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THE METHUEN DRAMA COMPANION TO PERFORMANCE ART

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Bertie Ferdman and Jovana Stokic*

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Caring for Black Corporealities: Experimental Black Performance

THOMAS F. DEFRANTZ

As we wait in the lobby, the gallery space beyond our view pulsates with sound. After hanging our coats, a fantastical performer, shirtless, but wearing a pink tutu, greets our small group and offers to escort us. Brimming with anticipation, we move close to one another. Inside, we can't possibly account for all that happens. Music, flashing lights, flags displaying projections of events happening on the other side of the space, enlarged but still mysterious. Smiling people. We greet other audience members, then meet other performers fantastically clad as they will be, wondrous and indescribable. Joy permeates even as the room is heavy with a funky Afrofuturist sheen somehow. Unexpected lighting shifts guide us here and there, moving us among the glorious dancers who move slowly, now quickly, forming lines and groupings that materialize and dissipate. They change clothes at times, becoming naked in between, without concern for the revelation. They enjoy this performance deeply, and we are invited toward care, smiling and beginning to experience a certain joyfulness alongside them. We note well that the collaborating artists are all People of Color . . . and that we in the audience roaming through the gallery are overwhelmingly white. ("Let 'im Move You," January 2019)

* * *

This chapter has two intertwined subjects: Black experimental performance in the context of gallery and museum spaces, and the contemporary motivation to construct systems of ethical *care* among artists and audiences. Organizational logics surrounding experimental performance and dance presume a Eurocentric model of creative modernity, one that pushes "beyond" concerns of asymmetrical social

access or aesthetics of affiliation and affirmation that might define Black life.¹ How, then, have experimental artists found ways to remain “Black” even as they push boundaries of performance forms seemingly unrelated to core values of Africanist performance? If Black artists engage experimental performance with an unstated responsibility to represent the imaginary group of Africans in diaspora, how do these artists construct *care* as a vector of creative craft, and especially *care* for Black people who may not encounter their work? How are Black artists shifting the terms of experimental dance performance toward an ethically engaged possibility? This chapter explores the intersections of these fault lines to consider how *care* might be imaginatively resuscitated in live art formations.

We might all understand that Black artists still face an unconscionable double bind of working as artists, who might stretch the normative conditions of social encounter, while also being expected to represent Black life in its infinite diversity. Black subjectivity remains embattled as a social possibility; unfairly constrained even as it expands in unexpected ways (DeFrantz and Gonzalez 2014; Gaines 2017; Mbembe 2017). In a difficulty as awkward as the enactment of slave trading, Black artists engage an extra layer of activity in the micro-decisions that determine whether their work will be recognized in relationship to a Black assembly, or as presumably white inventions disinterested in the struggles and disavows of Black life.

Dance, as a theatrical practice, faces awkwardness when ported into museum and gallery spaces that were not designed to accommodate its features. Many modes of theatrical and experimental dance were created to suit presentation in bespoke circumstances: places where audiences might sit comfortably and direct their attention toward dedicated performance space. In museums, and gallery circumstances, audiences typically have no particular place to sit or even stand. Dancers in these architectures tend to perform in makeshift circumstances: on rented flooring or concrete parquet. Dance enlivens the galleries where it appears, even as its practice is transformed by the displacement from stage to the close quarters of a standing, and moving, audience.

Black performance artists working with dance face a very difficult circumstance within this politicized space. What sorts of dancing might be possible in a museum/gallery, and who might recognize that dancing in its Blackness? Does it matter that white audiences often misinterpret the dancing as simple narratives of spectacle, when concerns of, say, religious practice, mixed-race identities, or family lineage might actually be on offer? How can Black performance imagine forward for its audiences as structuring logics worthy of placement in museums that will only count small numbers of Black people as witnesses?

