



The **Bloomsbury Handbook** of  
**DANCE AND  
PHILOSOPHY**

Edited by **Rebecca Farinas** and **Julie Van Camp**

B L O O M S B U R Y

# THE BLOOMSBURY HANDBOOK OF DANCE AND PHILOSOPHY

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*Edited by Rebecca L Farinas and Julie C. Van Camp*

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*To Selma Jeanne Cohen (1920–2005), the pioneer in philosophy of  
dance who inspired us all*

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# Resisting the Universal: Black Dance, Aesthetics, and the Afterlives of Slavery

THOMAS F. DEFRANTZ

Twenty-first-century philosophies of African American dance emerge within the rhetorics of the afterlives of slavery: concerned with the possibilities of resistant space amid ever-expanding systems of white domination. African American dance arrives in relationship to a black commons; a creative space of potential deliverance produced through animated engagement with a continuity among musical and danced gesture. This chapter explores afropessimism as an ontological ground for the production of Black dance, defined here as corporeal response to the historical fact of African American disavowal. A consideration of choreography by Ulysses Dove (1947–1996) offers theatrical examples of resistant strains of Black expressivity within stage dance that speaks to Black American concerns of personhood, communal interaction, and spiritual wellness.

Black aesthetics regularly refer to a world not of our own making, but constantly and inexorably in motion. The 2017 English language publication of Achille Mbembe's magisterial *Critique of Black Reason* provides a scaffolding for considering terms of encounter for Black people in public spaces. Mbembe offers up slavery, apartheid, and colonialism as the grounding devices that collude toward the production of Black subjectivity, a subjectivity necessarily constrained by relation to a disinterested whiteness empowered to disavow its very essence. Of course, *Black Reason*, like afropessimism, places "Black" at the center of a conversation, effectively enlivening its possibilities by focusing on the delay of an emancipated Black life; its continued non-arrival. In this line of reasoning, when Black subjectivity comes forth, it materializes as a result of forces and fields rarely concerned with the lives and loves of Black people, or our shared creative aesthetic imperatives.

Afropessimist thought tends to privilege the non-arrival of an enlivened Black subjectivity, in contexts of the United States, European immigration, and African sovereignties (slavery, apartheid, colonialism). In the United States, "birther" claims against President Barack Obama emphasized an impossibility of Black citizenry even to an eminently accomplished scholar and politician. Africans seeking to move to Europe are routinely cordoned into refugee camps, if they are not turned back at the borders of presumably "white" nations; when allowed entrance, Black people are termed refugees, rather than potential immigrants, and typically fail to exceed that status. Political unrest in the (somewhat) post-colonial

nations of the African continent continually place those states in an administrative limbo, denying Black people opportunities to participate, meaningfully, in a global economy tied to resources developed there.

Mbembe's grim theorization establishes an ontological ground for subjectivity cast in impossibilities and contingencies. Black life, like bare (white) life, arrives entangled within political exigencies that exceed concerns of Black possibility, or more importantly, Black differentiation that might undergird any rendering of the complexities of experience in time. Black life emerges as the source code for a desperate alterity, one that is not of its own making but entirely of the ongoing global social order.

To dance inside this container is to engage the afterlives of slavery as the onto-poetic ground of creation. An ontological dimension of non-arrival and disavowal; a poesis of creativity cast in contexts that support, and even nurture, this disavowal. A poetic structure of being bound up by its particular contexts of dissemblance. In this formation, theatrical dance arrives indebted and responsive to, and inevitably formed by, slavery/apartheid/colonialism as an evidentiary vibration of social expression. Dancing extends the dialectics of a reason formed by subjugation and exclusion, at times proving a resistant physicality or embracing a social memory through embodied practices. The whole of dancing, though, is encountered through the machinations of modernism born of chattel slavery.

In this, we begin in the ruins of afro-pessimism that seem to offer their own totalizing narratives. Of course, philosophy and dance emerge in relationship to complex structures of social engagement. It bears stating that no single philosophical structure can speak to all forms of dance, dancers, or their witnessing publics simultaneously. We might also note that in this line of reasoning, a Black point of philosophical view will inevitably be positioned as a constructed relativity, one brought into being via white supremacy and white-centered traditions of political thought that center whiteness as normative.

