

6 What Is Black Dance? What Can It Do?

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What are the terms of dance that allow for the emergence of Black dance? How are identity and culture implicated in the articulation of genres of dance? How is it that televisual dance – music video dance – inevitably seems to refer to Black dance and its aesthetic values? What are the foundational modes of gesture, rhythm, musicality and social relationship that produce Black dance? This chapter considers the formation of Black dance as a critical category created by dancers, and the terms of address that produce that same category among researchers and critics. An assessment of historical becomings of Black dance allows us to think through the different sorts of access that insiders and outsiders have to its contents. The chapter will consider examples of dance to suggest divergent, but related, forms of Black dance: theatrical and social. The terms of a ‘doing’ for Black dance as resistant demonstration and embodied aesthetic protest will be discussed through the examples. We will also consider cultural appropriation as an urgent mode of analysis relevant to the construction of Black performance theory and Black dance.

What’s at Stake?

Again and again, we notice that performers who claim relationship to an African diaspora dance differently than others. There may be more of a sense of rhythmic attack; a stronger sense of release in the lower back and the hips. There may be a willingness to kick higher or bounce lower throughout a movement sequence. There may seem to be something ‘extra’ in the execution of the phrases; some sort of authoritative panache that makes the dancing seem to be of the dancer herself, right now, in immediate gestural relief.

But how can we attribute an approach to performance to a group bound by ethnicity or even race? To do this, we will have to engage the possibilities of a strategic essentialism, one that will allow us to make claims for Black dance and Black people. We must remain aware of the limitations of essentialisms here. But we must also be willing to explore techniques that might hold together performances born of African diasporic approaches to creative practice. So, let’s pursue, together, this mode of performative address that we call Black dance.

At stake in Black performance and Black dance are possibilities for group communion and a group articulation of aesthetic and social priorities. Black performance brings into being the possibility of Black people making and doing: creating intentional gestures in order to register, distinctively, as Black people. In this definition, Black performance circles back to its emergence as something created for the purpose of expressing itself aesthetically and socially. Black performance exists to confirm the presence of Black people in the world.

If we begin here, we can see that Black performance arrives as a form of social engagement, and its production confirms creative borders, boundaries and remains. Black performance doesn't include every sort of performative action ever done by a Black person; rather it encompasses those creative actions that allow people to recognize Black presence. This includes some forms of performance and dance practice, and some approaches to dancing, but – obviously – not all of them. In defining Black performance in this way, we allow it to emerge for itself among those who create it as an aesthetic and social confirmation of a possibility of Black life.

Why do we need such confirmation? Frankly, because the histories of Black people have been circumscribed by disavowal, coercion and genocide. Black life emerges in the global abjection created by capitalism and driven by racism. We find endless examples of the ways that Black people have been consistently disavowed in the annals of Western thought and literature; in the context of the United States, Black people have been relentlessly policed, incarcerated and disenfranchised. The music and dance that emerged within this bleak context for social life answered the call for creative expression and corporeal resistance, even as it demonstrated unanticipated possibilities for Black performance and its importance.

Black dance, then, allows for a recovery of an animated body of people rising up in resistance and demonstrating strength and possibility through art making. When we consider dance in this manner, we begin by acknowledging the terms of its production in social life. Black dance does not float aimlessly in a sea of 'aesthetics' that are of, or for, some sort of detached 'art for art's sake'. These dances emerge as intentional art that seeks to satisfy a basic human need for affirmation through the expressive movement of the body.

How are Identity and Culture Implicated in the Articulation of Genre?

Large theoretical claims may seem to universalize Black dance, by imagining an ontological ground for its practice as a system of knowing-being in the world. But this is exactly what might be produced by Black dance; this might be what it can *do*. Black dance can stabilize aesthetic liveliness in the creative practices of Black people who might be engaged in music and dance for many reasons; Black dance allows us to appreciate Black people in musical motion as foundational to understanding Black life.

Of course, we acknowledge that Black identities are multiple and complex. They may be multi-racial, queer, cis-gendered, working-class, creative-class, varied religiously and geographically distributed. They are not one thing, or singular. And yet we call on Black dance as a category of engagement, a mode of address to bring together practices that produce particular sorts of effects in the world. As with any art, we cannot narrow the possible effects of Black dance with any usefulness; it will arrive and disperse with unexpected results depending on its frames and contexts. But we can call Black dance forward, as a signal for Black expression that erupts when and where it is needed; where it might be valued and useful. Black dance surely answers a need for expressive motion.

