



**COMPETING  
CHOREOGRAPHIES**

**10 YEARS OF THE KEIR  
CHOREOGRAPHIC AWARD**

Edited by Angela Conquet and Philipa Rothfield

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THE KEIR FOUNDATION

# The [Black] Body Arrives

## Notes on United States-Derived Black Performance

thomas f. defrantz

### How Blackness Materialises

Blackness arrives overdetermined: hypervisible, unavoidable, pre-accelerated, immensely valuable as property when able to be contained, monetised. Blackness carries an inordinate weight of representation and presumptive logics for people as, at least, a cipher of magical perseverance; a rendering of ritual possibility; a demonstration of physical excellence; a liberated presence that exceeds restraint so that it can care for us all. Among more ugly feelings, Blackness has been forced to stand in for feral hedonism, outlaw danger, disregard for social order, and an unknowable primitivism that contradicts any future of shared civil society. The fact of Blackness drives an awkward shared discomfort: those of us being seen too much become increasingly suspicious of those others who are consistently unsure what to do with the seeing. Indeed, those of us presenting as Black know that we are overexposed: others see us a bit too hard.

The presumptive logics of Blackness moving through the world in certain sorts of ways pre-determine an uncomfortableness among us far too often. We become unsure how to relate one to the other. We are all challenged by the need to recognise difference as an organisational platform that predicts misalignments of desire when we gather in creative assembly. The things that we each and all assume cleave to us, creating vicious systems of seeming impenetrability. And yet, we do have exceedingly different experiences that precede our gathering in theatres, or museums, or dance studios, or rehearsal processes, or as collaborators. How do we account for difference as a productive lever that actually strengthens our affiliations, rather than only as something that keeps us apart?

To live in Blackness is to live in a pride of resilience against all odds. The slave trade that produced Blackness as a category of being was not of any of our making today, and yet we have survived it to be here, among each other, now. Our presence reminds us that perseverance is possible and necessary for human continuation; Black people — who have

only been constituted as a group recently, in the last 100 years or so — share an awareness that our movements demonstrate a possibility, especially in mixed-race or white spaces. In these contexts, our gestures at any scale offer evidence of resiliency and commitment to presence. Surely this contributes to the prevalence of grounded strength common in imagery of Blackness framed by performance on stages. While there were African people and Indigenous people across the planet since time immemorial, the articulation of Black as an identity marker is a decided result of the rise of modernism, global capital and exchange, and white supremacy. In this, we are all participating in global capital and systems of global disavowal, whether we are aware of this truth or not.

*How do we account for difference as a productive lever that actually strengthens our affiliations, rather than only as something that keeps us apart?*

Blackness materialises, then, as a cipher of ability that surprises its inhabitants and those looking at us at every turn. We didn't design ourselves to be Black; to be a recognisable assembly of identities among 'races' destined to be respected because we are still here. When we recognise our Blackness as an aspect of being — as an aspect of how we *are to be* in the world — we materialise with an unquenchable ability to handle the stresses of contemporary life, armed with generations of stories of ancestral achievement, almost all tales of survival. Like any other family tree, but entirely different because of the impossible calculus that produced Black as a property in the bowels of the slave ships so long ago.

### Aesthetic Considerations

Black cultures — or Africanist cultures, actually fomented across time on the continent and its isles — thrive in aesthetic formations that encourage participation and rhythmic manipulation. These two urgent, essential aspects of Africanist aesthetics deserve careful parsing as ways to understand what happens in Black performance or in performances offered by Black artists within any number of genres. Note well: Black has become a politically-intentional designation for Australia First Nations people; we are all Bla[c]k here. Participation becomes part of how Black cultures seem so incredibly available to any public. Because these aesthetic forms are generally concerned with antiphonic relations of call and response, they invite a joyous sense of funky, get-down, 'anything goes' relation. Participation supports the generally positive feeling general audiences might have in the presence of house dancing, or voguing, or the elaborate openings of any number of ritual dances deriving from African form that are transformed for the stage. Black elaborations of American modern dance or ballet emphasise an opening of gesture towards its physical

ends: extending limbs beyond normative articulations in order to encourage an immediate response from witnessing audiences. These extensions of form towards extra-normative physical and emotional performances create the undeniable dynamic charisma that many Black cultural performances convey. Charisma as an aspect of Black performance arrives as an imperative answer to the need for participation by the witnessing group. Overworking the performance encounter — and that is only ‘overworking’ for those who are not interested in generating participation among audiences or witnesses — becomes a way for Black artists to ensure the healthy unfolding of event through palpable responsiveness of all gathered.

