomplete and decidedly partial documentation of the performance, the work is at once raw and complicated, in part because of its resistance to narrative or compositional clarity.

## BEGIN WITH THE BODY AND WHAT IT SEEMS TO BE DOING

*Reflection on the 1985 film: The improvisation is about what makes sense now, to me, in relationship to you, now. It’s not about a technique or an organized way to tell this particular story for the ages. The improvisation answers what it is for us to engage this thing together, now. Dancer Donald Fleming is long and lithe, with an upward curve to his gestures;*

*Houston-Jones tends to explore more urgent downward-directed weight. As the two confront each other, Houston-Jones does most of the chasing. But they don't touch or actually reach each other in this first foray. Composer Cochrane enjoys the various ways he can play with farting, overprocessed sounds that deny tenderness. At first Fleming resists dancing and mostly allows himself to perform aborted physical impulses. As he works through an improvised solo to guitarist sounds offered up by Cochrane, his movements become more and more dancerly. He becomes willing to perform moves that look like "dance." He tries to achieve a trancelike, liminal state, moving with harsh arcs and forcing his curving body to answer the brittleness of the guitar. Houston-Jones watches from the background in an off-balance sort of cruising attitude, moving slowly, seeming to be at once titillated and unsure.*



A scene from *Them* at PS 122, New York, 1985. Pictured left to right are Chris Cochrane, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Donald Fleming, and Jonathan Walker. Photograph by Dona Ann McAdams.

Fleming's longish solo from the first iteration of *Them* seems to be about looking for the least likely physical gesture to come next. This sort of creative "breaking of habit" can be very difficult for dancers to achieve. After all, habit is what allows us all to move through the world. Physical habit might be recognized as the mode of motion that allows us to get from here to there, to walk briskly or run, or to climb stairs without thinking. Dancers take technique classes daily to train their physical habit into reliable physicality. But Fleming works to dance outside of habit: to create physical articulations that are queer to himself and, by extension, to those of us viewing his performance. Throughout, he never appears too far away from a sense of being hurt or abject. The small gestures and impulses he performs demonstrate an embodiment of a continual sort of abjection, and as we watch, they seem to tilt toward a manifestation of physical death. The death of moving outside of habit.

Upon his move to New York in 1979, choreographer Houston-Jones began exploring CI as a mode of generating movement. By 1985 this mode of physical suggestion spoke to his intertwined aesthetic and political concerns as a young, mixed-race, gay artist. By the time *Them* premiered, he had chosen elements of the CI form that spoke to him: the blank refusal to capitulate to any known movement sequence; the intransigent resistance to flowing, familiar gestures; and the idiom's allowance for unlikely partners to dance together without any assumption of unison complicities of motion. For Houston-Jones, CI allowed the arrival of an unexpected grotesque, one always shifting moment to moment and encounter to encounter. And CI explicitly resists the comfort of physical habit. This form within a kind of formlessness enlivened Houston-Jones's creative willingness to explore and to create works that answered unspeakable dimensions of gay life under siege in the first years of AIDS in New York.

Contact improvisation developed during the neoliberal political moment of privatization, famously forwarded by Ronald Reagan's economic policies. The neoliberal turn assumed that citizens might be best suited to create their own structures of support—social and economic—in lieu of extensive governmental coordination and oversight. Paradoxically, neoliberal policies shift responsibility for well-being onto the citizen, without reference to differing entry points to economic or social exchange. Contact improvisation fits into a neoliberal rhetoric of democratizing dance by seeming to allow any who would engage its form access to its expressive and social potential. In reality, though, CI lives in the world, and the world remains

nostalgic turn that produces desire, whether the physical terms of that desire persist or not. In some ways, the reconstruction of *Them* surely explores the performers' need to be onstage, to be viewed in practice and in public.



Portrait of Chris Cochrane, Ishmael Houston-Jones, and Dennis Cooper. Photograph by Christy Pessagno, 2010.

*Reflection on interview in Berlin, August 16, 2012: The men seem to get along and like each other, of course. They are survivors. They don't agree on everything, though. Dennis is the "smart" one because he has words at his command. He also seems the most skeptical to use everyday language to describe the experience of their collaboration. Ishmael defers amid the group, but not when it comes to his making movement with other people—then he is the boss. Chris, who seems so strangely needy at times onstage, seems even more so in person. Yes, we realize that you are a sonic inventor and a genius at creating those sounds and this performance. Do you think we don't notice you? We surely do recognize your brilliance. Together, we four find our way through a conversation. Several times I think, these guys don't seem very gay at all. I wonder if this is part of how they work together well. After spending the tiniest bit of time with them all, and even more with Ishmael alone, I think that they would hate that I could say this. And I wonder if they would be glad that I could think so, too.<sup>11</sup>*

I thought about love. I think I confused what they did with it. But my belief made the day great. I think I decided to make that my goal—to be like them. I put such incredible faith in the future that I sobbed a little I think.—Dennis Cooper, in *Them*

#### HOW CAN WE SEE THEM NOW?

*Reflection on performance in Paris, 2012: In a duet sequence from the first version of the work, Donald Fleming pushes Houston-Jones onto the mattress, climbs on top of him, and presses his hands into his mouth. They rise and begin again. The climbing on top feels aggressive, invasive, and violent. Again and again they almost kiss or embrace, but Fleming pushes Houston-Jones onto the bed and straddles him, moves his head about, and they rise again. Jones is again pushed down and straddled by Fleming. Again and again, up and almost kiss, then a push and down again. Ultimately indeterminate, the sequence enacts a repetition without resolution—no ending to this cycle of attraction and repulsion. Houston-Jones seems passive and soft, somehow yielding. Fleming demonstrates hardness and unrelenting domination. Does it matter that white man Fleming lords over black man Houston-Jones? In the 2010 reconstruction, African American dancer Niall Noel Jones performed the role of the aggressor. Are we to rethink the terms of racialized representation in the age of Trayvon Martin's murder? How could we not?*

*Reflection on performance in Berlin, 2012: We are a mostly middle-aged white European audience of some 250 or so. At an eye-level evaluation, we are a maybe 15 percent women, 10 percent young (presumably queer) men, and 100 percent educated art audience. We are mostly gay. The sold-out performance begins with the hush of expectation. Ishmael Houston-Jones enters the space, which is littered with performers in the wings and along the edges.*

*Cochrane's sound rises as a blindfolded young man is manipulated by the mature dance artist. The music gets bigger and bigger—is it overwrought?—and Houston-Jones becomes captivated by its scale. He performs his solo of nervous-system interruptions, slapping his face fifteen times before stopping his own hand to leave the space. His dance is a question, and the rest of the work will offer its answer. This performance seems quite sure of itself. It wants us to consider*



bound to concerns of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Contact improvisation was mostly practiced by heteronormative middle-class white men and women, who used the form to express their very personal attitudes about seemingly apolitical vectors of embodiment, including skin, weight, gravity, touch, and velocity. Contact improvisation always had queer people of color among its number, but its engagement seldom reached outside of the detheatricalized moment of its “jams.” It may have spoken *to* the world in many ways, but it seldom spoke *of* the world at large in a way that acknowledged gay and racialized presence.

