



dear alvin

Where to begin? So much has changed since the time when we never met, LOL. You had already left this earthly plane when I began thinking about your work carefully, in order to produce an academic study and a book—and a life in dance, TBH. Your presence has never wavered though, for me or some 8.5 million New Yorkers who see your name each year throughout the boroughs, as they wonder what culture might look like. It's funny, you created the gathering pool for strangers to imagine dance and excellence as something available through our Black presence in its rampant diversity. You did that, and it still endures, and that is why I write to you now, for this exhibition catalogue, and with you too, I guess, to wonder with the reversionings and the shifts and the shittiness of so much of it now. And, Alvin, it did get a lot shittier than many of us thought it could . . .

Oh, Alvin, you created an event horizon—an open summation that spills outward toward any manner of Black possibility realized through embodied gesture. None of us working in dance or Black visual cultures or maybe even music moves without relationship to what you created, as strange as that surely sounds. We all belong to you somehow; we are among your edges and your legacies as people who wonder about dance. We think of you and the most famous images of your form from the 1960s onward: beautiful of body and an unflappable integrity of commitment to give dance back to the people. **We people.** Maybe this is the event horizon for professional artistry: to create structures that encourage people to see themselves among the movingness of dance. We might not want this all the time; sometimes we want to see otherworldly visions of sylphs and sirens or lockstep J-sette. But you reminded us to look for ourselves on the stage; our families and the stories we heard somehow made manifest through dancing. You never wavered in your belief in this, and your resolve proved right through all the ridiculousnesses that continue. You believed in Black people, and here we are, keepin' on keepin' on.

Alvin, we never met, but I'm one of those queer kids from the Midwest, a fluorescent-beige gay Black boy who learned to love dance after seeing your company on tour. We are legion, of course, and you believed in us, placing us and our desires front and center in your operations and your creations. Gay Black boys loving our mothers. Fuck, you believed in your mother the way we all have to think twice or three times before we do a misdeed she won't like. She had all those hesitations that church life brings forward for us queers and the suspicion that God don't like gay. She was strong, in the ways that Black femmes

always seem to move way beyond the possible to make space for us. It surely isn't fair that they bear so much pressure no matter what. Your mother, Lula Cooper (née Cliff, of course, of course), told us that her grandfather was a white man from Washington state. That's how our Blackness moves, through all manner of combinatory formations, desired or not; your great-grandfather, though, cared for his Black family in some ways. This probably helped your mother teach you not to race-hate even when that would be the obvious response to white supremacy. She made a way for you to become you and committed to a multiracial assembly. You never forgot her or denied her place in your imagination. We both know that being gay means thinking about Mama in a certain sort of way; she just knows so much more than the other dolls and she belongs to *us* somehow. So, when your mother famously slapped you backstage for wearing makeup and something like *prancing onstage*, you forgave her and brought her closer in some ways. We gay sons try to do this; we forgive because we're trying to fit in when we know that our queerness pushes us out, at least a little bit. Maybe this is an edge of you, your gay essence, but being gay reminds us all the time that it's not an edge but a center of daily desire to be mitigated and explored with caution. Caution, that we don't disappoint Mother. Well, maybe just not *too* much . . .

Alvin, you made a dozen beautiful dances. We should all be so lucky, we who slog away in the studio and try to align ambition and desire to movement and music and design. You made many more works than that dozen, of course, but these twelve or so capture my imagination whenever I hear their music or think of their performances. A dozen, then: *Night Creature*, *Cry*, *The Lark Ascending*, *Quintet*, *Survivors*, *The River*, *Pas de Duke*, *Memoria*, *Blues Suite*, *Masekela Langage*, *Hidden Rites*, and of course, *Revelations*. In some ways, I understand how you did it. You worked with the music as your companion in creating the structure for dancing; loving the blues or gospel music or the spirituals in a terrific arrangement, or Laura Nyro or Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach or Ralph Vaughan Williams. Your great musical taste: sophisticated and relatable at once, now available to anyone with an internet connection and the patience to listen along with Duke Ellington or Keith Jarrett. You allowed music to guide your creations, and the notebooks that we found after you passed offer glimpses of how you thought with the musical structures. Music catapulting us toward destiny, always; and when the music was "just okay," your dance was a little bit better than that somehow. Today only a few choreographers work with music as the guiding light for performance in this way; it has to do with copyright and royalty rates and control and the ability to edit the sounds and transform them somehow. It's all good; it's just how things are now. But we can depend on your dances to allow us to hear and feel the music you've chosen in all its affective evidentiary. It's an important reliability that you brought to the theater. In your dances, the music *means*, and respecting it allows us to grow collectively . . .