Artists respond to these difficult circumstances in a variety of ways that bring challenges as well as possibilities. While curators and education/audience coordinators might construct context for the performances that are offered to audiences of live art, my concern here rests with the accommodations that artists enact in order to participate in the awkward social and physical economies of too-often indifferent venues (DeFrantz 2019).

Some artists take the asymmetrical starting point of Black artistry amid largely white audience venues/environments as the initiating action of invention. Durham,

North Carolina-based live artist Monèt Noelle Marshall crafted a three-evening invention performed in galleries and warehouses around town. The first of these, “Buy My Soul and Call It Art” (Marshall 2018), deployed a cast of twenty Black and white performers in an immersive performance that unfolded throughout a sprawling assembly of gallery spaces, conference rooms, and lobby areas of the Living Arts Collective, a small arts complex in a trendy area of bars and restaurants in Durham.

We arrive with the heady excitement of encountering something unknowable. The work has been described by the artist as being about “Black art, Black bodies and Black people [who] are undervalued in mainstream (white) arts spaces, the unpaid emotional labor of Black people and the relationship between the arts market and slave market” (Marshall 2018). We eye each other excitedly as a mixed-race audience. Surely mostly of the crowd present as white, but we encompass a healthy array of proud, young Black people. We make small talk and admire fashions, until two docents at a table ask us, as a group, how much we think Black performance is worth. We giggle nervously, until it becomes clear that this will set the terms of our admission to the show. Singly, and in pairs, we approach the table to answer the question; we are given that amount of cash in a play denomination. As we move through the installation at our own leisure, we pause to witness scenes of subjection: an “emerging Black woman artist” offered up by a white curator/auctioneer who accepts our play money; an extremely adept, virtuosic Black male social dancer trapped within a glass booth while two white curators/presenters collect money offered to him, clearly taking the money without his consent. We wonder, resist, guffaw, cry a bit, and wish for something else to happen as we wind our way through the horrorshow of racialized disavowals. (“Buy My Soul,” January 2018)

Marshall and her collaborators effectively demonstrated how Black artistry often lands in untenable relationship to practices of assigning monetary values to the sharing out of Black creativity. One installation in the show did not rely on money to determine its worth. A “Black Joy” room allowed only audience members who cared to identify themselves as Black to enter a closed-off space, where two Black women hosts played soulful songs while they and the audience danced together. Docents at the door to this room allowed only those who identified as Black to enter; whether or not those audience members presented as Black. Inside the Black Joy room, we sang together and danced, telling each other stories about our day and our hopes for tomorrow and tomorrow. We instinctively understood this room to be precious and concerned with our well-being; we were not asked to monetize the encounter among ourselves that pointed toward a shared possibility of collective emotional resource.

“Buy My Soul” cast Black performance as the explicit subject of a racialized encounter among art, artists, and audience. Dancing in the show arrived bifurcated: as the expert soloist dancing for our money in the awkward circumstance of a glass booth, or in social dances offered up by performers amid audience in the closed-off “Black Joy” room. In this, the work effectively mirrored the social circumstance that

