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Body as Spectacle: The Queer Black Male Body in American Modern and Contemporary Dance

by

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This thesis is dedicated with love to Liana Barach.

“Who can say if I’ve been changed for the better?  
I do believe I have been changed for the better  
and because I knew you, I have been changed for good.”
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Introduction

Most nights before falling asleep I usually open and scroll through every social media application on my iPhone. First Facebook, then Instagram. The “Explore” page on my Instagram is a collage of accounts that the application believes will interest me. The application has made its decisions of which accounts to suggest through tracking the pictures and accounts I visit, “like,” and explore the most. Accounts entitled “hotguysanddogs,” “hotmenandcoffee,” and “cute_boys” tend to frequently make an appearance. These accounts feature “hot men” doing what “hot men” do. According to these pictures, hot men do things like own dogs, drink coffee, and occasionally ride the subway. Most nights I play a little game with these accounts. I test how far back in the account’s photo history I will have to scroll in order to find a man that even slightly or ambiguously resembles a man of color. Just recently, it took over 100 pictures and over 59 weeks of photo history to find a Black man in an account entitled “thesunshineboys_.” Apparently, “hot men” simply means white men. These pictures are not only a reflection of my own biases towards hot men who happen to be white, but also of society’s Eurocentric ideals of masculinity and male beauty, which I have internalized. These Instagram accounts may as well be titled “whitehotmenandcoffee” and “whitehotguysanddogs” because this country was created “by the people, for the [white, straight, cisgendered, traditionally masculine, able-bodied, male] people.”

I grew up in Lynn, Massachusetts, a small city north of Boston. Lynn is surrounded by many small towns including Salem, Marblehead, Swampscoott, and Beverly. The most obvious differences between Lynn and the towns surrounding it
are the racial makeup and average income of its residents. This divide became most
evident to me in my freshman year of high school when I joined the tennis team.
Tennis is a white man’s sport, as I quickly came to realize. Our team had one white
student while every other team we played, and lost to, did not have a single member
of color. Marblehead’s 32nd player could easily destroy our #1 player. During one of
our afternoon practices I asked our coach why our team had not won a single match
against any other school in the history of our existence. Very candidly, he said,
“Those kids have all of the resources possible to ensure their success in anything they
do and Lynn English is a Title 1 school. We don’t even have our own tennis courts to
practice on.”

Title 1 is the nation's oldest and largest federally funded program, according
to the U.S. Department of Education. Annually, it provides over $14 billion to school
systems across the country for students at risk of failure and living at or near poverty.
Lynn English High School, like most Title 1 schools, is a school with majority
students of color and on average 20-30% white students. Lynn English is considered
the number one high school in the city and still pales in comparison to the lower
ranking schools in our surrounding towns, whose quality enable Massachusetts’s
ranking as the state with the number one public school system in the country. Still,
even within our supposed “melting pot” of a city, there are clear, physical divides
among residents according to race and class. One might assume that everyone
receives the same education in Lynn, but unfortunately this is not the case. All public
schools in Lynn track their students. I was placed in the Honors/Advanced Placement
track in 6th grade. I remained on this track, along with all of my white friends,
throughout my high school career. Although they live in the same city as I do, my
white friends reside on the outskirts of the city where the property values are much
higher and the primary and junior high schools, which they are required to attend, are
better funded.

Overt racism was something I never faced at home, in my city, where more
often than not everyone around me was of color or in the same socioeconomic class.
As a result, I was never prompted to be curious to discover and understand the ways
in which systemic racism and classism are still a part of the fabric of our everyday
lives. I attributed all of the misfortunes in my life and my parent’s inability to provide
a sustainable living environment for my brothers and me to to my family’s lack of
intellectual interest and drive. I assumed my friends’ white parents were educated and
wealthy because they were intellectually curious and had chosen to be successful. It
wasn’t until I came to Wesleyan University in 2012 that I began to critically engage
with topics of racism and classism, and became aware of the invisible powers
working to subjugate minority families like my own. Growing up, being “black,” and
for that matter, queer, was simply never an important marker of my identity. The
microaggressions¹ I faced, but never truly understood as problematic indicators of
deep-rooted institutional inequalities, seemed frivolous in comparison to the overt
discrimination African Americans and people of color had once endured.

After I “came out” to my mother senior year of high school, I was liberated
by her acceptance and did not care if the whole world knew my worst kept secret.
Until I began to engage with other students and professors at Wesleyan, I never
understood that the lighthearted and playful homophobic remarks I had received

¹ Professor of counseling psychology at Columbia University, Derald Wing Sue’s definition of
Microaggressions.
throughout my life were emblematic of society’s pervasive internalized homophobia. I had never read the work of gender theorist and feminist philosopher, Judith Butler, or the work of Critical race theorist, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, until I took my first sociology class at Wesleyan. I thus began the long, arduous, and important process of dismantling the gender binary and understanding invisible systems put in place that lead to the disenfranchisement of minority populations. I finally began to place my queer Black body into the context of the American economic, political, and social system.

After taking courses at Wesleyan that truly challenged my intellectual curiosity and critical engagement, I became hyperaware of the materiality of bodies beyond our biological and physical carbon components. Postmodern literary critic, Katherine Hayles, argues,

"Embodiment is akin to articulation in that it is inherently performative, subject to individual enactments, and therefore always to some extent improvisational. Whereas the body can disappear into information with scarcely a murmur of protest, embodiment cannot, for it is tied to the circumstances of the occasion and the person."²

She notes that the dominant culture, i.e. white male culture, provides abstract models and strict guidelines that inscribe cultural practices but it is in their enactment that incorporating practices materialize which enculturate the body. As a result, our bodies, along with our identities, become a product of our society and culture. Additionally, Judith Butler has shown that the materiality of the body is a construction that is also marked by sex and gender. Butler posits that “construction takes place not only in time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through

Though Butler focuses mostly on the performativity of gender, her theory on the materiality of bodies achieved through the performativity of regulatory norms is also applicable to race, ethnicity, and class.

I started dancing when I got to Wesleyan. Before receiving formal training, I often danced in my kitchen during So You Think You Can Dance (SYTYCD) commercials. SYTYCD is a reality competition show that aims at discovering America’s best and favorite dancer. Most of the dancers on this show are competition dancers with highly technical backgrounds. I grew to believe “good” dancers were dancers like the ones on SYTYCD; mostly white, very athletic, flexible, commercial, and in regards to the men, very masculine. After I enrolled in my first dance class at Wesleyan, I realized the dance community stretches far beyond the competition world. I developed a love for improvisation, chance operations, and choreography. In my dance classes at Wesleyan I developed a passion not only for experimental and innovative movement, but also for bodies. I developed a vocabulary for my own body, an understanding about how to contextualize bodies, and a critical eye for analyzing dance through various critical perspectives. Dance historians, critics, choreographers, and scholars such as Ann Cooper Albright, Deborah Jowitt, and Ramsay Burt provided the historical insight, research, and critique that advanced my understanding and ability to analyze a work critically and thoroughly.

I began the research for this work as a final paper for my Dance History class in the spring semester of my junior year with Professor Nicole Stanton. The paper was primarily focused on Ted Shawn, a pioneering choreographer in American modern dance, and the legacy he established that opened many doors for men in the

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dance field. Before Shawn revolutionized the dance world, men were typically only used to partner women, especially ballerinas. Shawn created a specific space for male dancers to inhabit. In the original history paper I argued that while Shawn’s efforts did move the field in a more inclusive direction, it also served to mandate who would inhabit said space and who would not or could not. Shawn perpetuated homophobic and misogynistic ideals about gender throughout his artistic journey. Subsequently, Shawn’s legacy had an incredible impact on choreographers credited for the establishment and continuation of modern dance as a serious art form in American society. I expand on this notion in the second chapter of this thesis to include Shawn’s inevitable exclusion of people of color and queer identifying individuals through the perpetuation of traditionally Eurocentric ideals of beauty and masculinity.

Additionally, I analyze the ways in which Shawn and canonical modern dance choreographers were influenced by one another and the era during which they were creating work. Finally, I include contemporary artists who have dedicated their lives to deconstructing the power structures Ted Shawn had established and how the field is affected, or not affected, by their efforts.

This thesis is situated in multiple fields of study including race studies, gender studies, and sexuality studies. In the first chapter of this thesis I explore the ways in which these three perspectives converge through the politics of identity. First, I analyze these three areas of study from a historical perspective. I research the ways in which racism, homophobia, and the heteropatriarchy have been established in American history. As I am discussing the evolution of racial ideas over hundreds of years, the social conceptions of race and the terms used throughout different historical
periods vary greatly. I will be more consistent in my use of language to define these racial categories, often referring to "people of color" or "Americans of color" in discussions of earlier periods of American history when these terms were not widely used. Second, I analyze the commonalities of these three fields as performative identities imposed by majoritarian authorities. Finally, I string these three identities together as often these oppressive institutions (racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, classism, etc.) are interconnected and cannot effectively be examined separately from one another.\(^4\) Due to the intersectional nature of this work, I introduce and explain many terms and concepts throughout. I typically do not elaborate on a concept after I have introduced it; I instead dissect its relevance in relation to the particular discourse within which I have reintroduced it.

In chapter three, I analyze the politics of performance and spectatorship. I research the ways in which performance acts as “counterpublics” to be used as a method for transformation of the public. I situate dance as a performative, lived, and embodied experience created for viewing by an audience. I research the ways in which the identity and experience of the dancers, choreographers, and audience members affect the production and reception of the work. I engage with the topics of agency and accessibility as they pertain to queer and of color dancers and artists. Additionally, I analyze the ways in which performance politics rely as much on the audience as they do on the performers. I research the impact of the “male gaze”\(^5\) on queer and feminists performance making. This concept assumes art is created from

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\(^4\) Here I evoke the concept of Intersectionality as proposed by Critical race theorist Kimberle Williams Crenshaw.

\(^5\) The male gaze is a concept coined by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey. It refers to the way visual arts are structured around a masculine viewer.
and for a male perspective and a male point of view. Finally, I engage with the politics of voyeurism in this chapter specifically how voyeurism relates to Black and queer bodies in performance art.

As a result of the interdisciplinary nature of this work, there are topics I do not include in my analysis as their inclusion is far beyond the scope of my research. I do not include research on Trans* literature as my research is primarily focused on male-identifying bodies. In addition, I do not include socioeconomic class as an analytical lens, as I limit myself to gender, race, and sexuality studies. Inevitably, class comes up throughout my discussion due to the intersectionality of this work and the performative nature of class as an identity. Lastly, I do not discuss research on the AIDS/HIV epidemic and its impact on both the queer dance community and the Black community in the 1980s in the U.S. The AIDS epidemic is nuanced and vast enough to merit its own thesis, its inclusion here might distract from the aim of this work. Additionally, I do not include Ishmael Houston-Jones, a canonical choreographer of the 1970s and 1980s, in my historical analysis of postmodern dance, as his work during those decades was primarily focused around the AIDS epidemic.

This thesis is primarily focused on analyzing the effects that the “queer of color” identity of male dancers has on their visibility and success in the dance field and how their bodies are situated within performance spaces, as well as with understanding how this positionality works to erase personal identity outside of cultural identity politics.
Chapter I
Identity as Cultural Performance:
Explorations on the Intersectionality of Race, Gender, and Sexuality

“For the oppressor, however, it is always the oppressed (whom they obviously never call “the oppressed” but - depending on whether they are countrymen or not - “those people” or “the blind and envious masses” or “savages” or “natives” or “subversives”) who are disaffected, who are “violent,” “barbaric,” “wicked,” or “ferocious” when they react to the violence of the oppressors.”
– Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire

Some of the more contentious issues plaguing American modern society are the prevalent, yet invisible, injustices faced by marginalized groups including queer people, people of color, and women. Through a history of imperialism, colonization, slavery, segregation, homophobia, and sexism white men have historically been situated in positions of power and privilege. Understanding the critical engagement of this work requires a brief introduction into how these systems of power and oppression have been established and how they are sown into the social, political, and economic fabric of the American system. This first chapter will solely focus on the establishment and analysis of these theories and how they impact our society. The ideas discussed at the beginning of this first chapter fall under the umbrella of critical race theory (CRT), which is “a theoretical framework in the social sciences focused upon the application of critical theory, a critical examination of society and culture, to the intersection of race, law, and power.” Particularly, my research will be focusing on how these critical constructions of race govern our everyday interactions and experiences. Later in this chapter I will describe the ways in which Black culture and
particularly Black masculinity have been formed as positioned against historical societal constructions of gender, whiteness, and privilege. I will introduce queer and feminist theory as it pertains to homosexual Black men and performativity. Finally, I will analyze the ways in which the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality have created a hierarchical system of power within the dance community that situates Black queer men at the lowest position.

**This is a (white) Man’s World**

Although many Americans would like to believe that we live in a post-racial society, American history, as well as its prevailing legal and social systems, is so deeply rooted in racial oppression that they are effectively inseparable in contemporary life. Admittedly, the world superpower we are today is not the same young nation we were at the signing of the Declaration of Independence. However, the founding documents and ideologies of this country, as relevant today as they were in the 18th century, are steeped in oppressive rhetoric and the racial conceptions of their time. We consider the Constitution to be the epitome of just law, but no matter how many amendments it has accrued, it was originally written for white men and white men only. Even as our social and political atmosphere has appeared to change through the intervening years, the underlying principles have remained unchanging, situating the dominant white male experience above and against an “othered” minority experience. This minority includes individuals of color who do not benefit from the “white racial frame” embedded in the white supremacist, capitalist, and

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patriarchal attitudes held by the society we inhabit. This frame has multiple levels of abstraction. At the most general level this frame situates white culture as superior to black culture. At the most basic level, negative stereotypes and images of the supposedly ‘inferior’ race are blindly accepted and unchallenged by the white majority, which itself benefits from the system’s unending privileges. This frame, propagated by white Americans and historically accepted by most people of color, has been established through a history of colonialism, slavery, Jim Crow laws, and rampant institutional racism.

European colonialism in America brought forth the rise of Western capitalism “rooted in the global seizing of the land, resources, and labor of people of color by violent means.”7 Through imperialist efforts this first act of violence positioned the “white man, colonizers,” as a dominating threat to the indigenous world. White European colonists enforced British rule, stripped the existing population of their land, exploited millions of enslaved Africans, and created a hierarchal system based on race that governed the political, social, and economic spheres of the time. Non-white people were deprived of their civil liberties under colonial rule and years after America gained its independence from Great Britain. Slavery, a system in which principles of property laws are applied to humans, enabled white Americans to purchase, own, and trade human life without people of color’s ability to unilaterally withdraw from the arrangement. The United States Constitution protected this phenomenon. Operating under the white racial frame and white supremacist ideology, this system of oppression relegated people of color to a second-class status that arguably has yet to dissipate.

