

thomas f.

The
Future
Histories

of Black
Dance

defrantz

Prologue

The dance began suddenly, with a jerk. A spasm, really. A surge of electrical impulse, forcing one thing to jostle into the next, surprising it with power, unsympathetic at first but then soothing through time. Settling into the inevitable. Change. A delta of difference. The way that impulse predicted movement::predicted feeling::engendered change::became dance.

The dance began with a jerk. A wrenching from one state to another; a push and a pull at the same time. This and that, not this or that. Both|and. Movement.

Shaping the change became the province of the dancer. The best dancers manipulated energy to generate motion; they managed the jerking impulses to render electrical variation as aesthetic gesture. Crafting time by shaping the impulses of the body. An alchemy of control and release; a willingness to change and care for the differences in posture, stance, gesture, rhythm. Always rhythm.

Succumbing to the rhythm, enlarging the meter, pounding and denying the beat, resisting its insistence, inhabiting its assumptive logic. Riding it, being with it, chasing it, leading it, following along. The rhythm : : an understanding of form within the jerk.

Edited by
Thomas F. DeFrantz and Annie-B Parson

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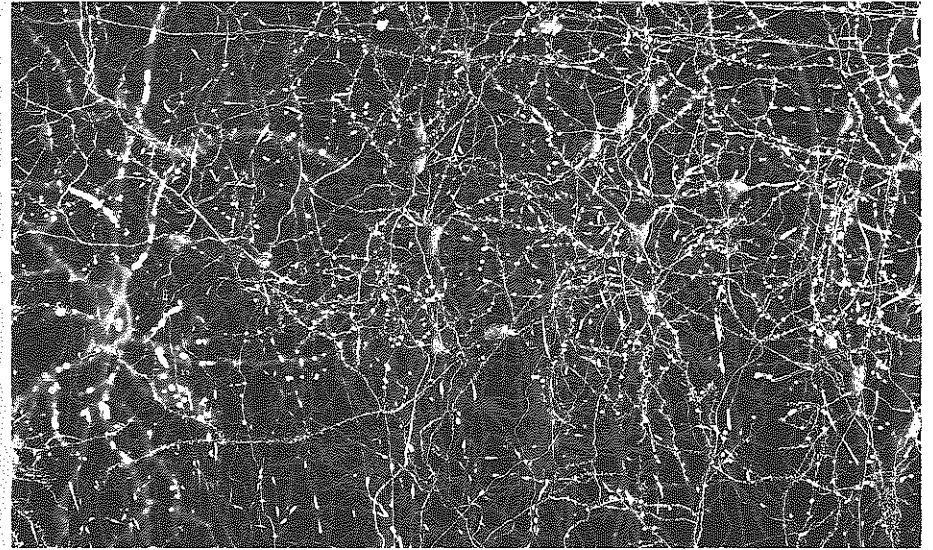
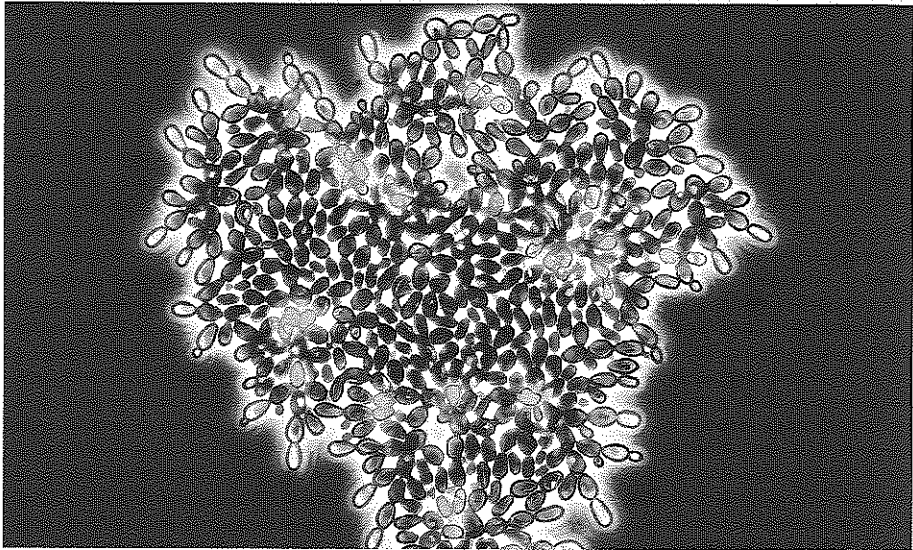
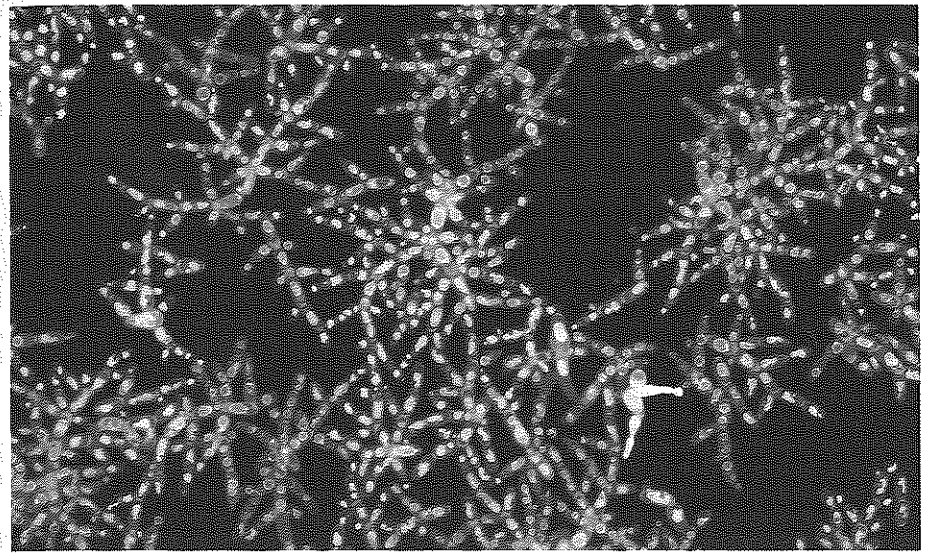
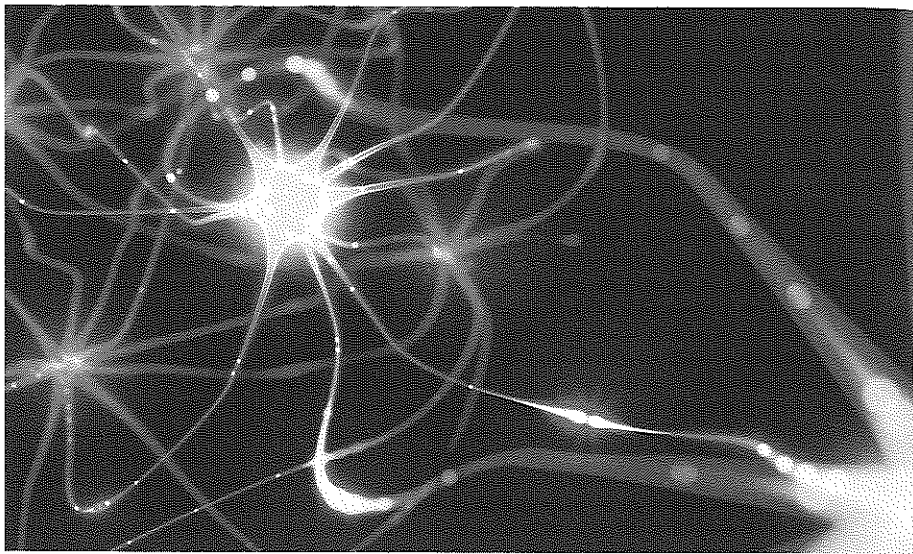
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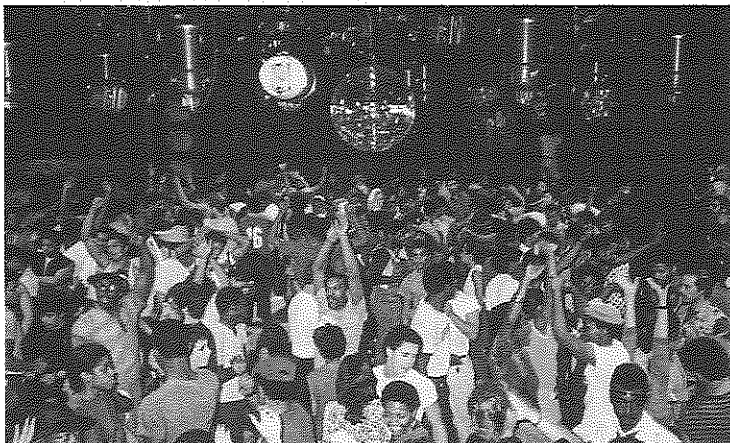
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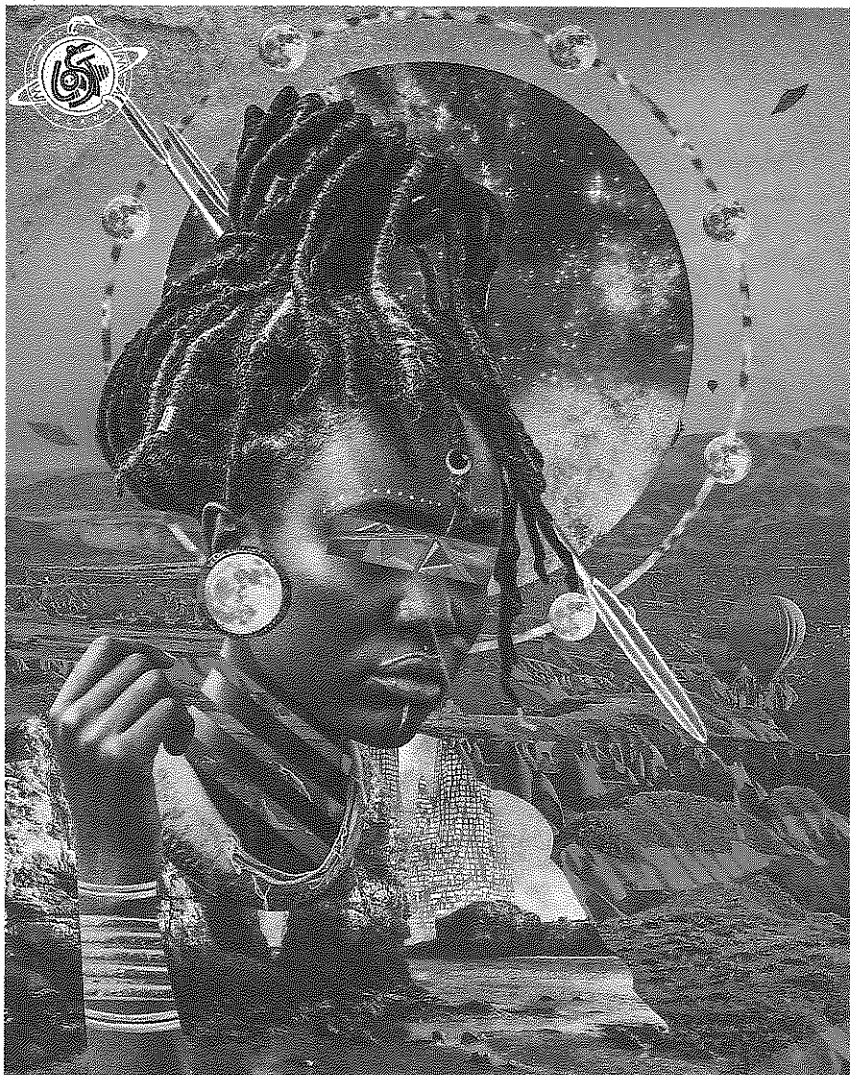
Several Millenia Later...