Working with improvisation allows the collaborating artists to imagine *Them* as a living, breathing response to the shifting landscape of outsider gay life. Physical and sonic improvisations by Cochrane provide counterpoint to the fixity of oblique narrations of death and desire read aloud by Cooper. The bodies of the composer/musician and the choreographer/dancers demonstrate human resources that allow them to persevere. Their performance of unexpected responses to the moment of performance both reflect and model our own sense of possibility at the rise of HIV infection and death from AIDS.

## TIME AND IMPROVISATION: QUEER THEORY

Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.

—José Esteban Muñoz

Improvisation forms the warp and woof of *Them*. The gestures of the performing bodies in motion are realized as a *queer* sort of body behavior, one that materializes outside of any regular motions of dance or dance theater. Because the inventory of movements—the physical lexicon of the work—becomes manifest improvisationally, in the creative exploration of the moment, the work is inherently queer in the most everyday sense, as a realization of a desire to do something unusual.

The work is also “queer” in its most obvious twenty-first century articulation of the concept, as dance that offers up nonnormative sexuality as a center of its operations. Queer theory, which found its way into college classrooms and then mainstream discourse in the 1990s, concerned itself with the anxiety generated when desire, sex, and the portrayal of gender don’t necessarily match. For example, men who look butch and macho, like motorcycle gang members, might desire sex with others who look like them or with feminized, cross-dressing men who live public lives as women. The queer space between this powerful, socially circumscribed triumvirate of sex, desire, and gender allows for strangely eroticized behavior and response to gesture; queer acts typically feel unusual, precocious, and sexy. Houston-Jones and his collaborators mine the possibility of a creative structuring that resounds outside of “straight time.” The work operates differently from the richly detailed postmodern dances of the early 1980s, dances like those of Garth Fagan or Bill T. Jones, which explored order and predetermined gesture created with compositional scrutiny. In *Them*, the various scenarios are meticulously designed by the choreographer but filled in by the collaborators according to the moment. Most important, the work utilizes CI to tell a story of queer sexuality and abjection, a story that is concerned with age and location, and in some ways, race.

Hope along with its other, fear, are affective structures that can be described as anticipatory.—José Esteban Muñoz

Where the late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz seeks hope in his depiction of a queer utopia, Houston-Jones mines fear as both a compositional strategy and a structuring device for the work. Anxiety and fear permeate the dance in each of its iterations. When the performers strike attitudes of repose, a nagging desire always fills the air. Little of romance or tenderness finds its way into the exchanges between the men of *Them*. Rather, stillness operates as triage for the next encounter.

*Reflection on the 1985 film: Now the two dancers lunge and grasp at each other, chasing and indicting each other while trying not to touch. Chasing and wanting, but not touching. Running and wishing, but rarely receiving. Are they afraid? Would something bad happen if they were to touch? They try to read each other's energy, but they also seem to try to miss each other. Again, that fear? Full of force—and something like anger?—They push toward contact. They collide, one succumbs, and they wrestle to the ground, into darkness.*

Working with fear or anxiety as a trope for gay male performance might raise some questions of stereotyping around the representations of queer bodies in *Them*. But Houston-Jones counters the prevalence of anxiety and nervousness with a sweaty, industrial masculinity that feels patently raw, a little bit dirty, and very funky (as in smelly). In calling on working-class or alienated male youth identities for his dancers, Houston-Jones constructs *Them* as simultaneously threatening and titillating to the art-house audiences that witness its events.

Academic discourses of queer performance often focus on “failure” as a trope that helps us recognize queer. Queer includes gestures that don’t quite add up. These nonnormative, mismatched attempts to succeed that ultimately fail are to remind us of how fragile anything like “normal” might be and how difficult it is to remain “normal.” Houston-Jones explores

how sad and hard it might be to be queer, or to have been gay as HIV infection and death from AIDS took over the landscape of New York life. In all, the work feels like something of a ritual procession of its own volition by now: an act that will allow the performers to excise something around nostalgia and an absent futurity. In an interview the morning after, the guys tell me that the work “enacted a resonance” as its restaging brought together people who had been there in the 1980s, to assemble again and reflect on the twenty-five intervening years. Of course I wasn’t there, then, and neither were many of us in the audience now, in Berlin 2012, but we did indeed feel the yearning of this performance, to answer a need to allow this sort of queer masculinity and presence to continue into this space and time ...

Across the years—from 1985 to 1987 and then to 2010 and 2012—*Them* remained consistent in its compositional ambitions.<sup>12</sup> Watching films of its productions side by side, we note the familiarity of gesture and similarity of their emphases. This “family resemblance” has to do with the presence of the creators in all versions of the work; Cochrane, Cooper, and Houston-Jones have participated in every performance of *Them*. The ability of the work to remain recognizable to itself and an attendant audience also has to do with the subtle clarity of the compositional technique at work in the sonic, literary, and corporeal processes that produce its contents. Finely crafted, in each of its three streams of invention (music, text, movement) the work withstands shifts of venue and cast. What has changed across time is the refinement of its theatrical gestures. Sequences take shape within a logic of the theatrical event; scenes begin to feel like the “earlier scenes” and the “later scenes” of the evening. This relates most importantly to the sense of inevitability of its ending. The 1987 and 2010 productions both included final scenes with the animal carcass and the inspection of lymph nodes as endings for *Them*. In 2010 and 2012, the performers all knew that whatever happened along the way in the structured improvisations, these scenes would land on their audience with burning representational force.

