

of race? How do these readings of cultural images get further disseminated into the social fabric of the United States? Again, these are the next questions we must ask.

On the whole, I highly recommend this sophisticated, yet readable inquiry into race and professional dance.

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DANCING REVELATIONS: ALVIN AILEY'S EMBODIMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE

by Thomas F. DeFrantz. 2004. Oxford: Oxford University Press. xviii + 300 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 hardcover.

From the 1980s until today, at the same time that the country's "dance boom"¹ rose and fell, a new kind of historiography of black American dancing emerged. The influence of hagiographies—or celebratory surveys of great figures and big trends—had waned in favor of a more critical attention to theoretical problems of nomenclature, classification, historical documentation, and critical interpretation. Certainly, new editions of hagiographic surveys, annotated bibliographies, or photographic histories by Edward Thorpe (1989), Lynne Fauley Emery (1989), James Haskins (1990), Alice Adamczyk (1989), and Richard Long (1990) continue to be used in college classrooms to teach the history of black American dancing; and Richard Long and Joe Nash's careful presentation of rare images of performers dancing within their prime in *The Black Tradition in American Dance* (1990) is just one example of why these hagiographic books remain important starting places for students and scholars of black American dancing, despite these studies' theoretical naïveté.

Yet, by the early 1990s, new anthologies like Gerald Myers' and Stephanie Reinhart's groundbreaking publications from the American Dance Festival (1991–1993) asked old questions in new, urgent ways: What is "black dance" and how might the term be critically limiting? How might terms like "ethnic dance" or even "world dance" be polarizing, ghettoizing, divisive, and uncritical? What is the relationship of concert and social dancing by blacks to the concert and social dancing by whites?

Today, the works of both black and white historians like Brenda Dixon Gottschild (2003; 1999; and 1996), John Perpener (2001), and Susan Manning (2004) galvanize the field with unprecedented theoretical innovation and historical documentation. Thomas F. DeFrantz's superb new critical historiography of the choreographer Alvin Ailey's work beautifully builds on the best late twentieth-century investigations of black American concert dancing, while innovating a new ethic for the historical interpretation of American choreography in general and black American choreography in particular.

In the introduction to his 2002 anthology *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, DeFrantz, an Associate Professor in the Department of Music and Theatre Arts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, offers a bristling and astute evaluation of the state of historical scholarship on black American dancing. In the process DeFrantz calls for a more critical assessment of the impoverishment of primary source documentation in past surveys by Thorpe (1988) and Emery (1989). DeFrantz's new book, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture*, with its rich, precise use of primary sources from the archives of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

and its careful integration of firsthand interviews, and both secondary and tertiary critical and theoretical sources, provides an antidote to past methodological missteps and shows 'em how it's really done—to borrow phrasing from the black neighborhoods of my childhood.

DeFrantz also corrects one of the most enduring problems with past evaluations of Ailey's work by such pioneering critics as Marcia Siegel (1981): not only was Ailey's achievement often marginalized within critical surveys of American modern dancing like Siegel's, but newspaper reviews of his work often lauded his 1960 masterpiece, *Revelations*, while habitually downgrading his entire oeuvre as little more than a one-note wonder. DeFrantz says that,

My project does not involve rehearsing the "problems" in Ailey's work as a choreographer, nor am I looking for chinks in the armor of a widely celebrated African American cultural institution. Rather, following art historian Richard J. Powell's summation, I hope to provide an interpretation of Ailey's work that acknowledges its particular aesthetics and cultural processes in formation "from an *a priori* position of cultural wholeness, conscious historicity, and an inherent and unapologetic humanity."² (vii)

DeFrantz's caveat prepares us for a book that demonstrates not only how racial and cultural politics can be choreographically embodied; *Dancing Revelations* also shows how a history may be told through an in-depth critical interpretation of nearly all of a man's artistic works.

This latter objective—to show how Ailey's works themselves bear the living history of his artistic and cultural imagination—still feels groundbreaking in

American dance scholarship. Such an objective demands that the author be a dance critic, a dance historian, and a dance theorist in a single book; detailed movement and structural analysis must join with historical and theoretical contextualization. It is here that DeFrantz's contribution truly shines. For, at a time when postmodernist theoretical maneuvers may trump the extended, patient close analysis of extended passages of movement, *Dancing Revelations* reveals that a book can contain descriptive movement analysis, theory, and traditional historical documentation in equal measure. DeFrantz accomplishes this startling blend of approaches in three main ways.