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Freeing African American slaves did very little to correct the social imbalance perpetuated by racial perceptions that affected Americans of color’s inequality of wealth, privilege, and opportunity. After the Emancipation Proclamation in the United States, Jim Crow laws were introduced throughout the South that barred African Americans and people of color from gaining any of the political, economic, or social capital necessary to advance as a racial group. People of color were segregated from their white counterparts in all public arenas. African Americans could not hold office, attend white schools, apply for certain jobs, or even walk on the same side of the street as privileged white Americans. People of color also faced mortgage discrimination that restricted them to “Black ghettos.” These rules and regulations for appropriate behavior in both public and private spheres were mandated by law in the South and by simple practice in the North. Ending segregation in the United States began with the desegregation of schools by the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Only 65 years, a mere two generations, has passed since these racist mandates were ruled unconstitutional and even less time has passed since their elimination was widely implemented. To believe racism is no longer an issue or no longer a part of our daily experience is naïve at best and uninformed and incorrect at worst. This widespread judgment is made possible by the white racial frame and the effect its dominance has to make systemic racial oppression invisible.

America is a country built on 350 years of racial oppression, stemming from societal constructions and division of the races. Races are “not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond with no biological or genetic reality; rather races are categories
that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient." Categorizing the white race as superior and the Black race as inferior continues to create obvious differentiations among the races with regards to the formation of their individual and group identity. Whites, “who don’t see themselves as having a race, but as being, simply, people,” are regarded as individuals. White Americans, as individuals, are not confined to a list of stereotypes or markers of identity. Their bodies are unaffected. As is evident in contemporary representations of white Americans in the media, when white Americans commit horrific crimes, blame is typically attached to mental illness or special circumstance but never race. When white Americans achieve success, the conversations never include the wealth and white privilege endowed to these individuals at birth. Black Americans on the other hand are regarded as a whole race or “an aggregate of individuals around issues of history, oppression, struggle, and upliftment.” The negative stereotypes and associations that characterize people of color serve as a standard for racial prejudices and discrimination. In 2015, media coverage increased of young Black boys across America being murdered at the hands of white police officers who all claimed an array of reasons to justify the murder of innocent children. Some officers felt threatened while others mistook the age of these young boys. American media then represented these boys as “thugs” and “delinquents” and the officers as enforcers of

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9 Ibid., 15.
10 Media representations of Charleston Church shooter Dylan Roof
safety simply exercising self-defense. These examples illustrate society’s skewed stereotypic prejudices against Black boys in America in their characterization as inherently dangerous and inhumane individuals. Black bodies, specifically male Black bodies “are tangible things onto which we attach blame.”

Today, in a much more covert manner, the dominant white racial frame continues to shape, structure, and rationalize a slew of racially exploitative and discriminatory actions by whites, and sometimes others, in this society. Not only do white Americans regularly make racist jokes, but they also “mock Black entertainers and leaders, yell racial epithets on the street, show racialized fear when Black men are near, cross streets to avoid Black people, make racist comments to Black “friends,” and mock any person who takes exception to their actions.” Under a dominant white racial frame, most of these white Americans do not interpret these actions as playing a pivotal role in maintaining the racist system nor do they engage in overt performances of racial discrimination in the front stage for “fear of being deemed a racist.” White American society refuses to believe these racist notions are psychologically ingrained and reveal the severe effects historical racial dehumanization has had on the structure of the American system. More importantly, as stated above, racism is seen as an individual matter and not as a societal issue by whites who believe they are not governed by the white racial frame. Through a history of white male empowerment and Black male subjugation, American society, operating under the white racial frame, has enabled white men to govern all aspects of

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our society and demonize Black men as a threat to their power through strict constructions of Black identity and Black culture as deviant, sexually dangerous, and untrustworthy.

**Constructions of Black Identity and Masculinity**

According to Bryant Keith Alexander, author of *Performing Black Masculinity: Race, Culture, and Queer Identity*, “culture is socialized practice that establishes the positionality from which we all operate in relation to others.” Black masculinity and Black identity is socially constructed in relation to white masculinity and white identity and simultaneously constructed by White America and perpetuated by Black America. Black America, and specifically Black men, bound by these stereotypes and characteristics, is forced to perpetuate this identity in order to reclaim the images and tools of representation framing their own culture. In order to maintain cultural membership and fulfill the strict expectations set forth by both white and Black culture, Black male bodies adhere and perpetuate the masculine, dangerous, and “thug” personas constructed on their behalves. As a result of society's unrealistic expectations, Black men have been constrained and restricted in their development of their own sexual and masculine identities. Additionally, young African American men are shaped by “society's normative expectations of hypersexuality, hypercriminality, and violence from Black men” leading to skewed representation of Black identity through negative stereotypes and dangerous interactions between society and Black males.

17 Slatton, *Hyper Sexual, Hyper Masculine?*, 87.
Identity formation, specifically for young African American boys, is a complete socialization process that begins in the home. In the case of African American individuals, the “home” refers to the Black community. The Black community itself as it is shaped by its oppressive history and positionality to white culture as the subversive and subjugated group in Western society. This particular method of child rearing dates back to pre-colonial African cultures, where the whole community was responsible for a single child’s upbringing.\textsuperscript{18} “It takes a village” is believed to be a phrase that derives origin from an African proverb which conveys a similar message. This message essentially speaks to the impact a community has on a single child’s socialization. In Western culture, “community” can be extended to include society as communities are much better connected through media and technology and therefore much more influential. In American culture, this method still exists as a means to form Black identity and culture, but more importantly as a means for protection and survival. Membership in the Black community is both strict and sacred; it is strict, as it adheres to specific, traditional ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality and sacred as it provides a sense of belonging that serves as protection against an oppressive dominant culture. For the people of color community, blackness is a “unity of diversity and not a descriptor of commonalities.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18} Slatton, Hyper Sexual, Hyper Masculine?
\textsuperscript{19} Alexander, Performing Black Masculinity, 47.
“To be an American negro male is to be a king of walking phallic symbol; which means that one pays in one’s personality for the sexual insecurity of others.”

In 1955, Emmett Till, an African American teenager from a small town in Mississippi, was lynched and his body was dumped in the river, reportedly for flirting with a white woman. This individual case is not an anomaly. Legally accusing and convicting African Americans for alleged sexual misconduct, sexual assault, or rape became commonplace during the Jim Crow Era. White jurors and judges would commonly convict Black men and would legally use race as a factor in judicial proceedings. Whole cases would be evaluated with illegitimate and insufficient evidence, but would typically result in jail time or lynching of a Black man on the basis of race. Undoubtedly, this practice reveals society’s fear and hatred of Black bodies, specifically Black male bodies, as inherently sexual machines rather than individual human beings. The Jim Crow South was characterized by the sudden removal of slavery as a system without the addition of any other changes in ideologies or racial construction. The racialized rhetoric used for centuries before

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20 http://www.biography.com/people/emmett-till-507515
21 McCune, Sexual Discretion, 31.
22 Slatton, Hyper Sexual, Hyper Masculine?
emancipation to legitimize the system of slavery persisted long after. As a result of labeling and a history of sexualizing and criminalizing Black male bodies, we have become too preoccupied with penile activity. As a society, we are vastly concerned with the activity of the male penis and, in the case of the Black male penis, the dangers it causes. Black men in particular adhere to these sexual stereotypes rather than promote social and sexual freedom of choice because moving outside normative rules of performance would subject their masculinity to scrutiny and question.23

The importance of music, song, and dance in the African and African American communities dates back centuries before the displacement of Africans to the New World. African communities use song and dance as a means to prepare for war, marriage celebrations, mourning the dead, arriving at adulthood, and even changing chiefs within villages. Music has been integrated as a staple in African and African American culture throughout their respective histories through oral and written traditions. The African American Cultural Movements of the 1960s and 1970s fueled the growth of funk and later Hip-Hop forms such as rap and house in the United States. Hip-Hop music, particularly rap, has become a staple in the Black community in regards to cultural and identity formation in the 21st century.

“Prominent themes that promote misogyny, violence, and materialistic ("bling") culture”24 are present in rap lyrics and ultimately woven into the practices of these communities. Popular rap artist’s stereotypic representations of masculinity as defiant, angry, and violent adhere to the archaic conventions of masculinity set forth by Black and White America.

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23 McCune, Sexual Discretion, 31.
24 Slatton, Hyper Sexual, Hyper Masculine?, 103.
“Lil nigga bigger than gorilla
’Cause I’m killing every nigga that try to be on my shit
Better cuff your chick if I want her, I can get her
And she accidentally slip and fall on my dick”

- Chris Brown

“You fagots scared ’cause I’m too wild, been here for a while
I was like fuck trial I puts it down
I’m so Young Money, if you got eyes look at me now, bitch”

- Lil Wayne

Chris Brown, Lil Wayne, and Busta Rhymes are some of the most prominent rappers of today’s generation. The above lyrics are just a small portion of the song ‘Look at Me Now,’ which is riddled with homophobic, misogynistic, and materialistic references. The song is about someone looking in from the outside into the life of another who has “made it.” Society’s, and particularly the Black community’s, criteria for “making it” include extravagant wealth and capital that enables you to both easily sleep with women and void legal repercussions by working around the legal system (Lil Wayne’s lyrics: “I was like fuck trial”).

“I’m that cat by the bar tossing to the good life
you that faggot-ass nigga trying to pull me back right?”

- 50 Cent

Again, another rap artist toasting to the “good life,” that he can now afford, and demonizing those who are not at his level of wealth and privilege through homophobic slurs. These songs, while seemingly representative of these rappers’ lives, have not only had profound effects on young Black boys in America and their notions of the methods required to achieve success and power, but also have played a pivotal role in constructing normative ideals of Black hypersexuality, criminality, and

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26 Ibid.
27 “In da Club” 50 Cent. *Get Rich or Die Trying*. 2003
violence by promoting these attributes as the primary means for achieving success and securing survival.

As previously stated, these conventions of Black masculinity and Black identity are held by White America and perpetuated by Black America as a means of passing. People of color, and marginalized bodies as a whole, engage in passing as cultural performance by performing stereotypes to maintain cultural membership, but also use those stereotypes to enhance cultural identity. Visibility, of any marginalized group, is accomplished through affirming society's views about your own identity. In Chapter 2 of *Performing Black Masculinity*, Professor Alexander recounts an interaction with a “White-girl service worker” that people of color experience often and understand all too well.

“(Very polite and soft spoken) “Excuse me, may I have some service?”
(Ignored by White-girl worker)
It initiates itself as a sincere yet unacknowledged effort to connect, to communicate.
(More irritated, a little more strident) “Excuse me, I’ve been waiting for some time now.” (Sentence cut off short as the White-girl worker turns to another White customer)
Acknowledging the tensions that may exist within the lifescrpts of those involved, it becomes a little less tolerant, more insistent.
(Escalating in tone) “Excuse me, I need some help here!”
And finally it realizes that niceness (Good Man) won’t work; or, as my brother would say, “You want to see me act like a nigger? I can act like a nigger!”
(Explode in anger, direct challenge) “Can I have some Goddamn service now!”
(White-girl worker is frightened and maybe embarrassed) “Oh, I’m sorry sir. I didn’t see you. How can I help you?”

Later in this chapter Alexander explains that “our inner worlds are inextricably interconnected with our external worlds.” Our histories, positive or negative, shape our interactions and perceptions of situations. In this particular case, under the white

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30 Ibid., 93.
racial frame, the “white girl” is shaped by her white privilege and her apparent inability to recognize atypical performativity of “Black” culture. The Black man is shaped by the stereotypes governing his performance of culture, identity, and self. Black men must then engage in the painstaking process of reconstructing in the minds of others an identity that is reflective and representative of who they are and whom they wish to be rather than an identity formed through the negative representations of Black culture.

**Men at Play: Queer Politics and Male-Male Interactions**

Western culture, with its strict sex typing and intolerance for the deviant, has created a world unsupporting of the homosexual. “The very concept of homosexuality is a social one, as one cannot understand the homosexual experience without recognizing the extent to which we have developed a certain identity and behavior derived from social norm.” Historical, Western culture is organized along patriarchal lines with women’s roles and expectations merely shifting slightly throughout the centuries. We inhabit a heteronormative world that values masculinity over femininity resulting in systemic sexism and heterosexism faced by women and queer people. Femininity as a characteristic, constructed to be inferior to masculinity, is attached to both women and homosexual men. “The fallacy lies in the assumption that such differences are intrinsic in the biology of sex and therefore justify different treatment, when actually they result from such treatment.”

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homosexual men, the treatment they receive comes in the form of homophobic societal constraints and contradictory social expectations, marginalizing them and perpetually positioning them in contrast to racially and sexually normative men.

Much like race, sexuality, is a social construct that distributes labels and stereotypes to form individual and group identity. Individuals outside of the designated or labeled group typically assign these labels. Much of the early literature about homosexuality was written by straight white men, as has much of the literature written about marginalized people in general. Additionally, the opinions and actions of these white men, most often Christian White men, were greatly shaped by their traditional Judeo-Christian values. The Christian Bible states that homosexuality is an abomination. This belief has shaped the opinions, discourse, and even survival of homosexual men and women for centuries. The history of sexuality in the United States is similar to the history of race in the United States in that race and sexuality have historically been used as a tool to demonize marginalized bodies in an effort to uphold the capitalist and heteronormative patriarchy. In addition, this history of sexual oppression is woven into the fabric of the American institution as a tool to discern value and discriminate against those whose identities do not adhere to the codes and stereotypes set up by society and whose existence serves to challenge the established status quo.

Homosexuality challenges the established status quo and is therefore a threat to heterosexual men, but more specifically a threat to homosociality. Gender Studies, Queer Studies, and Queer Theory academic scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick coined the term "male homosocial desire" in reference to “all male bonds, including,

33 Edwards, Erotics & Politics.
potentially, everyone from overt heterosexuals to overt homosexuals.” This type of male bonding is inseparable from a fear or hatred of homosexuality. Therefore, homophobia becomes the foundation of homosocial behavior between heterosexual men established in order to obtain and withhold power amongst one another while excluding effeminacy. These behaviors also reject homosexuality and function as a “regulative ideal keeping the jouissance of men following in phallocentric productive directions.” This homosocial behavior specifically becomes an issue when heterosexual men are watching, identifying, engaging with, relating to, or understanding homosexual men. “Obligatory heterosexuality becomes the name, though not the ultimate meaning, of the homosocial game.” This bonding is yet another form of exclusion and supremacy that results in the subjugation of historically marginalized bodies while glorifying heterosexuality, heteronormativity, masculinity, and often whiteness.