*Reflection on the 1987 film: Houston-Jones appears on the bed wearing boxer shorts, a backward shirt that looks like a hospital gown, socks, and a blindfold. He carries a dead goat. He presses it against the bed and himself. One blindfolded and the other already dead, they cannot see each other or understand the nature of each other’s presence. He hugs the goat close to his body and twitches with it. The encounter is a silent scream of despair and remorse, desperation and sublime grotesquerie. Again, it is somewhat difficult to see what happens here in this archival film. It is surely hard to watch.*

*Reflection on performance in Berlin, 2012: Arturo Vidich enters the space, blindfolded and in a semblance of a hospital gown, led by another performer who carries a goat carcass. Deposited on the dirty mattress, Vidich and the goat wrestle, seeming to sputter in despair at their shared misfortune. Blood seeps across his body and onto the sheets. He puts the goat over his head as if it were a mask, or as though its interior could relieve this unrelenting degradation. Flailing under his large, weighted body, the animal carcass is difficult to see. The action of this segment is indecipherable and unpalatable.*

*Them* ends with a gesture-based theatrical coda rooted in a physical realism not seen earlier in the work. The men stand nervously looking into imaginary mirrors that direct their gazes toward the audience, searching for lumps in their lymph nodes, feeling tentatively at their necks, armpits, groins. In this state of personal vulnerability made public for the stage, a death figure in black moves among them, wrestling them to the ground and immobility one at a time. Some go fairly easily; some resist and struggle until they succumb. A portion of the text repeats, with a difference—read now by one of the younger dancers before being taken up again by Cooper. This ending surprises us in its shift of aesthetic ambition; the realistic pantomime of the moment of awareness of mortality seems overwrought. But then, these direct gestures anchor the physicality of the work in a way that the text and music already have. As viewers, we might appreciate the clarity of gesture and affect that this section provides. This sequence also confirms that the work is something of a play, more akin to “dance theater” than abstract postmodern dance or CI. *Them* concludes confidently, aware of its theatrical and cultural ambitions and capacities.

failure as an inevitable physical by-product of improvisation, and he encodes failure to operate as a structuring concept for the way in which his male performers resist emotional intimacy. Throughout the work, physical encounters fail, and conventional theatrical dancing also fails. Importantly, the work offers no utopian vision of gay sexual practice. When Muñoz writes that “utopia is always about the not-quite-here or the notion that something is missing,”<sup>2</sup> he underscores the notion that utopia is a speculative and aspirational category of being. It doesn’t quite exist, but it is crucial to consider in its ambition to inspire social change.



Ishmael Houston-Jones, Chris Cochrane, and Jonathan Walker in *Them*, PS 122, New York, 1985. Photograph by Dona Ann McAdams.

*Them* points toward no alternate, “better” future; it focuses instead on spaces of abjection and dystopian fear. The fear and anxiety of *Them* portray an inability to sustain care or empathy among men. Even in a series of tableaux of three entangled men in physical contact, their shifting poses and forceful scrutiny of each other suggest a nervousness tempered by “dis-ease.” Sometimes the men touch, but the touch doesn’t seem to actually do anything in particular or linger past its moment. Physical touch on the stage appears like the impermanent touch of sex that Cooper continually describes in his narration.

#### MEMORY AND ABJECTION: CRITICAL RACE THEORY

To make dances from a place of melancholy abjection is to wield power of immense proportion.

—David Gere

*Them* suggests a remembering of pain and mistrust, of hurt inspired by a sense of outsidership, and of death as the wage of men having sex with men. In some ways, its totalizing sense of abjection speaks to gay failure as a norm and reminds us of similar cautionary tales of real life told by disenfranchised artists of color through the ages. While *Them* has little to say about race in particular through Cooper’s text or Cochrane’s music, its overwhelming affect conveys a bitter tongue well practiced by a global cohort of black artists speaking to circumstances of white control. The work feels *hard* as it deals with personal inabilities to act within stigmatizing social circumstances. Paralleling the limited social and economic mobility that most African Americans encounter, Houston-Jones’s gay archetypes have little hope and can seemingly do little more than they already do in the world of *Them*.





Arturo Vidich in *Them*, PS 122, New York, October 22, 2010. (See plate 16 for color image.) Photograph © Ian Douglas.

Queer dance is hard to catch, and it is meant to be hard to catch—it is supposed to slip through the fingers and comprehension of those who would use knowledge against us. But it matters and takes on a vast material weight for those of us who perform or draw important sustenance from performance. Rather than dematerialize, dance materializes. Dance, like energy, never disappears; it is simply transformed.—José Esteban Muñoz

*Reflection on performance in Berlin, 2012: These are grungy people in grungy sorts of scenes. The goat carcass suits the work because it is also ugly and decrepit, sort of phantasmagoric and horrible. (While short in terms of duration, this sequence holds huge impact. Audience members always leave during its performance.) The goat sequence seems longer in the reconstruction. It seems more important somehow in this later version.*

*We hear children's voices playing outdoors as the men check their lymph nodes. The voices add an actual sense of innocence and possibility to a work bereft of seeming alternatives. This sequence goes on for some time—longer than the dance with the goat—and the embodied manifestation of abjection and queer death digs into the sense of the entire event yet again. They don't go lightly to the floor; ... they kick and scream, they resist even as they fail.*

*And in this, I wonder if the work has a moral compass that tilts toward a puritanical, cause-and-effect sort of ethic. The answer to the unmitigated sex becomes these murders. The anxiety of queer life now, reflecting back on gay life of twenty-five years ago, ends with defeat and disenfranchisement. There is no outside of this outsider effort to resist conformity.*

Visual art theorist Bill Seaman's "recombinant poetics" draws on a metaphor of cellular regeneration to emphasize how new meaning making happens as participants intermingle "their mind-set with the interpenetrating fields of the media-elements that shift in meaning in relation to constructed context and dynamic action."<sup>13</sup> Focusing on the intermingling that inevitably troubles our relationships with materials encountered, new and old, Seamen asserts that "the participant conceptually projects meaning across the entirety of the ongoing experience."<sup>14</sup> If we consider the young performers as the "participants" in the reconstruction process, we can surely appreciate the many ways in which their presence changes *Them* on a molecular level. *Them* shimmies and shifts, taking on an aggressive, hyperbolic resolve to achieve a husky, curious, youthful masculinity that arrives newly minted after the millennium.