It matters that Mbembe's arguments suggest a certain relativity for Black aesthetics needing to be in relation to European systems of aesthetic understandings in order to exist. Indeed, dance as a practice inevitably meets its translation into language through philosophical systems that value individuation and a possible separation of people into subjects, some of whom dance better than others. To consider dance practice within Eurocentric models of philosophical address will inevitably be to consider Black people's dancing within a framework of afropessimism and the afterlives of slavery. But we will also wonder at a possibility to center Black aesthetics as of their own awareness and volition, headed toward our own enlightenments, if you will. In this chapter, I want to try to center Black performance within its own aesthetic structures, not exclusively as alterity, but as foundation for imaging an aesthetic world-making. What could it mean to propose modes of address that allow Africanist aesthetics to flourish among audiences committed to aesthetic invention that tilt toward Black possibility, coherence, and even salvation? What if those aesthetics are bound up with afro-pessimist thought?

If Mbembe allows us a place from which to begin considering terms of Black dance and aesthetics, how then might we see work on a twenty-first-century concert dance stage? What aesthetic devices would amplify the turn toward African humanity, borne out by Mbembe's critique? Our "seeing" of dance on stages will necessarily come in response to a framework that acknowledges a purposeful looking, one willing and able to imagine the fact of dancing in public as being bound up with circumstances that produce a Black subjectivity that extends far beyond the stage lights.

## ULYSSES DOVE AND THE BLACK-CENTERED HUMANITY

The nagging question continues—how can we recognize Black possibility in terms of aesthetic invention? If a question of “the human” continues to be addressed in the theoretical formation of the [white] Anthropocene, then a question of Black creativity continues toward a difficult counternarrative of non-human or non-being that arrives outside of Western aesthetic concerns. And yet: Black people do make ballets; dances that suggest a Black-centered humanity born of the afterlives of slavery and imagining toward a speculative social commons.

The consummate creativities of works by choreographer Ulysses Dove offer instructive example of how Black American artists embrace the difficult space of making conceptually-inflected dance where dance embedded within Black aesthetics has not been allowed. Dove began dance study while a pre-medical student at Howard University, and graduated with a dance degree in 1970 from Bennington College. In New York, he danced with several white artists—Merce Cunningham company, Mary Anthony, Pearl Lang, and Anna Sokolow—before joining the Black-inflected Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1973. He quickly rose to the rank of principal dancer acclaimed for his commanding presence, bright clarity of movement, and truthful dramatic intensity. He turned to choreography at Ailey’s urging, and created the 1980 solo “Inside” for star dancer Judith Jamison. He left the Ailey company that year to begin a significant freelance career in ballet, choreographing dances marked by relentless speed, violent force, and daring eroticism for the Basel Ballet, Swedish Cullberg Ballet, Dutch National Ballet, London Festival Ballet, American Ballet Theater, New York City Ballet, and Groupe de Recherche Choreographique de l’Opéra de Paris where he spent three years as assistant director.

Dove’s dances explore the physical ends of speed and gestural attack. In many cases, his works depict the relationships among a group of people bound together by pre-existing circumstances but dancing alongside each other in search of a shifting relationality to be solved by movement. His works for the Ailey company, including *Bad Blood* (1984), *Vespers* (originally created for the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, 1986), and *Episodes* (1987), each detail a community in transition and fraying at its edges, searching for a social order among shifting arrangements of individuals, duos, and groups. His works explore a patently queer sort of sociality, peppered with unusual bouts of intense movement and unexpected physical accents.

*Dancing on the Front Porch of Heaven* (1993), subtitled “Odes to Love and Loss,” deserves careful examination here. Set to composer Arvo Pärt’s *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten*, the dance for six couples clad in white unitards bristles with an elegaic, emotional intensity. A descriptive analysis may help us understand a particular experience of the dance. The work begins in silence, as six dancers—three men and three women—rush on from an engulfing dark void toward a small pool of white light at its center. They stop at attention, carefully spread in a symmetrical circle at the edges of the light. They thrust their feet apart as one, and then grab hands with heads bowed, never looking toward each other. Stepping to the side, they perform an obeisance of consecration, curving through a fanciful curtsy and bow toward the group, the ground, and the skies. They gesture as a group by sex, with men arching backwards first, followed by women, and then all six, finally looking toward each other in the circle, rising upward on their toes and opening their arms gently, as in tribute to their assembly.