But what is Black dance? Our willingness to call out Black dance supports thinking of it as a recognizable gesture, so that we can identify some of its possibilities and productivities. Black dance calls on approaches to aesthetic gesture that converge to suggest a continuum of embodiment. But, of course, it is not a single thing or a single mode of performance.

Rather, Black dance arrives as an approach to moving and being in relationship to others. So then, to dance Black: move with intention; remain attentive to rhythm and conscious of ways that it shifts time and space. Cast your weight downward into the ground and earth, to physically consecrate gravity and the fact of body and its presence here and now. Bend the arms and knees; bend at the waist, bend the neck and tilt the torso, bend the feet back towards their flexion. In bending, create the possibility to extend and propel; to create the possibility of a release that can be reset. Twist and circle the hips; twist the wrists, circle the head; create centrifuges at several movement centres simultaneously. Twist, and bend, release and explode; vary the rhythm in surprising manners; share energy by elaborating on the nature of time. Play the rhythmic break.

In this description of the manner of Black dance, we can understand not particular movements, but rather, approaches to moving. These approaches might be deployed in all sorts of genres of dance: tap dance, b-girling and capoeira, modern dance or contemporary dance, ballet or Senegalese Sabar, South African gumboot dancing, line dancing, or partner dancing. And these approaches arrive and disperse within these forms of dance across time, as forays inherently unstable and unsustainable. These approaches are not particular sequences of movements, but ways to structure movement. They are engaged by dancers in various contexts and tend to arrive in bursts, or nodules. And they need to be identified at least by the dancers performing through them, if not through their attendant witnesses, or their audiences.

Black dance, then, is a complex approach of movement bound by relationship to its own recognition. This depiction of dance may be quite different from a generic description of theatrical dance forms, such as 'ballet' or 'modern dance', which depend on particular rules of physical line or volume that might be achieved through training. In this chapter, Black dance emerges as an intentional deployment of energy designed to achieve recognition within its practices. Circling back to what Black dance *does*, we assert that Black dance arrives in order to confirm a liveliness of Black possibility, by means of these gestural approaches.

Some genres of dance rely more heavily on the physical approaches to Black dance mentioned above. B-girling and B-boying, sometimes referred to as 'hip hop dance', and the capacious category of 'jazz dance', which might include all manner of dance in music videos, are two modes that rely almost entirely on approaches to manipulating rhythm and bending the body in an unexpected manner. To consider these forms of theatricalized social dance, we come into direct contact with the extended possibilities of Black dance method. In hip hop or jazz dance, we witness the body challenged to its extremes: whirling, twisting and bending on the ground, balancing against itself, catapulting in the air. In jazz dance, the twist and bend of the hips; the rhythmic pulsations and accenting that clarify divisions of meter; and the aggressive pushing of energy from dancer towards their witnessing audience all bind the form to aspects of Black dance.

Some dance researchers might assert that these two genres – hip hop dance and jazz dance – along with certain social dances and dance practices crafted in explicitly African and African diaspora contexts, constitute Black dance. But this narrow defining would discount the approaches to, say, experimental contemporary performance or modern dance that some Black artists engage. These artists might intend for their work to register as Black dance, recognizable to their witnesses and performers as such, even as their work also fits into other genre categories. A ballet performed *en pointe*, for example, might be

conceived and received as Black dance. Our challenge here, then, is to identify Black dance on its own terms, and allow it to do its work, first for the Black people who create it and share it, and then with the audiences that gather around it. By prioritizing Black people in relationship to Black dance, we will centre its discussion, assessments and achievements in terms of engagement that speak back to the social circumstances of making dance and art; circumstances that are particular. Even as the creative expressions of Black dance might speak out to a global audience, they speak from particular social histories and aesthetic concerns that allow the emergence of Black dance to do its work in the world.

