

Oxford Handbooks Online

Black Dance after Race

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The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity

Edited by Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young

Print Publication Date: Jul 2016 Subject: Music, Ethnomusicology

Online Publication Date: Dec 2014 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199754281.013.37

Abstract and Keywords

What happens when race ceases to be a primary marker of identity used to categorize experience transformed into art making? What might “postblack” dance convey? What are the sources and sympathies of a “fugitive” black, and what debt does “black dance” convey? This chapter explores the inevitably radical capacities of black dance in a speculative future when race matters differently than it does in 2015. The chapter includes discussion of recent offerings of theatrical dance made by African American men that imagine an “outside” to racial identification, alongside assessment of contemporary performance that seeks to align and elude racial labeling. The essay suggests the limiting strictures of language and categorization in defining dance along lines of race.

Keywords: Trajal Harrell, Ralph Lemon, Kyle Abraham, postblack, Fred Moten, black dance

We Go on a Journey,
You and I,
a Speculative Exploration of
the Place After the Day

DAY: Postblack Contingencies

The day was full of anger and mistrust, of forces of violence and domination, of cloudy appropriations and outright theft that led to separations and sorrow. In the day, we believed that race should separate us; that race should enrage us as we try to consider its variations and asymmetrical deployments of resource; that race should matter as a way to mark difference for the benefit of some. We were probably lazy in this, and we began to allow race to mean “black” in many

contexts; we used race as a shorthand to call on an undifferentiated, unknowable black mass. Willing to see—"Look, a Negro!"—we saw race in acrid vividness, differentiating upon sight into channels of family, safety, propriety. "Do as I do, and be as I am," we demanded in the difficult pale of mid-day heat, as we looked for answers in our too-obvious differentiations. Bound by custom and fact of impossible inequities, we squinted in agonies of confusion. We wondered how these very different modalities of bodies in motion came to be, and how their value could be calculated with such wild differentiation. The black dance is most visible in the harsh light of day, where sight trumps all other modes of being. We knew that race smelled, bad. But we saw black dance and we tried to somehow see beyond it. The black people—unrelentingly visible—would not allow us to not see them; we would not allow ourselves to not see us. But in the day, we had to try to see beyond, anyway. We had to try.¹

(p. 707) The rise of race as a category of identity aligned with deployments of power determined to subjugate many to the benefit of a few. White social theorists, presumably threatened by the emergence of recognizable groups of people whose social destinies were not necessarily bound up with obedience to a ruling white elite, developed principles of eugenics and biological determinism that could separate levels of humanity along axes of race. Eugenics emerged as a pseudo-scientific attempt to reify people in groups by virtue of "genetic identities" and skin color; its determinations falsely aligned with assumptions around intellectual, social, and physical abilities.

Race became a means and method for social stratification, and a means for nineteenth-century justification for the horrors of slavery in the Americas as well as a host of subjugations worldwide. If race could exist as a way to understand human variance, then some races could be determined to be "better" than others within a Darwinian-tilted assessment of capacity. White British colonials and others had held longstanding assumptions about a superiority of white civilization over so-called primitives in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Australia and New Zealand, and the indigenous Americas. Race emerged as a recognized scientific classification method; scientific racism—at the end of the nineteenth century, just as people of color began to find social and political agency to resist structures of subjugation that continually placed them at social disadvantage. Racist interactions peaked in rampant representational force during this period, epitomized by genocide of colored aboriginals in Australia, laws of Apartheid in South Africa, and continuations of Jim Crow laws and lynchings in the United States.

Once settled into the social and civic structures of many communities worldwide, race flourished as an analytic mode that allowed for unblinking acts of violence, denigration, and political and social oppression. Race became a logic of structural inequality; a way of seeing and reacting to the world. Global social uprisings in the 1960s intended to grant civil rights and self-determination to subjugated groups around the world, including millions of black people under white European rule all over the continent of Africa and also in the United States. Political independence in many African nations—nations which had, ironically, been mapped and created by white European colonials fulfilling a racially-

motivated desire to claim the lands and resources of the continent inhabited by black people; arrived alongside hard-won civil rights legislation in the United States and some aboriginal rights legislation in Canada.

The dismantling of racialized legal allowances precipitated the dismantling of “race” as a category of language, an action begun by literary theorists in the postcivil-rights eras of the 1980s. These literary theorists suggested that “race,” like other aspects of languages of oppression, held overly-accented representational force in a world that supported civil rights for all citizens regardless of race. Race, these theorists argued, functioned as a historical referent to social structures of domination now ameliorated by open possibilities of political access for all. Of course, this utopian sort of rhetoric could only partially be true. Classification by race had, perhaps, become legally intolerable, but racist interactions that pitted people of color against each other, and a historically more oppression-minded white elite, persisted.

(p. 708) **Postblack** emerged as a term of rhetorical import for those who imagine a world beyond race, one that might be experienced by young people born in the second generation after civil rights legislation of the 1960s. Millennial Americans, for example, might think that race matters less than class, or gender, or possibly sexuality or location as a determinant of social mobility. Postblack, coined perhaps by visual art curator Thelma Golden and brought into mainstream usage of sorts by journalist Ytasha Womack, suggested a world that doesn’t exist, but one that might not bind its black citizens into preassessment or predetermination along lines of racial visibility. We must note that postblack foregrounds black as a marker of identity even as it suggests something beyond race; the term stabilizes “black” as a historical and experiential category that might be embraced, scrutinized, eluded, or avoided.