The electrical impulse that begat dance had been tamed to produce its contents. The flash of the future produced this telling of Black dance history.

**...in the Afrofuture,
dance instruction is a
solitary pursuit...**

TeleBrea Roth'astein waved her hand in front of the sensor pad to open the door of the classroom assigned to Arts and Culture 732.5: Black Social Dance. She needed to check the visual-imaging interfaces for her class, scheduled to meet for the first time that evening. TeleBrea was known by a global cohort of students to be a tough but approachable professor of indeterminate age who encouraged her students to understand Black dance as a capacity and strategy more than as a collection of dance forms or set of particular practices. Her interface sessions were smart and sweaty, a combination of discussion, provocation, integrated neural-system participation, and some very old-fashioned dancing. For tonight's session, she expected most of the fifteen hundred enrolled participants from the university and some eighty thousand witnesses, with five live-presence students coming in person to dance in the neural-system-participation classroom.

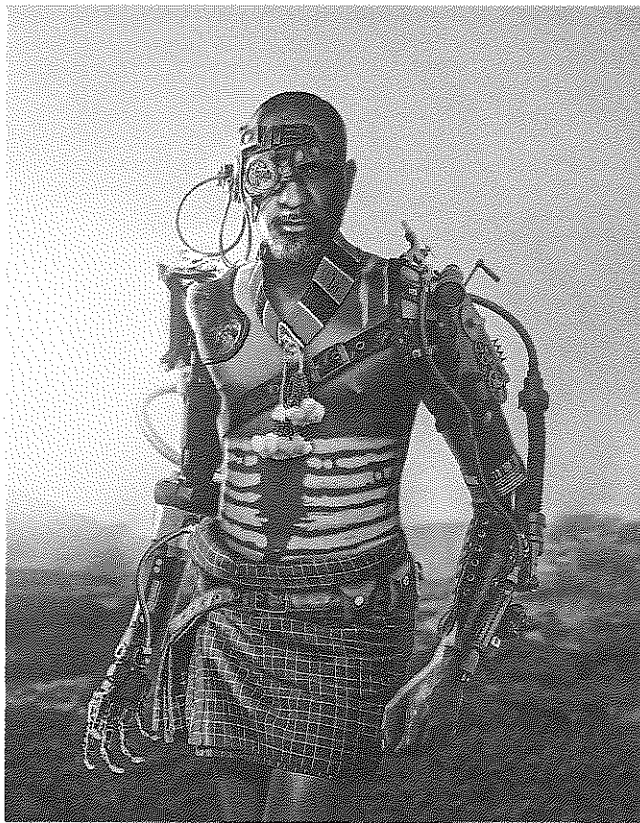
TeleBrea had been teaching at this private university for only a couple of years. Well, teaching in person, that is. Long ago, she had run a successful neural-distance dance academy of her own. The university had picked up the feed, broadcasting her teaching to its student network as an elective "physical activity." Two years ago, TeleBrea was asked to do on-site sessions. It was highly unusual for someone working in dance—in particular, Black social dance—to be invited to teach on campus. TeleBrea's participation vectors had gone from the twelve hundred she used to have in her broke-down home neuro-pulse network (which operated at a truly slow five million clicks per second) to this brave new hyperfast world of nearly one hundred thousand students



at a time plugged into a full neural interface (two billion responses per second). She liked working in these advanced, freshly outfitted facilities, where, with a tap of her temple processor, she could summon an IT-support team ready to troubleshoot any communication that went awry.