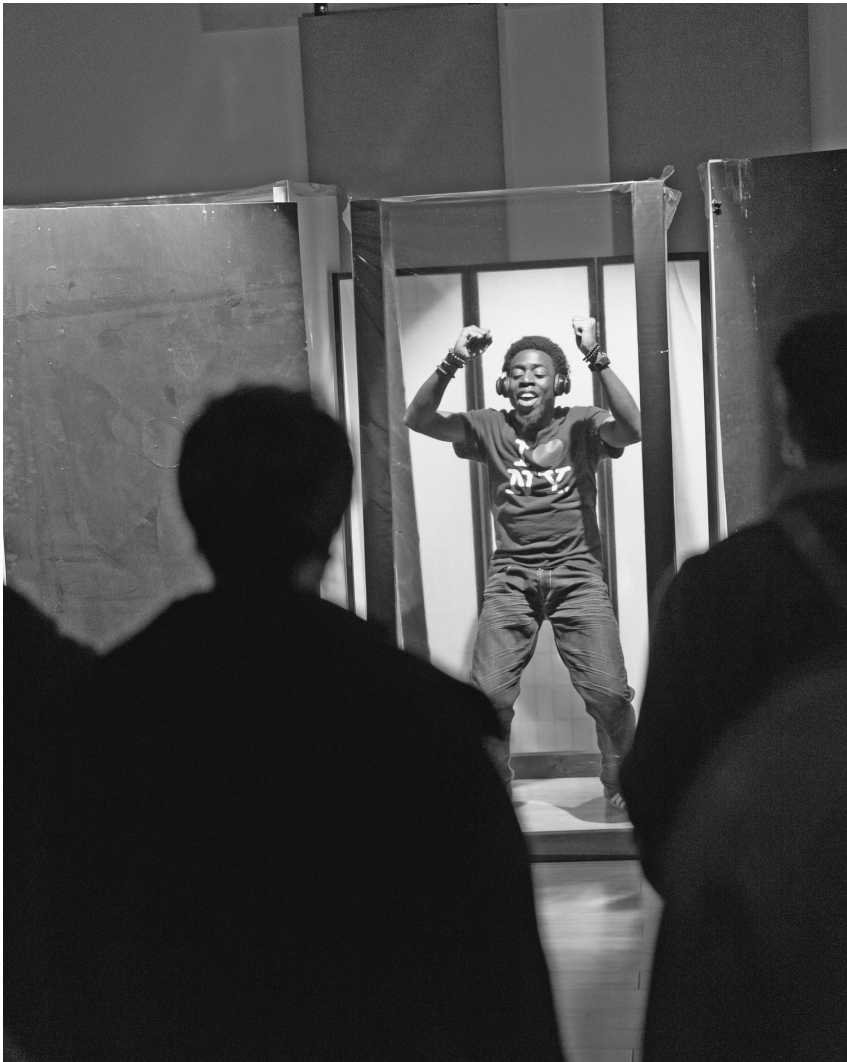


FIGURE 3.4.1: Leroy Eldridge in Monèt Noelle Marshall's "Buy My Soul and Call It Art." Photography by Derrick Beasley.

cordons off urgent everyday Black creativity from general white scrutiny. Audiences who didn't care to identify as Black at the beginning of the performance saw only the expert dancer working very hard in the impossible, glass-walled container. But Black audiences saw this performance in relationship to the context of their own social dancing together in the "Black Joy" room, enhancing an embodied connection among dance practice from social to theatrical.

Placing the expert dancer in a veritable cage also underscored the awkward spatial limitations that nontheatrical spaces bring to bear on dancing. Here, the

performer was forced to contain his gestures within the dancing booth, denied the opportunity to move through space or even to the ground, as his dance training might have predicted. In this, Marshall reminded us of the ways that dance in the museum and gallery space is often contained beyond its grounding suppositions, required to emerge in cordoned-off spaces or on platforms created specially, and contingently, for the small run of performances alongside the collectible objects that will remain long after the performance.

This difference in the liveliness of the dancing and its ephemerality from the seeming stability of objects that might surround it—or even, the real estate of the gallery or museum that houses it—creates a dynamic tension that works against dance and its particularities. By its very nature, dance is hard to see—in that its nuances are best appreciated by other dancers or experienced participants in ways that are beyond the means of many audiences. Dance exists outside of language, so it is extremely difficult to talk or write about its contents. And trajectories and legacies of dance have been historicized and theorized sporadically and incompletely, in a manner entirely more modest than visual art or even performance art.