Particular Forms of Black Dance

We turn now to explore some examples of Black dance. Because Black life has emerged in relationship to flows of capital and power that repeatedly denigrate its potency, Black dance arrives with at least two distinctive modes of analysis important to its discourse. Social dances, meant to be shared among other dancers, and theatrical dances, intended to be viewed by witnesses and audiences who needn't dance themselves. (An expansive category of sacred dances will stand outside of the terms of this chapter.) The distinction between these modes matters: social dances assume a dancing populace already in motion, and in relationship to the dancing at hand. Theatrical dances assume a familiarity with Black forms of address and aesthetic practices on the part of the performers, but not necessarily on the part of the audience. These two modes mirror an insider/outsider experience of Black life. The experience of dancing within an embodied knowledge of histories that have constructed the category of Black dance arrives with distinction from other sorts of dancing and spectatorship. Dancing Black dance while identifying as a Black person is quite different from dancing Black dance styles while identifying in other ways. And watching Black dance forms without dancing alongside them, from across the room, creates fissures in expressive analysis. What the dances 'look like' is often quite different from what they have meant, historically, or what they feel like for the dancers performing them.

Thinking in these two modes of social dance and theatrical dance, allows us to structure discourse of what Black dance can do. We begin with social dance, and a consideration of the Electric Slide. The Slide arrives among all sorts of group 'called dances', that is, line dances that offer simple instructions to be undertaken by the gathered group of dancers. These dances continue in unbroken sequence from the earliest days of American social affairs. For African Americans, the line dances demonstrate a fleeting social mobility, in the gathering of people to dance together in joyful rhythmic motion and, historically, outside of the all-seeing eyes of the church clergy. Because enslaved Black Americans had little recourse to 'free' social time, traditions of group dancing were largely constrained, historically, to church services which were, ironically, negative towards dancing. Restrictions on African American assemblies – whether enslaved or not – lessened slightly in the nineteenth century, and dancing together became possible in some US locations.

Line dancing follows traditions of social dance adapted from European forms, including the quadrille, which deployed a musician and a caller. But where white American adaptations of European forms tended to stress the ability of the dancers to follow complex instructions, or to learn dances in advance of the social event, Black line dances tended to arrive with

easy-to-learn, rhythmically flexible arrangements of steps that change facing towards all four cardinal points in space. Where the quadrille calls for an even number of participants who dance in pairs, line dances, including the Electric Slide, can accommodate any number of participants. And where the quadrille might require all sorts of instruction and preparation, the Electric Slide can be learnt by a wide swathe of dancers of varying ages and abilities.

The Electric Slide emerged in the 1970s in concert with a musical recording that suited its contours. The dance has remained among the most recognizable forms of group celebration, practised at any number of social events. The basic form of the dance is very simple, and can be learnt quickly. But the Electric Slide encourages improvisation and the insertion of personal style into its contents. Variations and elaborations on the basic steps keep the dance lively and interesting for participants; the dance encourages the pleasurable moving alongside others in similar directions, but with individualized approaches and variations to each passage through its contents.

Electric Slide at Obama Inauguration, YouTube video, January 2009. A loose crowd among a large crowd on the Mall in Washington DC. People are wrapped up in blankets, winter coats, heads covered against the drizzling cold. A recording of Stevie Wonder and Usher – two important figures in African American R&B who represent inter-generational affiliation – bleeds into the air. The duo sings ‘Higher Ground’, a song by Wonder about finding the way towards something better. The YouTube video begins *in medias res* with a few dancers in motion, but quickly twenty dancers are visible. To perform the dance: they move to the right for four counts, to the left for four, to the back for four, lean down towards the ground with their left shoulders in the front, then rebound back away towards the right. A two-count quarter-turn to face a different front. Others join in quickly, dancing in celebration and against the cold. They carry their bags – purses, knapsacks and book bags; they dance to explore the formation; the uneven, eighteen-count rhythmic structure; and to share energy in a common physical text enlivened by their individuality. Several videos of the inauguration event reveal the Slide as an embodied touchstone of connection, gathering dancers of many ages, ethnicities, gender presentations and abilities to share their creative address to its contents. (See ‘Further Reading’.)

The Electric Slide follows many other line dances that served similar creative functions for African Americans: allowing for joyful rhythmic expression and self-actualization through dance. To better understand what the Electric Slide *does* as a Black dance, we return to a social context for Black life. If our context for understanding Black life stems from its general disavowal, within the political structures of slavery, the practises of social dance that encourage individual expression within a group dynamic become obvious barometers of enlivened social lives. Dancing the Electric Slide alongside others who identify as Black creates a possibility of communion, a sharing of social gesture and creative expression. Dancing elaborates social possibility for the group, opening outward from a moving-together-in-motion towards the possibility of an expressive self, embedded within a mobilized group.