“Masculinity as a sexual fetish is, therefore, oppressive not simply for dictating a certain norm, but for demanding something that could not be achieved.” Homosexual men are caught between the dichotomous relationship between being told they are not “men” and being expected to act like “men.” Homosexual men are often equated with heterosexual women in the heterocentric mainstream and are stereotyped with feminine attributes such as flamboyance, sensitivity, and fashion. Homosexual men are also thought to be promiscuous deviants. These opinions are

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35 Ibid., 17.
grounded on two main principles and historical ideologies. First, the idea that sex between two men is simply for pleasure and does not serve to produce children, therefore going against the capitalist, consumerist, and religiously grounded ideologies of our society. Second, the spread of AIDS/HIV in the 1970’s and 1980’s in America created a particularly disdainful image of homosexuals and the homosexual community, specifically the black homosexual community. Society perpetuates these views through overt cultural validation of heterosexual culture and the demonization of homosexual culture or “lifestyle.” Through media socialization, social prohibitions, laws, institution of marriage, tradition, and tax benefits the institutions governing the public and private create a marginalized identity for homosexuals. These societal constructions create strict codes and definitions for male queer identity that confine and limit the gender and sexual expression of these individuals as they experience the fabrication of their own sexuality and sexual identity.

In an effort to combat the rampant homophobia surrounding the queer community, many individuals have taken the images, stereotypes, and prejudices placed onto them and reclaimed them as their own by positively representing the believed hedonistic and promiscuous nature of their community. Rejection of the established heteronormative ideology includes the rejection of marriage, monogamy, childbearing and other traditions that fall under the umbrella of the “heterosexual experience.” One particular show that serves as an example of this movement in reclaiming stereotypes is *Queer As Folk*, a 2005 Showtime television drama set in working-class Pittsburgh that revolves around a group of gay friends and their

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relationships, careers, loves and ambitions. The representation of their lifestyles, particularly those of the gay men in the show, is radically sexualized and explicitly depictive. Many of the homosexual men on the show do not have children or consistent sexual partners, and attend a gay nightclub at least five times a week.

Though, this was the first television series with predominantly homosexual characters “presented as regular people, with complex and full forms of existence”\textsuperscript{39} as opposed to overused archetypes of the homosexual male common in television, the series was highly criticized for representing one particular aspect of homosexuality that was not inclusive of multiple homosexual experiences.

While some members of the homosexual community challenge representation through reclamation, hyperbolizing identity, and fully rejecting the established norm, others embrace “heteronormative” culture not only to gain acceptance and visibility, but also to demonstrate that sexuality is a singular facet of their individual identity and not the sole marker. A goal of this portion of the gay community is to dispel notions and associations of homosexuality and effeminacy by going to an extreme with masculine display of gender expression.\textsuperscript{40} Their aim is to separate sexuality and gender expression as distinct and independent of one another. While scholars agree and understand that sexual identity and gender expression are separate entities, the hypermasculinization carried out by this particular group is at times a result of internalized hatred and homophobia. Additionally, this complete rejection of effeminacy is a result of existing in a society that blatantly favors, benefits, and privileges straight, masculine males. The establishment of polarized


\textsuperscript{40} Edwards, \textit{Erotics & Politics}. 46.
groups within the gay community, along with groups that fall within the spectrum of
gender expression and sexual fluidity, creates clear divisions and hierarchy of opinion
within the community. As expected, in a society where masculinity and whiteness are
favored, masculine classifications within the homosexual community render “jocks”
and “bears” at the top and “twinks” at the bottom of the social hierarchy. “Jocks” and
“bears” are classified as masculine, muscular, and often hairy individuals and
“twinks” are classified as young, feminine, thin, and hairless. The distinctions
between feminine and masculine characteristics within each group are explicitly
evident and demonstrate society’s glorification of straight, masculine men.41

Heterosexual relationships often follow strict gender roles established by the
masculine and feminine interplay present in our heteronormative society. The issue
with same-sex relationships lies in society’s inability to accept non-traditional sexual
interactions between same-sex individuals. In heterosexual relationships, men often
adhere to existing male sexual constructs that deem them alienated and emotionally
incapacitated. Men are not expected to be emotional, intimate, or tender.
Vulnerability, emotional expression, and robust affectionate behavior are all
attributed to the female partner in heterosexual relationships.42 It is then stipulated
that intimacy is femininely based and therefore not applicable to male-male
relationships. This norm is evident in the dance community through the nature of
male-male duets, a convention I question and explore in my own choreography and
analyze in chapter four. The issue then continues in society’s inability to both
separate sex from gender and gender expression, and understand that gender is only a

41 Jocks, bears, and twinks are terms used in gay culture to further separate individuals within the
homosexual community through culture-specific identity groups.
42 Edwards, Erotics & Politics.
binary because it is socially constructed as a result of sex. “The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it.”\textsuperscript{43} When the radical status of gender is accepted as a social construction independent of sex, “gender becomes a free-floating artifice” where \textit{man} and \textit{masculine} does not always signify male or female and vice versa.\textsuperscript{44} Gender expression, societal expectations, and sex roles would then lose their significance as a marker for sexual and gender identity. However, this issue still remains in the historical marginalization of the feminine and attachment to women and homosexual men.

**Homo Thug: The “Queer of Color” Phenomenon**

Gender, race, and sexuality are performative identities that are culturally constructed through a stylized repetition of acts in response to the present oppressive systems of power. American society, a series of capitalist patriarchal institutions, regards masculinity above femininity via a traditional model which includes tropes of masculinity involving strength, muscularity, emotional detachment, and (re)productive vigor. American society, a white supremacists society, regards whiteness above Blackness in its historical oppression and othering of Black bodies and Black culture. Finally, American society, a heteronormative institution, regards heterosexuality above homosexuality as a gendered and sexual minority deemed defiant of or disruptive to the established norm. “William Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality is meant to account for convergence of Black and feminist critical


\textsuperscript{44} Edwards, \textit{Erotics & Politics}.  

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issues within a paradigm that factors in both of these components and replaces…
consider(ing) Blackness at the expense of feminism or vice versa.”\textsuperscript{45} The 
intersectionality of these identities then positions queer Black male identifying 
individuals as deviant homosexual thugs deemed to be a threat to the intricate 
workings of the established systems of power. Additionally, homosexual men, who 
do not present as such or mask their sexuality, pose the biggest threat to society 
through a “down low” practice viewed as deceitful, malicious, and dangerous.\textsuperscript{46} Since 
identities are formed in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white 
supremacy, and misogyny, queer black men inhabit a very specific public space in 
society, which establishes their physical existence as performative spectacle.

The discourse surrounding queer culture is heavily influenced and analyzed 
through the white racial frame. Whiteness dominates queer culture through visibility 
and accessibility granted to the white community within the queer community as a 
result of a racial hierarchy. The majority of queer theory canonized in academia and 
intellectual discourse only analyzes the white queer experience. The lack of racial 
discourse present in most publications “reaffirms the belief that it is possible to talk 
about sexuality without talking about race, which in turn reaffirms the belief that it is 
necessary to talk about race and sexuality only when discussing people of color and 
their text.”\textsuperscript{47} The unification of a feminist subject not organized around 
socioeconomic class, race, or ethnicity is an issue that ignores the complexity of 
identification for feminists of color, whose bodily history encompasses their racial

\textsuperscript{45} Muñoz, José Esteban. \textit{Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics}. 
\textsuperscript{46} McCune, \textit{Sexual Discretion}.
\textsuperscript{47} Muñoz, \textit{Disidentifications}, 10.
identification and bodily experience as much as their female or queer identifications. The historical oppression and othering of queer Black bodies does more than marginalize their identity; it also prioritizes the white majority who in turn receive benefits that progress their social and economic standing. White feminism, unified around the subject of being simply a (white, straight) woman then becomes an inaccessible and exclusive cultural movement for queer women and women of color. Within the queer community, queer men of color cannot escape the prejudices and stereotypes attached to their identity from a history of society’s hypercriminalization and hypersexualization of Black bodies.

The importance of masculinity and strict performative gender roles within the Black community also leaves little space for homosexuality to exist, specifically for Black men. “The descriptive speculation of a ‘real nigger’ of course both empowers and marginalizes at the same time.” The identity of a “real nigger” signals a desired performative identity and establishes an evaluative criterion on which embodied performances are measured. Many homosexual Black men as a result of community pressures engage in the act of passing, an act of survival as their very existence positions their bodies in a dangerous state. Passing as cultural performance requires discreet navigation of a queer space with complete sexual discretion. Jeffrey McCune’s *Sexual Discretion: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing* perfectly encapsulates the experience of Black homosexual men on the “down low” (DL). One of the two most prevalent issues plaguing this community of individuals is that the literature on the subject of DL men often generalizes experience and attributes the outlook on male-male relationships to all DL men. Issues of representation ignore

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individual and varying experiences that result in stereotyping of DL experience and the construction of a deceitful and dangerous image. It can be particularly dangerous since Black queer men on the DL are seen as the cause for high rates of HIV/AIDS infection in the African-American female community.\textsuperscript{49} Another important issue lies in the idea that “DL discourse has women in a state of constant paranoia around ‘their’ men’s sexuality, while inadvertently pre-scripting what qualifies for being a ‘real man’ – what he looks like, talks like, dresses like, and acts like.”\textsuperscript{50} Additionally, pre-scripting an identity for heterosexual Black men inadvertently pre-scripts an identity for queer men of color as deviant, untrustworthy, and especially dangerous thugs or queens.

The separation between masculine homosexual men and effeminate homosexual men is exemplified in Chapter 3 of McCune’s book where he infiltrates the DL scene through an ethnographic study of a predominantly Black gay nightclub in which there is a physical separation between men who enjoy techno music and men who enjoy hip hop music. “Effeminate men – or the ‘queens’ – are the characters in this dance space who are most often positioned as artificial, fake, or not ‘real men.’ Here the ‘sissy,’ ‘fag,’ or ‘punk’ is understood as being a pretender or impersonator.”\textsuperscript{51} These effeminate men belong on the techno music side of the nightclub and engage in homonormative forms of gender display as a form of sexual expression. The men dancing on the hip hop side of the club engage in a subversion of sexual activity. These men wear “traditional” hip hop garb and enjoy listening to heteronormative rap songs that promote misogyny and violence. These assessments

\textsuperscript{49} McCune, \textit{Sexual Discretion}.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 167.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 82.
assume that, for these men, masculinity trumps femininity. Additionally, it assumes the performance of the “hip hop men,” who adhere to culturally accepted forms of masculine display, is a natural performance as opposed to a responsive product of a prescriptive and demonizing society. As a result of the supposedly rampant homophobia present in the Black community, queer Black men generally conceal their sexual activity. This is most evident in the dance world when homosexual men conceal their homosexuality during company auditions and performances in order to fit a desired heteronormative mold and, as a result, ensure their continual success in the art form.

The process of crafting and performing the self is an arduous task for subjects who identify with more than one minority identity, particularly ones with contradicting essentialist conceptions. Politics of performance balance a delicate interplay between an unadulterated, desired sense of self and a self that is imposed by societal structures. In response to the oppressive systems of power that influence the identity formation of queer people of color, many engage in disidentification. Queer theorist, José Esteban Muñoz, provides the best definition for this term.

“Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture”

Muñoz defines disidentification as an empowering process that derives identity but also acknowledges the presence of a majority that is being opposed. It is the act of

52 Muñoz, Disidentifications, 31.
positioning oneself within and against the various discourses through which we are called to identify. Performance, both every day and in concert, serves as a common tool with which to engage in disidentification, carrying with it a host of politics that makes the act both liberating and problematic.

The queer of color phenomenon has an enormous impact on the positionality of queer male dancers of color in society and in the dance field, as I will analyze in Chapter 4. These artists cannot escape the prejudices attached to their bodies in their everyday lives and especially on the performative stage. Because dance is a performative art form that uses the human body as its medium, queer, Black, male dancers cannot escape these ideas as they perform in or create artistic work. Choreographers would much rather utilize and work with 'unaffected' white bodies. Neutral and uncoded as they are perceived to be, white bodies on stage, as in the world, serve as a template for universal representation; a clean slate. The use of black bodies thus becomes both rare and undesirable, as their bodies cannot be separated from their politicization and associated history, inducing white guilt, fear, and even envy. This phenomenon is a symptom of systemic racial inequity and presents an immense roadblock on the path to success for queer dancers of color.
Chapter II
American Modern Dance History: Constructions of Masculine Identity and Masculinity

Emphasizing pure, unstructured movement, and the natural body in the context of concert dance in lieu of classical ballet and European vaudeville, Ruth St. Denis, Isadora Duncan, and Loie Fuller adopted a new form of dance, American modern dance, during the late 19th century in the United States. These white women mostly performed solos and created works for other white women until the turn of the century, when their predecessors began to introduce white men into the modern dance field. Notably, Martha Graham was one of the first established choreographers to introduce these men into her company. In 1914, soloists St. Denis and Ted Shawn launched the first academy of dance to produce a professional dance company that included men. After Shawn and St. Denis split, Ted Shawn and his Men Dancers, all white performers, premiered at Shawn’s farm in Massachusetts in 1933, marking a turning point in American modern dance. In a fight to increase acceptance of the American male dancer and to bring awareness of the art form through a male perspective, Shawn created a specific image for the male dancer of the time, which still holds true today. From Ted Shawn’s narrow perspective, which was influenced by his strict religious and traditional Southern upbringing, the male dancer is not only white, but also strong, masculine, aggressive, unemotional and most importantly, detached from all aspects of femininity. Therefore, Shawn constructed specific politics of the male body and established what qualities were attributed to a “good”
male dancer. In this chapter, I will argue that Ted Shawn’s strict constructions of male identity and masculinity, along with seminal modern and postmodern dance artists’ perpetuation of said identities have had a profound effect on the subsequent and current identity of the American modern male dancer and the success of white, straight-presenting, male dancers in comparison to their queer, of color counterparts.

Inhabiting Space: Ted Shawn and his Men Dancers

Ted Shawn is regarded as one of the most influential choreographers and pioneers of American modern dance. Shawn established the first academy of dance to produce a professional dance company alongside his wife Ruth St. Denis. After purchasing a farm in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, Shawn also established Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, the oldest internationally acclaimed dance festival in the United States. On this same farm, Shawn founded and premiered the first all-male dance company in America, Ted Shawn and his Men Dancers. In choosing the male athletes from the Department of Physical education at Springfield College where Shawn taught, he sought to reestablish modern dance from his specific male perspective.\textsuperscript{53} Shawn’s ensemble of white, athletic, masculine men perfectly correlated with and preserved his racist, misogynistic, and homophobic ideologies about men in the dance world.