To combine these deficiencies that hound dance with the difficult theoretical apparatuses allowed Black performance is to understand the yawning gulf surrounding Black performance art. Because Black people have vibrant and complex relationships to dancing as a social practice and a theatrical form of expression, Black audiences tend to value the particularities of dance practices in nuanced manner. We notice the difference between social dances such as the Dougie from the Nae-Nae, and understand how to shift our critical attention between the forms of dance in order to assess their execution in performance. Black audiences grow up witnessing each other as social dancers, and performance art that arrives embedded within Black social life that draws on Black social dance might enjoy a critical Black audience familiar with the specific qualities and possibilities of different modes of dance. Amid its many propositions, Marshall's show leaned into the fault line of divergent aesthetic familiarity with Black social dance, a dividing notion deployed to foreground intentional care for Black audiences to enjoy a rich and variable experience in the art gallery.

Some contemporary Black artists imagine their work as an opportunity to move experimental Black performance closer to Black audiences who might not be drawn to gallery or theater spaces. jumtatu m. poe and Donte Beacham's multipart performance project "Let 'im Move You" (L'IMY 2014–19) embraced the quasi-theatrical practice of J-Setting as its primary mode of physical technique (poe and Beacham 2019). J-Setting, a practice set in motion by female dancers/cheerleaders at Southern United States college football events in the 1970s, involves posing, punctuating sinuous recognizably feminine movements with hard accents, and a follow-the-leader format that realizes a hierarchy of available roles. J-Setting migrated from its practice by high-heeled women in football stands to a nightclub form danced by queer men of color; it has more recently spawned the basis for reality television programming and the physical style of many contemporary music videos.

Beacham, poe, and their collaborators worked with J-Sette as the refracting agent for an expansive project with various modes of address and realization. J-Sette calls

for a leader and a group of followers, casting complex dance combinations as a sort of follow-the-leader game that draws on shared knowledge of intricate passages of movement (DeFrantz 2017). J-Sette is deeply rehearsed, so that all participating dancers understand the short sequence of movements that become its phrase material. As in the calls from pitcher to catcher in baseball, the J-Sette leader makes signals to the team, defining the order in which the material will be danced and by whom before performing the sequence themselves.

J-Sette offers a hypnotic, kaleidoscopic effect in performance. Dancing, complex movements seem to pass from one dancer to the others in waves of sinuous complicity accented by hard recoils and bounces of the hips and pelvis. The form was designed to be legible across the vast distances of the football field; as it has been moved into nightclubs, public parks, and now museum and gallery spaces, its stark theatricality has only been enhanced by the close proximity of the audience to its performers.

poe and Beacham created their L'IMY platform with a unique, three-pronged performance format that encompassed its realization in nightclubs, outdoor public spaces, and galleries/experimental theaters. The artists considered all three sites of performance equivalent in their explorations, and were careful to coordinate each type of encounter into their practice. The twelve-member L'IMY company rehearsed and traveled across the country—to Philadelphia, PA; Portland, OR; Boston, MA; Durham, NC; Dallas, TX; Tallahassee, FL; and New York City—to engage audiences as partyers, passersby, and audience in each city.

The project's dispersal through these three sites of encounter intended to disrupt the seeming impossibility to organize largely Black assemblies in museum or art gallery spaces. In the context of the United States, Black people, who constitute about 13 percent of the population, rarely constitute more than this share of a museum or gallery audience. But Black performance artists such as poe and Beacham might enjoy sharing their work in majority Black circumstances, or at least among viewers who might understand the deep structures of citation and legacy operating in their work. L'IMY engaged Black audiences in places where those audiences gather: in nightclubs and outdoor parks and street corners in Black neighborhoods. This modular approach to experimental performance ensured that the project would reach a larger Black audience than would come to a museum, gallery, or experimental performance space.