Tongues Untied (1989). An imaginative documentary created by Marlon Riggs (1957–1994) that poetically aligns text with imagery of queer Black men in various states of community. Thirty-seven minutes into the film, we see a group of Black men dancing the Electric Slide together. They move as a group, but not as one; gliding across the ground in an outdoor park; a group of at least ten men move through, varying the choreography as they need to. Are there more than ten? The camera fails to reveal boundaries to the

group; the dancing extends, in slow motion, beyond the time or space of the camera's frame. Even as we only glimpse the Slide shared among the men, briefly, we sense its capacious variety. Some turn even as they travel while others don't; some punch the ground with heavy weight while others float and shimmy above its facticity. The short sequence bristles with diversity: small men, tall and juicy, thick men; skinny men in polo shirts and possibly fem-men in shorts all dance together. The Slide calls them together in a social dance of communal variety, and the men share joy through their act of intentional, embodied choice-making in the service of physical musicality.

Of course, the Electric Slide is also enjoyed by participants of many social identifiers; it is not contained exclusively as a Black social dance. In this, the form demonstrates a useful social productivity stemming from Black cultural expression. That the dance enjoyed by Black people could be enjoyed by others allows for a social mobility among Black culture; this feeds back into a pleasurable function within the dance itself as an emblem of shareable creativity.

Theatrical dance forms raise questions of watching and judging; evaluation and scrutiny within the practice of an audience's search for inspiration or meaning. These modes of address arrive with complex tensions for Black people. The afterlives of slavery suggest that Black people being scrutinized by others for their physical form and for their value as agents of work will be bound up in the complex histories of global capital and the disavowal of Black humanity. This historical background persists well into the twenty-first century. Often, performances by Black artists on stages are viewed by audiences as exotica rather than as valid creative expression.

Still, theatrical dance allows for repeated engagement with principles of Black dance. Choreographer Donald Byrd, artistic director of the Spectrum Dance Company of Seattle, has made dozens of works that explicitly engage aesthetic suppositions of Black dance. Byrd, who claims African American ancestry and choreographs through a studied respect for principles of African diaspora art making, created *Short Dances/Little Stories* in 2003 to music by Southern pop-rap musical artist Mystikal.

Short Dances engages the gestural attributes of Black dance referred to earlier: weighted movements that push through the stage floor; angular flexion of limbs in unexpected orderings; a propulsive and playful manipulation of rhythmic accents in phrasing that confidently stresses the dynamics of the musical accompaniment. As is often true in Byrd's choreography, the performers here are encouraged to *bend* the movement beyond its obvious physical and rhythmic ends, at times: pushing an extended limb past expectations, or holding a difficult balance longer, and with more obvious risk, than might seem necessary. These extensions of phrasing and stance confirm a Black aesthetic approach to timing, weight, phrasing and capacity; they bring forward the sensibility of dynamic resistance as a mode of theatrical address.

Theatrical dance offers more semiotic information to a viewer that can be discussed and interpreted from a distance. An audience, gathered to witness the event of the performance, can gain all sorts of clues to help determine value and meaning from the evidence on stage. In the case of *Short Dances*, we note the simple chic, form-fitting black costumes that accentuate the musculature of the dancers. Outfitted like superheroes, the costuming encourages us to notice every tensioned pulling of muscle as well as the extraordinary fitness of the dancers performing the work. Theatrical lighting reveals areas of bright intensity and darkness, creating shadows that allow dancers to seemingly appear and recede at will.



Fig. 6.1 Allison Keppel in Donald Byrd's *Short Dances/Little Stories*, 2003. Photo: Gabriel Biencycki.

The dancers jump and land with an otherworldly sort of authority, commanding sections of the stage through their presence in blistering pools of light. A scenic element of a wall in the background covered in abstract graffiti art sets the work in an unquestionably urban centre; a part of a city where young residents took matters of community decoration into their own hands to create visions of a world beyond the one at hand. (This scenic element changed in several performances of the work, at times painted during the performance by collaborating visual artists, and at other times simply revealed as a backdrop to the stage action.)