And what of the body as archive here? For Cochrane, Cooper, and Houston-Jones, their bodies comprise the inevitable archive that allows the work to exist. Their experiences as mature artists saturate the latter-day performances of *Them*, and through their continued performances they consider their bodies to be indispensable to its realization. The younger bodies become a different kind of archive, one that still searches for ways to confront the rich array of information contained by the dance's structure. The younger bodies are interchangeable (indeed, dancer injury and unavailability have forced last-minute shifts in casting for the project at times). The younger bodies know things that the older bodies don't; they know more about CI technique, maybe, but less about the fizzy physical thrill of gay cruising or the torturous weightiness of everyday abjection



Felix Cruz (foreground) and Jeremy Pheiffer in *Them*, PS 122, New York, October 22, 2010. (See plate 15 for color image.) Photograph © Ian Douglas.

Remembering pain and cycling its wages into creative ensemble effort is a basic practice of black art. Work in this mode mines suffering toward an end of renewal and recovery. It tends to conceive of remembering as a revitalization of social possibility. In this, Houston-Jones visits territory familiar to Leroi Jones's seminal performance work *Slave Ship* (1967), an experimental play with music and movement that told of the horrors of the Middle Passage. *Slave Ship* featured improvised musical structures that were considered avant-garde when it was created. It imagined theater comprised of the moaning sobs of captives in the hold—realized in a darkened space that allowed no exit for its audience. *Slave Ship*, like other radical black performance art, including Eleo Pomare's dance theater work *Blues for the Jungle* (1966), forced its audience into difficult corners of complicity and empathy. These works made black bodies *strange* to their mostly white audiences. They built upon unexpected nuances of aggressive behavior that spilled over the boundary between audience and performer. Radical black dance theater works like these, and Katherine Dunham's staging of a lynching in *Southland* (1951) a decade earlier, confirmed the possibilities of enacting contemporary dystopia as a strategy for the creation of provocative, difficult, progressive performance.

In staging the bullying and hostility common to punkish gay life in the 1980s, Houston-Jones and his collaborators refer to these earlier works that engage critical race theory at their core. Like the three works mentioned above by Jones, Pomare, and Dunham, *Them* assumes a community that recognizes itself, already in motion, even if that community's gestures are circumscribed by an offstage, controlling protagonist. Where the earlier works assume an offstage, racist, white mainstream that constrains the gestures of the community onstage, *Them* adds a dimension of sexual dissidence to the challenges of racist interaction. *Them* refers obliquely to an offstage, heteronormative mainstream that would deny its characters the social agency to love, admire supportively, or rejoice in a shared identity politic. *Them* arrives as dissident evocation of a world rendered without resource to calm.

*Reflection on the 2010 film: The they of Them are not particularly raced, but they could be. Is this what the beginning of racially mixed progressive expression might have looked like in the 1980s—this sense of ease without racialized ontology or a possibility to be alongside each other in this space of East Village gay/queer? Wasn't it enough that these men made choices outside of a pressing Yuppie mainstream that seemed to want everyone to join the banking industries of the day? Reagan's neoliberal tilt seemed to circumscribe a crass, tiny space for young people of color to join the fray of "I'll get mine first" economic participation. But Houston-Jones's world of grungy gay men seems little interested in hierarchies of race or class. Here, though, black presence capitulates to white essence. Black presence might be resolutely humanitarian at its core of creation through the violence of the Middle Passage and forced enslavement. The white essence of Them realizes a somehow chic, devil-may-care nihilism.*

*Reflection on the 1985 film: Cooper's text offers an unsentimental recitation of the deaths that came unexpectedly and too soon. It also presents a string of personal, first-person stories that detail young life full of desire for more, and more varied, sex. These stories, voiced against bleeding sounds of Cochrane's electric guitar, predict a searching sequence in*



amid the inexplicable rise of HIV infection. No single body, or generational group of bodies, has all the answers to the work. In concert, they ask the question, "How can we shift together, in dynamic action, to create an archive of physical responses to experiential truths of gay life in New York in the 1980s? What does our physical recombination produce?"

We note with interest the following story in the *New York Daily News* in 2014: "For the first time since the HIV epidemic exploded more than a generation ago, AIDS is no longer one of the top 10 causes of death in the city, the city's top health official said Thursday."<sup>15</sup>

And men—they—still have sex. They still mourn an ineffable desiring that will not abate.  
They still die. And we watch them.

#### NOTES

The epigraphs, in order of appearance, are from José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3; David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 122; Burt Supree, "Men with Men," *Village Voice*, December 23, 1986; Gia Kourlas, "Ishmael Houston-Jones: The '80s are back with Them," *Time Out New York*, September 20, 2010; and Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 81.

Interviews were conducted with Ishmael Houston-Jones on February 29, 2012, in Paris; August 18, 2013, in New York; and July 14, 2014, in Durham, NC.

1. "Contact Improvisation is an evolving system of movement initiated in 1972 by American choreographer Steve Paxton. The improvised dance form is based on the communication between two moving bodies that are in physical contact and their combined relationship to the physical laws that govern their motion—gravity, momentum, inertia. The body, in order to open to these sensations, learns to release excess muscular tension and abandon a certain quality of willfulness to experience the natural flow of movement. Practice includes rolling, falling, being upside down, following a physical point of contact, supporting and giving weight to a partner.

Contact improvisations are spontaneous physical dialogues that range from stillness to highly energetic exchanges. Alertness is developed in order to work in an energetic state of physical disorientation, trusting in one's basic survival instincts. It is a free play with balance, self-correcting the wrong moves and reinforcing the right ones, bringing forth a physical/emotional truth about a shared moment of movement that leaves the participants informed, centered, and enlivened." Steve Paxton, "A Definition," *Contact Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1979): 26. See also Ann Cooper Albright, "Touching History," in this volume.

2. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 118.

3. See Jacques Derrida and Christie V. McDonald, "Choreographies," in *Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance*, ed. Ellen W. Goellner and Jacqueline Shea Murphy (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 141–56.

4. Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*, 4.

5. See Danielle Goldman, "Improvised Dance in the Reconstruction of Them," in *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, ed. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (Oxford University Press, 2015).

6. Lindsey Drury, "Response: Lindsey Drury on Ishmael Houston-Jones, Dennis Cooper and Chris Cochrane's *Them*, with a Reply from Ishmael," *Movement Research: Critical Correspondence* (October 20, 2010).

