CORPOREAL TURF: NOTES ON BLACKNESS AND DRAMATURGY

ANGÉLIQUE WILLKIE

This essay is part of an ongoing reflection. It will have a beginning; it will have an end. But that is neither the beginning nor the end of the questioning or of the thought process. They will both continue to evolve. Like a performance.

In 2018, Miguel Gutierrez, New York-based multidisciplinary artist, choreographer, and performer of Colombian origin, wrote an article in *BOMB Magazine* that allowed me to put words to unformed thoughts that have haunted me throughout my career. In "Does Abstraction Belong to White People? Thinking the Politics of Race in Contemporary Dance," Gutierrez quotes Afro American choreographer Donald McKayle:

> I always begin a project with the knowledge that I am dealing with people, with individuals, with human beings. And my approach is always visceral. I give moments that are visceral. Everything must come from within and everything must have meaning. When I choreograph, I never use people merely to create a design. I mean, abstraction is always present in an art form. And I use it, but I have never used human beings simply as a design element. My work has always been concerned with humanity in one way or another. Basically, I feel the beauty in man is in his diversity and in his deep inner feelings.

That statement was made by McKayle in 1973 in an interview with the *New York Times*. Gutierrez describes this citation as a way of helping him

understand the tension that exists between what he calls "white modern dance" and "black modern dance." McKayle's need (and, by proxy, Gutierrez's also) to work from "within" is both aesthetic and profoundly political; his comments resonate for me as a call to artistic arms that remains valid fifty years later—a realization that in itself speaks to the current interrogations of our craft, and to my own predilections.

The title of this essay (or, rather, ongoing thought process), contains meaning for me in each of its component parts. "Corporeal" for me refers to the relational body, by which I mean the physical body and all that accompanies it (morphology, ethnoracial origins, age, gender, physical (dis)abilities, among others), as well as the way that the body engages with and is seen by the world (sociocultural background, sexual identity, languages spoken, religious beliefs, political preoccupations, etc.). Most importantly, this relational body is a site of both meaning-making and social inscription and is in constant and fluid engagement with its surrounding context/s. I think of "turf" primarily in the context of territory, with the notions of contested space, boundaries (and their transgression), belonging and autonomy embedded in my thinking. But there are also other inspirations that emerge from the term. In the online Merriam-Webster dictionary, among the definitions that come up for "turf" is grass, with its surface layer of soil held together by its roots. I think of the anchoring provided by those roots that are below the surface (or "from within" in McKayle's words), while the grass and surface soil are external (the potential "abstraction"?). There is also the idea of turfing someone—informal British English for throwing them out—which evokes for me the transgression of some limit and the right one has to eject the transgressor. The idea of corporeal turf then encompasses the territory of the body, implying autonomy, boundaries, potential contestation, etc., as well as what lies beneath its "surface," which I interpret as what is known in/to that body that cannot be known from outside that particular corporeality's engagement with the world.

In my reference to Blackness, I am looking beyond a specific ontology and toward an experiential knowing that is its own practice—a praxis. It is *a* lens through which I situate my light-skinned Jamaican self and my experiences in a world and an art form that are dominated by white, Eurocentric

values, methods, and aesthetics. My unquestioning adherence to these values, methods, and aesthetics over many years has become the basis for my current interrogations, which sit at the axis of the very undefinability of Blackness and its very real experience: how it has consciously or unconsciously informed my artistic contributions; how it has been read *into* my artistic contributions; how its presence has informed the agency I experienced in creation. In McKayle's words, what are the "deep inner feelings" of my Blackness—these are the questions that rise to the surface of my thinking as I contemplate my art. Dramaturgy, for me, manifests in the fundamental source material and emergent through line of a creation and is responsible for identifying and cultivating the meaning embedded in, or unfolding through, the work in process. It expresses the ethos of that process, both informing and informed by the ever-evolving relationships between the original material being explored, its creators and/or performers, and the outside world. Ultimately, in the context of this essay, it is as much the ways in which I connect the notions of corporeality, territory, and Blackness as it is my individual navigations and negotiations as a Black artist in a creative process. Together, these notions provide the overall context for my reflections and set the stage for the ways in which I invite the reader to engage with them.

CURIOSITIES

My interrogations emerge primarily from my lived experience as a Black Jamaican woman who has enjoyed a successful career as a performer and dramaturge in a dance form that is primarily European, or at least Western in its origins. My dance training in the Martha Graham technique took place in the mid-1980s in Toronto, while the bulk of my professional career as a contemporary dance performer, teacher, and dramaturge took place over the twenty-five years I lived in Europe, throughout the 1990s and well into the 2000s. Arriving in Brussels, Belgium, at the height of what was known as the "Flemish dance wave," which had begun in the 1980s, I had the privilege to work with groundbreaking art-makers, including choreographers Alain Platel and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, theatre director Jan Lauwers/Needcompany, and as a singer with

the "world-music" group Zap Mama. Currently, I enjoy a full-time position as associate professor in a prominent academic institution and continue to perform and to mentor artists, both locally and internationally.