Alvin, you hit your full stride right when US Black culture turned to hip-hop. That must've smarted for you a lot; seeing the Black world turn its attentions to music and dance that didn't need a concert stage but thrived in nightclubs, basements, street corners. Early hip-hop changed how we thought about dance and expertise in Black gesture, rendering modern dance and its descendants old-fashioned. By then, you had made a school and method for helping us move into careers as professional artists, and to explore concert dance as a way to express aspects of Black life. But hip-hop told us all something else about being Black and young and embedded in global capital; it unleashed political possibility in a way that museums and opera houses never could. You watched that happen, but you weren't here long enough to witness how some artists eventually made space within your dance company to allow for house, disco, and hip-hop to land on your stages. OMG, you would so love Rennie and the things that Kyle and Ron K. have made for the company. Still, hip-hop moves with a lurch through the concert hall: some publics resist it because its politics are obvious even when they seem to be only the noise of sonic dissent. But Black worlds without hip-hop are unimaginable now, so its gestures arrive in fragments everywhere you were and in many of the dances you made, performed now by artists who have grown up entirely imbricated in this culture. I wonder what dances you would make now. You made a funk-disco dance at the very end of your career, but I don't think you cared for it much, and WIGIG . . .

assault; in the last decade, we went through a long-delayed reckoning that finally shifted the ability of a dance company to operate in hierarchical lockstep. This also means that dance companies don't hold a general appeal for many young dancers; I mean, not every artist wants to be told what to do and how to do it. You worked outside of that model, even as you did "make dances"; you coordinated the vision of music and lighting and design and casting and the moves and movement of people on the stage, often in elaboration of what you remembered from the Lester Horton studio. You also tried to allow the interpretive artists—the dancers—to be some version of themselves inside your dances, encouraging us to extend and stretch the material toward portrayals that made sense to each of us along the way. So, over time, the actual materials of the dances change. Tempos become faster, more turns are added, emphases alter. Your method, which is entirely Black, demands that the dancers *interpret* the movement; it's never enough to just "do the steps." You've gotta feel it, care for it, wonder with it, design its engagement. **Aileydancers**, as we call them these days, figure out how to craft performance and a life as an artist because of the structures of your choreography. But that vision of a company is generally gone for most folk. Somehow, THE AILEY stands as a singularity of sorts, an actual dance company that employs dozens of artists for a consistent itinerary of performances throughout the year. You know, your company still performs more than any other in terms of actual dance engagements. Hard work ain't no stranger here . . .

Alvin, by now, most dance artists are engaged in *projects*. It's a weird sort of structure, TBH; we gather to make a thing with rehearsals and preparation stretching across several years. We focus on a few ideas and build out discrete worlds of dance theater performed in hour-long creations. This is the standard for "interesting" dance now, a certain specialization that invites the audience to think together through the exploration of ideas. Some of us focus on Black femme living and trauma; some of us focus on Igbo and candomblé spiritual practices; many of us focus on queer possibilities. These performances are smaller-scale than the things you made, and they don't try to *be for everyone*, in that often-quoted way you said that dance could be. I'm talking specifically about dances for Black adults, though; for the children, we still go to Debbie Allen's show and school recitals, and we watch reality dance competitions on television. And we go to see the Ailey company, when we can afford it. It got really expensive, as you always knew it would. The opera houses and large stages where your company performs now aren't always so welcoming to those of us struggling with the rent and getting the kids to school. But when we can afford it, we go see your Ailey people in order to *feel*. Alvin, I think that's a *project* too; this dancing out ways to *feel* that get shared with an audience in your work. SMH. It's confusing, but this idea of relatable dance that encourages us to *feel* among one another is not considered to be valuable or necessary culture by some social elites. The *projects* that traffic in more obscure formations are what we usually see in museums and live-art dance theaters. Of course, I think there's room for all of it, for the familiar and the strange, if we could manage to recognize our different ways of being in the world and their amazings . . .