... in the future, dance classes are taught by way of distance neural interfaces as often as not ...

Honestly, though, TeleBrea didn't have much experience working with live students in the classroom. TeleBrea's home-teaching sessions had always been conducted without any students in proximity. The distance neuro-pulse students had tended to be awkwardly detached as they tried to perform the movements she demonstrated, even as their pulse devices guided their gestures via quick nagging electrical charges. Distance dance lessons had become popular when neural implants replaced wearable sensors. As dance teachers generated movement within the very bodies of their students, TeleBrea, like other industrious dance teachers, jumped onto the bandwagon of impulse-driven instruction. The emergent technological interfaces allowed more and more people to take up dancing as creative physical exercise. The plug-and-play method of having a talented dancer literally move you by way of her movement attracted all sorts of students.



...in the Afrofuture, traditional Black social dance is still taught body to body—at home...

TeleBrea's specialty was the old-timey Black dances of the twenty-first century. She learned these dances from her father, Zekeil, when she was a little boy. Zekeil came from a dancing family. In fact, TeleBrea's parents had met at a dancing protest in New Detroit. Zekeil and Jadeena, TeleBrea's mother, danced at all the protests they could in the 2070s: at the resistance against Central Congo overdevelopment, at the



rethinking-repatriation affair of South Florida, at the holistic happiness hoedown staged in Chinese Côte d'Ivoire.

When TeleBrea was born, Zekeil and Jadeena knew that he was no single-gender child, and they did the work to allow him to express the gender-fluid identities that suited him. Intragender children were not all that uncommon at the dawn of the twenty-second century, but the dispersed community didn't make anyone's life easier. Between five and eight years old, TeleBrea preferred to be recognized as a boy, and Zekeil taught him the basics of turn-of-the-last-century b-boying as best he could. Zekeil learned them from the old World War IV internet archives you could still find hooked up to some church communication networks. He taught him the wind-jamming line dances that had been popular in the 2030s, the great power-failure decade, when most Black folk lived with electricity only half the time. And he taught him the man-to-man be-a-man partner dances that had developed in the megajails of the 2060s, those dances that alternated tender-caressing hand-dancing and full-bodied slamdancing, crashing one into the other to the synthesized sounds of the mechanical

apocalypse. TeleBrea enjoyed these styles and how his father guided him through the movements the old way by demonstrating, playing together, discussing the metaphor and meaning, and touching hand-shoulder-leg-foot-elbow-hip-forehead.

TeleBrea learned her warrior dances from her grandmother Tesladella Roth'astein, her mama's mama, who had emigrated from Argentina in the 2050s. Tesladella taught TeleBrea the long-time-ago Black Power fertility and power dances: twerking and j-setting.

Learning these dances from her grammamere helped TeleBrea understand her feminine and social self as a capacity she had to practice. In the middle of a vogue drop—a movement she always did as part of her twerk sequence—TeleBrea thought of herself as a badass girlboy, ready to kick the ass of racist bs worldwide and across time.

...in the Afrofuture, some dancers claim mixed-gender, mixed-race Blackness...

TeleBrea's social dance classes gained in popularity as he matured as a mixed-gender mediated personality. He began posting his 3-D-visualization dance logs as a teenager, first alternating gender representation week by week and then day by day. She didn't want her gender shifting to be a trick, so she always chose a unified mode each day, sometimes something recognizably male, surreptitiously androgynous, but demonstrably female, other times straight-up fembot glamour-puss. Her glamour-puss persona, while popular, took considerable time to generate, and TeleBrea only worked that mode on rare occasion. TeleBrea's claim to Blackness, though, never wavered.



...in the Afrofuture, neural attachments allow students to connect with instructors at the level of muscular impulse...

The five on-site student teaching assistants freaked TeleBrea out. They were young, hungry for movement, agile, and, she thought, not very nice. Of course, they each had excellent technique and could do pretty much anything that came their way. They were all hyperflexible, and a couple of them could dislocate their shoulders on command to perform the old MarsMan styles that blew up in the 2140s. The university assigned these TAs to TeleBrea without her consultation, and they were paid with tuition remission and superfast neural-connection interfaces. The TAs provided an alternative physical narrative for the distance learners; students could alternate between the impulses that TeleBrea emitted and those of any of the TAs. TeleBrea knew her dancing

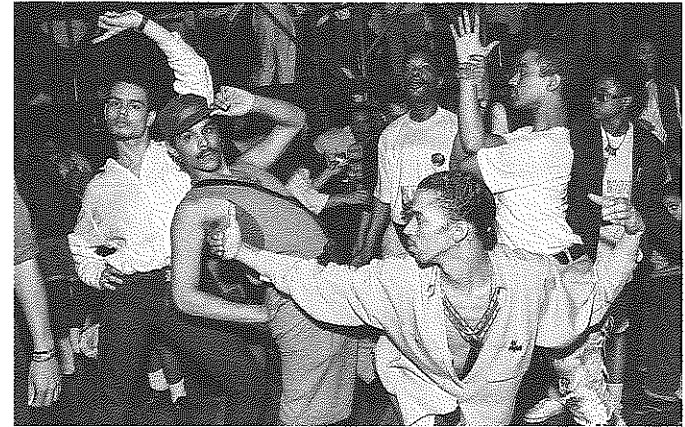


was infinitely more nuanced than that of the TAs, but many of the course enrollees preferred to feel the spikes of energy cast by the younger dancers.