In all of those contexts—with the exception of Zap Mama (we were all African diasporic women)—I experienced what it was to be the only, or one of very few, Black artist/s. The Europe I lived in seemed to pride itself on a kind of postracial mode of being in which my Blackness posed no issue. However, I was aware in Belgium that my privilege came from the fact that I did not belong to that country's colonial diaspora (the Congo or Rwanda) nor to its more recent immigrant population from the Maghreb, which suffers deep marginalization and Islamophobia. This meant that my presence in the Belgian artistic community was not provocative; rather, it assuaged any perceived need for representational diversity, notwithstanding whatever talent I was able to bring to those contexts. If anything, my light skin, Jamaican origin, and being a native English-speaker were assets. It was not until I moved back to Canada and to North American sensibilities some ten years ago that I realized I had not felt "seen" for the specificity of my Black experience during those years spent in continental Europe. And, in full recognition of the complexities of the Black experience, I am not always comfortable with the heightened visibility that accompanies my Blackness in the Canadian context either.

Yet I recognize my need to embrace that complexity—the continued navigation between hyper- and invisibility; the ambivalence of wanting my specificity recognized and yet not wanting to be obliged to explain it; the need somehow for the stories my dance tells to reflect these ambivalences or perhaps simply to openly be informed by them. I am interested in the ways in which my lived experience as a Black woman from Jamaica living in Canada and Europe feeds my artistic contributions and their dramaturgies and nurtures the creative power and agency that come from my personal relational well. This for me is corporeal turf and I consider it a decidedly decolonial[1]

1 A term coined by sociologist Aníbal Quijano, **decoloniality** "undoes, disobeys, and delinks from this matrix [of modernity/coloniality]; constructing paths and praxis toward an otherwise of thinking, sensing, believing, doing, and living." Decoloniality is understood as a process of undoing. It is concerned with "the habits that modernity/coloniality

positioning. Honing in consciously on my own sensibilities and on the questions and ambiguities that arise from my particular Black body navigating white dance allows me to undo the layers of (colonial/white) conditioning that have been so significant to my dramaturgy.

Over the past five to ten years, there have been increasing concerns expressed by dance communities in North America and in Europe regarding the need to decolonize the art of contemporary dance—its training, its aesthetics, its creative methods, its programming and funding, who is in dance studios, who are dance audiences, etc. What is implicitly being considered in the calls for decolonization are the structural racist biases that are the legacy of Western society's development. Admittedly with some discomfort, I have often found myself wondering in what way these calls are relevant to me if I have actually enjoyed a long and successful career performing, creating and teaching contemporary dance on the international stage. What is that nagging questioning that has been with me over so many years? Yet another publicly displayed murder of a Black man—George Floyd in the summer of 2020—and the subsequent global reckonings provoked by the Black Lives Matter movement have brought me to a place of personal stock-taking and the acknowledgement that in my specific experience, decolonizing my dance includes situating my own background, i.e., addressing my Blackness and the ways in which it has been present, or not, in my artistic practice, and then speaking clearly (i.e. creating, teaching, performing) from that position. Simply "being an artist" is a universality that I have believed and aspired toward, but it does not in fact fully reflect the realities I live nor the ways in which I am perceived in various contexts.

One of the most notable experiences of my time in Europe was as a performer in Belgian creator Alain Platel's *La Tristeza Complice*. Platel's approach to creation is anchored primarily in a profound curiosity about people and the conviction that art has a social responsibility; his work does not shy away

implanted in all of us; with how modernity/coloniality has worked and continues to work to negate, disavow, distort and deny knowledges, subjectivities, world senses, and life visions" (Mignolo and Walsh 4). By contrast, the term decolonization refers to a shift in the power relations imposed by and through the structures of colonization.

from complicated subjects or bodies on stage. I was transformed as an artist by my experience with him and I realize that the beginning of my latent queries perhaps began with *La Tristeza*, as we called the piece. The performers enjoyed tremendous freedom throughout Platel's creative process and his talent in assembling the poetic collage of bodies and expressions that emerged was gentle and uncanny. Nevertheless, I wonder to what extent how I was "seen" could have been brought more consciously to the surface during the creative process, allowing me to embrace or refuse any projections accordingly. For example, neither during the creation nor in performance had I considered the potential impact of my duet with fellow dancer Koen Augustijnen, in which I sang "If Love's a Sweet Passion" from Henry Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* while he used his teeth to pull at my clothing and undress me. I discovered only many years later that a photograph of that scene graced the front cover of American dance studies scholar Ann Cooper Albright's 1997 book, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*. In it she writes:

> In one section, for instance, a drag queen (played by Koen Augustijnen) repeatedly grabs a woman's body (Angélique Willkie). Pulling and picking at her skin, her hair and her clothes, he seems at once abusive and yet also desirous of becoming her. Watching a white man touch a black woman in such an abusive manner emphasized her passivity and at first I felt very uncomfortable with the sexual and racial politics of this scene. Nonetheless, these politics were complicated by the fact that this man was wearing a bra and lipstick, as well as the fact that he had earlier been the object of sexual harassment. In addition, the woman endured the whole event while doggedly singing a slow ballad. While I found the work to be disturbingly ambiguous at times like this, I also found it powerful and compelling. (xx–xxi)

Koen and I did not intentionally explore the dynamics of race or gender or passivity. What our respective corporealities represented in that moment together transcended any initial objective on our parts—and perhaps also Platel's. It is clear from Albright's reflections (who read the situation and our

bodies as a white American woman steeped in the historical race relations of that country) that the kind of ambiguity and complexity that I am ultimately interested in exploring *as Blackness* was present in this scene—in spite of my lack of awareness.