Born in Kansas City, Missouri in October of 1891 Shawn was studying to become a minister at the University of Denver when he caught diphtheria and had to take up dance in 1910 in order to regain muscle strength. While studying to become a

minister, Shawn developed narrow ideas about the places men and women held in society and the work that they engaged in. These ideals translated into his work as a choreographer and dancer. Dance Scholar Ramsay Burt introduces these ideals held by Shawn as falling under the umbrella of Muscular Christianity, which later informs much of the masculine constructions of the male dancer. Under these notions, masculinity is conceived as “natural,” and this pro-male attitude views woman as “functioning to uphold values of civilization.”\(^54\) Subsequently, women cannot be allowed to hold too much power, as the “feminization of culture leads to the weakening of manhood.”\(^55\) Modern dance as a whole is largely informed by the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant values held by its pioneer choreographers.

Muscular Christianity, defined as the Christian commitment to health and manliness, is concerned with a commitment to piety and physical health. Physical strength and the heroic male body were iconic images that influenced Ted Shawn’s choreographic work. Shawn chose dancers from Springfield that were both white and aesthetically masculine. Most of the men in his company were rumored to be gay, as was Shawn himself. “He and his company of male dancers spent [time] trying to prove they were not what Shawn and many of the company were.”\(^56\) Their efforts to remove all aspects of femininity from their movement led to the creation of hyper-masculine, athletic choreography. Their closeted nature also created a precedent for how issues of homosexuality would be treated in a homonormative and etherealized dance world.

\(^55\) Ibid.
It is also important to note that Ted Shawn was born and raised in the Jim Crow South. Jim Crow laws were state and local legislations that racially segregated antebellum Southern United States. These laws, *de jure* and *de facto*, were enacted in an effort to maintain the positionality of Black and white Americans in an inferior and superior position, respectively. This “separate, but equal” status rendered African Americans to a public and private inferior quality of life. Shawn, a white Southerner perpetuated these notions of racism and used his white male privilege to create a masculine identity for (white) American men that borrowed from the “natural, masculine and aggressive” sensibilities of previously enslaved African Americans. As evident in his choreography, along with many pioneering choreographers, Shawn strove for the “natural” that Black bodies had greater access to and thus appropriated these attributes to white Americans.

*Kinetic Molpai*, one of Shawn’s most iconic works celebrating the struggle, death, and rebirth inspired by Ancient Greek ceremonials is a singular example of this creative notion. The movements are picturesque. The dancers hold all of their tension in their clenched fists and move through space with bravado unseen in the works of previous female choreographers. *Finale from the New World*, a work choreographed in 1936, contains typical grand gestures, which Shawn borrowed from the work he saw men performing throughout the years of the Great Depression and implemented into numerous pieces. Shawn attributed dainty movements with plenty of wrist involvement to women and vertically dynamic movement performed at construction sites to men. The costumes rendered the men shirtless for most of the works in order to establish a place for the ‘manly’ physique of the American male dancer. Shawn’s

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57 Burt, *The Male Dancer*.
ideals developed from a rejection of European ballet movements, which he considered ‘delicate’ and, in doing so, moved towards an unrealistic and exaggerated representation of masculinity.  

![Figure 2: Photograph, Ted Shawn and his Men Dancers in Kinetic Molpai](image)

In addition to a hyper-masculine creation of movement, Ted Shawn was also appropriating from non-Western cultures as he had been doing in his early days with the Denishawn Company and Ruth St. Denis. In accordance with the duo’s imperialist attitudes, the Denishawn Company performed works that ‘borrowed’ from East Indian culture with respect to movement, costume, and set. After moving onto Jacob’s Pillow, Shawn continued to use his position of power and privileges as a white male to appropriate ‘positive’ aspects of masculinity that were not representative of the 1930s American man. Shawn was able to this because he was operating under the white racial frame, which allowed him to take and appropriate culture as he saw fit. The positionality of female choreographers and the virtually nonexistent choreographers of color in the 1930s would never allow for their

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59 Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival archives.
60 Burt, *The Male Dancer.*
representation of the male perspective, especially under a white supremacist and capitalist patriarchy. Shawn was free to borrow without consequence and held the agency of universal representation. In borrowing from non-Western ideologies of masculinity, Shawn observed that the “other” garnered a truer sense of masculine identity, which Shawn then hyperbolized and attributed to the white American male. Black masculinity, being the more natural of the two, became a threat to white masculinity. Blackness, traditionally considered more “natural,” was perceived as less refined than whiteness as a result of history of Black enslavement and inferiority.

Along with the creation of hyper-masculine movements and ideologies, Shawn and his Men Dancers had also created a particular all-male, all-white, gay environment at the Pillow. “Shawn’s commitment to promoting men in dance, and especially the ideal of an all-male company, encompassed his idealizations of homosexual love between two men.” By closeting his sexual identity and promoting machismo and pro-male attitudes throughout the farm, Shawn created the ideal homosocial and homoerotic environment. Establishing a male homosocial environment requires complete rejection of the female body, feminine aspects of life, and the possibility of women holding any power over a group of men who stand in solidarity to strengthen their masculine power over inferior (female and othered) bodies. The Pillow, filled with masculine, homosexual white men, proved to become a haven for male dancers seeking to make a career out of dance in a safe environment where they would be promoted and encouraged, rather than demonized in a female dominated art form. Ted Shawn and his Men Dancers sought to create an

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avenue for men in modern dance, but instead created a narrow alleyway for a highly particular type of white, able, athletic, masculine, and mostly closeted male body.

Reinforcing the Establishment: Graham, Limon, and Ailey

As previously mentioned, Martha Graham was a profoundly influential dancer and choreographer whose codified technique and movement philosophy is still taught worldwide and has fundamentally shaped American modern dance. Martha Graham began her career as a principal dancer with the Denishawn Dance Company, led by St. Denis and Shawn. Graham remained with Denishawn until 1923 and started her own dance company three years later. At first, the company was predominantly white women until Graham introduced men, notably being one of the first famously established choreographers to do so. A famous dancer by the name of Erick Hawkins, who would later become Graham’s husband for a short time, was one of the most famous additions. Graham is not to be completely associated with the first wave of feminism as St. Denis and Duncan were. Graham’s movement philosophy was rather more interested in embodying expression, moving towards modernism and creating dance that held meaning without needing to be beautiful or expressive in the way ballet and vaudeville dancing had become.\(^63\)

Graham’s particular use of men in her company works was evident of how she understood the space men occupied in dance, which was inarguably influenced by Ted Shawn and American society as a whole institution. One of Graham’s most well known works is *Appalachian Spring*, in which Hawkins originated as the groom and Merce Cunningham as the other male role. The two men barely move for the first half

\(^63\) Albright, *Moving History / Dancing Cultures.*
of the piece, remaining completely still while the female dancers move around or beside them. When one of the men finally begins to move, the movement is strong, athletic, and virtuosic in comparison to the fluid, almost balletic movement of the female dancers. After giving this dancer enough time to display his athletic masculinity, Graham herself begins to partner with him and essentially uses the male dancer as a prop to hoist herself into the air, both physically and metaphorically. The constant lifting, assisting, dragging, and gentle care the male dancer gives Graham places each body into a very particular space within the dance that adheres to strict societal gender norms and conceptions of femininity and masculinity. The preacher then also begins to dance alongside the other female dancers, in the same way the previous male dancer had. Yet when the women lift him, it does not read as assistance, but rather a self-mediated hoisting and simultaneous burying of the other female dancers. Similar patterns of male virtuosity and aggressive, athletic movement continue throughout the piece until its end. Although Graham’s works were not about gender difference, one cannot help but to attribute the differences in costume, movement style, and presence to the established constructions of masculine and feminine identity in American society and Ted Shawn’s influential constructions of male identity and creation of the particular space in dance occupied by male dancers.

Jose Limon is another prominent modern dance choreographer whose codified movement vocabulary is still taught worldwide and has shaped modern dance. Limon studied and danced with the Humphrey-Weidman Company (Humphrey studied at the Denishawn School and company under St. Denis and Shawn). As a Mexican-American who could pass as Caucasian and therefore held
certain white male privileges, Limon occupied an ambiguous political and cultural middle within the dance community. Limon created repertoire, including folk dances and dances about emotion and experience that spoke not only to his Mexican and American heritage, but also to all aspects of humanity. Limon’s technique was set with adherence to the “Apollonian and Dionysian” dichotomous concept where a part of his choreographic dance making proved chaotic and visceral and the other gave the movement meaning and harmonious structure.64

*The Moor’s Pavane*, one of Jose Limon’s most famous works, retells the story of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Limon himself plays the moor in the original piece, and although there seemed to be no clear intention of gender play or representation of marginalized sexualities, the works of pioneering choreographers and the implications of gendered difference created a lens through which to critically view this work. “Jose Limon’s “The Moor Pavane” is conditioned by the problems underlying male-male bonding in a homophobic society.”65 The intimate moments between the Moor and Iago were deemed too intimate, while the combative movements referenced the dancing men of Graham and Shawn.66 These observations can further be dissected through the homosocial environment set up by misogynistic men like Ted Shawn in society and dance. The intimacy portrayed by the male dancers was beginning to cross a line of homophobia that allowed men to be as intimate as possible without being sexual or deemed homosexual, while maintaining hegemonic power. Although Limon’s works were applicable to most human experiences, one cannot help but

66 Ibid.
attribute the criticism in male-male interactions and contact to the established constructions of masculine identity in American modern dance and Shawn’s establishment of white, athletic male bodies as the accepted norm.

Founder of postcolonial studies and Palestinian literary theoretician, Edward Said crafted seminal work that grouped together all representations of the Orient under the rubric of Orientalism, which he defined as “a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, historical and philosophical texts… a Western style of dominating.” To do this, Said leaned heavily on the idea of Orientalism as a social construction composed of repetitive and organized representations, which emerged because of an unequal power relationship between the East and West. In other words, Said uses the model of “discursive formation” as defined by Michel Foucault to emphasize that the Orientalist discourse and power dynamics themselves produce Orientalism. Ted Shawn was not shy to appropriation and exoticism of the Orient. Representations of Black bodies and specifically Black masculinity were constructed out of not only racism and stereotypes, but also Shawn’s borrowing of what he perceived as masculine behavior from non-western cultures. In addition, Shawn’s fascination with the aesthetics of difference also led him to exoticize African-American culture.

White American dance audiences wanted to see white Americans perform captivating works that explored modernism, expression, abstraction, and humanistic experiences. White American dance audiences also wanted to see Black dancers in “‘Authentic’ African material(s) derived from firsthand knowledge of classic West

68 Said, Orientalism, 3, 4.
Black choreographers who wanted to create work with Black dancers that did not adhere to white audiences’ preconceived ideals of African and African-American life had very unsuccessful careers. Edna Guy is a clear example of a Black choreographer whose Negro spirituals did not compare to the Negro spirituals of Helen Tamiris, a white and Jewish choreographer from New York City whose success surpassed that of Guy’s. White dance audiences and white choreographers assumed they had grasped clear notions of Black life and Black bodies on the concert dance stage, but because they truly did not have the access or agency to celebrate these experiences, appropriated and exoticized the culture of the “fascinating” East instead.

Alvin Ailey was an African-American dancer and choreographer who established arguably the most highly acclaimed and historically famous Black modern dance company in the world: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Ailey first received his dance training from Lester Horton in California, before arriving in New York City and becoming heavily involved in theatrical dance. According to literature on his early concert works, “Critics likened his style to the movements of wild animals…he presented a stage world ‘in which the men are men and the women are frankly delighted about it.’” Ailey’s virtuosic and highly energized dancing reinforced accepted notions of masculine behavior and dancing along with an automated erotized Black body. Arguably, Ailey’s ability to simultaneously create a spectacle and a celebration of Black bodies acceptable by white culture has resulted

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70 Albright, *Moving History / Dancing Cultures*, 346.
in the general popularity of his company among both racial groups and its continual success.

![Figure 3: Photograph, Alvin Ailey dancers in Sinnerman (2012)](image)

“As a dancer, Ailey created a persona which redefined popular stereotypes of the Black male body on the concert stage to include the erotic.”

Alvin Ailey’s choreographic work highlights the company’s exuberant athleticism, especially that of the male dancer’s, which echoed the masculinity present in Shawn’s work.

Blue Suite, a part of Ailey’s early repertoire, defined Black bodies within the accepted stereotypes while harboring subtle portrayal of racial injustices faced by the Black community in 1950s America.

The dancers, male and female, fall into automatic gender roles and established styles of dancing and interacting present within Black communities and perceived by white culture and society as a whole. The heterosexuality and athleticism, with homoerotic undertones, displayed by the men in the piece is also expressed in Ailey’s most famous work Revelations. Revelations includes the famous “Sinnerman” men’s trio, which according to the Alvin Ailey

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71 alvinailey.org.
72 Albright, Moving History / Dancing Cultures, 346.
73 Burt, The Male Dancer, 128.
74 Albright, Moving History / Dancing Cultures.
website itself, “shows who we are as Ailey men.”

Reminiscent of Ted Shawn and so many heteronormative choreographers after him, the men in this trio are bare from the waist up and rhythmically move with bravado, athleticism, and precision. Like most of Ailey’s work, the men also never touch, unlike his heterosexual duets. I would argue that as Ailey was a homosexual, cloistered black man, his success stemmed from suppression and assimilation of sexual, racial, gender based representations both in his personal and artistic choices.

When comparing the works of Ted Shawn and Alvin Ailey, arguably the two most iconic male choreographers to pave paths for male dancers and dancers of color, respectively, many similar conclusions can be drawn that support the argument of an establishment and perpetuation of a strict masculinity and masculine identity in American modern dance. As a white male in the early 1900s with access to privilege, wealth, and voice, Ted Shawn permanently transformed the dance world by introducing an image of male dancers. This image was the standard that would be held in comparison to evaluate generations of male dancers. The white man, with his racist and homophobic attitude had once again usurped another facet of art and claimed a space he assumed was rightfully his. A space which choreographers like Graham, Limon, and Ailey have made full, through willingness and an inability to halt the shrinking of space around their own marginalized bodies. Ailey, in an effort to preserve the presence of Black bodies and Black culture, having essentially no other choice, perpetuated an identity, constructed out of white-Eurocentric ideologies and operating under the white racial frame, to appeal to white audiences of the 1960s.