Teaching, TeleBrea relaxed into remembering the dances and engaging their contours. She dipped with subtlety and suppleness, carefully tending to the motions and their implications, narrating the histories as she had been taught them and demonstrating their bounded weightiness, rhythmicity, and affect.

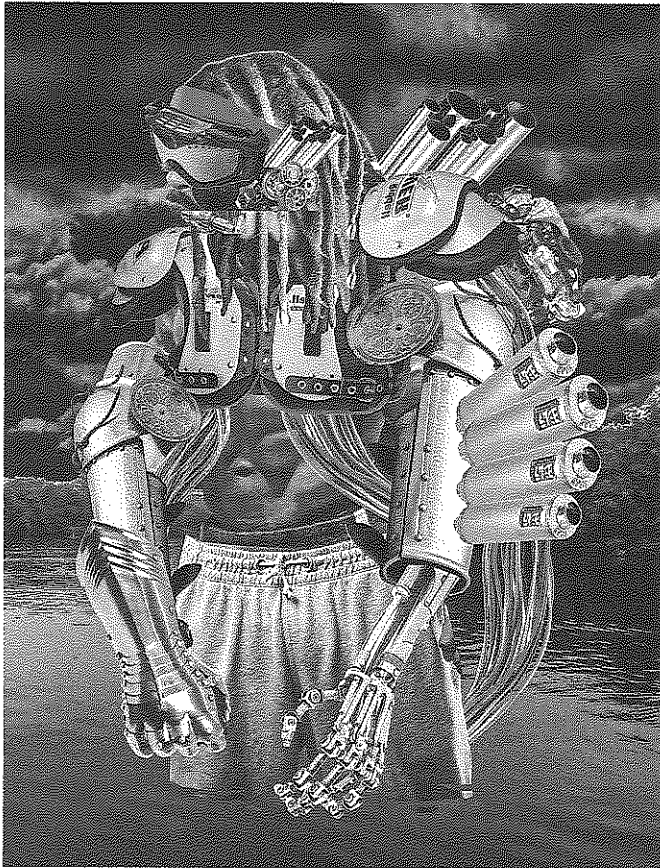
On this particular day, she chose to focus on the oldest dance in her repertoire, a strangely free-floating but rhythmic partner dance from the old days. TeleBrea knew his Black history, and he knew that this was a dance about the prison-industrial complex and the ways that twenty-first-century Black youth would engage in extravagant gang dance battles. The dance called for a sort of weighted-volition down-and-back, down-and-back with the legs, while the arms floated and pushed, the hands gathered into loose fists, and the chest heaved in time to a sound score of dogs barking and old police sirens.

TeleBrea danced, and the TAs looked bored. She knew that they would rather be doing their bumping-time interface dances, the ones that gave full-body stimulation by neural feedback in



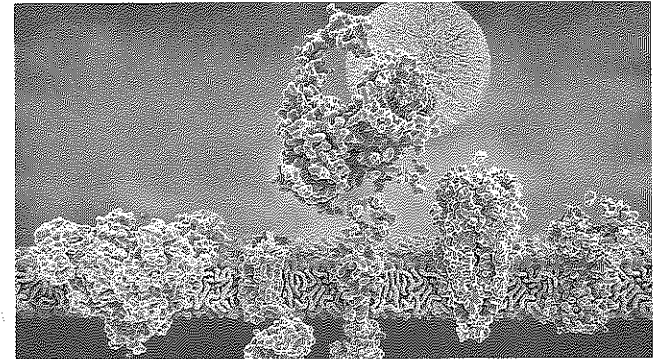
response to the slightest passing erotic thought. Some folks thought of these new styles as just sex dances that interfaced young people did together in groups of eighty to ninety, and that they were nothing more than electronic orgies that had nothing to do with dancing and little to do with Black culture. TeleBrea wasn't sure. Maybe there was something in this group undulation that had emerged in a hookup network between Oakland and South Memphis and that told a story about Black erotic connection? One time, she switched on her feedback paradigm, which allowed her to feel the gestures that her students created, to better understand where the movements worked and, more commonly, where they didn't. Sure enough, while most of her students were trying to capture the gestures she created, others were watching interface news feeds or chatting about music.

TeleBrea did the unusual. She screwed up her face, clenched her fists, deepened her voice, and morphed into a male persona. "Come on now, wake up!" he said. "This is an important dance you need to know to understand Black history! This is an old courtship dance that would be done by partners who wanted to get each other's attention. Jack your legs, heave your chest, make a loose fist, and push up alongside your partner so you can dance in team. Let's go now, this is it. It's time to do... the RUNNING MAN!"