My perspective was that of a Jamaican Canadian Belgian dancer who grew up in a context where most people looked like me or, at least, were all considered Jamaicans alike. Self-identification according to race was not a way of positioning myself in the Jamaica of my youth; social class and poverty were more significant as ways of being situated in that society. Immigrating to Canada with my family at the age of fifteen was a first introduction to me being seen as Black; but even if I had to deal with the realities of becoming a minority, I fortunately did not experience much direct racism. Coming from a relatively comfortable upper-middle-class background, I grew up believing I could do and be whatever I committed to, no matter where or amongst whom that took place. Some fourteen years later, I arrived in Belgium where I seemed not to be considered the same kind of "Black" as I had been in North America. It was another phase in my migratory past that has forcibly been characterized by adaptation, (successful) attempts at assimilation, and a certain hybridity. This meant a kind of identitylessness and convenient anonymity in Belgium that no doubt contributed to the freedom I felt to explore and to own whatever emerged in the creative process of *La Tristeza*, regardless of any other potentially contextual factors. If anything, I identified with Platel's concern for marginalized populations through the lens of the so-called haves and have nots, but not through the arbitrary signification that is race.

As I think back to my contemporary dance experiences at that point, I realize that since I still did not think of myself as a *Black* dancer, neither did I imagine that Blackness would be the lens through which others would see me. I naively thought I would simply be seen as a dancer—hopefully a good one. So I played! I had a bald head, so I wore a wig. I liked to sing, so we explored ways of making that complicated. I thought of women I had seen in European train stations, and those hidden on sidewalks and street corners I knew as a child. I wore their clothes and tried to disappear as they did. Koen was a heterosexual man with long hair, so he played dress-up and

his transvestite character emerged. We liked working together, so we did. There was no particular conversation between us nor with Platel regarding the meaning-making we were engaged in—no shared reflections on our differences in race, sexuality, or gender. He simply left us the space to explore. The magic of Platel's work for me is its complex and yet simple humanity, its love affair with the minutiae of people, something I believe, in part, emerges from his confidence in the strange and wordless intuitions that constitute a successful collective artistic encounter.

Nevertheless, there is something about the agency of deliberateness that now holds my interest. Addressing possible interpretations of my creative interventions—knowing of course that it is impossible to predict the reactions of an audience—might have allowed me to fully invest my place in the evolving dramaturgy of that creative process. This current path of questioning is as much about my desire to interrogate how we function in dance creation as it is an opportunity for me to fully embrace my own artistico-political *raisons d'être* and the reality that my Black performer body is a socially and politically charged site that cannot be separated from meaning, creative content, or dramaturgical contribution.

DRAMATURGY IN DANCE

The practice of dramaturgy in dance, or how we make what we make, in my opinion, is fundamentally linked to the question of why we make what we make. When dramaturgical practice engages critically, it questions the concept of choreography, the process of creation, what is dance, the relationship to the audience, the body, the agency of the performer versus that of the choreographer, etc. There is no one way to practise dramaturgy. There are as many dramaturgies as there are processes, and it is a fundamentally artisanal discipline. Its becoming happens only by its doing. There is no positivist theory of dramaturgy, there is no instruction booklet; already, defining it is a subjective exercise. It is as experiential as it is experimental. I adhere to Flemish dance dramaturge pioneer Marianne Van Kerkhoven's suggestion that dramaturgy is not a truth that is imposed on a creation, but rather a constantly

evolving thought process that is specific to each context. She described her practice as follows:

> The kind of dramaturgy that I am familiar with has nothing to do with the "concept dramaturgy" that has been in vogue in German theater since Brecht. [. . .] The kind of dramaturgy that I feel connected with, and that I have tried to apply in both theater and dance, has a "process" character: one chooses to work with materials of various origins (texts, movements, film images, objects, ideas, etc.); the "human material" (the actors/dancers) is decidedly the most important; the personality of the performers is considered as the foundation of the creation rather than their technical abilities. The director or choreographer sets to work with these materials; during the rehearsal process he/she observes how these materials behave and develop; only at the end of this process does a concept, a structure, a more or less defined form slowly emerge; this final structure is not known from the beginning. (qtd. in Cools 90)

Van Kerkhoven's reference to working with "human material" does not specifically suggest the broader notion of corporeality as I have expressed it here, nor does it address the agency that I hold dear in the idea of corporeal turf. However, her emphasis on "process" and on "working with materials of various origins" certainly suggests that dramaturgical practice has the potential to engage with what I would describe as corporeally sourced creative content (versus simple movement or theatrical exploration). Dramaturgy, as I know it, is a practice of listening, observation, improvisation, and sometimes provocation. Its form is fluid, by nature constantly adapting to its context, and it includes all facets of the creation. The emergent character of dramaturgy is rooted in the fact that its process, its reflection, its articulation, are intimately linked to live artistic exploration and therefore, potentially, to the sensibilities, propensities, and capacities of all individuals involved in the creative process. There is little doubt that considering "all individuals involved" goes counter to the usual hierarchies embedded in the creative process, which give clear

priority to the vision of the choreographer. However, the development of decolonial dramaturgies relies precisely on meeting the challenge to not only allow but to facilitate and encourage the agency and opacity[2] of the performers.