Postblack suggests something simultaneously elusive and stable; as a chronological marker, it tells us to imagine a postcivil rights ascendancy of black social mobility without fear. Postmodern choreographer Bill T. Jones claims this space of his creative maturity, although he was born during the civil-rights era; his choreographies arrive well after legislation has made black a legal capacity in the context of American artistry. Jones’ work is not beholden to speak for the race; postblack surely suggests this kind of meandering or mumbling possibility that the social acknowledgment of a black subject enabled. Black citizens without rights could not speak; after civil rights legislation allowed for a voice of black people to emerge, that voice could take shape (almost) as it desired in the expansive neoliberal market of the 1980s. Artists born in the 1970s and 1980s became the first postblack citizens, reaching maturity in the 1990s and 2000s to suggest innumerable approaches to expressions of black positionalities. While some of these positions seemed tied to an articulation of black thought, other artists moved toward engagement with creative strategy not at all bound by connection to the statelessness of a precivil-rights blackness.

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Postblack moves in unanticipated directions, but tends to return “home,” to the place of blackness as experience. Because postblack emerges as a chronological antecedent to civil rights black and black power, its grounding assumptions arise from the proposition of an imaginary whole of black acts that manage to convey meaning in the space of black identity. Postblack may intend to reflect youthfulness and energetic recasting, but it also engages a subtle naiveté, that a category “outside an outside” can exist. Black remains consistently configured as an outside to mainstream; and yet postblack outsidership cannot render its practitioners somehow “inside” a creative mainstream of artistic practice. After all, postblack stakes claim to an identity marker that actually implicates racialized experience. The mainstream needs things to be simple and unified; black, like race, complicates matters.

To work in a postblack sensibility as a choreographer means to care differently about the wages of black lives as a category of expressive resource than earlier generations of artists and audiences might have done. This could be realized as a playful willingness to place references to black experience alongside, say, postmodern physical assemblage without making reference to dance as a strategy of survival for black people. Different generations of artists approach the methods of postmodern assemblage differently.

(p. 709) Where Bill T. Jones (b. 1952) often makes work that might be tethered to thinking of RACE in capital letters as an issue that his choreography might confront, postblack choreographer Kyle Abraham (b. 1977) stages dances that incorporate blackness as a texture in the warp and the woof of the choreography at issue. Ethnicity as texture means ethnicity that is ultimately nonconfrontational or safe, and able to be recast toward an end not entirely comprised of the survivalist moment.

Postblack, then, refers to a time and circumstance in which black might not be primarily bound up with survivalist modes of social interaction and intervention. Modes of postblack comfort may exist for some by 2015; for those who enjoy upper-middle class resources of gated living communities and private higher-education. But black presence and especially its revelations of youthful masculinity remain at issue for many. Postblack choreographers might seek to create worlds of dance that avoid immediate responses of racial profiling circumscribing their work, even as they willingly engage black experience as a source and texture of the dance at hand.

Pavement

Choreographer Kyle Abraham may take the moniker of postblack artist if he likes. He has been awarded a number of fellowships and funding—including the MacArthur “Genius” Award in 2013; surely because his strong theatrical work fits into a postmodern heritage that he claims; his work also arrives with recognizably black affect and tends to tell stories of black life. Abraham often references Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, his hometown, as a site and source of black life and love; the Midwestern city where he grew and trained figures mightily in his creative life.

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The evening-length stage work *Pavement* (2012)² continues Abraham's interest in histories of the black neighborhoods of Pittsburgh, as well as the popular culture that defined his young adulthood. The work is also inspired, Abraham notes, by writings of W E B Du Bois, and the magisterial collection of essays and sketches, the *Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903³. Du Bois' work arrived as postmodern, intertextual assemblage, even before literary theorists knew to call it that; *Souls* may be considered intertextual in the manner of a modern-day mixtape. The always-shifting text makes references to, at least, history, to political circumstance, to the need for advanced education, to the difficulties that education makes when there are no jobs available for the educated, and even to Du Bois' own family and the death of his young child. In like manner, *Pavement* pulls together an operatic sound score mixed with popular music selections and film soundtracks to tell a story about the disintegration of a community. In some ways, the work wonders at the possibilities for human intervention in the nature of urban development, a development that impacts black male lives with awkward, ambivalent forces.

Are we all necessarily subjects of institutionalized discrimination, racial genocide? What is the price for a ticket to freedom? How will any of us pay for it, and does our freedom mean abandoning the places where we grew up? Du Bois pondered these questions, and his civil rights agenda constantly confronted these aspects of black intellectual, (p. 710) social, and artistic development. In like manner, Abraham wants his audiences to consider the terms of black freedom, the legacy of the near-past 1980s and that era's go-go neoliberal economic policies that valued the individual over the group. Watching the work, audiences are invited to consider the many ways that a literal pavement grounds us, and gives us a sense of home, even as it allows our rights and relationships to crumble if we don't tend to them in the places where we live.