While setting, lighting and costumes tend to support the unified vision of a stage event, music and movement offer their own shifting paradigms of information for the audience to consider. The musical score here, by Mystikal, rides through New Orleans hip hop sound, a sort of bouncing dance music built around distinctive sample materials that stutter and hesitate even as they cohere to a steady, duple-metre beat. Mystikal's voice conjures an old-fashioned, country preacher masculinity. He leans into a gruff, hardened animated growl for most of his 'hooks' – the refrains of different songs used to accompany this particular dance. His rapping, though, vacillates between quick, rhythmically playful passages and slower, gravelly assertions. Like many rap artists, Mystikal works with a chorus of background singers and 'hype men'; voices included in the recording who encourage the leading artist and offer preferred responses to the song as it unfolds. Generally, Mystikal strikes an assertive, aggressive sound of exhortation as he rhymes, claiming the sonic space that his music encounters unapologetically, as his own domain.

A woman roots herself into the stage, legs wide apart, partially concealed by shadows bouncing off her all-black dance costume. Her feet are bare, and they grip the black stage floor with a palpable intensity. She gestures in a mysterious sequence of roiling

muscularity: circling her hands and arms intently in front of her body, sometimes with arms long, or with arms bent and fists hitting into each other or along her forearms and biceps. Feet planted, she whirls with her torso and shoulders; gestures that might convey something about hunger? Something about addiction and pain? Something about needing love? She bends her knees to reach down to the ground but rebounds with hands against her mouth: was she not allowed to say something? Is she holding something back, with hand against face? She reaches down toward the floor with arms extended together, divining for an unknowable something, then completes the gestural sequence with an unfolding of the hand from high above her head towards the floor, as if in a formal greeting of thanks, to be viewed at a distance. The thirty-second sequence arrives full of mystery and grounded intensity: these gestures *mean* something for this dancer. We, in the audience, are drawn into her commitment and the possibility of self-actualization evident in her forceful manner.

Short Dances emerges as Black dance because of its setting, musical score and the harsh attack of the dancing performed by Byrd's collaborators of the Seattle-based Spectrum Dance Company. Surprisingly, none of the dancers in the performance claimed a singular Black identity. The performers are mostly white, with one or two-mixed race artists. Donald Byrd does claim Black identity in the world, of course, and he coaches his collaborators towards a take-no-prisoners, fierce attitude that reads to audiences as Black affect. This affect allows the audiences of *Short Dances* to recognize its intentions as Black dance. The dance engages a nearly indecipherable assemblage of movement ideas, performed at the absolute ends of their possibility. In pushing the dancers to perform at their expressive extremes, the work demands that the dancers physicalize and embody the sorts of burning impossibilities that surround Black social life. Joy, desperation, anguish and hard-edged aggressions pepper the work and its performance.

Also, surprisingly, the movement vocabulary for *Short Dances* derives largely from ballet and contemporary modern dance exercises. But in this context, with this *mise en scène* of scenery, with the music of Mystikal, and with the physical attack of these performances, the dance movements arrive as sharp as knives and as potent as the outrage of civil uprisings or social protest.

The fact that Byrd creates Black dance without Black people dancing on stage speaks to a possibility of affect that might be contained by Black dance as a craft and approach to performance. This possibility is crucial to our understanding of Black dance as a process in and of itself, a mode of performance that might be engaged by many, but speaks from and towards a particular sensibility. The sensibility of Black dance as a creative liveliness in relationship to Black social death becomes a standard for understanding the undeniable attractiveness of Black dance. Many people want to dance in this way, because the dancing clearly speaks to possibilities of humanity that are difficult to imagine.

Past Approaches to Analyses

Indeed, Black dance tends to look powerful, freeing, fun and outrageous. This has led many critics and commentators to note only these most obvious dimensions of these modes of dance. Taken in and of itself, as phenomenal gesture, Black dance seems to answer a call of uniqueness in the social spaces where it lands: in North America and Europe. Black

dance is not necessarily articulated or idolized in the Caribbean, Latin America or on the African continent where people of colour enjoy rich varieties of corporeal expression. Again, we note that Black dance as we define it here has grown within the peculiar crucible of chattel slavery that produced a seemingly coherent Black identity in the United States and then in Europe. So, while there are many forms of dance engaged by Black people, people of colour and others, our enquiry here focuses on the approaches to performance that have been gathered beneath a banner of Black dance. That banner gathers an approach to dancing and expertise that underscores an expressive and resistant possibility in its foundational appeal.