The dance continues as a series of short forays among small orderings of people. A duet for a man and woman is interrupted briefly by incursions of the other women, each

of whom briefly partner the man. They dance together as a quartet, in a homage to legends of Apollo and the Muses, famously depicted in dance by George Balanchine in an eponymously titled ballet of 1928. The work is filled with movement inventions rarely seen in contemporary ballet: unaccompanied fouetté turns for a woman that evolve into a turning *développé à la seconde*; *bourées* performed in wide positionings with legs splayed open; a mysterious rocking, side to side gesture by a woman kneeling on the floor adjacent to her male partner. The whole is performed with a brittle severity, with physical accents marking the beginning and ending of each bit of movement.

After a restatement of the opening gestures in a circle by the whole group, this quartet is followed by a duet for the other two male dancers (Plate 8). Their same-sex duet arrives with an intimate tenderness and physicality. The men touch each other with forceful care, hands massaging torsos with a visible physical effort; lifts and balances executed so that one man is completely held and supported by the other; at one point, moving slowly as one toward the ground until they arrive at the same time with legs splayed. They perform holds and balances that had been done by a man and woman in the first section; the duet reveals intimacy among two men as commensurate to relations of man and woman.

In at least this aspect, Dove's choreography wonders at a possibility of an embodied, emotional connection that might be aligned with a tempered wellness in relationship. These first two sections suggest intimacy among partners, cast in heterosexual multiplicity or homosocial erotics. These relationships emerge among the watchful group, and the dance confirms the necessity of the group to create the space for the partnerships.

*Front Porch* encompasses a second section that demonstrates the distinct potentials of the individuals in short solo dancing, followed by forays in couples and trios. In an unusual creative flourish, Dove repeats the short musical selection by Pärt as the score for the second part of the work. Pärt's oeuvre has become especially popular for ballet choreographers who want to cast their creations within a yawning, inexorable constellation of overlapping sounds. The descending string orchestrations and tolling bell sounds construct a yearning, abject ineffable that fills the air of the theater, suspending a sonic notion of grieving and loss. Dove's repetition of Pärt's score suggests an on-goingness of lament into an open space without boundary; and the work ends well after the short musical score has concluded, with the interpreters walking in endless circles as lights fade. In one rendering, these sounds, and implicitly this dance, will continue as they have before and do now, into an unknowable future.

Because *Front Porch* arrives as an abstract meditation, without a concrete narrative, it is susceptible to a universalizing analysis, one that stabilizes a (white) analytic stance that focuses on what the bodies in motion seem to do on the stage. Indeed, the observations about Dove's dance above might be written by any researcher in dance curious about documenting the work and thinking out from its implications. Anyone working in dance and philosophy might notice the homosocial implications of the same-sex partnering; the open-ended sounds of Pärt's score, repeated; the implications of a funeral rite of some sort. But what could it mean to regard the choreography from a philosophic perspective entangled with the afterlives of slavery? How might we see *Front Porch*? What sorts of metaphoric turns might be suggested by the choreography and its dancing; the arrangement of light and sound offered up toward a Black *we* in an audience, we already committed to understanding Black aesthetic possibility?

Let us continue an analytic turn through two-part, twenty-minute ballet. Dove's choreography provides grounding for this discussion of Black dance, aesthetics, and resisting universalisms that too often force Black presences toward the sidelines of their

own inventions. To begin, we note the opening, and repeated, gestures of consecration that bring the dancers into a holistic circular formation to begin their collective labor. In this, *Front Porch* stages an encounter among people as the site of theatrical dance onstage. For the work to proceed, the dancers must agree to be alongside each other; the tight circle of artists confirms that this event will take place as an exploration that involves all six participants equally invested in its processes.