Dramaturgically, *Pavement* demands that we engage a reflective sort of historical present, one bound, now, by the then-new black exploitation movies of the 1980s. Abraham's work looks backward, consistently, toward a racialized past that shapes an indeterminate present. In *Pavement's* opening gambit, blues music, casually shaped but professionally rendered, accompanies Abraham's simple walk from the side of the stage space. He pauses somewhere not quite in the center of the space; visible, but not at the center—and poses for a moment, as if considering the nature of the day just past, or the day that is now, and to come. Smelling at the sounds he hears, he twitches and moves emphatically in small bursts of energy that manifest outward, like small volcanoes of released lava and ash. This opening solo speaks of an uncomfortable now, derived from the old-timey sounds of the blues harmonica, and driven forward toward a possibility of now, onstage, here, at the beginning of an evening-length dance. The emphatic and small gestures of this solo feel like a prelude that is also the texture of the entirety; the generative artist demonstrating his own physical sensibility and preparing the space for dancing and emotive communications by his gathered collaborators. We feel the prelude of forward propulsion in this sequence of twitches and physical moans, guided by music chosen from a Spotify search for home-town black musical memory as the grounding force. The solo turns in on itself with small movements and gestures that are the hallmark of Abraham's

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personal movement tendencies: circular bursts of energy, sometimes stunted and sometimes pointed, but rarely extended or released; bursts that turn on themselves to suggest something implosive without end.

In the twenty-first century model of a dance company as a shiftable collective, Abrahams is able to cast each of his projects as he might a Broadway production: with collaborating artists gathered according to race, physical stature, gender, and of course, availability. Mid-twentieth-century modern dance operated differently: choreographers with namesake companies (Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Bella Lewitzky) chose dancers according to their sense of predicted capacity within the current repertory alongside a liberal ideology of “color-blind casting.” This practice allowed Graham’s work to be populated with mostly African American dancers at certain points in her company’s life, while avoiding racial ideologies that might have predicted particular roles for black dancers. Modernist abstraction allowed choreographers to eschew racialized approaches to company casting; of course, that very same modernist abstraction meant that stories of black life or relevant to black audiences and artists as black people on the planet would not be realized. Contemporary dance of the early twenty-first century approaches race, gender, and representations of sexuality more aggressively, allowing race to be a marker among many that constructs meaning in theatrical storytelling. Abraham’s work contains abstraction, but it is not abstract in its casting choices, (p. 711) dramaturgy, or narrative depictions of black life. This may be a postblack position writ large: that **black matters**, and matters gravely, but black may also be set alongside physical abstraction that builds from reference to movement ideologies as social ideologies (Figure 31.1).



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 31.1 *Pavement*, choreography by Kyle Abraham, Photo by Steven Schreiber

Pavement engages a startling physical image of black abjection in its structure. The dancers lie prone on the ground, face down, with their hands clasped behind their backs as if handcuffed. This physical gesture recurs through the dance, and becomes the ending gesture of the work—a posture of defeat,

submission, social asymmetry. The gesture, created along a fault line of race, but wrapped in the container of contemporary performance, acquires the shape of racialized abstraction, confirmed by social truths, but simultaneous recast as aesthetic motion within a frame of opera-house dance. In a telling early sequence, two black men engaged in a duet are interrupted by a white dancer who manipulates the men and places them in the inert, face-down, hands-on-the-back, “popo” position. When a second white man enters and gestures playfully with the first, the terms of *Pavement*’s occasional engagement of race become clear. While it might matter that these two dancers are white

in this sequence, their whiteness does not exclude them from participating in other events in the dance later. In general, despite this authority-laden policeman-esque exchange, the white male dancers appear as members of the community, in the way that white presence might always materialize along side every aspect of black life. Abraham allows race to register at times, when it comes to the front of the circumstance, only to recede and dissipate at the next turn of phrase.

(p. 712) Abraham's musical choices throughout the dance reveal a broad range of intertextual referents that point toward complex musical underpinnings of black life. But is this still black life if it is bound by Ryuichi Sakamoto, Bach, and Vivaldi? According to *Pavement*, of course it is, and black life arrives here full of irony and misdirection. The popular music recordings "Going Down to the River" (Fred McDowell), "A Change is Gonna Come" (Sam Cooke), and "Someday We'll All Be Free" (Donny Hathaway) backdrop for some stage action that surprises and confounds. While the songs follow the lyrical rhetoric suggested by their titles, the stage action ultimately suggests that little change will come, and the "someday" when we might all be free cannot be found or even predicted. Direct action; as in, a white dancer manipulating a black dancer into a posture of shame on the ground—arrives alongside loose-limbed, release technique dancing by the entire group as physical abstraction in response to the musical impulses of European liturgical music. This sort of mixture of musical forms and their physical responses confirms a fragmentary, almost reactionary mode of dance making, always responsive to the external sonic impulses that envelop the stage. At times, the dancers respond to bits of the soundtrack from *Boyz n the Hood*. The portions of the film soundtrack chosen for the dance accomplish a complex ordering of emotional manipulation familiar to the techniques of Hollywood black life fantasy: crystal-clear sounds of gunshots, police sirens, and dialogue confirming abjection and subjugation; a no-exit sort of possibility for black men bound to circumstances of poverty and violence in an undistinguished urban neighborhood. Listening to the constricted, cinéma vérité soundtrack from the 1991 John Singleton offering, the audience is invited to wonder at the collapse between celluloid fantasy and live bodies dancing and sweating on stage in front of us. Are the dancers stand-ins for the film characters that some of us might recall? Are we to trust and believe in the soundtrack in the way that we trust and believe the actual dancing movement performed before us? Postblack choreography can raise these issues of real and imaginary, as it relishes the slippage between black as totalizing identity and black as a fleeting, if profound, aspect of contemporary life.