Historically, Black dance has been discussed by white critics as an accessible, vernacular mode of movement. Its techniques and achievements have rarely been considered art, or even art-like. Racism has fuelled the dismissal of Black dance as an urgent mode of art making. When considered as vernacular performance, Black dance could be undervalued as childish, unstructured or spontaneous. Black dance has been consistently discussed in terms of a 'natural' achievement, something somehow bred into Black communities and realized without effort. Of course, these sorts of assertions arrive without merit and are entirely untrue. Expert Black dancers practise, rehearse, risk failure and achieve unique performances through persistent effort. But the legacies of demeaning Black dance as unintellectual or underdeveloped persist and surround creativity in this mode.

Explorations of Black dance that arrive within recognized modes of artistry – as modern dance or ballet – have been consistently undervalued as derivative or second-rate. For example, the formation of the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969 answered a call to explore the presence of Black dancers within classical and neo-classical ballet, a challenge that had not been effectively answered in the United States at that time. The company achieved grudging success among white critics, always circumscribed by the novelty of Black artists performing work presumably made for white dancers. Black dance historians and critics tended to value the company's work and its realization of an urgent possibility for Black dance. But when the company slowed its operations in 2004, laying off most of its staff and taking a hiatus from performing, general financial support for the company could not be bolstered (see Kaufman 2004).

To write about Black dance with some understanding of its subtleties of execution and approach requires an appreciation for vernacular cultures, that is, cultures of the everyday, including the cultures of social survival, and their extension into the realms of expertise as art. Black dance may indeed be available to many, but its most expert practitioners move it squarely into a realm as artistic practice worthy of consideration for its unique, crafted achievement. Few writers have taken the time to create worthy documents in this area, but we can look to the sublime writings of Katherine Dunham to understand a potential in this area. Dunham's career included dancing in Hollywood and on Broadway, as well as studying dance as an anthropologist in several sites in the Caribbean. Her performances and her development of a dance practice/technique provide embodied evidence of Black dance retention and creativity.

Dunham combined aspects of dance that she observed during her study to create the Katherine Dunham technique, an approach to dancing that emphasizes relationships to rhythm, stretch and balance, and detailed understandings of how movement and sound correspond and relate to each other. Dunham technique, unlike other modes of theatrical

dance forms, such as modern dance or ballet, is built around its relationship to drumming and musicianship, and the careful awareness of music in motion. Dunham technique can be constantly referred to as Black dance, as its terms of engagement arise in relation to the embodied musical practices of Black people in diaspora: in Martinique, Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and other spaces that Dunham researched.

Dunham's writings assume a continuity among the dances of the islands and the dancing of Black Americans in the context of the United States. While she recognized stark differences of social life in the United States and in the Caribbean, she focused on the aesthetic approaches to dance that suggested shared concerns and physical explorations. In Dunham's writing, we find evidence of diasporic affinities that place dances in familial relationship to each other.

In this, Black dance can affirm presence across geography and time. Obvious creative connections among North American stepping and South African gumboot dancing, or the 'wining' dances of the Virgin Islands and the 'twist' of the United States confirm black communities in creative motion, dancing through differing social circumstances. The dances mean differently across location and era: for example, the Running Man constructs dispersed narratives of relation to commerce when performed at a party in Brooklyn, circa 1989, or in Budapest at a nightclub in 2009. But these dances remain related, and thrive in their relationality as evidence of perseverance. In this, Black dance operates beyond affinities of form; its practice provides embodied evidence of possibility.

Researching Black Dance: Critical and Creative Challenges

We have outlined many challenges surrounding Black dance as a mode of address, the largest being that the category strains against its own impossible boundaries. Black dance arrives as a hailing of Black life, a reminding practice of creative expression that incites Black joy by way of Black corporeality. But Black dance may be enacted by dancers who do not claim Black identity. And Black dance has not been valued with much nuance by writers, historians or theorists who do not claim Black identity.

What might it mean for whites, Asians, aboriginals and Latin people to dance Black? What is it to inhabit the creative remains of someone else's traumatic history? How can we make sense of finding physical pleasure and creative expression within gestures born within the crucibles of social coercion and disavowal?

Creatively, Black dance makes less sense when it is engaged without any Black people present. And yet, this sort of appropriation has haunted theatrical performances since Black dance could be named. The desire to move in the manners available to Black dance has chased artists all over the world, resulting in expert Korean hip hop dance crews; white European ballet experiments that combine improvisation and a 'get down' approach to performance; and any number of swing dance festivals with few Black participants.