Expertise in these aesthetic worldviews also involves making rhythm palpable. This occurs most obviously in musical and sound structuring that offers an insistent pulse to be upset and manipulated by the interpretive artist. The assumption of a steady beat of some sort that can then be suspended, resisted, extended, or accelerated contributes to the construction of sturdy Black performance practice. Rhythm is also made manifest visually by Black dance artists in any idiom. The staccato attack of, say, krumping or tap dance intends to provoke a reckoning with rhythm among gathered audiences and witnesses. Vogue-femme dance relies on a riding through disco and house music beats; twerking to New Orleans bounce features elaborate responsiveness of the pelvic girdle to the crashing sonic waves of rhythmic overwhelm intrinsic to that genre.

Rhythmic acumen and audience participation are so prevalent in Black performance as to be unremarkable, and yet these aesthetic devices typically provide an essential immediacy to the performance event for anyone within range of the show. At times, the imperative to compel participation becomes read as simplicity by some critics and cultural elites, especially those who believe that art should be difficult to grasp in order to be effective cultural labour. The gap between expecting art to be somehow exclusive rather than intentionally available to their audience produces a cultural relativism that devalues Black performance. The logic goes, something so everyday as a Black performance’s ability to move a crowd towards shared feeling must not be worth much in a context of white performance that values exclusive access more than the pleasures of an everyday access to art. And while an ability to generate responsiveness from a temporary public might be foundational to Black aesthetics, this practice can surely be finely-honed and appreciated in its elaborations and subtle realisations. Participation and elaboration of rhythmic pulse can be exquisitely rendered, as it always is by the most gifted, practised performers of Black aesthetic worldviews; in two obvious examples one need only witness tap dancer Savion Glover or singer Erykah Badu to consider how the sharing and teasing of rhythmic availability constructs performances that extend a social skin towards shared imagining.

### Relations that Produce Aesthetic Worlds

Indeed, this reliance on participation as an aesthetic lever ensures that Black performance is guided by relational aesthetics that assume connections between making and sharing work and the people who become audiences to that labour. Black creativity assumes that an audience will become involved in the revelation of the performance. In this vision, relations produce entire aesthetic worlds. This truism can help us understand how rap has taken global hold especially for young, politically-motivated artists: a direct relationship between audience and performer encourages a poesis that might feel fresh, of-the-moment, urgent and accessible. Note well that rap can arrive simultaneously obscure and full of impenetrable verbal references, to be understood only by those with the closest relationships to the rappers. But even in these cases, the rhythmic cadence of rap performance encourages a certain respect and admiration for achievement that comes of its willingness to appear as an available structuring of knowledge.

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In this, we turn to the insider-outsider points of view that shoot through Black performance in most every genre. Accomplished musicians in Africanist aesthetics understand a crucial value of insider knowledge that underpins the most luminous performances born of improvisation, as most Black performances tend to be. Insider knowledge allows some audiences to clock, or notice, references to terrible public policies or outrageous policing activities among lyrics or raps offered in slang; insider information convinces some audiences to laugh aloud at the audacity of an extended balance held a bit too long by a contemporary dancer in a movement passage that might have been a bit dry without that elaboration. Black performance assumes a mixture of relations among audiences, which are typically mixed-race affairs; but even within a seemingly-closed circle of a vogue ball and its competitions, performers offer movements that will only be recognisable to the competitors and judges among the more obvious references to wacking and dipping that define the form.

The worldmaking of an assumptive relational aesthetic drives Black performance forward. Black ballerinas dance outside of ‘classical’ form to assert a presence that responds to the political circumstance of their continued disavowal. If Black women’s bodies could never be pale, winsome reeds, floating en pointe as some conceptions of ballet predict, then these Black women’s gestures might arrive with a particular sly wit even within the framework of a neo-classical work. After all, if Black is to be overexposed in any case, its relational imperative encourages a rendering of event that always-already knows its ability to exceed expectation.