You operated as a RACE MAN, something we don't even have anymore, and something lots of people can't even imagine. You did things that could help *glorify the race* and move a moral compass toward an obvious inevitable triumph of Black being-in-motion. That's shitass hard work, of course, forcing people to acknowledge something obvious about our collective Black concern for embodied artistry and performance. Our music and dance run this world, and you knew that all along, but you held yourself back so that the race could move forward. We don't even call Black a race anymore all the time; being post-racial nowadays, we acknowledge our mixedness as often as not. Still, lots of us just plain Black, and that's cool. If you want to be a race, there's more of them to pick from now. But you had only one race to join, and you stayed in even when it wasn't convenient at all (as race seldom tends to be). Because that sort of thing has disappeared now—there's not even an Oprah anymore, not really—it's nearly impossible to understand what that was. An actual commitment to Black people whom you would never meet or know, most of us struggling just to get through the bullshit day? Yah, we don't have that anymore; it's just not available . . .

Watching your dances again and again, I think, man, you loved the ladies. I know it wasn't a playa mentality you were chasing, like some of the other guy choreographers of your

day, LOL; it was more like, you respected these femmes and wanted them to lead us forward. Makes sense, and it also managed to keep the dudes coming into the room, these fine Black women dancing like you can't believe. The women work hard in your dances, even if the guys usually steal the spotlight. So many of the women who have interpreted your *Cry* tailor-made for the original OG Judith Jamison: Donna Wood, Briana Reed, Barbara Pounce, Debora Chase-Hicks, Nasha Thomas, Dwana Adiaha Smallwood, Bahiyah Sayyed-Gaines, Renee Robinson, Deborah Manning, Linda-Denise Evans, Linda Celeste Sims, Jacqueline Green, Constance Stamatiou, Jacquelin Harris, so many more. It's totally unfair to make a list when so many must be left off; there are so many, many more . . . Exquisite performances each unlike the others. To consider how the women work in your dances, all we have to do is watch "Fix Me, Jesus" or "Wade in the Water" or "The Day Is Past and Gone" from *Rev*, and we get it: the femmes guide, protect, care, decide. You didn't make winsomes who need someone else to walk, turn, or balance; you showed us again and again that femme forward is the only Black way. TY4that.

But, Alvin, the queer space is the most important space that you cultivated, even if it remains fairly closeted. You had lesbians and gays in your company from the beginning, and you brought in the queers from the start. Why wouldn't you have? We gain by proximity and being near one another allows us to know something more than we thought before. Meaning, by centering the gays in the large company operations, you created a space that would not disavow our rampant same-sex desire as it led us to the dance classes, to the auditions and performances, to the bathhouses and "women's-only" soirees. We gays always have pride of place in Ailey, even if we don't trumpet it too loudly, lest some Adam Clayton Powell sense of propriety derails your company's preeminence. Bayard Rustin had to be on the sidelines, and you opted to keep yourself straight enough for the normativities that were funding large-scale culture in the 1960s. But you never stopped loving us and our loving, and the queer marquee-stars of Ailey are legendary. WAP as we want to be, telling the essential stories of Black creativity on big-ass opera-house stages. Yaaaaaaasssssssss.

But then, it's probably this closeted respectability that turns some of the too-cool afro-fools away from Ailey operations. It's too bad, of course, that we have to *turn to you* now, as if you weren't doing your work all along. For you, believing in dance meant believing in Black people moving, and people gotta move; our movements are magnificent. Other artists wonder through variations of obscurity or critical theory, but you rendered the cosmos with a plié and a shoulder roll, a tilt and a turn with a contraction. One example I'm thinking of is from the beginning of *Memoria*, the work you made in a rush of emotion to remember your white dance-party girlfriend-confidante Joyce Trisler. *To the sound of quiet, thought-ridden piano arpeggios supported by a bed of strings trembling in an ambivalent dissonance, two women dance together, mirroring each other and consecrating the ground below with fluttering gestures of hands passing up and down the body. And then, a striking image of mutual support: one woman in a deep penché arabesque, the other in a high-extension side balance. Each supporting the other; an unexpected held pose that suggests a place of momentary rest activated by the connection between the two women.* In this brief moment, we witness femmes caring gorgeously, one for the other. This lasts a second at most. And it can last forever in our memory. How could we all not value that possibility in dance on a stage? Your method as a choreographer is infinitely relatable even when people think they want something else. There's nothing like witnessing Black excellence no matter its container; only a fool would deny the cumulative power of Ailey. Still, we don't all pay attention all the time, it's true.