In this opening imagery, and its repetition, we feel both the honoring of a special moment of dancing, as well as a call for full participation by the group. Dance requires its invitation, and each of the onstage artists are called to place themselves into the line of scrutiny by the others. In this, the dance refers to an aesthetics of collective action that subvenes Africanist philosophic approach in the afterlives of slavery: the actions of the group surround and encompass the activities of individuals, with an important relationship of a person to the whole. Amid the ruinous disavowals of slavery, apartheid, and colonialism, Black aesthetics refer to a gathering notion of the largest group, inevitably unable to become aware of its totality or to represent itself fully. Performers consecrate the activity of performing through an agreement to refer to a larger, unknowable collective of Black creativity. This is, in part, what philosopher Fred Moten continues to refer to in his renderings of Black performance: a collective sensibility that circumscribes individual action.

In the third section, the dancers emerge from a dark void at the back of the stage, now coming toward us in the audience and dancing in direct relationship to our presence. In this, they begin as spirit guides or devotional witnesses, as if in attendance in the background of our assembly, and able to set our affairs in motion by their gestures. Because they move in relationship to us, so that we might see them and what they can do, their movements reassure us; they remind us that expertise matters, even amid the disavowals of social life. Each performer offers up a distinctive solo that demonstrates their expertise, honed toward their ability to perform unexpected balances, multiple turns, and difficult transitional material between movement phrases. In these sequences, they reveal themselves as individuals within a group dynamic, each able to contribute to a larger tapestry of social life. Their varied dancing for us confirms that care for the particularity of movement can produce a heightened state of being, shared among us by way of their carefully modulated gestures.

As each performer leaves the central spotlight, they move to small individual circles of light distributed symmetrically from the center point, cast across the stage space. Each performer walks slowly, clockwise, at the edge of their own lit area. Their movement reminds us of self-awareness and the need to do what needs to be done; gathering energy in reflection and preparing for the difficult battles to come. After a brief meeting for the group in the center spotlight, Dove's choreography suggests the impending battles, through solos and duets that arrive aggressively paced and difficult to perform. They dance as if they are screaming, railing against offstage systems of domination that might be somehow calmed by intensive, fast movements. Partnering work and a longish duet for a man and woman do not convey romance so much as shared warriorship. These are people ready to battle, and to support each other in the difficult times to come. Moving quickly, the group reforms in its circle, and after a fast obeisance toward each other, disperses to the six points of light.

As the work proceeds, we notice that Dove asks his collaborating dancers to move with an aggressive, forceful speed and physical attack throughout the work. The performance bristles with enlivened, energetic precision. This embodied vigorousness demonstrates an



PLATE 8. Pacific Northwest Ballet's Joshua Grant and William Lin-Yee in Ulysses Dove's *Dancing on the Front Porch of Heaven*. Photo: Lindsay Thomas.

aesthetic imperative to be palpably present in creative action; to reveal agility as an aspect of the performance and its emergence. We note that few ballet choreographies make such sustained demands for speed and palpable difficulty made manifest through performance. Dove's choreography pushes the dancers toward the ends of their capacity, as if to offer up their abilities to be monitored and witnessed by the group, while simultaneously preparing them for a world that will always ask for more than before.

In tracing this sort of aesthetic approach, we begin to see how choreographic tactics reveal philosophical conceptions of worlds in motion. To consider Dove's choreography from an aesthetic world framed by Mbembe's reckoning is to think of gesture in relation to process or possibility rather than to achievement or evidentiary demonstration. *Black Reason* blurs the contents of a theatrical dance toward their implications, beyond their fact. That we dance on a stage, in ballet slippers, demonstrates borrowing from a ruined historical encounter; one that allowed the creation of hierarchies that define ballet in terms of *prima* ballerina and *corps de ballet*. Dancing through ballet, we embody these presumptions of differences in ability and rank. But in *Front Porch* those differences are elided, and each dancer has an equivalent contribution to make to the whole of the encounter among each other, and the sharing outward toward an audience.

At the end of the work, the dancers move singly and separately, but rhythmically in step with each other. The final image of a slow, continuous movement that extends into the time after the dance suggests an on-going-ness of intention that must be maintained and performed by the people in order to survive. After having demonstrated the strength, resilience, anger, disappointment, and care for one another that arise throughout the ballet, this lingering motility confirms a powerful community in diaspora, ready to battle and maintain regard for one another even as they might be dispersed. The image resounds within Black aesthetic life as foundational to possibility and creativity: that there might be a palpable connection among us in diaspora, able to feel something of our extended kinship in motion and affiliation among.