Both of these choreographers, along with many others throughout history have taken

75 Courtesy of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater website: alvinailey.org.
part in the construction of a particular role to be filled and a particular space to be held by men, and particularly black men, in the homonormative, etherealized art form called dance.

**Avant-Garde and Postmodernism: Paxton and Cunningham**

As dance moved out of the 1950s and into the 1960s and 1970s, new choreographic strategies began to emerge that revolutionized the dance world. The use of everyday movement and everyday people, as opposed to trained dancers, minimalism, and most importantly, improvisation and contact improvisation, mark the era of postmodern dance. “Whether the prevailing structure is a mathematical system for using space, time, or the body; or arbitrary assemblage; or fragmentation, juxtaposition, the deliberate avoidance of structure by improvisation; or the constant shifting of structure by chance operations, there is always the possibility, in postmodern dance, that the underlying form will be barred.” Postmodern dance choreographers rejected the compositional structures and presentational restraints on modern dance and began to implement everyday movement into performance art. Postmodern dance sought to address the definition and identity of dance. One artistic tool commonly used involved drawing greater emphasis on the process of art making so as to “demystify” matters of virtuosic technique.

Steve Paxton, hailed as the founding father of contact improvisation, was a dancer and choreographer of the Grand Union group, an improvisational dance group based in New York City from 1970 to 1976, who briefly danced with Merce

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77 Ibid.
Cunningham and Jose Limon. The primary focus in contact improvisation is the dancer’s physical awareness and sensation. This focus “threatens to remove the work from the realm of art altogether, by making the spectator obsolete.” In this section, I will outline how Paxton’s efforts, along with many of the other prominent members of the postmodern movement, to erase the differences between bodies and create sameness amongst all performers resulted in the partial deconstruction of an established masculine identity in American modern dance, but did not result in an establishment of a more queer definition of masculinity. In addition, I will analyze the ways in which this effort also did little to create a more inclusive dance community for people of color and traditionally marginalized bodies, but rather created more space for “non-traditional” white bodies.

Steve Paxton, dancer and choreographer, danced with Merce Cunningham for three years before establishing the Grand Union group. Merce Cunningham

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78 Ibid., 42.
79 http://www.walkerart.org/
created work during the era of avant-garde art. Cunningham collaborated with a variety of different artists and was one of the first choreographers to implement technology and the use of chance operations into his choreographic development. In regards to gender difference, Cunningham chose to ignore gender roles as a way to draw more attention to the physical movement and the bodies on stage. Cunningham was said to have premiered unisex choreography.\textsuperscript{80} He was interested in creating a codified movement vocabulary that would blur the differences in gender, race, and sexuality amongst bodies on stage. This interest arguably came from a refusal to implement conventional signs of masculinity into his work in order to reestablish his presence as a masculine man.\textsuperscript{81} Many would argue though, that while Cunningham’s work is much less gendered than Shawn, Graham’s and Ailey’s, he maintained many heteronormative tropes within his choreography. Women rarely lifted men, while men jumped more often and much higher. Although his costumes sometimes aided to create an androgynous look, there is an undeniable resemblance to traditional ballet movements and conventions in his choreography. The residual effects of Ted Shawn’s legacy on the constructions of masculinity and masculine identity on the American male dancer were still prevalent in this era. Cunningham, a successful homosexual white man who could pass for heterosexual (fitting exactly Shawn’s criteria) and enjoy the privileges that come with that, created work to abolish these established notions rather than challenge and reestablish them. In the end, Cunningham fell victim to traditional gender, race, and sexuality politics as evident in

\textsuperscript{80} Burt, \textit{The Male Dancer.}
\textsuperscript{81} Burt, \textit{The Male Dancer.}
most of his famous work including Second Hand (1970), Beach Birds for Camera (1993), and Ocean (1994).

As Steve Paxton danced with Merce Cunningham, who danced with Martha Graham, who danced with Denishawn, it is expected that certain philosophies regarding dance, dancers, and body politics would be evolving, yet similar throughout the decades. Steve Paxton, as a part of the postmodern and Judson Church movements, sought to create a space for all types of dancers to explore dance identity without training or specific politics about the body previously held by pioneering choreographers. In wanting to erase these lines of difference across bodies, the postmodern movement neglected audience perception and interpretation. During contact improvisation workshops and performances, men sometimes appeared as “strong, dynamic, powerful and controlling,”82 which reinforced conservative notions of masculine identity previously established and held by dance audiences. Paxton himself, previously a gymnast, was a white, athletic, masculine dancer who was accepted into the art form for these same reasons. Paxton’s solos “dodged and refuse expectations of masculine display,”83 but by the very fact that he was a white, athletic male, partly disregarded his efforts and proved to create as little global inclusion as Cunningham’s efforts.

Arguments do exist that suggest contact improvisation, along with other movement philosophies of the 1970s, pushed dance to become a more accepting art form inclusive of different bodies, gender expressions, and sexualities. I would argue that these postmodern choreographers enjoyed the luxury of white and wealth

82 Burt, The Male Dancer, 149.
83 Ibid., 150.
privileges that enabled them to create work that satisfied their artistic pursuits without needing to seek the approval of wealthy white audiences. I would also argue that for male dancers – since masculine homosexual men, both white and Black in this era, brought about these monumental strides – whole acceptance and global equality amongst different bodies and degrees of femininity present in the male dancer had not been achieved. This notion is blatantly evident in the fact that “change” that occurred in dance during the postmodern era is highly attributed to Steve Paxton, a white athletic man fitting Ted Shawn’s exact physical criteria for the norm. The progress made in the 1990s and 2000s had truly been revolutionary, but as I will outline in the next section, the problem with the male dancer still remains in the present day.

**Contemporary Modern Dance: Issues with the Male Dancer**

The final chapter in Dance Scholar Ramsay Burt’s “The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities” includes literature on contemporary modern dance choreographers implementing innovative techniques and redefining the definitions of gender and identity. Burt provides clear examples of contemporary artists pushing the envelope and reconstructing the ways in which we see dance, define gender identity and expression, and challenge previous and existing homophobic heterosexual conditioning. Fergus Early, Lea Anderson’s The Cholmondeley, and Ralph Lemon are the examples the author chooses to elaborate on. These three great choreographers are not only making dance, but are also critically engaging with gender politics and tackling issues of race and class. While these choreographers are doing a great amount to break down the conventions set up by Ted Shaw and preceding modern dance choreographers, it is frustrating that, at the end of the day, theirs aren’t
recognizable household names. Instead, they belong to a small contingent of marginalized artists whose work is critically acclaimed by a highly particular audience. These choreographers and innovative thinkers aren’t being commissioned as much, they aren’t making as much money, and they aren’t as successful as established companies or companies that are emerging and adhering to societal structures of masculine display and identity. These choreographers are critically analyzed in the academic spheres provided by higher education, but remain invisible in conversations held by general dance audiences.

“Progress or change in theater dance (as in all cultural forms) is not just a matter of a unilateral decision by the artist to change forms or conventions but a process of finding ways of making the spectator aware of the fact that what she or he has taken for granted – what has seemed normal or natural – is actually manufactured and contingent. Dance artists who are not white, male, heterosexual or privileged have to make representations differently in order to express their point of view, their sense of identity or their cultural values in theater dance. In order to make the spectator see gender, race, sexuality, or other components of identity differently, it is necessary to deconstruct those conventions and traditions which, in their effects, maintain these dance artists’ marginal and oppressed status.”

General dance audiences don’t always question why every man in Alvin Ailey is incredibly muscular, why almost every male dancer in the Paul Taylor Dance Company and Pilobolus is white and athletic, or why Marie Chouinard’s male dancers are beautifully sculpted in Ted Shawn’s image. As an educated dancer, choreographer, and thinker who critically engages with innovative methods of choreographic research, I understand the importance of these previously mentioned radical artists who are challenging the “manufactured and contingent” forms of creating and presenting dance work. As a member of society and a recent dance audience, I also understand that audience interpretation and perception are gravely

tainted by the societal constructions, including masculine identity and queer identity, already in existence. Successful and emerging companies understand this particular struggle, and battle with creating work that remains true to their integrity and movement identity, while remaining in business. At the end of the day, the politics at play in terms of who gets commissioned (who sells the most tickets, draws the biggest crowd, and receives the best reviews) is primarily influenced by whose work is better received by the general populous. The general populous comprised of both informed and uninformed primarily white audiences who are more concerned with getting a good show rather than challenging Ted Shawn’s archaic ideals of a masculine, homoerotic, and homosocial dance environments.

Beyond uncontrollable factors of societal and historical constructions of male identity and masculinity, other factors exist that continue to mold male dancers into a particular image that reinforces Ted Shawn’s narrow perspective. The ways in which audiences, particularly male audiences, engage with the physical body of the male dancer involves sociological and psychological barriers that deal with desire and homophobia. The psychological imprints embedded within the male dancer that stem from heteronormative teaching methods and environmental implications are also a factor. Furthermore, the constant need to defend dance as a macho and athletic art form creates a particular gender identity similar amongst all male dancers.

“Dance education may serve as an important means for disrupting dominant cultural assumptions about acceptable ways of moving for males and for challenging cultural stereotypes about male dancers.” The education of boys and young men in western concert dance creates a specific paradigm to ensure the future success of the

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85 Fisher, *When Men Dance*, 64.
male dancer. Multiple factors, including the lack of varying (black) male role models, gender based isolation and the differing training received by boys and girls are molding a male dancer ‘fit’ for the dance world.86 Young men admire successful male dancers and choreographers who have become household names because they meet the requirements set up by Shawn and society. Specifically, male dancers of color have an even smaller pool of influences to draw from, limited to Alvin Ailey, Ballet Hispanico, and Philadanco, whose male dancers also meet these requirements and happen to be of color. In addition, there are typically small numbers of young male dancers, if not only single male identifying dancers, in a class, which results in both the disproportionate encouragement of his success and his overuse in all the male roles that require a specific set of ‘masculine’ traits and a separate set of training. These factors, and many more, are influenced to a degree by the constructions created by Ted Shawn and the legacy his all-male company left on the history of dance, perpetuated by seminal modern dance choreographers, and the specific dance education boys must receive in order to be successful.

Along with the heteronormative dance education young boys receive, getting them interested and keeping them interested in dance requires a masculinization of education. In the effort to create an acceptable identity for the male dancer Ted Shawn knowingly used white male athletes to ease American audiences into viewing modern dance as a more acceptable and masculine art form similar to American male

sports. The Ted Shawn and his Men Dancers Company appeared in the *Boston Post* in 1936 with the caption:

“The most strenuous profession of all! Here are members of the Shawn group in rehearsal at Shawn’s farm atop Jacob’s Ladder in the Berkshires. These lads, besides doing all of the work on the farm, train five hours a day. They’re more rugged and better fit physically than any other athlete in the world and this dancing business, though it may seem simple, is more hazardous than any he-man sport.”

While recruiting and creating his company of all male dancers, Shawn did what most dance teachers today continue to do, which is to compare dance to a masculine sport in order to create a more alluring art form for boys. In order to get impressionable boys into the dance field, a validation of dance’s athletic endurance and macho qualities must be presented, as young boys face possible discouragement and ridicule from their external environments. Thus the gains must outweigh the costs.

Dance is the only art form that uses the physical body as the central medium for self-expression and thus carries with it all body politics held by differing dancing bodies in regards to gender, race, sexuality, ability, and more. Since dance involves spectatorship and the gendered gaze, the common problem facing the male dancer is present when men watch other men dance. “Male dancers become a threat to revealing the always-already crossed line between homosocial bonding and homosexual sexuality – if the appearance of the male body is desirable by other men.” Desirable male bodies on stage are a threat to heterosexual and misogynistic men’s homosocial order established to keep power distributed solely amongst one another. The everlasting rumors regarding the abundance of homosexual men in

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89 Burt, *The Male Dancer*. 

dance create another deterrence against dance for both homophobic heterosexual audiences and possible male dancers afraid of association. I would argue that this feeling of apprehension and undesired desire adds to the hyper-masculinization of a traditionally ethereal art form.

Before Ted Shawn created a legitimate space for men in concert dance, the male dancer was an undesired prop used by the ballerina to lift and assist. In an effort to legitimize dance as a viable career for men and create dance from a male perspective, Shawn created a professional gateway through which he ushered white, athletic, masculine men and created “the male dancer” in his image. Today, this image still casts a shadow on every male dancer who steps into an audition needing to prove their “dynamic” and “powerful” movement qualities in order to ensure success. Black dancers also must adhere to this archetype, but despite their best efforts, they can only ever transcend it partially. Black dancers must understand the limitations of their physical existence due to the positionality of their ‘affected’ bodies in relation to the ‘unaffected’ white male bodies.
Chapter III  
Choreographing Difference: The Performer-Audience Relationship

Every aspect of a dance performance is carefully orchestrated to optimize success. Success, while measured in many different ways, is typically measured by the amount of people who have attended an event, the amount of revenue earned from the event, and the kinds of reviews the event receives from dance critics that will dictate the performance’s continual success. The publications that advertise the performance have been thoroughly planned. The location of the event, orientation of the audience, the ambience of the theater or performance space when one initially walks in, the timing of the event, and even the seating of the event have been meticulously designed. The dance performance itself is another task that requires lighting, dancers, choreography, music, set, and a plethora of other components, which have also been carefully organized. In this chapter I will analyze the ways in which the politics of performance, evoked in the orchestration of such dance events, require the acknowledgement of the relationship between performer and audience. I aim to approach this relationship in various ways, particularly examining it through the lens of voyeurism. Additionally, I discuss how this relationship influences the execution, interpretation, and perception of the work. This chapter will explore the ways in which dance performance politics are rooted in the politics of the body and the identity of both the audience and performer.
Perception and Interpretation: The (Male) Audience Gaze

Dancers often dance for the purpose of being watched. Audience members often attend dance performances for the purpose of watching a spectacle. The most typical performance venue includes a stage and audience seating. The audience is typically veiled under a cloak of darkness, rendering its presence uncertain and its members anonymous. The dancers are brightly lit and focused. This physical relationship creates an impenetrable fourth wall that separates performer and audience. While breaking the fourth wall is a legitimate and deliberate artistic choice, I will be analyzing dance works that remain within the confines of the proscenium. This particular dynamic situates theater and performance as a voyeuristic exchange.90 The typical performance space legalizes and encourages voyeuristic behavior between audience and performer. The audience, as the “voyeur,” remains unseen by the dancers, positioning them as peeping toms peering into a world of forbidden pleasures. The dancers, bound by the confines of the performance space, create a world in which through references the audience is reminded of their daily performative experiences and physical embodiments that go unnoticed.