Exceeding expectation in performance relies on a pre-accelerated sense of relation between artist and public. Black artists inevitably face a public that undervalues their achievement in part because of the social status of Black life. And yet that same public also expects a demonstration of excellence in part because of that same social status, that would seem to predict a certain failure or inability to perform. Black artists are expected to be extraordinary in some ways, magically able to 'bring the noise' in part because they know something unfathomable about Black life in the world; that terrible condition produced through the 'othering' of Blackness as a less-than status also becomes the relational ground for extraordinary accomplishment, at least in the ability to be dynamic and available to a general public.

### Difference as a Lever of Identity

The obvious 'difference' of visible Blackness from a normative, everyday whiteness, or Asianess in some contexts, becomes a starting point for Black performance to cohere. And of course, the obvious problem of difference as a seemingly-inevitable rendering of 'normative' vexes us all. Everything might be different from everything else, and yet we typically think of 'difference' or 'diversity' as calls towards anything that isn't within the purview of white supremacy or white privilege. Diversity is a useless register of experience except as a call to colonial power; far too often, diversity becomes shorthand for Blackness or even a more general, people-of-colour rather than an actual articulation of differences of abilities, backgrounds, skills, interests, desires, intellects, etc. Within difference floating without any ancillary particulars — difference *from what or for whom?* — the whiteness of a critical and governmental perspective of centre proceeds. Blackness might only need to be different in order to be somehow valued; for Black people we experience difference within ourselves and our Black families, lovers, colleagues, friends, and creative collaborators moment to moment. And yet, when difference is leveraged as a feature of Black performance, it is typically deployed in relationship to an elusive white norm.

Identity, and identity politics, grew from a political desire to recognise competing, divergent, and parallel structures of worldmaking, life, aesthetics, possibilities, practices, experiences, and ways of being. But identity politics became distended by the ongoing need to re-explain asymmetrical experiences of seemingly-similar circumstances, like the aesthetic worldviews of Black performance. 'Everyone' might think that the qualities of performance are found in colonial white aesthetics of obscurity or preciousness; Black performance arrives *different* from that normative assumption. But what if Black performance arrives at a centre of expectation and experience, as it surely does for many Black people? In those cases, Black performance only tends to reveal Blackness as it offers historical narratives of disavowal or temporary triumph; mostly its realisation traffics in participation and an aesthetics of

rhythm. Neither of these aesthetic aspects are inherently Black or bound in identity. And yet, Black cultures have carefully crafted means to recognise agility in these modes; in jazz music or Afrofuturist visual imagery designed to force us into a shared astonishment.

Identity has tended to be deployed as a way to articulate distance from a white norm of power and privilege, whether by white women decrying patriarchal structures that kept them from equivalent earning power or access to government funding as artists, or by Black social dancers never respected enough to have access to a theatre or soundstage to document their achievements. But identity could include that proximity to normative masculinist power if more of us were willing to claim identity at every turn, rather than waiting for the Black people or the Brown people to mark ourselves as 'different.' We are all different and diverse, pretty much all the time, even if the awkward uses of a language of difference as a way to leverage identity seem to disregard this fact and hide the power of whiteness in forming centres of knowledge and 'normalcy.'

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### Body as a Site of Place

Embodied research that results in performance tends to cast the body into any number of memories: those of the performer/interpreter; those of the lead artist or choreographer; and those of the witnessing audience. Watching dance, we might all be encouraged to imagine how a movement came to be, and where a performer learned to craft those gestures. As we participate in the dance, responding from the position of the audience encouraging the performance forward, we might imagine ourselves in a similar motion, moving beyond breath through ambition towards a deliverance of execution. Dancing, we might hope for the same, wondering through the choreography towards its formation and how it reminds us of moves done long ago as well as movements assigned by the choreographer and new to the contemporary moment. Making dances, we ask others to inhabit our visions of how movement might be, crafting gestures with special assignments for moving weight or the release of energy or the achievement of motion in flow that satisfies the dance at hand.