...Later That Time Cycle...

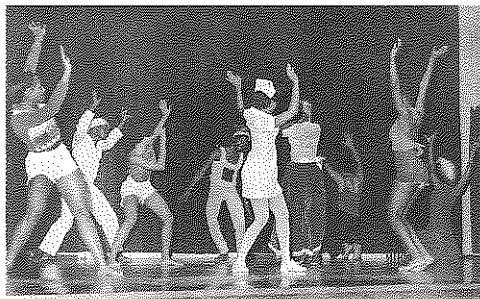
TeleBrea had learned dance history both ways. She had scoured the legal and illegal blockchains that held normative and manufactured renderings of the pasts. The documented accountings of where dance had emerged and where it had been supported. The dancing ceremonies that allowed girls to become young women in Yorubaland; the circle events that allowed communities to celebrate ground, grain, time, wind, ancestors, and corn in the First Nations. She knew about the courts and political regimes that used dance as a weapon in Old-Old Europe, the ways that dance kept people in their place according to ability in those systems.



In Old-Old Europe, the blockchains showed, monarchs forced dance onto the ruling classes, judging their faults harshly and barely rewarding achievement. In the more recent Old Europe, tyrants forced dance onto the working masses, demanding military parades and spectacles of movement that revealed monstrous visions of anonymous power. New Europe hadn't been much better, in TeleBrea's view, with its

daily protest mosh pits, which always left at least a few thousand souls injured. Dance was a constant throughout all these histories there were to know.

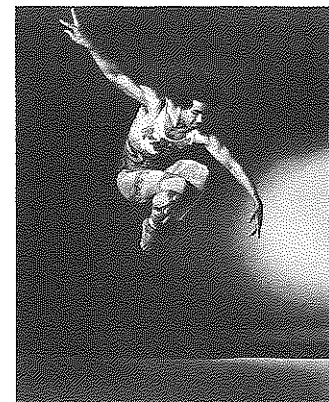
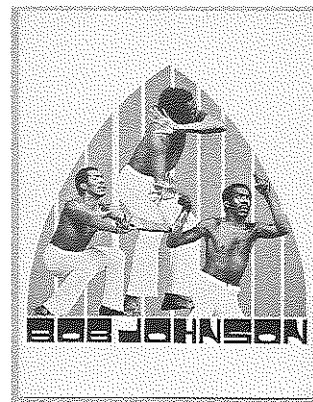
TeleBrea learned dance history the other way too, the more dangerous way. She asked people what they remembered. And she danced with them. She sought out people through the neural-pathway emitters whenever they mentioned dance in a context that signaled something from before the Last Revision. Traveling to visit people wasn't always taken kindly, but the old people TeleBrea sought out didn't seem to mind much. Most of them had avoided the implants that connected billions of others through an electrical interface. The implants allowed the giant global conglomerates to flourish. Corporations had long since replaced nation-states, but some people still understood that place and the rituals of location matter.



Dancing with others, TeleBrea learned stories of important figures from the distant past who had a lasting impact on how people decided to move together. And that's what dance history had always been, she thought—a decision to move together.

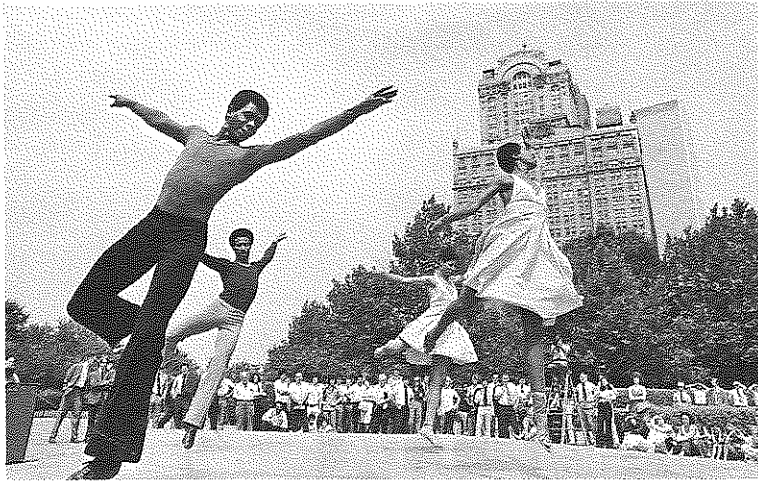
She learned about Bob Johnson of Old Pittsburgh and Rod Rodgers of First New York. She knew that

they had made dances during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and that they made dances that were not about themselves but about things they imagined. That sort of dancing was only popular for one hundred fifty years or so. After the First Climate Collapse, people really only danced about themselves.



She learned about Lester Horton, who had a cabaret dance theater in Original Los Angeles, and who mixed races and sexualities among his colleagues. Horton mattered because he brought together the crowd that surrounded him. Most people surrounded themselves with people who were just like themselves in terms of size, skin, hair, age, and general attitude. Horton had done something else again, bringing together people who had no real need to meet except that he made space for this to happen.

