



Blacking Queer Dance

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IV. Blacking Queer Dance

There is a power in queer. There is a power in seeing things differently, disrupting the everyday, resisting hegemony. Queer theorists focus on enabling these possibilities, on recasting history against dominant norms, on articulating worldviews that reveal the contingent nature of many social histories. In “queer,” we are creating a usable past that will allow others to move with self-awareness, considered decisiveness, and attack.

There is a power in black. By now, black represents a reconstituted subjectivity, a post-civil rights, postmodern reclaiming of caste as a marker of cultural ubiquity. A nascent black studies entered the academy a century ago, when W.E.B. DuBois began to publish his subtle, highly theoretical explications of African American corporeal memory as an intertwined account of social, political, spiritual, sexualized, and aesthetic history.¹² Of course, as Houston Baker Jr. has written, black studies gained its latter-day importance as a result of American civil rights activism, but its roots stem from the need of African Americans to recover histories that could counter the physical afflictions and institutionalized racisms circumscribing everyday black life.¹³ Black studies began purposefully, to disrupt “official” American histories that negated black presence or importance. It hoped to combat the abjection of being unmoored from a homeland or denied a usable past. Quickly, black studies turned to theorizing presence, and in the last decade, modernity. Black studies have proven prophetic for understanding cultural resiliency in the face of rampant capitalism.

Many of us enter dance through the queer door, body first. Denied access to pleasurable heteronormative socialization, we seek out darkened theaters and acrid dance studios in an effort to explore concepts of beauty and rarified physical expression. For the queer among us, dance offers a generative site to

probe unruly sexual energies and speculative physical desires. Surely the rise of experiential documentation in dance studies is connected to the recovery of queer histories, to the articulation of unspoken attractions, realizations, practices. But this is an important speculation: the queer precedes the dance. Dance becomes a “safe space” for queer, but not vice versa.

We can look to the marketplace here. The logic of capitalism demands a heterosocial standard; it demands a denial of the expressive potentials of the body. The body cannot offer a widespread site of public possibilities; a realization of unruly creative possibilities for each and every body could too easily overrun the commercial marketplace and ultimately the state. The marketplace and the state are not the same, but their need to control the individual have similar effects on dance as labor and, more importantly, the construction of the closet and queer. Queer emerges not only as a corrective to “straight,” but also as a necessary category of social production, an obvious binary counterbalance to heteronormativity and unmarked heterosexual privilege. Let’s face it, what could we possibly do without queer? Certainly not dance.

But queer studies are also driven by the marketplace. Consider that its scholars are often those who need a place to “land” that is hot, fresh, new. Surely in its earliest manifestations, specialists in literature who felt they had little to add to established paradigms of criticism turned to the emerging field. Queer studies invigorates the academy; it also provides a way to shake up the power structure of the academy itself. This is about shifting paradigms of analysis and interpretations, but it is also about the marketplace and its power even within the academy.

To articulate the queer in dance, we are often compelled to materialize excess: excess of gesture, effeminate displays, curt, butch phrasing; excessive strength by women who

lift men; flamboyant costuming or fantasy; men without women for entire movements of ballets; women without men for entire dances. This excess is at the core of what José Estéban Muñoz has theorized as “disidentification.”¹⁴ But all artists disidentify; this is how we recognize art. Queer artists may veer farthest from established social norms, and for my thirty-dollar admission the farther from the norm the better. Isn't this marketplace reality true for most? As we pay more for the experience of performance, our expectations for its uniqueness rise commensurately. In a previous era, excess and flamboyance were routinely linked to African American expression. But by now, theorists speculate that the excessive is not always a self-contained marker of “black.” Excess is an interpretive marker of scale. “Excess,” and here it is placed in quotations, is about the pursuit of excellence. In Africanist performance theory, moving beyond established norms are how we move toward the beautiful, the inevitable, the profound.

Queer studies tend to assume these extrapolations as the evidence of their very being. If the dance gestures are excessively effeminate, they can be described as queer. In allowing this, we colonize ourselves along the way, expecting the flamboyant excess to reveal a desirous counternarrative. In order to define ourselves as queer, we acknowledge straight; in this process, we inevitably mourn for something in the comparison. I do not know that this has to be true, but in our willingness to materialize excess, in writing about queerness in dance, I am convinced that we propagate a heterosocial mainstream discarded by the very work we identify as queer.