L'IMY also imagined itself toward an ethics of care for queer Black people in its rehearsal process and museum performance modes. In rehearsals, poe and Beacham engaged Shani Akilah and Abdul-Aliy Abdullah Muhammad as ethical artistry guides, tasked with accounting for the dimensions of communication and power among the collaborators, as well as considerations of the implications of the work in the world. Akilah and Muhammad's labor made palpable the desire for the project to engage Black artmaking in dance through a lens of thoughtful engagement. Within the contemporary moment of considering sexual assault and purposeful diversity as foundational concerns of ethical human interaction, in the context of #MeToo and #blacklivesmatter, the project's insistence on social justice as an aspect of its creative emergence underscored the shifts in process that artists engage in order to dance, ethically, in emergent traditions of live art.

To care for Black people in their danced encounters with art-house audiences as well as among each other might be an urgent radical shift in the conception and execution of contemporary live art. Too often, Black bodies in the white spaces of galleries and museums have represented a cipher of difference from an assumed white norm. Black artists were called upon to recount the terms of that difference through the dancing of the spectacular novelty of a temporary self-rule. Dancing, the bodies of Black artists hinted at an emancipated possibility where Black gestures could be valued in a privileged relationship to rhetorics of commerce. But performances in these white galleries inevitably collapsed into the demands of commerce as examples of museum programming selected to demonstrate a sort of vivid difference of the world. Too easily, Black artists become a cordoned-off identity of their own, removed from connection to Black people in the locale of the museum, or even in relationship to the world, now placed only in connection to other artists and aesthetic antecedents.

But Black artists do indeed feel a special connection to Black communities, and especially those populations who never come to museums or gallery spaces. After all, we are aware of our many extended family members who have little interest in museums, or with few reasons to be concerned with experimental performances. Collectively, we are seldom cast as the inciting reason for the gallery space to exist, nor do our interests provide the impetus toward a curation process that might include us as artists or audiences. Our creative work as Black artists, then, includes and encompasses a dimension of education, affirmation, and care that extends beyond a desire to answer aesthetic inquiry as its own end. Black artistry tends to circle back to the perceived needs of a larger Black community, an imaginary community in some ways, but one built out from the shared awareness of struggles and disavowal too-commonly experienced by Black people. It really doesn't take much for Black artists to feel implicated in the many shooting deaths and microaggressions regularly reported in the context of the United States, the UK, Europe, or Latin America; or in the migratory crises that force too many Black Africans into the impossible status of lifelong refugees. We find ourselves connected to these experiences through our own constant distresses, working in the majority white circulations of power and privilege brought forward by contexts for live art. In this circumstance, we can begin to understand that Black dancing in contemporary performance spaces arrives in response and relationship to daily life that renders its contours as unpredictable, uncontrollable incidents of potential disenfranchisement.

Considered in this light, we can begin to understand how Black dancing in live art circumstances bears a double burden of responding to the various histories that might surround live performance in museum and gallery spaces, as well as the legacies that contribute to the recognition of Black life. Doubled, experimental Black performance expands in contradictory directions, attempting to satisfy desires too often disinterested with the depths of field that encompass Black living.

In response to this double duty, some live art performances in museum spaces elaborate Black presence through mediated layering. The SLIPPAGE: Performance Culture Technology performance work "reVERSE-gesture-reVIEW," created in

response to visual works by celebrity artist Kara Walker, demonstrated a bifurcated possibility in live processing and dance performance (The SLIPPAGE: Performance Culture Technology 2017). The work drew on Walker's 2005 series "Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)," a collection of fifteen prints that place odd and aggressive silhouette figures atop images appropriated from the nineteenth-century newspaper. Walker's annotations interpellate Black figures—as silhouettes of recognizably Black people—atop print images that she chose. The fifteen large prints that Walker created render black silhouettes as the undiscovered focus of the Civil War imagery, in most cases overwhelming the historical renderings of white subjects. Walker's work points toward an under-recognized aspect of Civil War journalism: the fact that Black lives and loves were indelibly impacted by the war and its affect, even as their voices were virtually nonexistent in the public record of the war and its operations.