According to Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt, dramaturgy is always in progress, open to the disruptions caused by both rehearsal and performance (5). The possibility for disruption in and of itself implies a dynamic, contextual, and even political dimension to dramaturgical practice. It is this political potential of dramaturgy—in my opinion, a necessary ethos—that is of particular significance with regard to the socio-political charge, content, context that I believe is borne by and within each performer's relational body. Beyond their creative skills, it is this wider context that influences how they resonate with ideas, themes, or propositions, and I suggest that dramaturgy should not abstract these resonances from their wider context. My interest lies in how relational dramaturgies can become, or perhaps need to become, an active point of departure for creation. By encouraging the contextual threads that weave around and through my Black-woman corporeality to actively inform the creative process and its content, the stories that my dance tells, have a better chance of speaking through my own sensibilities and agency, even alongside or in service of the vision of the choreographer. This is the basis for what I consider the corporeal dramaturgy of the performer: at the micro level it is the body within the piece; at the macro level, it is the body in its larger socio-political context.

WHAT BODIES?

The body is central to my understanding of and relationship to artistic creation. The intrinsic logic of dance implies the specific contribution of the bodies of the performers. As a young dancer, the approaches to technical training that I was exposed to were essentially based on the movement vocabularies of particular choreographers (Graham, José Limón, Lester Horton,

2 According to Édouard Glissant, the notion of opacity is a conceptual justification for irreducibility, for inexplicability, for the right to non-transparent difference (see his *Poetics of Relation*). I will come back to this notion in more detail later in the essay.

Merce Cunningham, etc.) and the dancer's primary objective was to perfect these proposed forms to be reproduced in choreography. That capacity to reproduce movement in the spirit of the choreographer's authorial signature is what defined a "good" dancer. (I did not consider my formative training in Jamaican folk dance of any significance at all at this point!) Improvisation—understood as my own movement research and exploration—was a distinctly different skill that did not seem pertinent to me because I did not imagine myself needing to develop my own choreographic vocabulary. In contrast, most of today's creative processes are almost entirely dependent on the dancers' improvisations, either as the performance material or, at the very least, to generate it. Recent creations I have been involved in either as performer or dramaturge have worked with scores and/or the negotiation of tasks, actively avoiding any aesthetics of sameness or exactitude and relying on individual and unique responses from each performer to the choreographic propositions. Nevertheless, as has been the case throughout most of my dance adventure, there is a certain dismissal or invisibility of my socially inscribed, racialized body in the different creative discourses, as if it has been unimportant relative to my talents and contributions. My status as a woman has been more evidently manifest and discussed, but my body in the world as a Black woman disappears when, in fact, that intersectional reality is critical to my relational body, its very specific relationship to the world, and to the stories it tells.

In *J'ai pleuré avec les chiens*, Canadian choreographer Daina Ashbee's work for the 2020 edition of Montreal's Festival TransAmériques (cancelled due to the pandemic), the program notes speak to the fact that the piece assembles five women between the ages of twenty-four and fifty-eight (myself) ("J'ai pleuré avec les chiens"). There is no mention of our ethnic backgrounds, but the reality is that I was the only non-white performer in the work of an Indigenous choreographer renowned for powerfully intimate performances using nudity and a certain violence in the movement propositions—I wonder about history; I wonder about the presence of my older, naked Black body alongside four younger white women; I wonder about "invisibility."

In July 2018, Quebec theatre director Robert Lepage created the production *SLĀV* for the Montreal Jazz Festival and it had to be cancelled. The

production featured a predominantly white cast dressed in slave costumes, singing traditional African American songs and picking cotton. Audiences and critics rallied behind the binary notions of colour-blindness and cultural appreciation on the one hand, versus cultural appropriation and racism on the other. Lepage claimed that *SLĀV* was based on the foundations of theatrical practice. For him, that meant "to slip into the skin of the other in order to try to understand it. And, by the same, perhaps also to understand oneself." He continues, "From the moment that we are no longer allowed to slip into the skin of the other, where we are forbidden to recognize ourselves in the other, theater is distorted, prevented from performing its primary function and loses its reason for being" ("Annulation de *SLĀV*").

In reaction to the controversy, sociologist Myrlande Pierre talked about the expression of a "social malaise" and the fact that, in the context of *SLĀV*, a social and political charge was totally obscured in the final result of that performance, notwithstanding the noble intentions of its creators. There was a notable deficit in representation of the persons historically concerned by the production's dramaturgy and content. By persons concerned, I underline bodies concerned—the history of slavery is not disembodied. In this situation the body of the performer could not be seen as either neutral or universal. "Slipping into the skin of the other" was not an arbitrary exercise. An in-depth exploration of colour-blindness and postracialism is beyond the scope of this essay; suffice to say that, in my opinion, this particular example of cultural appreciation falsely depoliticized the bodies of both Black and white performers in a way that dissociated them from their broader lived, socio-political contexts and the power dynamics that are embedded in those contexts. Ironically, the two Black singers in the cast of *SLĀV* had to "leave their Blackness at the door" so to speak in order to universalize the entirety of the cast and content into a purely musical experience. As it turned out, the objections to the production revealed that the dramaturgies of these relational bodies could not be subsumed by an "abstract" and unrooted dramaturgy, and that perhaps performance and its creative processes need to move toward greater accountability with regard to their political situatedness.