Artists do not necessarily do this; as several authors in Jane Desmond's new anthology suggest, this maneuver happens in the interpretation of work by an observer. Consider Ulysses Dove's 1984 *Bad Blood*.

The title evokes a prominent queerness, a vernacular phrase that ties temperament to biology and desire to destiny. In performance, the bad blood of the dance emerges among the failed relationships and the missed communications of a vicious septet gathered around a mourner's bench. Here, as always, Dove's work is filled with images of violence as a metaphor for dis-ease and affliction. For me, this dance is clearly queer, from its disidentificatory use of “white rock” music, its depiction of a dysfunctional family bound by custom, tradition, or political circumstance, but rent by desires and attractions that are enacted and implied during its course. I also term “queer” the assembled sense of movement vocabulary that Dove employs here and throughout this work; the physical articulations of line are hard-edged and precise, requiring the dancers to work at the edge of corporal possibility, but the movement resists flow; it does not allow for seamless execution or continuous, even expenditures of energy. Instead, the movements are bound and erratic, built from a series of static postures strung together by lightning-fast shifts of weight and queer gestures of reaching, flexing, and flailing. But I also see this dance as incontrovertibly “black” in its percussive accents, its sharp-edged precision, its presumption of coolness within an overall narrative of abrupt bursts of emotional turmoil. Does my analysis have to be prioritized according to analytical devices? Or can this queer dance be blacked?

Intersections of black studies and queer studies are everywhere even as they remain largely uninvestigated. Parenthetically, these intersections are how discussions of African American cultural practices are often present in discussions of “queer,” even if black people themselves are not the source or subject of the conversations. Obvious also are the intersections of dance studies and queer stud-

ies. But what about dance studies and black studies? Why do these areas consistently disconnect? And why is queer dance too often sidestepping theoretical paradigms established in black studies?

There can be a great power in queer dance, drawing from and in relationship to black studies and African American dance histories. But not until...Not until we can articulate a liberatory theory of aesthetics; until modern dance histories begin in the crucible of the marketplace and its articulation of the modern enabled by the slave trade; until tap dance is allowed to be conceived as a gay male prerogative and not a hypermasculine alternative to ballet; until strategies of improvisation and spontaneity are valued as ancient cultural imperatives completely imbricated in classicism; until struggles to gain access to stages are understood as the triumph of body wisdom over scientific and social constructions of race, class, and gender. Speaking from experience, body wisdom is sometimes queer, and it is a potent site where black studies and dance studies can surely convene in theory and in practice.

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Notes

1. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
2. These comments are elaborated in Valerie A. Briginshaw, *Dance, Space and Subjectivity* (Basingstoke and New York City: Palgrave, 2001).
3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingus (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 134.
4. This text was written for oral delivery. It was not edited for publication in order to retain the tone of its original performance. The text was, however, condensed for publication.
5. "Bill T. Jones in Conversation with Ann Daly," *Art Performs Life: Merce Cunningham/Meredith Monk/Bill T. Jones* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1998), 123.
6. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, eds., *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
7. Philip Brett, "Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet," in *Queering the Pitch*, 11.
8. Susan C. Cook, "Passionless Dancing and Passionate Reform: Respectability, Modernism, and the Social Dancing of Irene and Vernon Castle," in *The Passion of Music and Dance: Body, Gender, Sexuality*, ed. William Washabaugh (Oxford: Berg Press, 1998), 133–150, and "Performing Masculinity on the Social Dance Floor," paper delivered at the 1997 annual meeting of the Society of Dance History Scholars, Barnard College, June 13–16, subsequently published in the conference proceedings.
9. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 23–75.
10. Anne Enke, "Locating Feminist Activism: Women's Movement and Public Geography," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999.
11. Elizabeth Wood, "Sapponics," in *Queering the Pitch*, 27–66.
12. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903).

13. Houston Baker Jr., *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
14. José Estéban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).