*Front Porch* constituted an important commission for Dove near the end of his life. Called forth by the Royal Swedish Ballet, the work confirmed Dove's ability to move among ballet companies in the United States and in Europe, a feat that was unprecedented for Black choreographers before him and, regrettably, ever since. Remarkably, Dove had not studied ballet at any of the major conservatories of the world, nor had he performed in a classical company himself. His unlikely arrival as a celebrated choreographer spoke to an exceptionalism allowed him as a Black artist who seemed to work with relatable, "universal" themes. Group communion, expert ability in dancing, and the disappointments of love or relationship seem to be present in the choreography of *Porch*; as they are in other of Dove's works. These themes would presumably speak "to any" audience attending its performance.

But attending the work in relationship to the afterlives of slavery, we might understand a livelier assessment of performance as consecrated responsibility to the group, to an ancestral calling, and to a future-leaning conception of dancing as strategy for cultural continuity. These contents might not be lost on audiences versed in afro-pessimism or the everyday contours surrounding much of Black life. Attending to the work amid Africanist aesthetics built within a container of disavowal and deflected potentialities can reveal unexpected contours of the work's shape and achievement.

Surprisingly, the artists that Dove created the work with held no experiential relationship to Black life as Black people. They were all white dancers who likely knew little of how Africanist aesthetics supported and amplified Dove's choreographic choices.



They danced with a sort of generic passionate resolve, eager to complete the movements offered up to them to the best of their abilities. Of course, there may have been hints available to the interpreters. Within the intimacies of the male duet, the dancers may have understood their labor as strategically resisting a heteronormative presumption that surrounds state-sanctioned ballet. The ballerinas may have reveled in the opportunity to perform difficult movements as soloists, for example, proving their ability as they rise onto pointe again and again in increasingly unlikely sequences of balance and physical attack. But few of the dancers may have understood how their dancing narrated aspects of Africanist aesthetic worldviews in its ordering and deployment.

The surprises of Dove's invention include the places where he worked, and the collaborators that he was afforded and chose. Indeed, we might consider the encounter of Dove and his assistants in the ballet studios of Stockholm, Sweden, as essential agents in the crafting of this work. In the moments of creative compression that comprise the creation of professional artworks, Dove continually evaluated the abilities of the company structure and the dancers at hand to approach his own aesthetic imperatives. In this, *Front Porch* reveals far more than the contents of the finished work performed on stage. The dance and its creation emerge within a context that wondered at the unlikeliness of Dove's status as a ballet master.

*Front Porch* has been taken into the repertory of several ballet companies, including the Pacific Northwest Ballet, directed by former New York City Ballet principal Peter Boal, and the Dance Theater of Harlem (DTH), directed by former prima ballerina Virginia Johnson. It is in performances by DTH, however, that we sense a richness of interpretation that aligns the work with many of its aesthetic impulses. Artists of DTH might lean carefully into the acts of consecration and group solidarity that begin the work; they might revel in the opportunities to demonstrate their abilities within the frame of a group effort to honor the memories of those who have transitioned from life. And they will surely elaborate on the work's final gesture of movement in diaspora, connected to a central, mythical origin; now rent asunder, but recovered in this act of creative assembly.

It might be helpful to philosophically consider the performance of *Front Porch* by a company of African-diaspora ballet artists to be imbued with expansive layers of meaning and emotional valence for its interpreters as well as its attending audiences of African descent and those concerned with the rhetorics of Mbembe's proposition. Viewing the work through the prisms of the afterlives of slavery, we begin to understand the particular possibilities of Africanist aesthetic action. These actions surround Dove's ballet with competing agendas: as demonstration of colonial encounter that can be ruined and revived by Black excellence, and as creative exercise that fulfills—and exceeds—the need for diverting programming to fill out a mixed-bill program in a theater. While it remains entirely possible to reflect on *Front Porch* only in these latter terms, as a well-crafted, twenty-minute, contemporary ballet; we would do better to theorize through the work in terms of its relationships to Africanist aesthetics.