As much as I am advocating for a deeper engagement with Black corporeality in dramaturgical thinking, I must also admit to a certain ambivalence with regard to its concrete manifestations in the creative process and how that might affect my agency. Did the Black (or even the white!) singers in *sLĀV* feel the need (and, if so, have the space) to express any concerns they might have had? Perhaps engaging in the project without hesitation was in fact an expression of agency! The social inscriptions on bodies cannot be erased, so my queries relate to how we acknowledge them in our art of the body and to what extent I/we have the agency to resist or to play with those projections in/through creation. In the case of Platel's *La Tristeza Complice* and Ann Cooper Albright's reading of the scene described, it's hard to say that I would necessarily have made a different choice with regard to the proposition had I imagined the impact for an audience of a white transvestite picking away at my Black female body. However, I might have felt significantly empowered to have been able to engage in a conversation about possible interpretations and/or even intentions on my part or that of the choreographer, particularly in the context of collaborative creation.

ACTS OF AGENCY

The collaborative creative process is one of mutual and consenting appropriation. It is what Marcus Boon calls "acts of possession and dispossession," and these acts take place throughout any artistic collaboration—they revolve around ideas, movements, personal stories, language, and a multiplicity of individual intentions and histories. This creative appropriation—i.e., possession and dispossession of creative material—can be considered legitimate in a situation where all parties begin by contributing from their acknowledged and respective turf. Any other situation becomes one in which power relationships, however well-intentioned, however invisible, are skewed. What does this imply for a choreographic dramaturgy? What is the performer's particular turf? As a Black dance artist, what have I brought into creations that I "possess(ed)," that I knew, and how was that recognized? What agency did this give me in those creative processes?

Confession Publique, a solo co-created with choreographer Mélanie Demers in 2021, has come to exemplify for me a performance that not only emerges from my corporeal turf, but also enhances the depth and scope of that turf as a source of dramaturgy, in the true sense of meaning-making—for me as performer as well as for the coherence of the work. As mentioned earlier, I see the corporeal dramaturgy of the performer as operating at both micro and macro levels—i.e., my body in the piece as well as that body in its broader societal context. In the case of *Confession Publique*, the micro and macro are inextricably intertwined. As the source material for the performance content, my corporeality is both the storyteller and the stories told. There is no decontextualization of my relational body from its broader web of influences and projections. In fact, on the contrary, we play wittingly with that web for its dramaturgical content—for example, the impact of displaying my older, Black, naked woman body on a platform reminiscent of the display of slaves or of the Hottentot Venus; or not allowing my (Black woman) voice to be heard by the audience as it is drowned out at various points in the performance. During the process, I engaged in acts of creative possession and dispossession as described by Boon in constant negotiation with the choreographer—my body, my stories, my willingness, my limits, what I felt I was ready to "give" to the process, what I felt needed to remain my secret garden, but all with the clear recognition that the choreographic craft was Demers's to hone. The result is an ode to agency and to opacity and to the power of my Blackness to speak for itself as dramaturgy.

The particular mix of my morphology, age, racial and ethnocultural origins, gender, relationship to my artistic disciplines, physical abilities, injuries, and, equally, the historical, institutional, political, and sociocultural contexts that inform my sensibilities, my personal and artistic perceptions that influence the ways in which I am perceived by choreographers and audiences—all of this (and more) constitutes the material from which my creation emerges. It is also the reality to which my creation speaks. Creating with, or rather from, an individual dramaturgy implies, for me, creating from a place of territorial corporeality, of turf, of agency, of opacity—none of these is neutral; none is universal.

WHEN AGENCY IS ABSENT

What might be an aesthetics of neutrality? Of universality? Of agency or its lack? The classical ballet of the French court was perhaps the summum of colonial normativity, privileging (white) non-differentiated, idealized (presumably universal) forms and bodies, rather than any differentiated individual content. It relied on a visual aesthetic rather than the kind of visceral humanity that Donald McKayle referred to in his 1973 interview. Describing the modernist conception of the subject as predicated on vision, art historian and theorist Amelia Jones writes that the "I" of the subject was a disembodied eye that turned all bodies into objects (37). One consequence of the prevalence of the disembodied visual was the othering of those who were visibly different, with little or no recognition of their individual subjectivity.

Saartjie Baartman, infamously exhibited as the Hottentot Venus throughout nineteenth century Europe for her steatopygic buttocks and genitalia is perhaps the penultimate example of a dehumanized performing Black woman "other," reduced to objecthood and denied all agency (there is some polemic as to whether or not she had agreed to being exhibited but with or without her consent, the dehumanization and objectification remain).[3] This imposition of an abject lack of subjectivity, of inner self, of turf, was the territory of the "other." It was in no way similar to the glamorous lack of individuality of the classical ballet reserved for white, universally normalized bodies.

This odd contradiction between the glorified anonymity and (white) sameness of a French court *Swan Lake* corps de ballet versus the degrading anonymity and vilified (Black) difference of a Saartjie Baartman is one that continues to haunt my thinking. One is chosen, the other imposed; one is

3 The fascination with Baartman's buttocks was so far-reaching that it is credited for the origin of the Victorian bustle dress, popular among upper-class women in the nineteenth century: "The origins of this accessory have an arguably complex history that is rooted in the exploitation of Black women. Specifically, the bustle is arguably directly inspired by Black body types. Through the repulsion and desire of Black women in European society, the bustle quickly became a staple among the elite" (Jackson).

reminiscent of light, purity, and transparency, the other of strangeness, inferiority, and even non-humanness. What we recognize as dance aesthetics have their origins in the evolution of this perception of bodies and its influence on universalized (white) dance, from the colonial period and its modernity through to postmodern and ultimately contemporary times. Despite a greater diversity of bodies being increasingly present (and still not sufficiently!), the frames of reference, both aesthetic and dramaturgical, do not inherently reflect the historico-cultural imaginaries of these "other" corporealities. Rather, in order to correspond (read: fit in), there has been a tacit understanding that they/we will adopt the universalized values that invisibilize our difference (read: invalidate our lived experience). This is yet another kind of anonymity—not glorified, not degrading, but abstracted, decontextualized, dehistoricized, made transparent. My need for decolonial dramaturgies sits here—i.e., in my desire to revisit, unabstract, and recontextualize my own story in all of its relational rootedness.