7. Marc Robinson, "Performance Strategies: Marc Robinson, Ishmael Houston-Jones, John Kelly, Karen Finley, and Richard Elovich," *Performing Arts Journal* 10, no. 3 (1987): 31–55, 36.

8. See David Velasco, "Ishmael Houston-Jones: 09.26.10," *Artforum* (September 26, 2010), <http://artforum.com/words/id=26489>. Interview with Ishmael Houston-Jones, Chris Cochrane, and Dennis Cooper, Berlin, August 16, 2012.

9. See Drury, "Response."

10. Lucas De Lima, "Infectious Nostalgia in Ishmael Houston-Jones, Dennis Cooper and Chris Cochrane's *Them*," *Montevideo*, January 16, 2011, <http://montevideo.com/2011/01/infectious-nostalgia-in-ishmael-houston-jones-dennis-cooper-and-chris-cochrane-them/>.

11. Interview with Houston-Jones, Cochrane, and Cooper, Berlin, August 16, 2012.

12. Filmed versions of the 1985, 1986, and 1987 performances of *Them* are held by the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts, Dance Division. *Them*, videotaped at PS 122, New York, May 12, 1985. Performed by Ishmael Houston-Jones, Dennis Cooper, and Chris Cochrane, with Donald Fleming and John B. Walker. Available at Performing Arts Research Collections—Dance (\*MGZIA 4-7553); *Them*, videotaped at PS 122, New York, November 28, 1986. Performed by Ishmael Houston-Jones, Dennis Cooper, Chris Cochrane, Barry Crooks, Donald Fleming, Julyen Hamilton, Daniel McIntosh, and David Zambrano. Lighting by Carol McDowell. Available at Performing Arts Research Collections—Dance (\*MGZIA 4-7534); and *Them*, videotaped in performance at the Du Maurier Centre, Toronto, Canada, as part of the Harbourfront Festival, in 1987. Performed by Ishmael Houston-Jones, Dennis Cooper, and Chris Cochrane, with Barry Crooks, Almon Grimsted, Benoît Lachambre, Daniel McIntosh, and Brian Moran. Available at Performing Arts Research Collections—Dance (\*MGZIA 4-7545).

13. William Seaman, "Recombinant Poetics and Related Database Aesthetics," in *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information*

the dance of men cruising each other in a narrow passageway of light. This cruising section includes familiar interactions of attraction and unsurety: sizing up others in anticipation of a physical encounter, enjoying the unknown pursuit. Somehow, this sequence feels meditative and almost delicate, animated by something that relishes being unsure and slightly mistrustful. The thrill of discovery—that the guy whom you cruised, cruised back and is also interested in you—gives way to an excitement of possibility. The men try to disguise their desires while letting enough be known to entice a partner. The sequence accelerates, though, into a frenzy of sound and motion and a sense of trying to exceed the tenuous relationship and the sound score—jumping onto the wall and trying to move and dance outside/beyond the work somehow. We hear the sound of audiotape moving backward. Finally the men touch and embrace in motion, but it is a sort of wrestling, fighting touch. They move to a bed and tear into a demonstration of confusing, angry, unloving sex. This is encounter without emotional intimacy, a fantasy encounter of relationship bound by power established in the crucible of the cruising.

A bat and a bed: two prominent props from the original production. An object of violence and an object of intimacy and repose. The first version of the work had no phantasmagoric ending, no bleeding goat carcass. As a scrappy sort of chamber dance for five performers, the first production betrayed little of its forthcoming grand dance theater ambitions. Later, of course, the additional prop of the dead goat would transform the performance content, and *Them* would become a classic of its time.

*Reflection on the 1987 film: Musically, Them develops a mature identity of sonic motivation across its various iterations. From his opening riffs, Cochrane plays like a shaman summoning the ghosts on his guitar and with his many electronic setups. He begins at a fever pitch that sounds of noise, offered as a prelude to variegations of sonic assault and an occasional meditative respite. By 1987 Cooper stands at the side of the performance space, rather than sitting at a table as he had in 1985. The larger cohort of dancers looks emphatically like the discarded youth of suburbia. They seem to be a gang of kids in ugly, ill-fitting gear that makes everyone seem very ordinary and anti-aspirational. Cooper reads the opening text—which has changed little from its earlier iterations—but now the dancers touch each other. These encounters—improvisations of manipulating but holding—seem to be about failed relationships, or at least about trying to be in a relationship rather than just physical contact. The dancers hold their energy close to their bodies in this section, and we see postures of intimacy that show what it looks like without, somehow, being intimate. After all, intimacy doesn't belong in this work. The movement accelerates into a sort of searching and jumping/falling thing, much more dancerly and explicitly about dancing than in the 1985 version. They fall. They keep falling. They keep touching without affect or tenderness. But they do allow themselves to touch faces, to hold bodies, and to physically resist each other. Is this queer corporeality? Does it resound more than it might because we know that its creators are men who have sex with men?*

Simple pleasures and affections are far away. In Houston-Jones' outlook the bullying, clamorous, brusque, torn-up aspects of ... relationships are intrinsically knotted up with our passion and tenderness and need.... [B]ut our rough human grace is overwhelmed by frustration and defeat.—Burt Supree

#### SOUNDS OUT OF TIME: GENDER THEORY

Houston-Jones has described the work as operating on three parallel streams of music, movement, and text. The creative pathways opened by each of these idioms are not intended to intersect, comment upon, or even support each other so much as to exist and emerge simultaneously, with each influencing the other organically by the nature of its presence. This complex method of assemblage assumes three coherent, self-contained entities unfolding in time. In this, Cochrane, Houston-Jones, and Cooper excel. The musical score can be appreciated on its own merits as an exquisite exploration of unexpected soundscape: screaming electric guitar riffs and farting electronic sounds mix with recordings of birds and children playing in a schoolyard. Indeed, Cochrane created a digital recording of the score on CD that stands up extremely well as an independent listening experience. Cooper's text for *Them*, similarly, rivals that of some of his most celebrated literature.