Although the presence of the audience is “unknown”, its dominating and homogenous identity is often assumed. Dance, as an art form, has been historically reserved for viewing by the elite upper class, composed primarily of white individuals. Consequently, the identity of dance audiences is typically composed of the white, upper class, wealthy, and educated public. Distinctions between “high art” and “low art” are typically made in response to the racial and socioeconomic

90 Here I use the definition of voyeurism as defined by George Rodosthenous in Theatre as Voyeurism: The Pleasures of Watching as “the sexual interest in or practice of spying on people engaged in intimate behaviors or other actions usually considered to be of a private nature.”
composition of its audience. The art discussed in this thesis, namely modern dance and performance art, is typically regarded as “high art,” indicating the educational and class privilege of its audience. With this understanding in mind, choreographers and artistic directors of successful dance companies must, at times, sacrifice choreographic integrity in order to satisfy and attend to the “general” dance audience. The functional result of this phenomenon is the overrepresentation of dancers on stage with whom the intended audience can easily identify. The comfort of the intended audience, achieved through this lack of difference, is crucial for the company’s continual success.

Representation, for majority white audiences, manifests itself in a racial and ethnic manner. John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, which contributed invaluably to feminist readings of popular culture, begins with the poignant opening line: “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.” This text consists of written and photographic analyses of the ways in which women are portrayed and viewed in media, publications, and arts. Berger critiques social and popular culture’s portrayal of gender and the effect it has on the seeing and receiving of culture. I have adopted this approach in the context of race and the role it plays in artistic work and its consumption. The first thing we unconsciously notice about strangers is their physical appearance, which includes their race and gender. “We are always looking at the relation between other things and ourselves”[^91] and representation is essential to forming this sense of relativity.

As a result of this racial bias and cultural affinity, the dance community is flooded by white vanilla. Four out of nineteen dancers in the Mark Morris Dance Group are dancers of color. Three out of eighteen dancers in the Batsheva Dance Company are dancers of color. Two out of the sixteen dancers in the Paul Taylor Dance Company are dancers of color. Gallim Dance, Parsons Dance, and Doug Varone and Dancers each have one dancer of color. Compagnie Marie Chouinard has none. In contrast to these dance companies, companies directed or founded by people of color have a higher rate of Black dancers. Such companies include Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Dance Theater of Harlem, and Ballet Hispanico. Though majority white dance companies do not claim to operate under the name of white supremacy, the lack of racial diversity in these companies, on either end of the spectrum, is clearly not due to the lack of diversity in the dance community. These companies are not explicitly designed to keep out people of color, yet membership remains particularly inaccessible for this specific racial group. There are numerous reasons for this overt racial inequality, paramount among them are the perceived flexibility of white bodies and the resultant inflexibility of Black bodies in dance.

I use the term flexibility, not in the conventional sense, but to describe the prevailing belief that white bodies can be used to represent universal truths and Black bodies can only represent Black truths. The very existence of blackness was introduced as an imperialist concept as the antithesis to whiteness. As a result, white bodies possess an implied neutrality; they can encapsulate a wide variety of emotions, images, and narratives. In this construction, Black bodies can only represent the
“Black struggle,” Black history, Black rage, Black sadness, and Black culture. The use of a Black body on the dance stage is often seen as a heavily charged political statement. Audiences cannot disassociate color, race, history, and their concomitant prejudices from Black bodies. For this reason, historically Black dance companies, particularly Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Dance Theater of Harlem, thrive with predominantly white audiences. These audiences accept these Black dancers simply because they are viewed as spectacle performance for the audience’s pleasure and entertainment. These companies are historically rooted in a celebration of Black culture or in addressing the issues and complexities of the Black community. White audiences can view and recognize these concepts from a distance, comfortably in their seats, without fully engaging with the “minority struggle” or accepting it as truth. This notion reinforces the theater as a voyeurism since the power dynamics at play in both theater and voyeurism become relatively similar.

Aside from representing abstract themes and concepts, white bodies can also represent Black bodies, but Black bodies cannot represent white bodies. Minstrel shows, which developed in the 19th century, featured white bodies in Blackface portraying Black people and culture for white audience’s entertainment and laughter. Not only did these shows create a lazy, dimwitted, happy-go-lucky image of Black people, it also began the persisting pattern of white performers taking the place and opportunities of Black people in portraying Black roles in the performing arts. The residual effects of this phenomenon can still be seen today in films such as Aloha (2015) in which Emma Stone, a white actress, starred as Allison Ng, a Hawaiian native of half Asian descent. Not only is Stone white, but she has incredibly pale skin.
and strawberry blonde hair. This case is not unique, but emblematic of the whitewashing\textsuperscript{92} that occurs in Hollywood and in the performing arts as a whole.

![Figure 5: Commonly used advertising gimmicks for Minstrel shows during the 19th century.\textsuperscript{93}](image)

In addition to this assumed “white gaze,” an always present “male gaze” is also included in the politics of performance. The male gaze is a concept coined by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey\textsuperscript{94} referring to two distinct and interlocking social phenomena. First, this concept refers to the tendency for visual and performing arts to be constructed and created for a masculine or male viewer. Second, it refers to the tendency of these arts to depict the world and women from a male perspective. Mulvey argues that the male gaze typically takes precedence over the female gaze, which is the gaze of women looking at themselves through the eyes of men. Thus, it becomes reflective of an underlying asymmetry of power between the two dominant genders. The establishment of the gender binary, positioning femininity as inferior to masculinity, creates a patriarchal society where phallocentric ideologies of

\textsuperscript{92} Whitewashing is the casting practice in the film industry in the United States in which white actors are cast in historically non-white character roles.
\textsuperscript{93} This reproduction of a 1900 minstrel show poster, originally published by the Strobridge Litho Co., shows the blackface transformation from white to "black". This image is available from the United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division under the digital ID var.1831.
representation are deemed “natural” and “normal.” The gender binary positions women as objects of desire, specifically male sexual desire. This desire is further problematized when men are interpreted and viewed through the male gaze.

Dance is one of the only art forms in which the artistic instrument is a living, breathing body. While this provides a tangible relation and human connection for an audience member, depending on whose bodies are involved, it can also provide a great level of disconnect, discomfort, or negative associations. Generally in relation to male bodies, homosociality and homosocial desire are the most relevant to the male gaze. Heterosexual males who prefer to socialize with men may be considered a homosocial heterosexual. Feminists to emphasize the presence of solidarity between men often use the term. This solidarity results in and perpetuates the heteropatriarchy, fostering the subsequent idolization and privileging of heterosexual, often white, males. Homosociality is dependent on same-sex relationships that are not romantic or sexual. Homosexuality, romantic or sexual relationships between same-sex persons, represents a threat to homosociality. Male dancers are generally beautiful in the traditional sense, as I have established in this work, of being white, masculine, and athletic. Watching a “hot white guy” leap across a stage half naked is a relatively exhilarating experience. Not only does this desire manifest itself in a desire to be that man, but also in a desire for that man. This is where the problem is introduced. Same-sex sexual desire would destroy the very infrastructure white, male hegemony is built upon. Therefore, the “issue with the male dancer” still remains as he threatens the status quo. If this threatening male dancer is also Black, then he becomes a dangerous threat.
Dancing While Black: Identity on the Concert Dance Stage

Women, queer individuals, and people of color strongly identify with the cultural identities imposed onto them by society as a result of the marginalization of minority groups. As a result of these enforced identities, minority groups in the art making world tend to be pigeonholed into creating work pertaining to their personal social experiences. Queer, Black, and female artists typically create work about the positionality of their bodies and how these positions manifest in particular social experiences. Homosexual men do not obviously present as such on the performative stage, therefore all-male dance companies typically do not confront issues of homosexuality in the overall totality of their work. All-female dance companies do exist, but their numbers and fame pale in comparison to mixed-gender and all-male dance companies. One of the most famous all-female, all-black, dance companies is Urban Bush Woman (UBW), founded by artistic director and choreographer, Jawole. The company’s performances are dedicated to exploring the cultural influences of the African Diaspora and showcase strong works based on women's experiences. Mixed-gender dance companies with similar racial composition as UBW will be discussed later in this chapter including Abraham.In.Motion, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane, and briefly Alvin Ailey. These dance companies have found success through their ability to present Black culture to white audiences in a palatable manner.

Abraham.In.Motion is a contemporary dance company based in New York City under the artistic direction of choreographer, Kyle Abraham. In the last decade, Abraham has quickly risen to fame earning some of the most coveted awards for the arts. Abraham has been the recipient of the Bessie Award, the Princess Grace Award,
and most recently the MacArthur Genius Award. The MacArthur Foundation annually awards over half a million dollars each to about 20-30 individuals who show "extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits and a marked capacity for self-direction." The recipients can use the award in whatever way they please without monitoring from the organization. Needless to say this award has created an incredible amount of opportunities for Abraham that have made his company a prominent name in the field. Abraham not only creates work with his own company, but has also been commissioned to make works for companies like Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. I will be analyzing Abraham’s 2012 work, Pavement, which was performed by Abraham.In.Motion, and I will briefly discuss his upcoming work, Untitled America, which will be performed by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and is set to premiere in late 2016.

Pavement is inspired by John Singleton’s 1991 film Boyz in the Hood. The piece explores themes of violence love and pain “from the perspective of a group of friends struggling to stay together while their community is tearing apart.” I had the pleasure of attending the Connecticut premiere at Wesleyan University in 2014. The work’s music score ranges from classical music by Bach to songs by Black artist, Sam Cooke. The movement vocabulary of the work ranges from balletic movements with virtuosity and precision to movements with intricate spine articulation drawn from hip-hop. The most salient moments from this piece evoke themes of Black culture and the black experience. One section includes the soundscape of loud gunfire paired with chaotic movements as a single female dancer slowly walks toward the

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95 MacArthur Fellows Program website.
96 Abraham.In.Motion Company website.
audience, reminiscent of dangerous black ‘ghettos.’ Another moment involves flashing red and blue lights, reminiscent of police car lights, while Abraham himself stands at the corner of the stage repeatedly and loudly pleading, “nigga (sic) help me.” An overarching motif involves the white male dancers forcing the black male dancers to the ground, onto their stomachs, and violently pulling their arms behind their backs, reminiscent of a criminal arrest. *Pavement* is filled with vivid imagery of and references to the “Black struggle.”

This piece is an illustrative example of Abraham’s engagement with disidentification, a ‘world-making’ process for minoritarian subjects, as “(he) proceeds to use this code (the disenfranchisement of minorities) as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.”

Because Kyle Abraham is a Black queer artist and his persistent use of Black dancers, his work will always be associated with his racial and sexual identity by Black and white dance audiences. Abraham engages with this notion and uses it as a tool to deliver work that not only is palatable for white audiences, but also addresses the social issues he desires to reference. This particular piece is extremely violent and somewhat traumatic for dance audiences, potentially perpetuating the romanticization of “the Black struggle” that in turn enables white audiences to view and engage the spectacle from a comfortable, removed position.

The most recent work Abraham was commissioned to create for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is entitled *Untitled America*. When asked to explain the concept and creative process of this piece, Abraham said that it is “really looking

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at the prison system and thinking about the cyclical nature of families that have gone through the prison system in some way.” Mass incarceration and the disproportionate incarceration of Black men in America is one of the most persistent issues currently plaguing the U.S. Michelle Alexander, a civil rights litigator and legal scholar, discusses race-related issues specific to African-American males and mass incarceration in the United States in her work, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration In the Age of Colorblindness*. The book has recently received criticism for its both glamorization and romanticization of the issue for the consumption of the white middle class.  

"The New Jim Crow is not for 'everyone' because from cover to cover 'everyone' except advocates of white and middle-class liberalism – in the imperial context of U.S. settler nationalism – are placed totally and completely beyond the pale." This work was written for the consumption and education of a white audience and the same criticism can be given for choreographic works by Abraham and Ailey. When Abraham created a work with white American Ballet Theater principal ballerina, Wendy Whelan, the piece did not address the dancers’ embodied experiences, but rather was inspired by folklore about a snake enchanted by smoke. As a result of Whalen’s neutral, unaffected white body, Abraham was able to create an abstract work detached from his imposed social identity.

Bill T. Jones, current artistic director of Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, is one of the most prolific contemporary dance choreographers of the 20th century. Like Kyle Abraham, Bill T. Jones has been the recipient of many artistic accolades including a 1994 MacArthur Genius Award. Jones has been creating work

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99 Thomas, “Why Some Like The New Jim Crow So Much.”
since the 1980s with his artistic and life partner, Arnie Zane. Zane lost his life to AIDS-related lymphoma in 1988 and since then Jones has continued to choreograph and perform, both as a soloist and with an ensemble of company members. “In their early New York appearances their racial and structural oppositeness was constantly observed.”100 Bill T. Jones, a tall and muscular Black man, and Arnie Zane, a short and slender white man, “redefined the duet form and foreshadowed issues of identity, form and social commentary that would change the face of American dance.”101 While the company’s work has consistently tackled a wide variety of themes and concepts, the most prevalent of these themes are identity and body politics, as the company members typically represent a range of varying embodied experiences including Black and white men, women, and bodies of varying shapes and sizes.

One of the company’s first ensemble works, Social Intercourse, dealt with “social issues of race, sexuality, and all those (social) things.”102 The cast of dancers includes Black and white bodies and small and large bodies. Many sections of the piece seek to question and dismantle the barriers between individual people and to (de)construct relationships between bodies. One section of the dance includes two men kissing and another includes the sexualization of the three black female dancers; a statement on and reflection of both society’s prejudices and definitions of the established norm.103 The Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin, which was originally included in its title 52 Handsome Nudes, includes a finale of naked bodies of varying sizes and colors on stage. The piece dealt with the freedom and right to be oneself, to

101 Ibid., 113.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
embrace one’s identity and body fully. The first section of the piece is a retelling of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in which “the variety of stereotypes Jones invokes establishes that everyone, black and white, is implicated in our widespread and variegated system of racism.”\textsuperscript{104} The progression of the work included men kissing men, black men embracing white women, and vice versa. Jones was truly challenging our perceptions and notions of comfort as an audience.