Alvin, you never got to live out loud as a gay man in a loving public relationship, in the ways we try to now. Today it's sort of possible to be gay, queer, non-binary, trans, or figuring-it-all-out in public on the socials and still be holding up some big old arts institution. You didn't get that opportunity though, and you had to live in a terrible shadow all the time, barely supported when you did find someone to love or become infatuated with. I saw those photographs of you in the archive years ago, of that super-handsome white guy you hung out with when you two were smoking hot and young. Weren't we all smoking hot just because we were young, somehow? Anyway, he has kind eyes and a great body in those

pictures; a few times some of the OGs told me a little bit about you and him, and how you were able to soften some when you had each other's gaze. That was before everything blew up completely, though, toward THE AILEY, when it was still a fairly itinerant, small dance company in the early 1960s. He was a good-looking foil for you, and I vaguely recall one snapshot with the two of you, probably on a beach. Maybe I'm inventing that part because I wanted it so much for you. Later, when the newspapers reported on your calling out to the young man ¿Abdullah? in a Manhattan building, near the end of your life, we were all super sad that your gayness had been turned tawdry in public without the balancing narratives of respect and reconciliation. You never got to be gay or queer or even homosexual from THE AILEY point of view, which is still a terrible thing. Fuck, by now even the POPE is willing to bless same-sex relationships; shit has changed. I'm really sorry you missed this moment—well, at least that part of this moment. . . .

Alvin, so much of the dance you made yearns to solve fragments of time in life. Movements that stir the air somehow, making it different than it was. Like booze, I guess. God, we like our stuff, don't we? The cocaine, the Molly, the oxy, and the shrooms, the sex and the Sunday service, the dancing all night. The bad relationships and the fighting, the petty disavowals and dismissals, the jealousies and the hurt of feelings overlooked. Sex with strangers destined to always stay strangers. We love our stuff; it keeps us going. It helps us recognize ourselves within the chaos. You staged this in your dances sometimes: the abusive power relationships that melt into tender embraces; the literal shooting up junk before dancing into an otherworld. It's really hard to be a *public Negro* and not need some sort of addiction to get through the week; the pressures are just beyond the beyond. It's probably part of why there are so few "race people" now; it's just too much work, and now there are more Black people on the planet anyway so maybe we can share the load. No one has to be an Alvin Ailey anymore, happily, and we're willing to give our Beyoncé a year or two out of the spotlight. But the pressure still lands on whoever is in the driver's seat, we know that, and we try to care as a group toward that responsibility as best we can. We're not very good at it though, and we left you out to dry in some ways. I hope we can do better caring for future leaders of your amazing company; supporting them so that they don't overwork. Work is another addiction fed by the marketplace, and none of us seems to know how to get beyond that. . . .

And then, some dance critics won't give up on trying to hold down your ambition and achievement; their musings on what makes Black art insufficient spill into how too many people think about our creativity. It's surely too bad that ideas move in these ways, but they do. As some warn that your imagination was too small, they prove again and again that they know nothing of how artistry spreads. It matters beyond measure that space emerges for the banal, for the magnificent, for the entirely expected and preordained, for the experimental, and for the exceptional. Of course, a celebration of Mary Lou Williams or a demonstration of training techniques turned into a dance phrase; in time, an entire dance of continual motion will lead us forward to the destinies of exquisite Black theater. While critics get caught up on the bumps in the road, we artists understand the long haul, past the slave ships and the auction block, past Congo Square and the Civil War, past the Summer of Soul and the eternal Black uprisings screaming for justice. Your vision arises as a balm, offering respite to the anti-Black weather. And yah, BAE.

And your belief in the spirit. Not Christian, but *spirit*; the thing that can happen when we are encouraged to dance and witness beyond the form. You helped us be with spirit as we performed in concert dance, in *Revelations* of course but also in moments in most of your works. The moments in the choreography when you encourage us to dance beyond the moment, the movement, the stage, the story: to dance into the unknown. Alvin, it's still hard for folk to acknowledge all that you built. It's a challenge to focus in on what makes *something incredibly important to so many people* valuable or interesting; it's easy to be dismissive and call it entertainment in opposition to thinking-in-motion. Today we make work about our impossible Black pasts, the inheritance gap, and the challenges of global capital and climate change, and we bring in cultural theorists to buoy our inventions. Alvin, there are so many Black cultural theorists now writing stupendous analyses of how none of it is working; we read their formations and wonder at the worlds they can help us build in dance. We try to make these worlds and sometimes we manage okay. But these works