First, his rhetoric is clear and lucid; I never feel that ease and depth of understanding is sacrificed in favor of jargonistic pyrotechnics. Second, DeFrantz builds his arguments in the book with the help of a unique structure. The eleven sections of the book are organized thematically. While, for the most part, each section moves forward in time from Ailey's earliest choreographic work to his last, the themes in each chapter are not topically parallel. For example, Part Five's topic of "Touring, Touring, Touring" couches an analysis of a 1968 work like *Quintet* within the problem of Ailey and his company's enlarging professional demands at the height of the mid-twentieth century civil rights era; and Part Nine's topic of "Gender and Spectator" couches its analysis of the 1971 masterpiece, *Cry*, in questions of black womanhood and problems of spectacle in the presentation of black bodies on stage. In each of these sections, a thematic organization allows DeFrantz to compare one individual choreographic work to other works that were made before, during, and after the premiere of the main work in question. DeFrantz's challenging structure also allows him to interweave into his

dance analysis vital information about the everyday realities of professionally mounting work with scintillating discussions of the work's critical reception. The rich tapestry of information and analysis more than captures the "cultural wholeness" that DeFrantz aims to provide in his opening remarks in the book's preface.

Third, *Dancing Revelations* accomplishes its novel blend of criticism, historical documentation, and theory by including one or two of what DeFrantz calls "breaks" at the beginning, middle, or end of most every section of the book. Borrowing the language of jazz, these sectional interjections allow DeFrantz to write in a speculative, free-associative, and far more conversational manner that is different from the rest of the writing in the book. In the book's breaks, DeFrantz riffs on such theoretical problems as the contested homosexual appeal of Ailey's work; the manner in which Ailey's work may or may not embody fashionable theories from Africana Studies, like the black British social theorist Paul Gilroy's understanding of black art as a transformative interpenetration of international influences from across the so called "black Atlantic"; and the place of Ailey's work in discussions of American modernism and postmodernism.

Interestingly, while they do not include wholly substantive or even complete accounts of why these disparate theoretical lenses are germane to an analysis of Ailey's work, the breaks give DeFrantz an opportunity to speak out of the guise of final, extended theoretical assessment as he experiments with answering some of the critical questions that occupy the current generation of scholars in American Studies, Cultural Studies, Queer Studies, and Africana Studies. To his enormous credit, DeFrantz does not take it for granted that readers

will have encountered the ideas of social theorists like Paul Gilroy. In the breaks, rather than name-dropping, he carefully cites, quotes, and explains the key theorists' ideas when he invokes them, thereby demonstrating the true depth of the theorists' significance.

At the beginning of *Dancing Revelations*, DeFrantz declares that Alvin Ailey is "arguably the most important black American choreographer in the short history of modern dance" (xiii). For me, importance is never an epistemological fact—or a matter of *being*. As critics and historians, we prove importance. So too must artists and companies prove their importance. Few repertory companies have the kind of international popular appeal and present-day fiscal durability of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Yet, the company built and earned its importance as a cultural institution through its choreographic acquisitions and virtuoso performance aesthetic. Likewise, by the end of *Dancing Revelations*, DeFrantz's sterling research and clear, innovative writing proves that Alvin Ailey is not just one of the most important black American choreographers, but one of the most important *American* choreographers of all time.

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Notes

1. Critics, presenters, and grantors use the term "dance boom" to refer to a time in the 1980s when the country experienced unprecedented federal and state-level funding for concert dance. See, for example, the Joyce Theater's 2001 discussion about the end of the dance boom at <http://www.joyce.org/wwwboard/messages/460.html>.

2. DeFrantz quotes Richard J. Powell (1997, 22).

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NO FIXED POINTS: DANCE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick.
2003. *New Haven, CT: Yale University Press*. vii + 906 pp., 200 illustrations, notes, index. \$50.00 cloth.

In his short story, "Reconstruction," author Mark Helprin's protagonist ruminates on the uses of history; the way the past shapes us through events both large and small, significant and fleeting. We can never know what moments or experiences will make us who and what we are.

In *No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century*, Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick's monumental and comprehensive new book, the authors make us witness to the panoply of people, performances, philosophies, choreography, movement styles, and cultural influences that have shaped the major streams of western theatrical dance, its interpreters, and its history in the last century. The volume's Preface states that Reynolds and McCormick have "sought to capture the vitality of performance" (xiii) and in that aim they have succeeded admirably. While the primary focus of the book is on the dance genres of ballet and modern dance, two chapters on "Musical Theater in America" and "Dance in the Movies" enliven and enhance the scope of the text. Written in a clear and graceful narrative, the material is well-organized, accessible, and entertainingly readable, all commendable virtues in any historical survey. The depth and breadth of the authors' research is evident in the sheer volume of