Abraham's presence in the work, as primary architect and designer of its movement sequences, confirms a lived-in, gestural approach to character, and corporeal sensibility. Throughout the work Abraham and the other dancers engage markers of black masculinity—pimp walks, complex handshakes, homosocial greeting rituals, and ritualized calling out to each other with denigrating words of endearment. When a single woman enters the space of ceremonial masculinity, her presence does not spark a stereotypical competitive posturing among the men; rather, she is incorporated into the fabric of the community. Her athleticism and willingness to participate in the various vignettes that call on a sort of masculine-social desperation implies a fantasy world of

nongendered, but always-already racialized interactions. At times the woman does respond and initiate gestures of compassion and tactile empathy that might be recognized as feminine, but these fleeting moments do not hold narrative or cumulative power in the largest shape of the whole work. Rather, this community gathers around Abraham's charismatic energy as its leading member, and its homosociality encompasses feminine (p. 713) presence. Presence of a single woman balances and opens questions—a feature that also helps the piece retain its essence of a postblackexpression.

The repeated physical gesture of black abjection grounds *Pavement's* movement invention. As all of the seven dancers lie prone on the ground, face down with their hands clasped behind their backs as if handcuffed, the potent image of genocide confirms a contemporary and an everyday social assumption of social stasis that haunts black bodies throughout the United States. When the performers repeat this gesture at the end of the work, in an extended motionless sequence that creates piles of bodies distributed across the stage, the audience is forced to consider legacies of subjugation that surrounds blacklife.

Watching the *Pavement* performance in two different venues across six months in 2013, I note the indeterminacy of the whole; that its form is broken and partial at all times, and that it seems to be finding its way from one moment to the next. The work offers a structured take on its various topics and approaches to solving the moments of dance theater suggested by the compilation of score and action. However, in my viewings, the work doesn't seek to convey how blackness might be solved, or how black corporealities exist within a frame of linearly-defined aspirational black life that might have been implied by *Boyz n the Hood* or the writings of DuBois. Rather, *Pavement* offers pungent vignettes of black life in a contemporary city, a life that seems devoid of any sort of totalizing meaning. For Abraham, postblack here means something neither racialized nor "colorblind," not real and not abstract, with episodes and casting that are not used because of race, but with an allowance that race might be implemented as it is surely always already part of the story.

DUSK: Fugitive Movements

In the evening, we loosened. As flecks of sunlight danced across the horizon, we began to imagine something else—something that fell into itself, something that emerged from each of us, but together. In that falling we could still see each other: blurred, and misty, we felt an exchange of energy. This dance felt comfortable and approachable, and moving from our half-lidded appreciation of each other, we allowed its exchange to soothe with its familiarity, in the way that its component pieces already seemed to know where to go. Shifts of the hip and shimmies of the shoulder reddened into epaulement; dancing competitively became sport, even as it drew on spirit. Usually, the exchange felt good, in a shaking free of fixity and a blending of physical provocation. But as we danced together, we resisted the demands of separation and accuracy that the unforgiving day had borne; the unrelenting drive to segregate, forcibly, sources, influences, and genealogies. We moved toward something shaky, incomplete, and possibly insincere. Our exchanges of energy pleased us both, but as dusk deepened, we realized that the joy of our amber-hued dance was fleeting and temporary. Our exchange could never be reciprocal, it could only be noticed, marked, and filed aside. Somehow, we still saw: “Look, a Negro ... Dance!”

(p. 714) **Fugitive Black**

The work of blackness is inseparable from the violence of blackness.

Stefano and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 50.

Black retains a fugitive status; one predicted by years of actual fugitivity of black bodies in the United States and beyond; a status confirmed by a fact of disavowal. The disavowal of black presence in the context of the United States, predicted by the US Constitution, which never actually mentioned the many black people who lived in the Americas by then—as citizens or under enslavement—arrived alongside an assumption of labor as the primary capacity of black bodies within the United States. In a historical rendering of the US, then, black could mean labor potential without any necessary consideration of humanity inside its racialized container.

Performance theorists Stefano Harney and Fred Moten rightly claim that the fugitivity of black “escapes even the fugitive,” a formation that imagines black radical expression always already in circulation, whether or not black people understand its inevitability. The image of the fugitive propels us; it confirms an always elusive black being out of reach, out of sight, and compelled by the need to escape, evade, and remain only as a trace. In this line of reasoning, black can’t be stabilized as a category of performance because black arrives outside of reach and beyond category. Black performance as intertextual force—drawing here on the work of Brenda Dixon Gottschild—means black performance

outside of category or the security of standard; it is performance that refers, dissident to its own existence *as well as* its far-flung constituent parts.

As a fugitive and intertextual practice, black performance emerges at times without warning and seemingly without precedence. And yet, *I chase black performance down in an attempt to be in its presence whenever possible. As it grunts, twists, and pounds itself into being, it also dissipates, and its power startles and disappears simultaneously. Power expended within powerlessness has the numbing effect of enhancing possibility while remaining obscure and ineffectual.*

(M)imosa

Choreographer and contemporary performance artist Trajal Harrell often explores a failure of performance to stabilize presence, and especially black modes of being. He works consistently in a space of reference to black life that is not tethered to speaking about or to blackness; rather, his work renders ambiguous personal musings on his visible identity as a black man. Born in Georgia, and a graduate of the American Studies curriculum of Yale College, Harrell creates performance experiences that explicitly reference European performance history and cultural studies; models that have enjoyed an unrelenting participation of black people in their ranks as theorists, artists, aesthetes, (p. 715) researchers, and of course, audiences. Harrell clearly considers himself to be among the (post?)black artists engaged in Europeanist performance, and several of his multipart and multiyear projects imagine a white audience willing to contend with black presence within structures of memory typically devoid of racialized consideration.