are not usually sustainable or for the ages, in the way that your modern dances can be. You didn't have this twenty-first-century explosion in Black critical theory. You worked with what you had, and you worked with it well. It's hard to talk about how relationships between Black people matter when they are played out with clarity on a dance stage. It's hard to witness Black people agreeing about how to move, as we do nearly all the time in your dances and in the dances that your company stages. Well, that's hard only because we are so used to seeing Black people in turmoil, in trouble, in pain, in trauma. You had a different vision for us; one where we are magnificent and gorgeously capable among one another. The other Black choreographers of the 1960s and '70s agreed, and their work has mostly disappeared by now too. We're left with Black artists who demonstrate their discomfort at being in the public eye, which is fine of course; it's all fine and it's all whatever the moment needs. But see . . . well, there was this moment when young Black femmes (including the queers and queens, of course) focused in on Black Joy and Black Girl Magic, but your work was rarely thought about in those contexts. You patented that shit back in the day; Black Joy as a sovereignty, **moving with others** toward a goal of Black expression. SMH. Somehow you got relegated to the old school. Alvin, we need your art, danced with the understanding of its caring heart of exhilaration. To do that, and to witness its essences, we need to believe in Black *[queerfemme]* possibility, which has never been easy. As if Black Joy would be easy to maintain. You did that, of course. You maintained Black Joy as an aspect of professional artistry in dances that demonstrated how to work through the pain and come out on the other side. Your dances always end with the very necessary applause at the achievement of the dancing; the joy of calling forth recognition of embodied expertise. But then, times changed . . .

So now we have a museum show about you and your edges—how lucky is that? It's an opportunity to put some more sweet into the sauce and invite people who never gave you a second thought the chance to do better. Act like you know: there are so many reasons THE AILEY continues while others fall off. It's about Black excellence, yes, but also about your ability to push Black Dance beyond any uncanny valley of critical obscurity to the place where dancing continually matters. Doing that populist work, you paid the price of the ticket for us all. You know, that thing Jimmy Baldwin wrote about—the price of the ticket as the demand for a song to justify our shared captivity in the agon of race. Alvin, you took it to another level, and made our dancing capacity *obvious*, for all to witness. The clarity of your approach stuns us, even now, when some young Blax can be quick to judge and accuse the elders of having been facile and too easily understood. We all become captive to the thinking that obscurity is better than clarity, forgetting that joy in motion holds a source code of collective futurity as an aspect of shared critical dissatisfaction. We might all be captive in an inability to recognize Black dance as its own end, without need for justification or elaboration or revision. Huh. Well, then. Let's see here. Alvin, what did you teach us?

We dance because whyTF wouldn't we? There are no limits to what a body in motion can do; our great distinction is to believe in that and to exercise that on the daily in pretty much every context there could ever be. We dance because we believe in dance and its multiplicities; we don't need others to explain to us why the dancing matters; we understand this on a cellular level. Truly. We. Get. It. *getit getit getit!*

But it's all okay; it gives me this chance to think toward you and rant and lament and wonder. None of that maybe from my life now decidedly in the middle. My little life in dance, also built on the bridge of your underappreciated back. I've gained so very much in the world from my willingness to care about your work and by extension my fantasy idea of you. We can all be this lucky, expressing gratitude toward you and holding up the sturdy vision of Black excellence that you propose.

Okay, so Alvin, here's a proper ending to a commissioned essay about you for a catalogue about your edges:

OF COURSE, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater belongs in a museum, as well as

on the stage and even in the streets. The 1988 film *Jazz City* featured Ailey dancers performing his choreography around New York, with *Cry* performed on a street in Harlem; the workingmen of *Blues Suite* dancing underneath a bridge to Brooklyn; the moves of *Night Creature* realized in a nightclub; the pas de deux of *Survivors* worked through in a prison; and *Revelations* offered up in a church sanctuary. Ailey's organization was able to do that because Ailey had crafted something so incredibly rare: a site of dance where Blackness can flourish toward its own creative ends, animated by the edgy gestures of gays and queers and lesbians and straights, all of us concerned with telling compelling stories of Black life.

But Alvin, here's what I really want to say to you:

I wonder how you are. I wonder if you would recognize yourself today. I wonder if you would make dances now. I wonder if you would rather be in public love and fucking on the daily. I wonder if you would become Catholic or move to Colombia—anything to get out of the USA. I wonder if you would rest more. I wonder if you would tell people how tired you are all the time. I wonder if you would write it all down, if you had the time and the place to think it all through. I wonder if you could be any more beautiful to me.

yours, in motion,

tommy