Houston-Jones's choreographic score is composed of several compelling scenes of action that allow the performers to execute a range of methodological approaches. Contact improvisation duets that morph into wrestling, a sequence of improvised postcoital tableaux, a dramatic improvisation around strategies of cruising, and a mysterious bedroom encounter of domination demonstrate four approaches to practice found here. The bedroom encounter threateningly places one man at the will of another, as he is repeatedly pushed down onto the bed to be physically topped. The dominating man climbs atop him and adjusts his hair, caresses his face, then rises to repeat the action again and again. This sadistic sequence suggests a perverse titillation in the masochistic act of domination. Taken together, the varied sections demonstrate a confident creative structure, one that values diversity of approach in staging provocation.

The body is a fragile and gendered archive, one rendered by social circumstance as well as intellectual, spiritual, and

*Overflow (Electronic Mediations)*, ed. Victoria Vesna (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), Kindle electronic ed., loc. 1644.

14. Ibid., loc. 1646.

15. *New York Daily News*, March 13, 2014.

#### FURTHER READING

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physical activity. In *Them*, the body is rendered as innately eroticized and sexualized. It appears as a process in motion always concerned with its physical capacity and fragility. While the dancers of *Them* grunt, sweat, and wrestle through physical encounters, Cooper's text recounts the body's ultimate instability and the ever-looming prospect of death that approaches us all. The bodies in motion onstage act as counter-report to the litany of deaths that hover at the edge of the stage space. This disturbing—and productive—tension among text and body, body and music, and text and music propels the experience forward.

The body as archive suggests knowledge outside of the limitations of language. Houston-Jones's reliance on improvisational structures allows this "looking outside of words" to be amplified in terms of gesture and dancerly motion. Many cultural and literary theorists have specified the ways in which language and writing circumscribe gender. Jacques Derrida, among others, writes persuasively on the ways in which textuality, based largely on linear binaries, appears as masculine, while movement might suggest an essential feminine outside of obvious, everyday systems of power and control. Derrida's concept of "incalculable choreographies" exists in an always-shifting consideration of gender and sex that reaches beyond any sexuality, reaching for something outside of the everyday.<sup>3</sup> Casting the body as archive, we underscore the impossible infinities of knowledge. What we did, and how and why we did it, are stored within the body's entire memory. But we tend to rely on language to share that information with others. And yet the body already knows what it has done even when there are no words that come easily to share that knowledge.

Cooper's text arrives at the edge of an emergent punk gay literature of the 1980s that placed nonnormative sexualities alongside violent excursions of self-doubt. Cooper's poetry and fiction hold volitional force as exemplars of homosexual literature written without reference to mainstream concerns of social propriety. His text for *Them* places stories of casual sex and unexpected death alongside poetic flights of fancy detailing a wish to belong to a larger group. The confident, evocative, and nonsequential text stabilizes the larger production with an unblinking yearning for life bound by young, casual sex. Indeed, as the musical and movement performers make choices in response to the emerging moment of the production, Cooper's text varies little from venue to venue in terms of its content. Thirty years later, Cooper's outsider, punk-tinged text aligns well with queer articulations of twenty-first-century nonnormative sexualities.

While Cooper's text fits into a lineage of homosexual or gay letters, Houston-Jones's staging of gay gesture finds a more limited cohort in terms of dance performance. In the mid-1980s audiences witnessed few theatrical works expressing gay male corporeality as an everyday sort of occurrence, meaning those not bound by melodramatic portrayals of homosexuality as pathology. Dance historian David Gere reminds us that Tim Miller and John Berndt's performances *Live Boys* (1980) chronicled that couple's everyday navigations of gay life in New York City at the time, including reference to a "mysterious skin fungus" that Berndt developed.<sup>4</sup> *Them* arrived at the beginning of work that responded to the emerging AIDS crisis as well as to outsider gay sensibilities.

Homophobia is very much the same—this idea of exposure, of something bad happening just because of who you are.—Gia Kourlas

Same-sex nomenclature and identity politics shifted from the mid-1980s to the 2010s. After the millennium, young men were as likely to claim a "queer" identity as a gay or homosexual one. The change in naming coincided with a large-scale shift in both the visibility of nonnormative sexuality and an ease with which young men might consider a spectrum of sexual identity and experience. The 2010 cast of *Them* included self-identified queer and straight performers, alongside the mature, gay creative artists. Queer identity in the 2010s surely enjoys a lower stigmatization than gay identity did in the 1980s. By 2010 there may even have been something "chic" about appearing in a work tilted toward queer and homosexual identities.

*Reflection on the 1987 film: The stories have so much sense of quotidian melancholy, an abiding sense of "this is just what the day is," that makes it all seem tawdry. When one performer starts to bang the bed repeatedly with the bat, I wonder, "Is this internalized homophobia? Are we being invited to witness the self-hatred that can come with being gay in a straight world?" But when the bully character chases the others around the space, we know that this sort of violence circumscribes the lives of the characters. The bully chases him, and Houston-Jones falls and rolls; he survives. The work trades in dystopia but also demonstrates a fact of surviving the ineloquent moment. These moves, these tableaux of gay presence, remind me of a sequence from filmmaker Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), when two young male hustlers have sex with an older client. Van Sant edits this sequence as a series of almost-frozen tableaux, as slightly moving, breathing bits of stillness, captured in melancholic pause. This gesture in the film and in *Them* seems to make gay men more present in the world somehow. "I wish I had taken a photo ..." the narrator reads, and I think, yes, if only to confirm that the thing I wondered at actually happened; that I, and these men, were here at some point. But it is all ephemeral and goes away soon: these lives, these moves, and these sexual drives.*

## NEW BODIES, NEW ARCHITECTURE

The body has a long tradition as the primary agent in the design and occupation of our buildings and cities. Our physiognomy, proportions, and sensate corporeal agencies that process external phenomena, internalizing them as stimuli and cognition, are the performance-based criteria for the spaces we design. From the harmonies of the Vitruvian figure and its contemporaneous drawings of body as basilica, to the augmentation of human geometries at the Bauhaus and by Le Corbusier, the human form has been architecture's metric.

In his *Triadic Ballet* (1922), Oskar Schlemmer extended, as well as limited, the human body's range of actions through the use of devices and costumes. Schlemmer put on stage a new construct of human kinesiology, created amid the automation generated by industrialization and the Werkbund movement. The use of diagrams and notation systems implemented at the Bauhaus by Schlemmer and László Moholy-Nagy provided graphic interfaces through which to design these new performances. For example, the *Sketch for a Score for a Mechanized Eccentric* by Moholy-Nagy integrated human performance, sound, and lighting in a single diagram.