With specific relevance for the myth of universality, Miguel Gutierrez, a successful dance artist, is still provoked to wonder:

> How did I come to be colonized? And how did I find out that I had been colonized? Have I found out? . . . How did whiteness become, I shudder even to write this, safety—a lack of feeling, a lack of allegiances. It made space, or at least I thought it did, for me. For a me that had no history . . . Who has the right not to explain themselves? The people who don't have to. The ones whose subjectivities have been naturalized.

Corporeal turf is, in a way, a response to the need to explain myself in order to fully exist, and yet, at the same time, to have agency over what is explained and how it is done—if at all. Édouard Glissant's notion of opacity is a preciously useful lens. The Martinican philosopher advocates for an openness to the unknown, an unpredictability, and, ultimately, a non-transparency that is neither anonymous nor decontextualized. Speaking to difference as it is habitually "measured" or categorized, Glissant writes, "If we examine the

process of 'understanding' people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency" (189). He explains transparency as the need to reduce according to a scale of one's own reference: "I relate it to my norm. I admit you to existence, within my system. I create you afresh." He continues: "But perhaps we need to bring an end to the very notion of a scale. Displace all reduction" (190). Opacity becomes what he considers a "rightful" escape from supposed legitimacy and, by extension, from the Eurocentric criteria that define that legitimacy.

CONSTRUCTIVE OPACITIES

Glissant makes a critical contribution to my reflections on Blackness in particular but, also, to how I consider the potential of and responsibilities embedded in dramaturgical practice. What has been considered legitimate for Black bodies in dance has to a large extent been either "reduced" to a place of invisibility and assimilation into the universalizing aesthetics of Western concert dance, or exoticized as hypervisible "other" kinds of dance (for example, so-called African, ethnic, urban, and street dance, etc.—often considered neither professional nor concert-worthy). As calls for decolonization, antiracism, and equity in dance continue to manifest, what is dramaturgy's responsibility? How can we see the creative process and its eventual outcomes differently? It seems to me that the first step requires that we see the performers differently—that we allow their relational bodies to be an integral part of the process rather than secondary to it; that we invite a lack of "transparency" into our aesthetics and our modes of operation; that we renounce the illusion of universality and sameness in favour of real encounters with other historico-cultural imaginaries and lived experiences.

In his volume *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, Uri McMillan looks at strategies for agency among Black women performers from the nineteenth century through to the present. Through the creation of so-called avatars, these women use their status as "performing objects" to gain empowerment and/or communicate a message that would otherwise go unheard. One of those artists is Lorraine O'Grady, an

upper-middle-class daughter of Jamaican immigrants, in her late eighties at the time of this writing. In her own writing, she describes her illusions of living in a postracial America being shattered in 1980 by an encounter with a white performance artist who wore blackface. O'Grady was, in her words, "transformed from post black to black." This shift in the way she situated her identity is compelling. What brings us into Blackness? For me, it was not only George Floyd's murder that brought me into my Blackness; it was watching my two Black teenagers recognize with confusion and horror that their Black bodies were less worthy in our society. That was my call to arms, manifesting in extensive antiracism work at my university and a deep dive into the place of my Blackness in my art form.

O'Grady's work focuses mainly on representations of Black female subjectivity and issues surrounding the erasure and invisibility of difference. She explores notions of territory and proprietorship of the Black body, particularly female, and its role in her exercise of subjective agency. She became concerned with what she considered postmodernism's oversimplifications of social reality, which she felt relocated subjectivity away from the body and in favour of history in a way that conveniently continued to serve those in power. She argues that the body undoubtedly received the effects of that history and was shaped by them and that it forcibly remains the location of resistance. In response to a comment by a "non-artist acquaintance" that "avant-garde art doesn't have anything to do with Black people," O'Grady took her camera to the "largest Black space she could think of"—the African American Day Parade in the streets of Harlem, New York—to document the crowds for her series *Art is . . .* Fifteen Black actors and dancers, all dressed in white and travelling through the streets on a gold-fabric-covered float, reached out to the excited onlookers and had them pose inside empty gold picture frames. The piece spoke for itself.

She described it to a journalist:

> It's funny. The organizers of the parade were totally mystified by me and by the performance. The announcer made fun of the float as it passed the reviewing stand: "They tell me this is art, but you know

> the Studio Museum? I don't understand that stuff." But the people on the parade route got it. Everywhere there were shouts of: "That's right. That's what art is. WE're the art!" And, "Frame ME, make ME art!" It was amazing. (O'Grady and Roth)

O'Grady's motivation for her *Art is . . .* project was to counter the idea that avant-garde art was irrelevant to Black people—not unlike Gutierrez's query that appears as the title of his article: Does abstraction belong to white people? Both artists understood the message that to participate in abstract avant-garde art meant NOT being Black or a person of colour because those realities and sensibilities have no place in that world; to be present there can only mean invisibly or as someone fully assimilated. The territory of the Black body therefore—Black people's corporeal turf—cannot be seen outside of the context of some level of resistance. Whether it is in defiance of imposed conditions of exclusion or invisibilization, objectification and hypervisibilization, or even if it is an expression of joy, Black people's art becomes an opportunity to manipulate their subjective identities—a gesture of both art and agency.