She learned about Mary Bruce, who ran a dance studio in Harlem and taught hundreds of Black children and young adults for a half century. Bruce created a social possibility by sharing dance and introducing people to experiences they had dreamed about, like performing at Carnegie Hall.

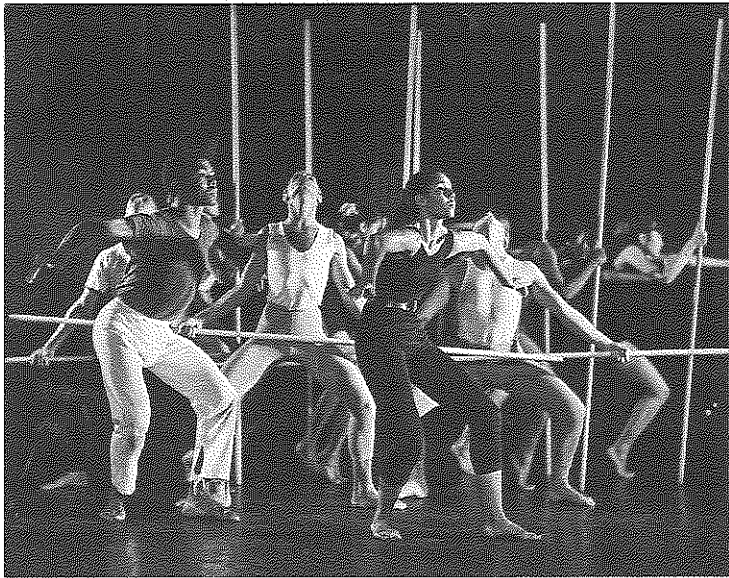


She learned about Ada Overton Walker (sometimes called Aida), who choreographed productions on Broadway in the 1900s. Once called “the best Negro comedienne today,” Walker, who worked as a celebrity dance artist and was a well-known tastemaker, was an activist and advocate for Black femme presence. Walker illusioned gender well.



She learned about the most famous near-forgotten artists, with names like Alvin Ailey, Katherine Dunham, and Pearl Primus, who launched a global commitment to Black theatrical dance in the awkward days of the twentieth century.

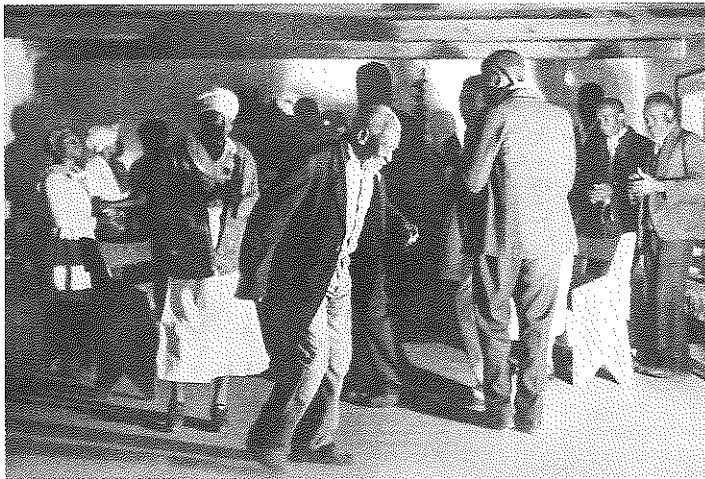
Learning, TeleBrea felt super femme. Like dance itself, which was usually gendered female, TeleBrea took the telling of dance history as an essentially feminist practice, a way to “spend time” in reflection and communion without needing to know an outcome. A place to experiment and feel. A place to wander in spirit.



The oldest dance that mattered to Black people in the First United States was a spirit form that intrigued TeleBrea to no end. A dance that evolved from circles within circles, traveling against the clock, rewinding time with shouts and cries, screams and songs, improvisations and elaborations of pain and triumph.

A dance that involved men, women, children, and all the permutations that produce a people in motion and feeling the spirit: the ring shout. If only, TeleBrea thought, the students could come to experience something of the complete deliverance offered by that most ancient of forms.

No matter now, though. Dance history is a moving target without end. What came before the ring shout were the slave ships; and before that, the tribal disagreements and ritual disputes; and before that, the confusions of change through time that exceeded what anyone could ever really know, let alone understand. Living in dance, TeleBrea learned the essential lesson: dance histories are chronicles of people moving beyond what they think they know.