As one of the primary reference points for the design and production of architecture, the body and its capacities of motion provide order and function to architectural space and structures. Notation of design is a feature shared by choreography and architectural design, utilized in both for its preservation and realization. Within the domain of ballet and other theater dance forms, architecture has conventionally focused on the production and design of stage sets, environments in which the performance occurs. The drawing and design of the building or the set are held in its collection of materials—its archive—and within the experience of performers and audience.

While a dance can be preserved in notation, the performed event can only linger in the viewer's memory. Because its primary medium is the body, the experience of the dance is ephemeral; only recently have new technologies been able to record it significantly as moving images. New technologies, however, can extend human performance into digital signals that may be interpreted in computation and reenacted in variable output.

With the widespread use of personal computers and accessible robotics, the past thirty years have yielded various models of proportioning and part-to-whole systems. If Schlemmer drew the human form within abstract geometries and mechanized its movements, the cyborg body is freed from physicality and type. This freedom makes possible the body's ability to participate in an evolving series of different and variable formats and forms. The ubiquity of technology is not exclusively an external condition. As the surface of the body is potentially altered or enhanced by technology, its transformations can also be absorbed within (e.g., implants or other internal additions) or expressed as anomalies on the exterior. These anomalies can be visible, producing changes in symmetry, proportion, composition, or any other enhancements that wearable computing can provide. These anomalies may also be invisible. Such transformations can augment the body's occupation of time and space, allowing us to see farther, be stronger, hear formerly inaudible sounds, and so forth.

In her now classic essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," Donna Haraway speculates that fusions of technology with bodied and social dimensions of the human, such as gender and race, will not only radically shift the boundaries of these identifiers but also contribute to the reinvention of power and social structures.<sup>1</sup> In Haraway's scenario, bodily enhancement is an option, but there are other possibilities that might facilitate more fundamental transformations. If our capacity to communicate with other agents—human as well as nonhuman—is developed, the human body and the architectural body become analogous. For designers, this cross-linking of disciplines, devices, and human limits allows for an open and flexible merger of systems that previously were locked in place with static, inert geometries. This technological cyborg in architecture allows human occupancy to dynamically manifest change in real time, as required.

Our first work with dance was a collaboration with two co-choreographers in conjunction with a university robotics lab and kinematics group that engage in team research and projects bringing together engineering, design, and computing.<sup>2</sup> This production was generated around the synthetic idea of the human-nonhuman agency of dance. This transmediated performance was a shared and collective expression among humans, robotic appendages, and wearable devices. All of these agents and the relationships manufactured among them were considered to be equal participants in the dance. The normal hierarchy of human performers, with tools or props in service to them, was replaced by a network model in which the dance comprised the relationship of modular robots and humans performing together. The aspect of performance in which humans are normally given the primary focus was shifted to be shared with the mechanical and digital performers on stage. The robotic arms were called "the divas" for their exasperating tendency to refuse to work or to respond in expected ways.



This shift in sensibility from “gay” to “queer” underscores a large shift in how *Them* might be received in the 2010s and beyond. After the millennium, scores of choreographic works dealing with same-sex identities and nonnormative sexualities found their way to audiences in the United States and Europe. Some works about global epidemics and holocausts were realized and experienced by artists and audiences interested in dance that might suggest possibilities for social movement. *Them* was both a remounting of an older work from a time of heightened confusion and anxiety and a singular work created by collaborators still concerned with performance as a valuable mode of identity expression. While the impulse for these artists to revisit the themes and methods of *Them* might have remained consistent across twenty-five years, the context for viewing or participating in this work changed mightily over time.

As Houston-Jones and dance writer Danielle Goldman have both noted, dancers for the reconstruction of *Them* explored expansive ways to approach the movement requirements of the work.<sup>5</sup> Many of the new performers had undertaken advanced dance training that might have included explorations in CI. Even the performers who had little or no performing experience before being cast in *Them* had been exposed to the sight of men dancing together intimately. While Houston-Jones felt it was important to include a range of movement experiences among his 2010 cast, the performers shared a gung-ho willingness to experiment as movers working in proximity to each other and ideologies of same-sex desire.

The 2010 dancers were generally younger than Houston-Jones and his collaborators had been in the 1980s. This generational displacement contributed to a sense of naïve optimism within the reconstruction of the work, an optimism that might have felt more akin to curiosity than anxiety in live performance. In general, the reconstruction of the work felt more like a playful exploration of structures of moving rather than an urgent invention of forms tailored to a particular story and its telling.

This may be the largest challenge of reconstructing a work of experimental theater: the fact that an urgent, inciting moment that inspires the collaborative creation may come and go, leaving only the trace of urgency in its wake. The moment that produced *Them* was characterized by worry and confusion, with gay men falling ill without any seeming pattern. The 2010 reconstruction occurred amid a popular culture nostalgia for the 1980s, as well as academic reconsiderations of early creative responses to AIDS.

Of course *Them* in the twenty-first century can't raise the socially provocative concerns that its performances brought forth in 1986. The space for politically motivated dissent does not rightly exist in the venues where the most recent performances toured. Presentations at the Pompidou Centre in Paris or as part of the Tanz im August festival in Berlin suggest an accommodation to the contemporary circulations of live art. The current restaging exists as a show that, like other shows, certainly speaks from a particular point of view, yet like other shows, it can be enjoyed and forgotten in short order. Because of this shift in time, the reconstruction turns *Them* into an evening's diversion. In this circulation, the restaging closes off its original potential for radical discovery and political excitation.