Marginalized sexual and racial identities exist in and are subjugated by the dominant public majority. The works of artists like Kyle Abraham and Bill T. Jones continually question, problematize, and negotiate the existing prejudices and perceptions of this majority, thus creating new publics that contrast with the normative majority. American critical theorist and feminist Nancy Fraser discusses this concept at length in her work, authoring the idea of counterpublics to articulate this experience. Counterpublics arise out of the exclusion of certain participants from the public sphere and serve to create space for othered identities in the public sphere despite its restrictiveness. Counterpublics are, by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment.\textsuperscript{105} The formation of an accepted ‘public’ forms our social world to establish a normative culture. Artists such as Abraham and Jones use their positionality as black, often queer individuals, to illuminate and provide voice on behalf of the minority experience. Their works, and the works of others of that ilk, are a form of counterpublics in the dance world as their subversion and simultaneous perpetuation of the Black experience serve to create


space and discourse for the minority experience.
Chapter IV
Theory and Practice: Choreographic Installments and the Choreographic Process

Having engaged with the social structures and cultural norms established in the previous chapters, I turn now to discussing the choreographic process and product of my own choreographic works. For the first installment of my Thesis work, entitled their condition, I set out to create a work of art purposely devoid of comments, suggestions, or connotations dealing with race, gender, or sexuality. Through my own lived experiences of the arguments I have constructed in this research, I know this task to be virtually impossible and set up to fail in that regard. For my second semester’s work, entitled balance me between your eyes, I operated within a similar yet, opposing frame. I created a duet between myself and another white, male identifying dancer. I approached this work with no regard to the arguments previously established about racialized and affected bodies on the performative stage in order to analyze the work in a retrospective manner and in contrast to my first approach. The work, rather than solely focus on challenging the structures and forms of identity, focused on a concrete narrative and the particular ways in which both the other dancer and I existed within this narrative.

I took many steps to attempt complete erasure of identity and cultural differences among the dancers within the first semester’s work. The dancers I chose, the duets and trios I created, the arrangements I constructed, and the phrases I choreographed all worked together to methodically produce a sense of equality and, to an extent, androgyny among the cast. I discarded these tactics in my second
semester’s work and instead adhered to the interpersonal narrative, for which our individual lived experiences were of the utmost importance. The bulk of the discussion of these choreographic installments will delve into the process of creating this work, as well as the process of analyzing the work in the wake of both the performances and the audience’s perception and interpretation of the work. I find that the conclusions drawn from these works further support my argument about the queer Black body as spectacle and the erasure of personhood that have become inescapable in contemporary U.S society.

Cultural Androgyny: A Discussion of their condition

The first step towards creating their condition was the creation of a suitable cast of dancers. I generally create work with technically trained dancers, with varying technical abilities. In addition to malleable and virtuosic, I sought a cast of racially diverse dancers that included an uneven proportion of female identifying bodies to male identifying bodies. I knew I would dance in the piece, not only to attempt the experience of being a neutral body on stage, but also because the population of technically trained dancers of color on the Wesleyan University campus is extremely limited. Notably, I am the only technically trained queer male dancer of color currently attending Wesleyan. After determining my participation in the work, I approached Sophie Miller, Luisa Donovan, Nick Daley, and Jennifer Swindlehurst-Chan to join me in this choreographic endeavor.

Sophie Miller is currently a junior at Wesleyan University. She is an American Jew originally from New York City, New York. Sophie has short, curly, dark brown hair, fair skin, and a petite frame. Sophie has trained in Modern and
Ballet for most of her life. Luisa Donovan is equal by physical description, fair skin and curly brown hair, however the musculature of her body is more prominent. Luisa is also an American Jew originally from Newton, Massachusetts and is currently a sophomore at Wesleyan. Luisa has mostly trained in Ballet for most of her life. Nick Daley is around 5 feet 8 inches. He has light brown hair, fair skin, and blue eyes. Nick’s body is mostly covered in lean muscle. Nick has trained in Modern and Ballet for most of his life and was a competition dancer for a part of his dance career. Nick is a currently a junior at Wesleyan. Jennifer Swindlehurst-Chan is half Chinese, a quarter British, and a quarter Hungarian. Jennifer is slightly taller than the rest of the cast and has long, straight, brown hair. Jennifer is a sophomore at Wesleyan from San Diego, California. She began training in Hip Hop at the age of 12 and has been training in Modern and Ballet intermittently since then. I am currently a senior at Wesleyan University and am originally from the Dominican Republic, though I have lived north of Boston for most of my life. I am similar to Nick in muscularity, but have dark, coarse hair and brown-caramel skin. I started dancing at the age of 18 and began my formal dance training at Wesleyan with Modern and Ballet technique.

During the rehearsal process, all dancers were aware of the task at hand and willing to work together to achieve it. The aim of this work had two primary components. Firstly, the physical content, choreographic choices, movement styles, and artistic themes were involved with the task of finding pleasure inside discomfort. I pushed my dancers and myself to create unique movement phrases that extended past their physical capabilities and find the pleasure in the pain and discomfort they felt inside that space. Most of the vocabulary in the final iteration of the piece was
either my own choreography or my dancers’ choreography, which I had altered. Secondly, the composition of the work was methodically discussed and constructed among the dancers. Many restrictions were placed on the overall structural composition of the work. The two men in the piece could not lift another dancer unless they too were lifted in equal numbers throughout the piece. Nick, the one white, cisgendered, male, could not begin any one sequence of events. Nick could not be in the front of more than one formation or at the top of more than one construction. I, the one black dancer, could not end any canon or dance at the bottom of or behind any formation. Achieving a sense of equilibrium among all of the dancers was of the utmost importance to the extent of removing simple gestures that were suggestive of any connotations related to race, gender, or sexuality. I employed these methodical counteractions to entrenched social hierarchies in an effort to compensate for their persistence and accommodate for the inevitable failure to eliminate the racial and gendered positionality of the dancers on stage.

The piece began in a line downstage, 2 feet away from the first row of audience. This first position lasted about 30 seconds after the first light cue. I wanted
to give the audience time and space to take in the materiality of the bodies presented to them. All of the dancers adorned the same color socks and the same “one size fits all” one-piece romper. The women pulled their hair back into a bun to further preserve homogeneity among our bodies. The first phrase material consisted of intricate gestural movements in complete unison with each dancer moving off stage beginning with the dancer furthest stage right. After Sophie, the dancer furthest stage left was left alone by her peers, she began a solo. Simultaneously, Jennifer, Nick and I emerged from the furthest upstage wing with a lifting sequence. This particular moment in the piece was the first to evoke difference for viewers. In feedback after showings throughout the rehearsal process, fellow a Dance major noted that my lifting of Nick and Jennifer seemed muscular and successful compared to Jennifer’s lifting of the male dancers. The entirety of the phrase consisted of lifting one another in order to ensure everyone was both lifting and being lifted, and no one partnership could be associated with heteronormative tropes of traditional dance.

Immediately following the trio sequence, Sophie and Luisa performed a duet. I knew a duet was necessary in the overall composition of the work to optimize the variations in group work, thus in order to meet our collective goal, the duet occurred between two female identifying dancers. A duet between two different genders would have been susceptible to interpretations of traditional gender roles and a duet between two men would have read as an aggressive battle or quarrel. The two females each composed a solo that were each brought together to form a duet in which there was equal lifting of one another occurred and equal burden was shared. None of my peers
provided feedback about the duet as a moment where someone could interpret a narrative or dynamic based on the gender or sexuality of the two dancers.

The next section of the piece brought all five dancers into a unison phrase that began at the upstage left corner. The dancers and I kept referencing unison phrase work as a choreographic trope to create a sense of sameness and cohesion among our varying bodies. This section led into a quartet and solo section of the piece. I performed the solo, downstage right, with the quartet of remaining dancers moving across the stage slightly upstage of me. I decided to perform the solo for multiple reasons. Giving myself the solo was an act of defiance and retribution. Audiences rarely see the token Black dancer in a company performing a solo with the other dancers as a background. Additionally, I was operating under the assumption that to reach equilibrium there must be a redistribution of power among bodies with more power and agency given to traditionally marginalized bodies, in this case the queer of color dancer. This was one of the most striking moments of my piece for some of the faculty members who provided feedback. One faculty member could not explain her immediate dissociation of my body from the rest of the dancers’ bodies. She noted, “there’s something about your body, black and muscular, that stands out as different to me in comparison to the rest of the dancers.”\footnote{Feedback provided by Nicole Stanton, Wesleyan University Dance department Chair.} In addition, a clear and inescapable out group/in group dynamic was established in this section.
The last section of the piece consisted of another line, this time perpendicular to the audience running downstage to upstage through the center. The order of the line from front to back was: me, Luisa, Jennifer, Nick, and then Sophie. The order was intentional. I was already on stage and therefore remained in front. Luisa was first because she had never begun any particular sequence of events. Jennifer and Nick were in the middle of the order as not to allude to race or gender play in the order formation. Sophie was last because she was the first to have a solo at the beginning of the piece. I will admit, I knew this last section was going to be racially charged. As each dancer entered, I stood at the front of the stage motionless. Each dancer approached me and manipulated my body into an uncomfortable position using both my arms and legs. Although the act was making reference to the idea of finding pleasure in discomfort, this section also read as a stripping of agency and power by straight-presenting, white dancers. All of the feedback provided for this particular section of the piece was riddled with racial rhetoric and identifications. The piece ended with a repeated sequence of movements that scattered all of the dancers throughout the space. As a result of my physically taxing solo, I was excessively...
sweating during this sequence, further emphasizing the effect of this spatial manipulation.

Figure 8: Photograph by Sadichhha Adhikari, final formation in their condition (2015).

As I knew when I embarked on this piece, the goal of this work was unachievable. The only way to create race and gender neutrality on stage was to compensate for the persistent roles we all recognize. In an attempt to work outside of them, I had to account for them even more. In order to make Nick not appear dominant on stage, he had to be marginalized, and I had to be dominant. This shows the extent of the power these entrenched roles have. We are always in dialogue with them, whether we seek to reject or accept them. Even with this goal, people still read the current social hierarchy in the piece. Many audience members reported interpretations of systemic struggle and liberation. Some friends suggested the piece referenced a narrative of bodies, with individual struggles and histories, trying to escape a restrictive system set in place to keep everyone “in line,” evoked by the theme of order and lines I had established in the piece. My body, as the darkest on
stage, evoked difference for many audience members, serving as a constant reminder of that difference, like bodies of color commonly do on stage and in life. Dance, a lived experience, using a living and breathing body with associative identities cannot utilize black bodies to universally represent humanity as the Black body is not “white,” it is Black. Black is the antithesis to white and will never acquire the power, agency, privilege, and neutrality given to the white body on the basis of race, gender and sexuality.

**Private Love, Public Sphere: A Discussion of balance me between your eyes**

“**Implicit voyeurism: when the audience observes nudity which is either suggested behind gauze or is dimly lit and is more imagined than actually seen.**”

- Theater as Voyeurism, George Rodosthenous.

*balance me between your eyes* was a twelve-minute duet between Nick Daley and myself. In contrast to my first choreographic installment, this piece dealt with sexuality, specifically homosexuality, and its place in the public arena. The piece explored an abstract, and at times literal, form of traditionally privatized, homosexual behavior. The difference in race between Nick and me was an intentional choice on my part, both to illuminate the lack of representation of interracial same-sex relationships in society and in dance and to be representative of my own romantic and sexual experiences. Along these similar lines, the ultimate goal of the piece was to present homosexual sex as a romantic exchange rather than a carnal one. The piece contained a loose narrative of a mundane sexual and/or romantic encounter. While I typically believe the process of creating a work is never as important as the final product, in this case, the process was equally, if not more, important. We created this
work not only by dancing with and for one another, but also by sharing with one another. George Rodosthenous’s *Theater as Voyeurism* became influential literature to establish my choreographic work within a theoretical context. The feedback, initial impressions, and overall comments of the work from my professors and peers cemented my theoretical argument.

The process of creating this piece was physically and emotionally involved. Nick and I dedicated three and a half hours of rehearsal every week for two months. Thirty minutes of one rehearsal per week was reserved for Nick and I to get to know one another on a personal level. To structure our method of sharing and exploring, we used the New York Times article entitled “Quiz: The 36 Questions That Lead to Love.”\(^{107}\) We would take turns asking each other questions from this article, hoping not only to get to know each other better, but also to be vulnerable with each other in new ways. The article is separated into three sets, each set of questions intending to be more probing than the previous set. The idea behind this quiz is that “mutual vulnerability fosters closeness.”\(^{108}\) These questions made this process a particularly emotional and loving one. Nick and I learned an incredible amount of detail about one another in a very short period of time. We learned about our distinct upbringings, our families, our biggest fears and aspirations, and the things we value most in our lives. Although I do not believe I fell romantically in love with Nick, I do believe I grew to love and care for him. Through this process, we were able to form a deep bond with someone we previously had not understood or cared intensely for.

\(^{107}\) Link of the New York Times article used in this rehearsal process. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/fashion/no-37-big-wedding-or-small.html?_r=0

\(^{108}\) Ibid.
As previously stated, our choreographic project contained a very loose narrative. Nick and I reflected on our sexual and romantic history on the Wesleyan University campus and decided our story would follow the storyline of our experiences with the “typical Wesleyan hookup.” Through our experience and ultimate interpretation, casual sexual encounters on the Wesleyan University campus begin with an initial sitting at a party. You meet your person of interest on the dance floor. You begin to dance. Occasionally, you step outside and begin to have a conversation about some frivolous topic meant to cloud the anxiety, sexual arousal, and curiosity in the air. After you continue to talk, or sometimes go back to dancing, you eventually share a kiss, or multiple kisses. After a mutual sexual desire has been established you typically leave one house party to attend the next. After an hour or so of dancing, talking, and kissing one of the two invites the other over to their bedroom. After finally arriving at the designated bed, the two individuals engage in consensual sex. After deciding whether to leave that same night or the next morning, you either never see this person again, casually have sex with them again, or embark on some unique romantic or sexual partnership with them. Nick and I attempted to portray this initial storyline through movement.

Figure 9: Photographs by Shelli Weiler, Eury German and Nick Daley’s opening solos in balance me between your eyes.
The piece began with a spotlight on Nick downstage right as Nick danced a solo. I watched Nick, from a dimly lit position upstage left as he moved within the spotlight. As the spotlight on Nick dimmed, the spotlight on me started to appear and I began to dance my own solo, with Nick watching admiringly from afar in near darkness. These solos were improvised inspired by the prompt to dance like no one else was watching. These solos represented the first time someone of interest catches your attention. After a mutual acknowledgement of one another, Nick and I began to mirror each other’s movement, ultimately breaking out of this structure and dancing towards one another using different traveling movement phrases. After a series of intricate partnering and lifts, Nick and I took our shoes off. The dancing continued, covering the whole space with virtuosic movement and falling in and out of unison phrases. Our dancing took us to the upstage right corner into the transition of my second solo.