In her reflections on the Black gaze, Black studies scholar Tina Campt describes how contemporary Black artists are pushing the boundaries of the simple representation of Black presence in art in favour of Black "livingness" (a term I borrow from Canadian Black studies scholar Katherine McKittrick[4]): "Here the radical question they are posing is: rather than looking *at* Black people, rather than simply multiplying the representation of Black folks, what would it mean to *see oneself through* the complex positionality that is blackness—and work through its implications on and for oneself?" (Campt 7, emphasis in original).

4 McKittrick's own words are best suited to define "Black livingness": "Telling, sharing, listening to, and hearing stories are relational and interdisciplinary acts that are animated by all sorts of people, places, narrative devices, theoretical queries, plots. The process is sustained by invention and wonder. The story has no answers. The stories offer an aesthetic relationality that relies on the dynamics of creating-narrating-listening-hearing-reading-and-sometimes-unhearing. The stories do not offer lucid tales or answers; rather, they signal ways of living in a world that denies black humanity (or, more aptly, the stories signal ways of black livingness)" (6–7).

Corporeal turf is about me cultivating my Black gaze, one that "shifts the optics of 'looking at' to a politics of *looking with, through, and alongside*" (Campt 7, emphasis in original) according to criteria that I determine. This is the basis for the decolonial dramaturgies that I am interested in generating at the micro level and being able to facilitate at the macro level; dramaturgies that emerge from and speak to Black "livingness" and that allow me to explore aesthetics and imaginaries that do not reflect any supposed universality.

OPAQUE BODIES

How do we decolonize the gaze? How do we undo the complex signification of skin without undoing the value of each individual's lived experience or indulging in tokenism? In his 2018 article mentioned earlier, Gutierrez recalls a comment made to a friend about the dance scene in New York City:

> I say how my current frustration is the lack of people of color in downtown dance artists' work. "Well, that's just who's in the community," she answers, unquestioningly, as if the white choreographers' casting choices have nothing to do with subjectivity or representational politics. That somehow their bodies can be signifiers for a universal experience that doesn't need to look at whiteness as an act of choice or as the default mechanism of a lazy, non-existent critique.

In the same way that this whiteness is an act of choice that privileges universal signification and transparency, (my equivalent of "lazy, non-existent critique"), so is working from and through Blackness a choice to prioritize specificity, opacity, and agency. But this is a long and convoluted lesson for dance.

The presumed universality of white corporealities finds its logical extension in the idea of a "natural body," and this notion, in turn, has played a significant role in the development of contemporary dance aesthetics and training. Crucial to the field of somatics as well as to the pedestrian movement vocabulary that anchored postmodern dance (the precursor to contemporary

dance), the notion of the natural body is ridden with the fundamental values and politics of very specific, essentially white, sociocultural contexts. "Theorizing movement as a cultural site of meaning making," Doran George recounts that the "natural body" and its desirability emerged out of a white post–Second World War America filled with liberal ideologies and the rejection of authoritarianism (5). In the context of dance, this manifested in a shift away from the more prescriptive regimes of classical ballet and modern techniques (Graham, Limón, Cunningham, Horton) in favour of the perceived freedom and authenticity of natural, apparently aesthetic-free movement, epitomized by the famous Judson Dance Theater of early 1960s New York. A founding member of the Judson collective, Yvonne Rainer's "No Manifesto" appeared in 1965 as a call to the non-spectacular, to ordinariness as a thing of value. But not all bodies lived the same "ordinary"; not all bodies enjoyed the same "natural."

Black corporealities experienced a distinctly different reality in this period: in the United States it was still the heights (or depths) of the civil rights movement, with bus segregation only made unconstitutional in 1956 and the voting-rights act guaranteeing unfettered voter registration for Black voters only being passed in 1965. Across the oceans, many former slave colonies (including Jamaica) were fighting for independence from their former colonial powers in the 1960s, and the last human zoo exhibiting Black African families was closed in Brussels, Belgium, in 1958 after the world expo. At the same time, on both sides of the Atlantic, a complex (colonial) fascination with "things black" had Black music, Black dances, Black athletes, and Black style become the objects of hypervisible commodification, while often invisibilizing the very bodies that generated them. From Josephine Baker's "banana dance" (admittedly she was idolized rather than invisibilized) to Elvis Presley's borrowed dance moves to the subsequent globalization of breakdance and hip hop, Black "natural" has been desired and appropriated, leaving so many Black bodies hyped and stereotyped or forgotten and unrecognized. At the dawn of the "natural body" that anchors somatics and postmodern dance, it seems unlikely that Black bodies would have been able to identify with, much less indulge in, the perceived freedom and authenticity of natural aesthetic-free movement, appreciating the ordinariness

of the (white) natural body. Any expectation that they should have been able to ultimately denies the realities of their lived experience, invisibilizing them and ignoring the subject matter, methods of creation, and aesthetics that could actually honour a Black gaze in Tina Campt's terms.