The homosocial physical world of *Them* makes little space for women. Cooper's references in the text remind the performers and audiences that women do populate the world beyond the pursuit of sexual encounter portrayed on stage. But *Them* capitalizes on masculinist privilege to exclude ideologies that arise outside of its narrowed field of vision. While the 1980s productions reflected a still-novel staging of masculinity performed by a cohort of male performers, by 2010 the casting of only men in the work inspired criticism. In 2010 Houston-Jones commented on his casting and the shifts of time: “The piece is poetic not didactic, but it is about certain experiences that are male. Dennis was writing about his memories of himself and others as males. The inspiration for the dances was mine (and Jonathan Walker's and Donald Fleming's) as male. Surely any number of female and transgender performers we know could perform the scored improves of the dance beautifully. But that isn't the point of view of the piece.”<sup>6</sup>

Here Houston-Jones confirms that the work has its own ambitions, and those are not entirely attendant on everyone. One of the ways that *Them* functions as an outsider, and therefore politically progressive, work, might be that it speaks for those who cannot or will not. It speaks for those young men who feel maligned and passed over by social stigma. *Them* can't be about mainstream or middle-class gay life. It can't tell of reciprocal emotional lives or successful compromise among partners. It gains its representational force as a testament to life outside of convention and also outside of widespread visibility. Houston-Jones describes the work to be about “urban roughness,” and says that it is “non-pastoral” in its motivations, while Cochrane opines that *Them* exists in relation to “suburban white gay stuff too,” an important nod to the grungy, slightly soiled ennui that permeates the air here. *Them* also makes male queer black presence manifest, in Houston-Jones's physical presence and authorial command of the project. *Them* portrays a ragtag, uneasy community of outsiders who commune by their erotic desires. These characters include the overly aggressive character wielding a bat and hitting pennies against the back wall of the performance space and a bully who chases others with his bat even as he lies down with them for sex. The bully, the young “twinkie,” the eager pup, the temporary wolf—these types emerge in response to the requirements of the physical score. Building on the differences among the assembled cast, *Them* demonstrates a variety of gay/queer identities that form and collide as young men convene.



## WHY RECONSTRUCT?

*Them* is one in a trio of works Houston-Jones created concerned with AIDS, the other two being *The Undead* (1990), an evening-length theatrical piece, and *Unsafe/Unsuited (A High Risk Meditation)* (1995), an improvised trio with Keith Hennessy and Patrick Scully. But *Them* emerged early in the chronology of recognizing HIV infection. Its ambivalence and urgency reflect the randomness and insecurity of the early 1980s. The choreographer tapped autobiography as a resource for his structural choices in order to highlight how the personal is inherently political, especially for an African American experimental choreographer:

In *Them*, especially, I was working out parts of myself, working out fears of disease, violence, and death, trying to find a way of dealing with those issues for myself. That's how autobiography lets the audience in. I don't want to make hermetic work, but I don't know how to make political work that's not personal: I'm trying to show myself as a human being facing these big issues—and sometimes failing. In my life, as well, I sometimes fail to deal with these issues—but I'm not afraid to do that publicly.<sup>7</sup>

When the creative trio discussed the reconstruction in interviews in 2010 and 2012, they agreed that the work was never intended to be “about” HIV or AIDS, but those circumstances impacted what came forward in its creation. In sourcing their own experiences in the world, along with their still-emerging creative processes as artists, the personal became politically engaged, and the work offers something up close and particular, gay, dissident, and punkish to its audiences. But the creators weren't always comfortable with how audiences and critics received the work. According to the trio, in its first iterations, some gay media “didn't like the work” and termed it “nihilistic.” They wondered that “everyone has to become examples of the problem or the community” at issue in creative work, and Cooper especially contended that the work, like much of his work, we might assume, explores “personal agony” rather than connections to groups of people. They also acknowledged the changes in audience response over time. Cooper noted that the “controversial work ... seems sweet now,” in the context of live art and experimental choreography circulating by 2012.<sup>8</sup>

Reflecting on the genesis of the reconstruction, Houston-Jones noted that the project was a commission from PS 122 artistic director Vallejo Gartner. Houston-Jones thought it could resonate in 2010 and enjoy a longer life amid the reclaiming of various dance and fashion trends from the 1980s. By 2010 the work had landed in the marketplace of chic, decidedly experimental work that intended to demonstrate still-vital approaches to creative process. In Paris, *Them* was programmed alongside *Teenage Hallucination*, a visual art show at the Pompidou Centre curated by Gisele Vienne and Dennis Cooper. At the Tanz im August festival in Berlin, the “largest annual festival for contemporary dance and performance in Germany,” *Them* enjoyed a brief, sold-out run. In these contexts, *Them* performs the work of progressive nostalgia, asking its audiences to consider the urgent masculinist dystopias of the 1980s from the safe vantage of twenty-first-century dance theater.



*Unsafe/Unsuited (A High Risk Meditation)* with Keith Hennessy, Patrick Scully, and Ishmael Houston Jones, PS 122, New York, 1995.  
Photograph by Dona Ann McAdams.

The three artists recognized that all of the original cast members—twelve dancers in all—are still living, but something about having fresh-faced, younger artists perform the work seemed important to its revival. After all, the handing down of stories across generations matters here, as we consider reconstruction and restaging. The task of sharing the work with a group of young performers fulfilled a basic human need to disperse ideas and ideologies among others. But some elements of *Them* became difficult to convey across landscapes of time: cruising, for example, is not a practice of the young in the twenty-first century. In a public question-and-answer session in Paris, one of the dancers noted that he and his cohort “didn’t have these problems” of HIV and intensive social stigma, so he found it somehow instructive to connect with older artists and learn about their struggles. Another dancer confirmed that he felt distanced from his collaborating elders, even in the use of *gay* rather than *queer*. *Them* connected its new cohort of artists, but not without the consequences of noting differences among its generations.

The reconstruction of *Them* pushed buttons for its collaborators. The work deals with events torn from their memories of surviving a terrible time, and its reconstruction landed, uneasily, amid conversations about the economies of experimental dance, hierarchies of ageism, and diminishing resources for the arts in general. In a strong critique of the politics of its reconstruction, New York-based performance artist Lindsay Drury opined that she didn’t think of Houston-Jones as “an artist who is seeking to make a history text of himself, especially while he is very much alive.” In response, he wrote, I “really care about how my work is seen and that it is seen and remembered.”<sup>9</sup> In some ways, within the contexts of late capitalism and twenty-first-century live art production, *Them* could do little more than answer the curator-driven need for controversial, experimental works that build upon flashpoints of traumatic historical narratives. Even as an unwilling example of early creative responses to AIDS, the reconstruction brought forward the embodied maturity of noted experimental artists performing live alongside sweaty, young, male performers to fit this bill.

*Reflection on question and answer session in Paris, 2012: In a (literally) white room with fifty people assembled, the three collaborators sit at a table to answer questions about their work. We are in the basement of the Pompidou Centre in Paris. It seems a strange place and time to talk about a performance work made many years ago in New York City. But maybe this time and place have no more strength than that time and place might have had. A line separates the collaborators at*