My second solo began with a halt of movement, followed by Nick quietly uttering the words “this is a good place to talk.” These words marked the introduction of our voices in the piece, representing the point in the night when occasionally the two individuals step aside or outside to have a conversation. A few audience members usually chuckled at Nick’s words as they were all too familiar with the phrase. I then danced while Nick ‘listened.’ I danced over his head as he sat looking out into the dark space of the audience as though he was pretending to listen as many people often do during these perfunctory conversations. At the end of my solo, I removed the sweater I was wearing, signaling to the audience both the physical heat between us and what was to come. After Nick and I got up off the floor, we slow danced, singing,
“Sway” by Michael Buble, to and for one another. This was one of the first moments in the piece that referenced romantic gestures or acts. The lyrics of the love song also evoked romanticism.

Once the slow dancing had ceased, Nick and I began to ‘kiss.’ As we slowly came face to face, our eyes met, our noses touched, and then, placing our chins on each other’s shoulder, we began to gently bump chests, alternating sides with each impact. The ‘kissing’ involved heavy breath and became faster until we came to a sudden stop and I whispered sweet nothings, inaudible to the audience, into Nick’s ear. This method of abstraction came about in a joking manner as we compared the aggressiveness with which we bumped chests to the urgency of a dancefloor makeout session. The lights shifted, showing that Nick and I had left one house party and entered another. At this stage in the night, we agreed, most couples leave a party together if they intended on engaging sexually with one another. Relocating to another party is typically an unspoken indication of eventual mutual departure towards a bedroom. Once we arrived at the new location, an awkward dance party commenced. During the awkward dance party, one of my peers commented that this was one of the first times in the piece she had felt she could relate to the two
individuals as humans rather than as dancers. “That was one of the first moments where I thought, ‘Oh wait, I know these two people.’”

We grew silly and playful with this section, personalizing and humanizing our bodies. Nick eventually took his flannel shirt off and we continued into the next section of dancing.

The next section of this piece was an expansive, transitional, unison section. This section represented the dancing done at the next house party, as well as the transition from the last location into the bedroom, a progression that typically increases your heart rate and fills you with nervous excitement. The choreographic movements were virtuosic and traveled over an incredible amount of space. The expansive movement in this section was set to contrast the sudden shift in tone of the piece that was about to occur in the next section. We ended that sequence on the ground and laid on our backs. Lifting my legs in the air and placing my hands on my butt, my body symbolically asked, “Are you a bottom?” Nick, lifting his legs and placing his hands on the arch of his feet, symbolically replied, “Yes. Are you a bottom?” I answered, “Yes” by looking intently into his eyes. Nick then asked, “Who’s going to bottom?” by staring into my eyes. I replied, “I’m going to bottom.” This is a common question two male partners ask one another before engaging in sexual intercourse, therefore we did not want to simply skip this crucial section. The situation can take various turns at this point in the conversation. Our situation continued and Nick stood up and stood over my body. I held the hem of his shirt, placed my feet by his hips, and peeled off his shirt by thrusting his body backward at the hip. He then performed what we called his “self-conscious white man solo.”

109 A conversation about the work with friend and Thesis Concert Stage Manager, Sarah Mininoohn.
The “self-conscious white man solo” got its name for various reasons. First, the removal of your partner’s shirt is, in some ways, the most important and the most vulnerable act in the homosexual sexual experience. I sat and watched him dance with my back to the audience, turning all eyes on his body. Second, by backlighting this section, we accentuated the musculature of Nick’s upper body and we rejected any virtuosic or presentational choreography for fear it would present as overly heroic. The movement in this solo was minimal and inwardly focused to show vulnerability.

During the first feedback session of the rehearsal process, a Wesleyan professor noted, “When Nick does his solo, in the back, with the shirt off, it doesn’t look like the kinds of solos shirtless white men typically do. It doesn’t have the same sexual, macho, ‘look at my body’ allure that traditionally shirtless male dancers tend to embody.” This tactic was a part of my effort to neutralize a typically charged sexual act and achieve an overall goal to create a piece which introduced homosexual behavior into the public sphere as an intimate and romantic act rather than a deviant.

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110 Feedback provided by Nicole Stanton. Wesleyan University Dance department Chair.
sinful, or solely sexual act. Shortly after removing his shirt and performing this brief solo, Nick took off my pants.

The removal of my pants, and later, Nick’s pants were two very important components of the choreography. First, Nick asked for my consent by whispering into my ear “May I take your pants off?” After I consented, Nick peeled the pants off my body in an unnaturally slow manner while I kept my eyes locked on his. The first time we performed this piece with an audience, Nick and I both noticed atmosphere in the theater shift. We could feel everyone in the audience tighten and become slightly uncomfortable. A fellow dancer noted, “When he was taking your pants off I was a little uncomfortable, but I knew I shouldn’t have been. I knew it was because two men were involved, but also because it felt like I was peering into a very private moment.” After some partnering, and sexually suggestive positions, I carried Nick to the most downstage center of the stage, directly in front of the audience, and asked, in a normal voice, “May I take your pants off?” Nick consented and I slowly took his pants off as my eyes met his pelvis. This was the first time I, as the dancer, became conscious of the audience’s eyes watching us. Their eyes felt intrusive and judgemental, but also confused and curious. Audiences are always defined by voyeurism but usually remain unaware of their position. My goal in this moment was to bring their attention not only to something they are unaccustomed to seeing on stage, but also to their own voyeuristic presence. The audience tightened, in part, because they became aware of themselves in the room. As witnesses to the events unfolding on stage, they were uneasy yet interested.

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111 Conversation with fellow dancer, Caroline Shadle, about her initial reactions to the work.
Figure 12: Photograph by Shelli Weiler, pants removal scene from *balance me between your eyes*.

Figure 13: Photograph by Shelli Weiler, pants removal scene from *balance me between your eyes*.
The final section of this work was, quite simply, a sex scene. Many components of this section contributed to its intimate, sexual, and private quality. The entire ending of the piece occurred in the upstage left corner of the stage, a space we had yet to explore throughout the piece and the farthest we had ventured away from the audience. The lights were dim and fixated on our now nearly naked bodies with the backlight shining bright towards the audience. The lighting had an effect of sculpting our bodies and accentuating our flesh, while also making it difficult for the audience to see without paying close attention. The movement in this section of the piece was all in physical contact. The lifts, sharing of weight, positions, and gestures all referenced sexual positions. The soundscape consisted of one minute of the track that was played at the opening of the piece played backwards, transitioning into complete silence. The silence was then filled with our breath as we danced through movements and eventually released a loud exhale as the stage went black. Our exhale represented the release that accompanies sexual gratification and was the last thing the audience experienced before the piece ended.

Figure 14: Photograph by Selli Weiler, final section of *balance me between your eyes*. 

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In 2010, during the seventh season of *So You Think You Can Dance*, contemporary choreographer, Travis Wall, choreographed a duet between two male dancers, Kent Boyd and Neil Haskell. The duet was set to a song entitled “How it Ends” by DeVotchka. According to Wall, the duet was about two ‘best friends’ who have built an incredible friendship together that is now falling apart because one of the friends has decided to move on. During the montage of rehearsal footage accompanied by the dancers’ voice-overs, Boyd describes a moment in the piece when Haskell figuratively stabs him in the back. Wall describes this moment as the turning point in the piece when Kent can no longer withstand the pain and heartache that accompanies betrayal and must fight back and ultimately move on. During the judge’s commentary, Nigel Lythgoe, executive producer and judge of *SYTYCD* who has a history of making homophobic comments, asked “Travis, no names please, but have you been stabbed in the back by someone recently?” Travis nodded from his seat. Multiple reviews the show critiqued Wall and Lythgoe for not admitting the obvious narrative of the duet. Critics widely agreed that Wall, an openly gay choreographer, had created a piece about a romantic relationship with an unfortunate end. The passion, romanticism, and chemistry between the two dancers on stage were undeniable. This was one of the first male duets I had ever seen and unfortunately one of the few. It’s extremely rare to witness a male duet on stage, especially one that explores intimacy or interpersonal relationships. *balance me between your eyes* was set to explore just that. Intimacy, romanticism, and love between same-sex dancers. Upon hearing the feedback and reactions in the wake of the final performance, I
found that the piece had achieved its goal of presenting same-sex sexual intimacy and
closeness in a romantic and tender manner rather than a sexual and deviant one.

Audience members were uncomfortable at times but were deeply captivated
and moved. The intimacy, honesty, and passion of the same-sex relationship this
work portrayed are content that is uncommon to both everyday representation and the
concert stage. Depending on the positionality of different audience members, some
already knew or had considered that such intimacy exists, having been conscious of
its lack of representation. Those of us who notice and experience the essentialization
of same-sex sexual behavior to deviance and vulgarity engage with such works as a
form of counterpublic. Seeing such content legitimized on stage can be an
empowering and even cathartic experience for people, like me, who see it validated in
the public sphere so rarely. Other audience members, people who do not spend time
thinking about the unequal representation of identities in society or who, by nature of
their identities or social positions, have not had to do so, may never have stopped to
consider this exclusion before. The discomfort these people felt at seeing an intimate,
same-sex relationship unfold on stage likely did not, in most cases, stem from
personal prejudices or a dislike of homosexuality; I believe it stemmed from the
experience of seeing something they have potentially never seen or thought existed
before. *their condition* and *balance me between your eyes* explored varying methods
of disidentification. The first installment of my piece strived to strip my black, queer,
and male identities while the second installment worked to reveal my homosexual
identity through an underrepresented lens.
Conclusion

Most nights before falling asleep I usually open and scroll through every social media application on my iPhone. First Facebook, then Instagram. Some nights I check Tinder. According to Wikipedia, Tinder is “a location-based dating and social discovery application (using Facebook) that facilitates communication between mutually interested users, allowing matched users to chat.” The Tinder profile provides very limited information about users and one is left to make decisions based completely off of physical appearance. Swiping left means you are not interested in matching with the person and swiping right means you are. I aimlessly swipe left on most users until one catches my eye. Most often than not, this user happens to be white and I end up swiping right. When a person of color catches my eye, I look through the user’s pictures, scrutinize their appearance, and most often times swipe left. Recently, I have gone back to review my Tinder matches and scoffed at a few of the users I have matched with. Since downloading this application, I have realized my threshold for what I consider attractive is much lower for white men than it is for men of color. This phenomenon is widespread and is largely not about personal preference or taste; it comes down to what we are taught is beautiful, correct, and good. Personal preferences are the decisions we make based on the social constructions we have already absorbed. It’s safe to say I am a product of my society.

Tinder is an accurate analogy for American society. The American system has spent the last four hundred years demonizing black bodies and privileging white bodies. White culture is perceived as superior to Black culture. White people are regard as more beautiful than Black people. White bodies are understood to be
‘unaffected,’ neutral, and pure. Black bodies are understood to be ‘affected,’ hypersexual, and dangerous. White people enjoy the most valuable privilege of all: normalcy. Being white means being normal and accepted, always having the benefit of the doubt. Being white, specifically being a straight white man, means your life only benefits from invisible, institutionalized systems of inequality, making most white people completely blind to the negative effects this system has on others. Being a person of color, a woman, or a queer person means you face social and economic disadvantages as a result of the white, capitalist, hetero-patriarchal ideals upon which in the American system is founded.

Race, gender, and sexuality are performative identities. Membership into these communities requires an acceptance and celebration of that particular identity. Membership also requires a recognition and acceptance of the oppression received from the majoritarian public. These communities provide a sense of normalcy for individuals who identify with historically marginalized identities. These communities also provide protection from the oppression of a public that is unaccepting of their individual identities. Within these communities, a stratified hierarchy of power is established that adheres to heteronormativity and white supremacy. An intersectional approach to these systems accounts for the linkage between race, queer, and gender identity politics. Colorism in the black community exists as a result of Eurocentric and white ideals of beauty. Homophobia within the queer community exists as a result of heteronormative ideals of masculinity and gender expression. Masculine white men dominate queer culture and queer discourse, which then results in the
overrepresentation of these experiences. The same phenomenon can be applied to the dance field.

Since Ted Shawn introduced men into the dance field one hundred years ago, white men have dominated the art form. Influenced by his misogynistic, homophobic, and racist influences and ideals, Shawn created an incredible amount of opportunities for white, muscular, and athletic men whose ‘unaffected’ bodies served to embody and relate supposedly universal truths about humanity and the human experience. These men became the accepted norm in dance as they have been in society. The black body, with its associated history and perceived inferiority, cannot represent the universal human experience. Black dancers and Black artists, as dance is a performative art that uses the human body, cannot escape the prejudices attached to their embodied histories.

As a choreographer and dancer of color in the Wesleyan University Dance department I have been taught to understand and contextualize my bodily experience within the art form. I experience choreographers create choreography, change composition, and manipulate my body in response to my Black appearance. I have consistently created work that explores my queer and Black identities. I have repeatedly witnessed artists of color within, and outside, the department create work that investigate identity politics while white artists create pieces about abstract thoughts and ideas. Through this department’s interdisciplinary curriculum, I have also been taught the distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art. I have come to understand that these distinctions are not only made on the merit of the work, but also on who makes the work and who receives it. White audiences dictate which artists
grow to be successful. These artists often tend to be white male choreographers and artistic directors and the few artists of color who have effectively made their work digestible for white audiences.

I am a queer man of color. Specifically, I am a queer man of color who has chosen a career in the performing arts, and therefore, the questions and findings of my research are particularly pertinent to my life. I am not the first person to shed light on these issues plaguing the dance field, but conversations surrounding race, gender, and sexuality in dance typically occur between academics who do not experience these challenges working against them in their own lives. Their interest and exploration is valuable, but their discussions rarely extend beyond the classroom. I embody the queer of color phenomenon that positions my body at the lowest position in society and in dance. With this research I urge dancers, choreographers, artistic directors, and audiences to question and investigate their tendencies and preconceptions about bodies as well as the differences between human bodies on the basis of race and sexuality. I urge choreographers and artistic directors of dance companies like Gallim Dance, Parsons Dance, and Doug Varone and Dancers to question why their companies only have a single person of color when hundreds of capable and talented Black dancers attend their auditions. I urge audience members who attend dance performances to understand that they hold preconceived notions about Blackness, queerness, and masculinity that they project onto dancing bodies. I urge my readers to continue to question and investigate the ways we as a society and a dance community can use identity not to discriminate and essentialize, but as a tool for communication and understanding difference. Finally, I urge the public who witnesses my
performance on stage and my presence in life to see that I am a queer man of color, and I am also so much more.
Bibliography


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**Discography**