ALTERNATIVE DRAMATURGIES

Harking back to Gutierrez's reflection on the "safety of whiteness" as a place where he "had no history," I am reminded that invisibility through assimilation does not mean I am/we are seen. Few people seek to make themselves invisible beyond the survival strategies made necessary by hypervisibility. Blending into whiteness, dehistoricizing oneself is about the need to survive. This erasure includes rejection of one's own spaces, places, and stories. Not appreciating my formative training in Jamaican folk dance and, instead, stretching my feet under Canadian radiators in order to improve my arch speaks to the inheritances of Western dance aesthetics and values that I integrated without question—as if they were universal markers for the body, for culture, for art. In the context of dance and dance-making, if differences are respected, heard, honoured, how can there be universality in bodies? How do we acknowledge the undeniable intersectional realities of subjectivity, race, gender, age, and sexuality among others that we contend with in our society and allow them to not only be present (i.e., represented) in our art, but to actually *inform* the art? Holding the realities of racialized invisibility in dance at the forefront, Gutierrez addresses this admirably: "Am I a subject or a vessel, an agent or a channel?" The disruptive political potential of dramaturgical practices is perhaps a disruptive political responsibility if we are to further develop decolonial approaches to dramaturgy.

Acknowledging my corporeal turf and creating from that place allows me to consider a dramaturgical praxis that uses my Blackness as its principal lens. By a lens of Blackness I mean a perspective that recognizes the nature of Black lived experience as specific, expressive of a different socio-political and cultural reality, of different imaginaries, and therefore deserving of closer attention in both the content and dynamics of the choreographic process.

My reflections on the performativity of Black corporeality come from my experience of the socio-political and cultural charge that is inherent to the dramaturgy of the Black performer in a white dance world.

Performer and scholar E. Patrick Johnson writes,

> The interanimation of blackness and performance necessitates the codification of this relationship through intellectual inquiry . . . Black performance has been a sustaining and galvanizing force of black culture and a contributor to world culture at large . . . Similarly marginalized as the black bodies with which it is associated, black performance, while always embedded within institutionally sanctioned and privileged forms of performance, has often been neglected as an intellectual site of inquiry. (447)

Thinking with Black performance in this broader sense suggested by Johnson, I see the potential for Blackness as a method or praxis to enter contemporary choreographic processes beyond simple representation and identity, and consider how it might further inform decolonial dramaturgies, i.e., dramaturgies that explore alternative ways of meaning-making and logics for creation. Choreographer Ligia Lewis, whose work is deeply influenced by Black feminist thinking, comments on her performance, *minor matter*, which began as a response to the Black Lives Matter movement in 2016:

> Can you abstract a black body, and should you? . . . Although I am entirely engaged with the materiality of the body, looking at it through the lens of just formal abstraction is difficult. I prefer layered activities that engage a process of thinking in real time and inviting that into the work—making work thick and messy, rather than clean and beautiful . . . This idea of creating something from nothing is the backbone . . . Making something from nothing, for me, is a very hopeful gesture, despite seeming otherwise—and when I look especially at dance history, from a Western perspective, we don't have anything to look back on, because we've been written

> out of history. How do I try to make something from nothing? . . . I often think how to alleviate bodies of color from having to represent more than they can. That's why the voice is so important inside of this work, and this interrogation of subjectivity is so important. I try to get away from any identitarian stance in relationship to this, and arrive at something that's more slippery, and that's potentially more nuanced. I want to work through this notion of difference, multiplicity . . . Especially when you deal with race, everyone wants you to have a stance. I think a position is important, but to have an answer? . . . We're in a place where all of us just need to be in the process of asking more and more questions, and inviting problems into the work. (qtd. in Gastineau)

Lewis's observations of mess and multiplicity are reminiscent of Donald McKayle's diversity and deep inner feelings—McKayle's viscerality is Lewis's thick swamp. Alluding to Glissant and his reflections on transparence and opacity, the visceral mess is not resolution-thick; it is quagmire-thick. It requires wading through process and product differently (and difficultly!), acknowledging, even welcoming to be lost, to disappear, to be irrelevant, to survive, to fantasize, to "future" (the verb!), to "diasporically spider."[5]

There is a necessity to continue interrogating our dance and its capacity to speak to, through, and alongside our collective imaginaries—past, present, and beyond. The founder of the field of cultural studies and fellow Jamaican, Stuart Hall, wrote that

> . . . identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than

5 In her article, "Diasporic Spidering: Constructing Contemporary Black Identities," dance artist and scholar Nadine George-Graves uses the metaphor of the Anansi spider—originally from today's Ghana and present in various forms throughout the African diaspora—to explore contemporary Black identities: "The multidirectional process by which people of African descent define their lives. The lifelong ontological gathering of information by going out into the world and coming back to the self" (33).

> being. Not who we are or where we came from so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. Above all, identities are constructed through, not outside difference. (4)

How I explore my Black corporeality and offer it in public performance informs what it can become, and that is its potential universality—the sharing of my intimate specificity in representational forms that speak to and from my turf. This is where the dramaturgy really happens—in the place of decoloniality; this is where dramaturgical practice is at its full disruptive potential. Contemporary dance has an obligation to consider all possible opportunities to reflect on its aesthetics, modes of operation, and value systems—most of which speak primarily to its social and ethnocultural origins rather than to the range of experiences of its current practitioners. Our art must dare to explore other conceptual imaginaries and, consequently, dramaturgies. I offer this essay as a humble contribution to this ongoing and necessary process.

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