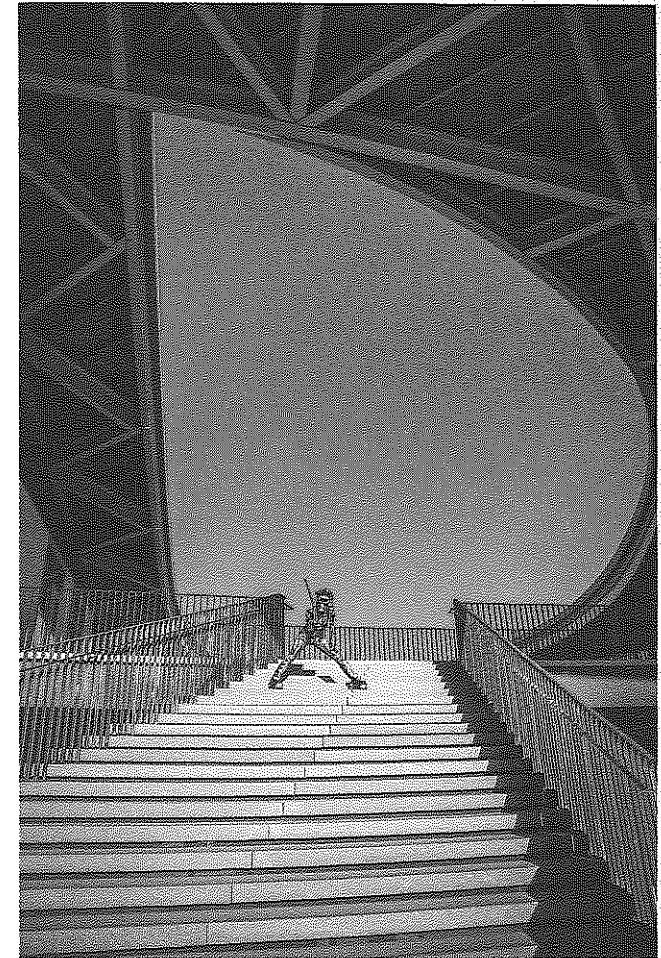
Afterword

TeleBrea eventually stopped teaching and capitulated to a full-consciousness dissolve into the data network. It wasn't an easy decision to join the streaming hordes of once-living beings, but electrical connections promised an even greater capacity to stretch across time and space. For the gender-shifting populace, data dissolves allowed for a simultaneity that suited an eagerness to be more than one or two. Dancers often performed the dissolve and claimed to enjoy playing among the rolling tides of power that embraced the dissolved and allowed them to surge, congregate, survey, and disperse in rhythms of exploration.

Eventually, TeleBrea disassembled. In time, the dissolved stopped being recognizable. They joined the electrical current as pure motivation, as an impulse, a jolt. The dispersal took a while, though. In a few hundred cycles, there might be none to remember the coherent resolve that had been the dance expert TeleBrea.

Except for one thing. A glitch in the system. A portion of TeleBrea's dance history remained intact in the blockchain; one idea following the next in a minor assembly. No one could know how it happened. A fragment of consciousness, telling a story of dance, survived the inevitable dispersal. This is what it said:

I wanted to dance with others and to share the smell of our excitement, to place a hand on the small of a back and smile as we stepped this way, then that, together. I wanted to engage in the most human of activities, to shape time by playing with rhythm. I wanted to love, and care, and wonder in our moving, and I wanted to show others what I thought I could do and who I wanted to be, by dancing. I wanted that revelation for them. I wanted that for us. I wanted to teach them the dance that my studies made me care for the most: the dance of the group as a bulbous, differentiated assembly, each doing as they will with all of us dancing together. Right and right and right and right. Left and left and left and left. Back two three four. Step touch, step back, step turn. Repeat and repeat and repeat until we are all happy beyond life, full of potential, full of relation, full of emotion. We slide, people, we Electric Slide. Right and right and right and right. Left and left and left and left. Back two three four. Step touch, step back, step turn. Slide, people, slide. rightandrightandright andright. leftandleftandleftandleft. backtwo threefour. steptouchstepbackstepturn. SLIDE! rghtrghtrghtrght. lftlftlftlftlfft. bk234. sttchstbksttn. SLIDE. rnrnrnr. lnlnl. b234. stsbst. SLIDE. rnrnrnr. lnlnl. b234. stsbst. SLIDE. rnrnrnr. lnlnl. b234. stsbst. SLIDE. rrrr. llll. b2-4. stsbst. SLIDE.



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- Page 3 (bottom): Neuron network in the human brain. Image: selvanegra/iStock
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- Page 16, 17 (left): Bob Johnson Papers, 1949-2003, CTC.2014.03, Curtis Theatre Collection, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System
- Page 17 (right): Rod Rodgers, photo by Jack Mitchell. Courtesy and © Kim Grier-Martinez/ Rod Rodgers Dance Company
- Page 18 (top): The Rod Rodgers Dance Company performing in Battery Park, 1975. Photo by Tyrone Dukes, courtesy and © Kim Grier-Martinez/ Rod Rodgers Dance Company
- Page 18 (bottom): Lester Horton's *Liberian Suite* (1952), performed by Alvin Ailey City Center Dance Theater, 1975. Photo by Charles van Maanen. Lester Horton Dance Theater Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress
- Page 19 (left): Cavendish Morton, *George W. Walker in "In Dahomey,"* 1903. Platinotype print, 6½ x 4¾ inches. National Gallery
- Page 19 (right): Aida Overton Walker as Salome, c. 1911. Photo by White Studio, © Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts
- Page 20: Gullah Geechee ring shout, c. 1930. Photo by Maxfield Parrish Jr. Courtesy of Lorenzo Dow Turner Papers, Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution
- Page 23: ZiggZaggerZ the Bastard (cosplay), 2019. Photo by tobias c. van Veen.

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