The mostly-white audience gathered in the museum gallery displaying Walker's provocative series. Milling among the images, an outrageous male curator character in a striped seersucker suit chatted up the audience, greeting some directly and loudly, while pointedly ignoring others. Proclaiming in half-truths, he became an unreliable narrator of historical events, even as he exhorted the audience to think about Black women's activities in the events of the US Civil War and Walker's exquisite interventions into that history. Subtly, the audience became aware of two Black women dressed in all-black who moved surreptitiously throughout the space, sliding across the floor and dancing slowly between standing groups of unnoticing attendees. The curator character led the group into a gallery where his voice became irrelevant as the dancing women moved through a forty-minute dance performance that cast them in mediated recordings of varying scale, projected with contrasting white and black shadows onto large projections of Walker's prints. ("reVERSE-gesture-reView," January 2017)

"reVERSE" engaged a live processing interface that captured the improvised movements of dancers Shireen Dickson and Brittany Williams and rendered them as white shadows moving through Walker's images. Dickson and Williams's dancing, viewed live by the audience in the space, was rendered as an opposite negative that animated the black silhouette figures projected onto a wall. In a spooky effect, Black women projected white shadows onto black silhouettes transposed onto the black-and-white reporter's renderings of contemporary scenes from the Civil War.

The forty-minute performance visited several of Walker's works, animating the figures with dance movement distinctive for each selection. A sort of "pimp walk," trap-music dance accompanied "Banks's Army Leaving Simmsport," suggesting a submerged Black rhythmic invention behind the neat lines of soldiers moving away from the viewer; "Lost Mountain at Sunrise" turned into an ironic pose of supplication mixed with an image of a Confederate flag and a recording of "Dixie" played by a marching band; "Alabama Loyalists Greeting the Federal Gun-Boats" became a whirlwind of bodies in disorientation, accompanied by the dissonant strains of Hungarian composer György Sándor Ligeti; "Cotton Hoards in Southern Swamp" arrived as an erotic sex play by two adolescent girls testing the limits of



FIGURE 3.4.2: Shireen Dickson in “reVERSE-gesture-reVIEW.” Photo by J. Caldwell, Nasher Museum.

propriety with props of furry phalluses. “An Army Train” proposed a phantasmagoric layering of a dancing smoke cloud menacing a woman working toward spiritual deliverance through motion, while a capella chorus sang “Lift Every Voice and Sing” against the sounds of rioters and gunshots.

The layered effect of the whole confused and amazed audiences who witnessed the performance, confounded by the deployment of technology that suggested

an evermore futuristic haunting of shared understandings of the Civil War and its legacies. Walker initiated these rethinkings in her visual objects; “reVERSE” extended the implications of Black silhouettes as foreground with the construction of white-negative shadow dancing projections, moving out of time from the live bodies that created their contents. In this layering, “reVERSE” proposed a technologically driven reclaiming of US history that might accommodate contemporary Black women dancing as the source material of creative encounter in the museum. In this, the work effectively *cared* for the embodied thinking of at least these two Black women dancers, centering their improvised inventions in a shared exploration of historical possibility.

The three works referenced in this chapter demonstrate how Black artists test vectors of care for Black people that extend beyond the singular encounters of audience and artist in live art circumstances. In tilting toward care as an abiding concern for the creation of performance, artists expand the work that their creations can do, moving beyond a reflection on detached artistic practice and toward a possibility of social justice as foundational to creative craft. In this, experimental Black performance artists who place their work in gallery and museum contexts can, at times, explore the urgent capacity of performance to model complex worlds in motion. This may be the inevitable work of Black performance, to restore an elided Black humanity to contexts that continue to disavow Black presence.

NOTE

1. A quick review of the literature related to “experimental performance” demonstrates a white tendency to universalize the terms of theoretical encounter, while resisting the presence of Black or Latinx innovations that will not easily “fit” into these terms. This tendency is demonstrated even within this very volume, where theorists write about universal (white) performance norms, without bothering to note the white supremacist perspective that inevitably excludes Black innovations.

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