In each of these circumstances, we might think of the body as an activation of place bound up with memory. The places where we lived, where we loved, where we learned unexpected aspects of ourselves are all present in our gestures and our movements, and are all available to the encounter that produces performance. Thinking of the body as a site of place helps us consider how the fact of our divergent histories arrives into performance structures whether we recognise this or not. Where we are 'from' and where we live now co-exist in the materialisation of performance. The body remembers an incalculable number of details that produce its gestures; it sites places that are not here or now into the performance that we construct as artists and audiences.

This line of thinking reveals how Black presence will radically charge the performance space, because racial segregation and blank racisms have produced wildly divergent memories of home and place among Black artists and white audiences. As the body remembers walking down a street and being over-policed or avoided, gestural adjustments accrue through repetitions and time. Some bodies recoil as they witness others, remembering places where this action suited encounters. Confident gestures that take up stage space reveal Black assemblies remembered from places far from the experimental theatres or opera house stages of performance; Black artists routinely imagine ourselves into sites entirely different from where we grew up. Our bodies bring resonances of homes and homelands into performance practice whether they are called for or not; the body remembers and its located sites of gestural development become part of the material of contemporary performance.

This might help us understand how Black presence within white structures of dancemaking can fit uneasily at times. When artists are unwilling or unable to acknowledge how our various journeys toward collaboration emerge from any number of social dissonances, choreography can perhaps 'seem wrong' for some interpreters, while seeming 'just fine' for others. Thinking of the body as a site of place can remind us that our histories compel our gestures, in and through choreographic tasks and physical expertise.

### Violences of Scrutiny

Thinking about how the Black body arrives in contemporary performance raises our shared sense of how we see each the other. And then, another aspect of Africanist aesthetics complicates matters across cultural formations yet again: the emphasis on competition as a form of aesthetic worldmaking. Black performance flourishes in competitive formations, each artist challenging another in the open space of a circular cipher. This competitive edge is entirely friendly and serious at once and determines how jazz music developed from 'cutting contests' that pitted musicians against each other under the attention of the witnessing audience. Competition fed the foundation of tap dance, developed in New York City as a form of battle practised in public venues and judged for accuracy, speed,

and inventiveness. Vogue and breaking each emerged as competitive forms practised in tight group formations; contemporary modes of Black dance including krumping, clowning, j-setting, and turfing all rise in relation to audience and designated judging that assigns a temporary victory to one dancer or team and then another.

This competitive streak derives from an Africanist imperative to demonstrate imaginative wit in any creative address from artist to witness. Wit is confirmed by audience reception; judging wit for elegance of design or audacity of impulse makes perfect sense as we try to understand the broad appeal of Black performance as a fizzy intellectually-grounded creative action. Jazz musicians and house music djs each bring unexpected musics near each other to create breathing improvisatory assemblies that compel audiences to feel. Rappers and tap dancers fire off rhythmic volleys in counterpoise to offerings by competitors, whether in live 'battle' formations or in the space of imaginary skirmishes. Creative competition undergirds how performance acts as a strengthening agent for Black people: preparation for battle through danced gesture or potent turns of phrase helps young people gain confidence to cope with an anti-Black world.

*Creative competition undergirds how performance acts as a strengthening agent for Black people: preparation for battle through danced gesture or potent turns of phrase helps young people gain confidence to cope with an anti-Black world.*

And the mainstream 'white' worlds of contemporary performance can surely feel anti-Black to many of us, whether we claim Black, Indigenous, Latine, Asian, or White identities. As Africanist aesthetics encourage us to compete in order to define and enhance genres of Black performance, our strained social relations force us into presumptive logics and asymmetrical relations of power and privilege. We tend to see each other too much and not enough simultaneously, riding difference as a way to assume narrow singularities of identity. We all might do better. We all might recognise that as Blackness arrives, it comes with entanglements of place, disability, sexuality, religion, gender, class, age, and body size. At least. We are each and all diverse within any of these identity politics, and we vary in our own judgements of our selves all along the way. Seeing Blackness as a singularity, or Black artists as capable of only one thing diminishes us all. Our location in Blackness is infinite, and our judgements towards that expanse deserve the mercy of elaboration that constitutes compelling performance.