Dove's death from AIDS placed him among the most prominent of publicly discussed gay male Black dance artists. He followed his mentor, modern dance choreographer Alvin Ailey, who had passed away four years earlier, publicly diagnosed with a "rare blood ailment," a dyscrasia that would not be identified as AIDS for several years. The social fear that surround Black sexualities offered up for public consideration haunted Dove, Ailey, and multitudes of gay and queer Black men and women who worked as professional dance artists. In the early 1990s, several artists made works that mourned the gay men

who succumbed to HIV/AIDS, as potential genealogies of creative continuity were cut short by the disease and its spread.

The intimate, hands-on men's duet of *Front Porch* demonstrated a careful intimacy hewn within classical ballet technique but extended toward Dove's elaborations. Dancing, the men care for each other in a manner similar to how heterosexual partnerships are staged in the work. Dove placed this affirmation into the work assuredly, confident that the ballet could support its presence without tipping into the awkward space of politicized identity politics that hounded other choreographic inventions of the era. For example, Bill T. Jones' *Still/Here* (1994) famously launched a controversy among white critics who felt unprepared to consider the afterlives of slavery as a starting point for understanding how to make a theatrical work. Jones, like Dove, participates in Black aesthetics in his creative craft and point of view, regularly bringing audiences into worlds of dance circumscribed by political exchanges echoing the rhetorics of Mbembe's text. By now, we might understand how Black aesthetics regularly refer to a world not of our own making, but constantly and inexorably in motion.

Dove's work is subtitled "Odes to Love and Loss"; love as a possibility that might be shared in public, in intimacies laid bare by the stage. Loss, here, becomes an ongoing aspect of being in community; an expectation danced through, but not to be denied or avoided.

Dove wanted us to see his family and friends onstage. He was surely aware that the audiences for contemporary ballet rarely comprise many African diaspora people. Even at the celebrated Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the statistical presence of a Black audience arrives smaller than the larger international white audience for dance. In this reality, Dove and other Black choreographers understand that their work will be seen and assessed mostly by cultural outsiders inexperienced in Black aesthetic worldviews. More than this, these artists spend their professional lives structurally removed from Black life, which is rarely bound up with ballet as a way of life.

To tell stories resonant to Africanist aesthetics in the mode of contemporary ballet is to perform another violence of displacement, one that assumes a dissonance between form and content. Black love—bound up in the afterlives of slavery, and subjectivity circumscribed by slavery, colonialism, and apartheid—might rarely be the content to be danced through by professional artists on an opera house stage. These stories and terms of encounter might often be addressed in modern dance, in b-boying and tap dance; in modes of theatrical dance created within the crucibles of Black disavowal. In ballet though, which surely defines a stream of aesthetic awareness for philosophy and dance, the structure's form might overwhelm the possibility of a careful, communal Black affect, one that imagines a commons able to acknowledge its shared grief. Still Dove managed, in his several works for a diverse group of companies, to stage visions of his own family and friends, and his memories of their trace. These are the people who materialize in *Front Porch*, *Vespers*, and *Bad Blood* at least. Ballet could, for Dove, provide a means of expression that embraced the unstable but palpable groundings that Mbembe offers us, to create dancing in a place beyond place—Heaven—bound up with the front porches of so many Black families in the South of the United States, wondering whether the porch would still be theirs at daybreak. The Front Porch of Heaven—near but not of; welcoming from the outside, commemorating love and loss as intertwined aspects of Black humanity.

But ultimately, this rendering is not about reading biography into the terms of an abstract work. Rather it is the beginning of a process to align aesthetic values with the experiences of audiences who witness the work. Many of us—and more and more, with

things as they are and continue to be—see these performances in the context of global Black life: fugitive, disavowed, resilient, and unexpected in affect. Lively, or enlivened, at every possible moment, and especially when the affordance to dance ballet on a public stage might be offered. Evidentiary of a *black commons* in formation, a shared site that considers pasts of disavowal toward futures of public theatrical dancing valued in relationship to that past, Dancing at the end of possibility, on the outskirts of traditional conceptions of ballet-as-art, toward the concept of a collective *soul*. Black dance animates the ruins of colonial mistrust that produced the post-modern turn. Philosophy concerned with an expanded social possibility will inevitably become concerned, deeply, with the emergent terms of a Black social commons and Black life.