In some ways, Harrell's work (*M)imosa/Twenty Looks, or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church*⁴ reveals itself as an answer to a call to keep asking, but stop answering, questions of racialized identity presence within contemporary performance. The work is a four-artist collaboration conceived as part of a larger project to inject black aesthetic presence into the historical moorings of Judson-church-era dance experimentation. Judson has long been historicized as a white movement toward an apolitical mode of performance that allowed "do your own thing" practices that made little reference to cultural identity. Harrell's project wonders what might happen if we revisit our sense of that historical moment in art practice to include fugitive black performance practices both contemporaneous to Judson as well as those of a generation later.

The *Paris is Burning* series revolves around the proposition "What would have happened in 1963 if someone from the voguing ball scene in Harlem had come downtown to perform alongside the early postmoderns at Judson Church?" Varied iterations of scale, from XS to XL, refer to moments in European history, from the literary presence of Antigone in one iteration to the practice of made-to-measure fashions in another. Each version arrives full of theatrical effect and changes in costume; flashing lights, black-light effects, and fantasy outfits that suggest impossible characters fill out a kaleidoscopic

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arrangement of grand gestures propped against small, imperceptible shifts in motion and energy. The series continually suggests both excessive, impatient imagination in its varied iterations and a steady process of exploration in its deployment across several years. It also confirms a furtive, impossible to capture, fugitive nature of its own being, as a work that continues to arrive after ten years of development without ever restricting itself to a set, preferred iteration.

(M)imosa engages a premise that each of its four performers is the “real” Mimosa, and each deserves a spotlight that the others presumably do not. Staged as a series of nonrelated cabaret turns, the work makes its largest musical references to drag performance choices popular in late-twentieth-century gay nightclubs. Its exploration of fin-de-(twentieth) siecle irony and excess, built upon a sort of queer failure, highlights an impossibility of avant-garde performance to capture anything like a “real” or “authentic” gesture. Like Abraham in *Pavement*, Harrell and his collaborators engage a range of musical sources, including Prince, Amadou and Miriam, Donae’o, Kate Bush, Irene Cara, and Diana Ross. These varied sources speak to an arch queer sensibility that mines “bad” and “failed” sentimentality, as in the Ross and Cara selections; sentimentality that elusively expresses an overwrought earnestness. These are spectacularly tacky musical materials, originally sung in treacly contexts of over-ripe black femininity—a Hollywood femininity easily mocked and appropriated, here, by male performers with ersatz sincerity. These failed performances of lip-synced sincerity underscore the debt owed to the absent black women of the movies as well as the stage space. References to an inauthentic, historical black feminine presence in popular [\(p. 716\)](#) media, usurped here by male performers, speak to the fluid asymmetries executed by race in performance.



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Figure 31.2 (M)imosa conceived by Trajal Harrell,
Photo by Laurent Paillier

(M)imosa engages recognizably black dance movement, in sequences of house dancing and voguing. The work also engages tropes of minstrel-era drag performance, in, at least, a lip-synch rendering of the Prince song “Darling Nikki.” These fantastical flights into black performance stabilize

Africanist aesthetics as the source and method of the larger work. For example, Marlene Freitas’s drag-king minstrel inversion of Prince’s ferocious rock anthem suggests a historical black rage, tempered by its prerecorded sound, and interpreted here by a topless white female body in obviously fake facial hair and make-up. Freitas’ intensity matches the commitment to portrayal that blackface minstrel performers engaged when they offered surrogated versions of patently-false black gesture on American stages in the nineteenth century. The direct address of the sequence; performed directly at the seated

audience—confirms a barely submerged sense of debt and demand. In this sequence, (M)imosa assumes our collective willingness to take on the debt of black rock and masculine outrage barely contained by Prince's recorded voice, even if only for a moment. The excess of emotional energy, directed at a spurned lover, echoes, perhaps, our rising sense of frustration at the unconventional, fragmented construction of the show. If this is black work, bound up with choreographer Harrell's interest in black history and its divergence from mainstream white histories of American dance, its blackness is surely fleeting and fugitive (Figure 31.2).

(p. 717) Harrell is the only visibly black performer in the work. The mostly-white company of artists for (M)imosa act as a consuming energy that overwhelms imperatives of empathy and community alignment that might have accompanied articulations of black dance in other contexts. While postblack creative work might search for ways to center black alongside other forms of identity politic, (M)imosa offers an alternative narrative of black presence. Here, choreographer Harrell performs blackness in the piece as a sort of disappearance, as a fugitive presence never quite in focus and never able to control the proceedings or lead things forward. For example, the three white performers in the work change clothes often, but Harrell does not. While the other performers move from one flamboyant getup to another, Harrell remains in simple khaki pants and an almost drab sweater, his "everydayness" acting as visual tonic and disguise among the freakish extravagance of the other costumes. This sartorial refusal to engage in the always changing, unstable world of white excess suggests a disappearance, or perhaps a hiding in plain sight, that echoes the camouflaged transit of fugitive black. Unable to be seen or perceived, in its everyday absence, black here becomes a sort of antidote to campy visual excess. In some ways, the disappearance of the performer telegraphs difference, or an unwillingness to be aligned with the queer group; a need to be outside of the outside (avant-garde) that the performance already represents.