The questions that loom in these dance encounters have to do with whether the dancing actually speaks in any way to Black people in the world. Again, if we are willing to imagine Black dance as the affirmation of Black possibility, then it would seem urgent to encounter Black people in its practices. Black dance might be best engaged to speak of and to Black people. When others dance Black, though, with an expectation to be recognized

for their ability in these modes of address, Black people might be confused, annoyed or distressed. Sharing culture might be something done in proximity, as when dancers teach each other moves and approaches to movement in circumstances where people dance. But to approach the shapes and rhythms of Black dance without any intention to engage Black people who have nurtured and burnished these movement practices can too often seem crass, supremacist and ethically unfortunate.

When Donald Byrd coaches his white and Asian dancers into the complex approaches to Black modern dance that appeal to him, he brings his many years of experience as a Black man into the rehearsal hall. Even when the work being rehearsed might seem to have little to do with his always-shifting identity markers, his experiences and familial relationships become part of the tapestry of art making that he engages. *Short Dances* succeeds as a demonstration of modes of Black dance because of its direct access to foundational physical understanding of how Black dance operates, emerges, and what it can do in the theatrical space.

But when white choreographers attempt to copy a sort of downward-directed ferocity of rhythmic attack, or a loose-limbed, improvisational-seeming 'do your own thing' choreography without the creative collaboration of Black artists, their work often seems false, odd or just confusing to its audiences. At times, these explorations might seem patently rude or embarrassing, as when Miley Cyrus tried to 'twerk' in a television special, or when the Chicago-based Joffrey Ballet tried to stage a ballet to the music of Prince with choreography that referenced Black social dances made by white choreographers. Most often, Black dance is referenced by white performers as a mode of playful, sexy 'fun' that might allow them to be momentarily 'free' from the embodied strictures of everyday whiteness. But of course, this possible outcome has little to do with the formation of Black dance that we have discussed here. Cynicism emerges at this intersection, where dancers seem willing to act out someone else's traumatic history in the mode of dance practice.

Conclusion: Making-Thinking Black Dance

Ultimately, if we are all able to acknowledge the depth of experience that produces Black dance, then we might be able to acknowledge its urgency, profundity and special value as creative address. We understand Black dance as a system of address that operates in several modes simultaneously. Black dance allows for resistant demonstration and embodied aesthetic protest; a working through of identity and its varied affects; the exploration of excellence; an improvisational address of rhythm and rhythmic phrasing; and the channelling of desire into the realm of an aesthetically-engaged body in motion. Black dance makes space for the thinking-through of the great social disavowal that produced Black identities in the world. Black dance contains its history as a remains of the Atlantic slave trade – as a creative response to a world without equal opportunities and in need of unexpected gesture and rhythmic layering.

And Black dance allows for an intricate urgent process: a system of address, a rendering of rhythm and relationship, a dancing beyond disavowal towards Black joy. In the twenty-first century, the revelation of Black joy surely might be one of our shared common ambitions in performance. In a world wrought with dissent and fragmentations, we might collect ourselves

around expressions that speak of, and towards, communities of colour in particular ways, often crafted by artists who identify themselves as Black no matter their ethnicity or country of origin. In this, Black dance offers us a possibility of collective aesthetic action, moving ourselves into the lines of action that centre Black people in the creative ways of the world.

Performance Details

Short Dances/Little Stories, choreographed by Donald Byrd, was first presented at Spectrum Dance Theater, Seattle, WA, in October 2003. The music from the dance was drawn from *Tarantula* by Mystikal, Jive Records, 2001; *Ghetto Fabulous* by Mystikal, No Limit Records, 1998; and *Let's Get Ready* by Mystikal, Jive Records, 2000.

Further Reading

For a discussion of nomenclature, and distinctions among African American dance and Black dance, see my essay, 'African American Dance: A Complex History' in Thomas F. DeFrantz (2002: 2–35). For videos of the Electric Slide at the Obama Inauguration see *Electric Slide* (2009). For more on Marlon Riggs's work, including classroom resources, articles, interviews and clips of *Tongues Untied*, see the *Marlon Riggs Critical Resource Page* at California Newsreel (online). For a recent scholarly overview of Katherine Dunham's achievement see Das (2017). Dunham published several studies of dance and memoirs, see Dunham (1946, 1959, 1969 and 1983) and Clark and Johnson (2006). For further reading on issues discussed in this chapter, see DeFrantz and Willis (2016), Gottschild (2003) and DeFrantz and Gonzalez (2014).

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