In all, (M)imosa arrives as a vibrant example of outsider art, created to establish alternative boundaries of structure, affect, skill, and racial complicity within a frame of contemporary performance. This contemporary, live art work begins from a politicized but ambivalent question about black presence in postmodern dance history, but proceeds to all-but-ignore that query in a series of aggressive stage acts that alternately amuse, confound, and provoke audience members. (M)imosa betrays no pretension to become something other than it is; unlike much of the work of Judson that self-consciously intended to revise terms of relationship among dancers and audiences, Harrell's work materializes as a sort of already failed gender/identity bending cabaret that cannot contain or shape itself into more than the sequencing of its varied parts. (M)imosa doesn't propose or conclude anything in particular about black presence within a downtown dance world, but it does raise the question of a historical exclusion that led to a circumstance in which black arrived downtown in fugitive, furtive fits and starts.

The fugitive black stays in motion, unable to stop, because stopping suggests an ability to resist the ever-changing tides of capital, empire, and subjugation. The fugitive black public cannot be seen; its visibility confirms a presence that is always already denied by

white-controlled capital. Fugitive black vibrates, in the shadows without marking. It hopes to emerge at key moments, to dilute the seemingly inescapable whiteness of performance without identity. Fugitive black arrives without obvious power, but with a mobility that supports unexpected shifts in tone and capacity. That shifting can help us move in concert toward something unexpected in terms of performance, black, and dance after race.

(p. 718) **NIGHT Speculative Futures**

After darkness fell, we stumbled. Under cover of night, our senses shifted from the primacy of the visual, and we realized that we had to feel to know. The dance of a Negro, so obvious in its spotlighted variety and specificity, now became an ambiguous sensation, a perception. Its essence—a flow-filled tangle of rhythmic and spiritual impulses—spilled out in myriad directions simultaneously, filling popular theaters, youtube channels, and movie houses, even as it decisively influenced opera house stages, wedding celebrations, and high school parties. And because we couldn't see its sources now, at night, we stopped allowing its presence to worry us. We danced without regard to difference, engaging the movements that answered the call of the moment and the need of the story. Dancing in this manner, we could feel the ambitions of the motion to connect us by way of unexpected gesture and unimagined possibility that just felt right. Disarmed, we allowed these feelings to lead us into murky regions of tactile duet: intimate and silly, sensual and senseless. At night our dance took form beyond measure when we allowed it to, outside the confines of the visible.

Credit is a means of privatization and debt a means of socialisation.

But debt is social and credit is asocial. Debt is mutual. Credit runs only one way. But debt runs in every direction, scatters, escapes, seeks refuge.

Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 61

Fugitive Debt

In *The Undercommons*, Moten and Harney write of the place of bad debt as the place of a “fugitive public,” or a public always in motion against its impossibly dystopian self-recognition of its own inability to act. “Fugitivity” is conceived as a place of no recourse and no alternative but to stay in motion; this incessant motility adheres not only to those who might be viewed as black “antisubjects,” but also to those repelled from the

acquisition of capital. Because we are all already supposed to be in debt, we are daily compelled to move and produce movements.

The act of imagining a future of black dance after race involves assuming debt—the debt of historical subjugation transformed into a future asymmetry that cannot be smoothed or forgiven. In discussing race as central to dance, we take on the debt of our forefathers; the debt that allowed for a middle passage that could bring vibrant dissonance among dancers and audiences. Culture misplaced became a root of black dance; dividing dance from its social practice and placing it on a stage for scrutiny by some (p. 719) who didn't dance at all created a debt of physical misunderstanding and social misuse. The credit offered by an allowance for black people to express themselves on stages must be answered by a debt of acknowledging subjugation that continues to accrue in cost through time. The problem of the minstrel mask persists; can black performers ever be allowed presence that is not doubly-encountered as simultaneous bathos and pathos? Perhaps this dance is strongly conceived and executed, but is it also somehow simultaneously pathetic and underdeveloped?

To speculate black dance after race, we have to imagine that there will be dance, and that there will be black. Either of these assumptions also assume debt; that dance will exist in a recognizable way in theatrical circumstances to allow an expertise of dancer who has trained and sacrificed physical diversity for the purpose of specialized performance. Here, we might consider the expertise of rhythm tap dancer Michelle Dorrance, or the ballerina Misty Copeland. Neither of these women can work in the other's form; and each have spent as much of her life within a dance studio, practicing, as outside "in the world." Our debt to these artists as audience involves our willingness to witness their artistry within a framework that circumscribes its capacity; tap dance and ballet each manage best in a circumstance with a responsive wooden floor. When these dancers move outside the venues that best allow their expression, we might experience their new surroundings in relation to the old, as an alternative to the favored, specialized sites of performance for their forms. In this, we turn back to our debt toward the specialization that allows tap dance or ballet to exist in spaces that are outside the home, and outside the everyday. Their expertise speaks to our willingness to take on a somewhat benign debt of physical practice.

The debt of "black" in this formation, though, arrives with violent force that continues to accrue. Black becomes even more potent as its fugitivity and fungibility overlap; black appears and disappears almost without warning, but almost always with vigorous effect. We can consider some obvious examples: the blackness of President Obama is continuously at issue; the murders of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis in 2012 revolved around their visible blackness and an assumption of social dis-ease affiliated with that blackness. Black continues to bring a tangle of violence along with its articulations and visibilities.

Shifting towards a future of black theatrical dance after race began many years ago, at least when Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus created works that explored cultural wellsprings of aestheticized social motion. While Dunham and Primus surely thought that their dances would open the space for considerations of African diaspora movement as worthy of its own aesthetic criteria, they also engaged these forms as the sources and subjects of the theatrical explorations they created. These artists thought that an “after race” understanding of their theatrical work might be one that resisted any exoticizing sensibility; one that resisted categorizing the work as “alternative” to some other, more mainstream practice; an understanding that worked against a presupposition that African diaspora materials arrive inherently racialized in order to be subjugated and devalued. Their works, including *The Wedding* (Primus 1961) and *Rites de Passage* (Dunham 1943) arrived with carefully-coordinated theatrical sensibilities (p. 720) that acknowledged the special character of stage dancing far removed from the circumstances that had created the formal structures engaged in the work. In one reading, we can imagine these dance performances that told particular stories of particular rituals transformed for the stage not only as exotic fodder for white audiences, but also as the enlightened exploration of dance content and method as its own end; an imagining of black dance that would bring forward black presence without regarding itself as an antidote, or a paying back toward legacies of slavery.

How *Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?*

Choreographer and visual artist Ralph Lemon creates performances that spill across several media and disciplines simultaneously. Raised in Minneapolis, Minnesota of the American Midwest, Lemon participated in theater and dance projects as a young artist, and began making postmodern choreographic work of his own in the 1980s. After he disbanded his dance company in 1996, Lemon turned to creating large hybrid dance theater/gallery installation/film/print publication projects that speak to metaphysical, social, and environmental themes. The ten-year project *Geography* led Lemon to create a mixed-form performance and installation work, *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?* (2010)⁵. This work, with several iterations, presumes an outside to the never-ending debt of racial exchange by way of engagement with noncontiguous forms and aesthetic resource.

The stage version of the work arrives in three distinct sections: an opening lecture, conducted by Lemon; a long dance sequence, engaged by the company of dancers, and a mysterious third section of grief, video projection, and a dance duet for the choreographer and a single woman artist of the group. While the work emerges as a decidedly twenty-first-century assemblage of technical achievement, with HD projection, exquisitely-rendered sound design, and cutting-edge lighting design, many sections of the

work can also be understood to be in relationship to historical forms of black dance and performance.

The work's opening lecture, like the stump speech of the nineteenth-century minstrel show, demonstrates the ability of the performer to render complex materials to the audience. In the traditional stump speech, the material gets away from the speaker, and the audience is invited to laugh at the ridiculousness of his various malapropisms. But in this case, Lemon allows the visual material to tell its own chaotic and unwieldy materials, while his text, spoken at a microphone on a stage, proposes mysterious and counter-intuitive connectivities. In this segment, Lemon claims a dance that makes him "happy and sad" at the same time. The startling assemblage of associations; Russian film, backwoods rural isolation, the political and physical limitations of old age, death and separation, animal life, and intoxication—suggests worlds without end, vistas connected (p. 721) beyond limitations of race or racial category. As Lemon sits on the stage in a comfortable chair, voice amplified by a sound system sensitive enough to overwhelm the possibility of any other voice in the room, we audience pay attention, and we begin the process of creating a pathway through the information in order to understand. The lecture confounds as it evokes; its humor fleeting and stinging at once; its contents beyond vision but bound up by feeling.

The second part of "How Can You Stay ..." begins with a demonstration of eccentric dance passed through a wringer of postmodern improvisational structuring. In the first section of the work, Lemon remarks that he hopes to create a structure that allows his collaborating performers to dance beyond technique, beyond sense, beyond sensibility. Of course, he also asks them to dance beyond their blackness into a space where unexpected impulse might be the stabilizing feature of movement creation. Remarkably, the dancing that emerges in this section feels similar to the twentieth-century traditions of "eccentric dance" that black Americans brought forward in the 1920s. Within their historical contexts, eccentric dances suggested physical movements that avoided social structures that might predetermine social possibility: these were dances that would not allow a stereotype of identity to be affixed to dancer according to race. These dances tended to be funny and silly, driven by the possibilities to do something unexpected and unprecedented with the body within the context of social dance. Eccentric dances contain a visual component of impossible movement that demands to be seen in order to be fulfilled, and eccentric dancing quickly became a popular form practiced in film and professional theatrical contexts. Eccentric dancers, like Snakehips Tucker, created dance careers from their ability to do work that couldn't easily be deemed dance or repeated in any other context; expert eccentric dancers resisted a fixing of form that might commodify the actual movements performed, even if the presence of an eccentric dancer performing could surely be commodified and packaged for consumption. The thing being done couldn't be easily fixed, but the doing of the thing; the performance—became glaringly visible and palpable in its execution (Figure 31.3).

Black Dance after Race

The artists of *How Can You Stay ...* engage in an extended eccentric dance sequence that resists this history, but nevertheless conjures its implications. The “formless” dancing arrives as the essential opening gesture of the second part of the work. Moving without seeming measure, and without recognizable intention or physical goal, the dancers moan, grunt, twist, pile energy into the ground, and work to create a tangible sense of purposeful effort without purpose. The eccentricity of this section intends to mark it as contemporary and fresh, live-art-like, and beyond categories of technical form. The section achieves an impressive ordering of energy as resource, and the company of black performers—some African American, some African, some with family connections in the Caribbean—establish the physical terms of an invisible, unalienated labor of expression. The eccentric dance confirms feeling as form; with feeling carefully relieved of a connection to racialized circumstance.



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 31.3 *How Can You Stay?* Choreography by Ralph Lemon, Photo by Dan Merlo

Collaborating performer Owkui Okpokwasilli's startling scream and cry that anchors the third portion of this work conveys none of the hallmarks of “dance” as they might be conceived in 2015. Her techniques are those of the actor, who finds a way to [\(p. 722\)](#) convey emotion as expressive gesture,

without reference to the appearance of the body. Okpokwasilli's force can easily be likened to the “heart-rending shrieks” of Aunt Hester from Frederick Douglass's writings (Douglass, 1845, 42–43), as we consider the work as a gesture of black dance. Surely theorists might easily make this connection for Lemon's work; black dance as referent to an originary sort of scar laid bare on Hester's back and emblazoned in young Douglass's psyche. But Lemon situates the scream within the context of a lost lover amid a prototypically modern relationship that reaches across racial and cultural identities. The scream here refers as much to an elite, creative-class displacement of global cosmopolitanism. Lemon's personal tragedy of loss, performed by surrogate Okpokwasilli, refers less to the scars of his blackness than to the scar of displaced heterosexual partnering. And yet—the debt that the contemporary performance owes to Douglass's memory must be paid by audiences familiar with the referent.

Lemon's appearance in the work stabilizes a confident authorial voice that commands every aspect of the work—as its curator designer, choreographer, dancing artist, researcher and dramaturge. While Lemon works with the excellent dramaturge Katherine Profeta, as a whole, *How Can You Stay ...* proposes that Lemon's world arrives self-constructed and related only to his passing interests, inquiries, and tragedies. The choreographer guides the audience with a mischievous distraction that resists any simple

relation of gesture and meaning; in this he repeatedly denies us a grounding motivation in race, despite his own visible blackness and that of his entire performing company. Lemon's presence resists visibility as a black masculine even as it resists consideration of the terms of relationship that conjure black into being via its opposites. The work intends to operate far outside of race.

(p. 723) The overall effect of this installation/proposition/performance about ecstasy and its failures also moves outside of dance to suggest something generally artistic, creative, and unusual. The work arrives with the ambition of a possibility of postblack but also as something postdance, posttheatrical, and postdisciplinary. This moving beyond category represents the revision of structure that might be offered after postblack: dance that is not quite dance, without boundary or form, comprised of a careful arrangement of inexplicably coherent ideas. The whole of *How Can You Stay ...* makes sidelong connection to black presence as an unavoidable debt, born by its cast's visible blackness. Is this what comes of black dance after race? An unassailable debt, fugitive in its location, but already present whenever black is brought forth in relationship to dance.

Black Men Making Dances in Theaters

The black men who made these three works exist within a contemporary economy of blackness that "needs" their presence, as stabilizing, masculine energies able to corral the labor of women, queer men and women, and queer men and women of color. Note well that these works include artists who might claim these identity markers at times; a masculine norm of authority produces the possibility for these large works to arrive in international performance venues in the 2010s. The neoliberal impulse to "include" black male presence among any survey of dance performance persists, and these artists surely arrive in some venues as live embodiments of "diverse racial presence." Their work outside of everyday constructions of black adds a patina of progressive racial politic, an indication that black can mean "beyond" its visibility. The fact of masculine presence reassures our collective movement into a space of "after race;" we trust these gentlemen to move us into unanticipated venues and circumstances.

And the unexpected surely summons us toward the place beyond the day. The dance of the Negro enlivened us all, and we resisted a troubling nagging that had been perpetually present as the past. At night, we began to reset our clocks, and the blackness of that dark hour thrilled us with possibility. Invisible to each other, we smelled, touched, tasted, and listened—what was that? What did that mean, that gesture that we could no longer see? Was it an essential, tribal-inspired motion that that told of secrets beyond comprehension? Did we know of it before; did we owe it something? Was it futuristic and sincere? Was it ... a black dance? And could it have been ... profound?

Notes:

(1.) "Look, a Negro!" quotation from Fanon 1967, 109.

(2.) *Pavement*. 2012. Choreography by Kyle Abraham in collaboration with performing artists of Abraham. In Motion; Dramaturge: Charlotte Brathwaite; Editing Advisor: Alexandra Wells; Costume Design: Kyle Abraham; Scenic/Lighting Designer: Dan Scully; Public Programs Developer: Maritza Mosquera; Sound Editing: Sam Crawford; Video images courtesy of Chris Ivey; Music: J. C. Bach, Jacques Brel, Benjamin Britten, Antonio Caldara, Sam Cooke, Colin Davis, Emmanuelle Haïm, Heather Harper, Donny Hathaway, Edward Howard, Concerto Köln, Philippe Jaroussky, Le Cercle De L'Harmonie, Alan Lomax, Ensemble Matheus, Fred McDowell, Hudson Mohawke, Alva Noto, Jérémie Rhorer, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Carl Sigman, Jean-Christophe Spinosi, and Antonio Vivaldi; Performers: Kyle Abraham, Matthew Baker, Rena Butler, Chalvar Monteiro, Jeremy "Jae" Neal, Maleek Washington, and Eric Williams.

(3.) Pavement creation notes available at website <http://abrahaminmotion.org/>.

(4.) *(M)imosa/Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church (M)*. 2011. With Cecilia Bengolea, Francois Chaignaud, Marlene Monteiro Freitas, and Trajal Harrell. While *(M)imosa* is co-directed, it surely springs from Harrell's larger project, begun in 2001.

(5.) *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?* 2010. Created by Ralph Lemon; Katherine Profeta dramaturg; performers Djédjé Djédjé Gervais, Darrell Jones, Gesel Mason, Okwui Okpokwasili, Omagbitse Omagbemi, David Thomson, Walter and Edna Clark.

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