

DANCING PLATFOR PRAYING GROUNDS: BLACKNESS CHURCHES, AND DOWN -TOWN DANCE Published by Danspace Project, New York, on the occasion of *Dancing Platform Praying Grounds: Blackness, Churches, and Downtown Dance*, curated by Reggie Wilson as part of the Platform series at Danspace Project

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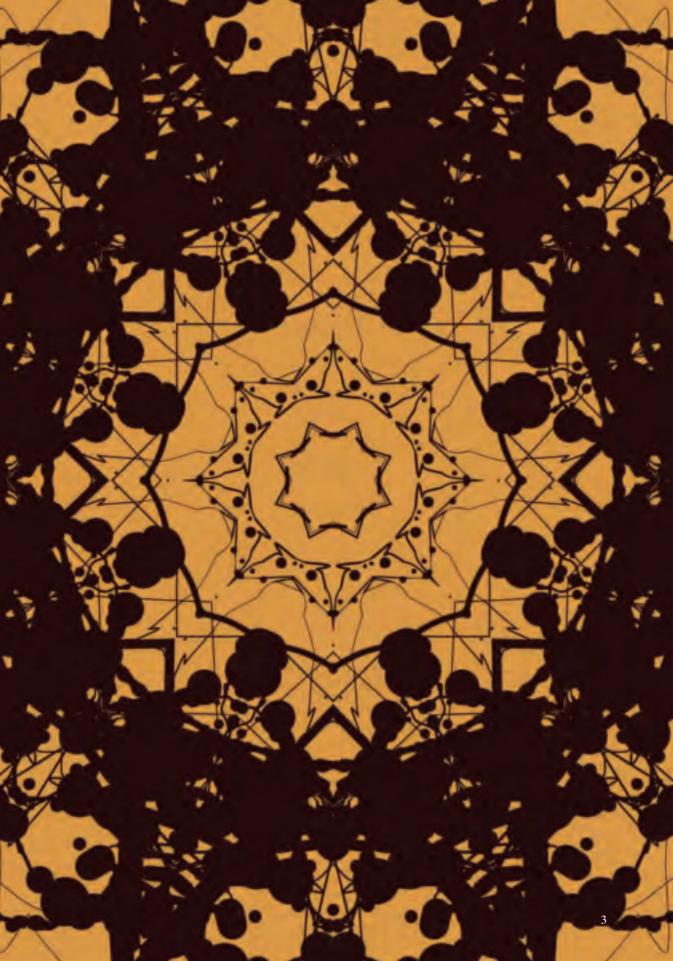
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Danspace Project pays respect to Lenape peoples and ancestors past, present, and future. We acknowledge that Danspace Project and St. Mark's Church are situated on the Lenape Island of Manhahtaan (Mannahatta) and more broadly in Lenapehoking, the Lenape homeland.

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE 12 18 2017

DANSPACE PROJECT St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery 131 East 10th Street New York, NY 10003 (212) 674 8112

DANSPACE PROJECT IS PLEASED TO ANNOUNCE *DANCING PLATFORM PRAYING GROUNDS: BLACK-NESS, CHURCHES, AND DOWNTOWN DANCE* (DANSPACE PROJECT PLATFORM 2018) FROM FEBRUARY 28 - MARCH 24, 2018. PLATFORM 2018 WILL BE GUEST-CURATED BY ACCLAIMED CHOREOGRAPHER REGGIE WILSON.

THE PLATFORM SERIES WAS INITIATED BY DANSPACE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND CHIEF CURATOR JUDY HUSSIE-TAYLOR IN 2010 TO PROVIDE TIME AND SPACE FOR ARTISTIC AND CURATORIAL INQUIRY. THE PLATFORMS WERE CONCEIVED, AS SHE HAS SAID, "AS EXHIBITIONS THAT UNFOLD OVER TIME" OFTEN PROVIDING A CHOREOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO CURATORIAL PRACTICE. *DANCING PLATFORM PRAYING GROUNDS: BLACKNESS, CHURCHES, AND DOWNTOWN DANCE* EMERGES FROM WILSON'S ONGOING RESEARCH INTO RELIGION, RACE, AND, AS HE EXPLAINS, "THE POTENTIAL OF THE BODY AS A VALID MEANS FOR KNOWING." PARTICIPATING DANCE ARTISTS INCLUDE SAME AS SISTER/BRIANA BROWN-TIPLEY AND HILARY BROWN, KEELY GARFIELD, BETH GILL, JONATHAN GONZALEZ, MIGUEL GUTIERREZ, ANGIE PITTMAN, EDISA WEEKS, AND NI'JA WHITSON. THE PLATFORM WILL CONCLUDE WITH A DANSPACE-COMMISSIONED NEW WORK BY REGGIE WILSON.

"THIS PLATFORM BEGAN WITH A CONVERSATION REGGIEAND I HAD IN 2014 AFTER SEEING HIS PIECE MOSES (ES) IN ST. CORNELIUS' CHAPEL ON GOVERNORS ISLAND," EXPLAINS HUSSIE-TAYLOR. "REGGIE HAS ENGAGED WITH MANY FACETS OF AFRICAN DIASPORA RELIGIONS AND DANCE. IN THAT CONTEXT, I MENTIONED TO HIM THAT I'D HEARD A RUMOR OVER THE YEARS THAT THE BALCONY IN ST. MARK'S CHURCH MIGHT BE WHAT IS HISTORICALLY KNOWN AS THE 'SLAVE GALLERY.' THAT BECAME A POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR HIS CURATORIAL INQUIRY."

OVER FOUR WEEKS CHOREOGRAPHERS, WRITERS, ARCHITECTS, AND SCHOLARS WILL ENGAGE WITH WILSON'S QUESTIONS ABOUT RACE, RELIGION, DANCE, AND THE ARCHITECTURE AND HISTORY OF DANSPACE PROJECT'S ICONIC HOME IN ST. MARK'S CHURCH IN-THE-BOWERY. CHOREOGRAPHERS WILL EMPLOY STRATEGIES AND KINESTHETIC PRACTICES ACROSS CULTURAL, RELIGIOUS, AESTHETIC, AND DANCE LINEAGES TO CREATIVELY CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS: WHAT HAS BEEN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RACE, DANCE, AND RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE IN NEW YORK CITY AND OTHER US SITES? HOW DID CIVIL RIGHTS GRASS ROOTS ACTIVISM AND ORGANIZATION IN CHURCHES AND COMMUNITY CENTERS MAKE WAY FOR CONTEMPORARY MODELS FOR PERFORMANCE, DANCE, ARTS ORGANIZING, AND PRESENTATION?

BUILT ON LAND PURCHASED FROM THE DUTCH WEST INDIA COMPANY BY THEN-GOVERNOR OF NEW AMSTERDAM PETER STUYVESANT, ST. MARK'S CHURCH IN-THE-BOWERY WAS COMPLETED IN 1799. ST. MARK'S CHURCH IS THE OLDEST SITE OF CONTINUOUS WORSHIP IN NEW YORK CITY, AND THE SECOND OLDEST CHURCH IN MANHATTAN. ST. MARK'S HAD SIGNIFICANT CONNECTIONS TO AMERICAN MODERN DANCE HISTORY PRIOR TO DANSPACE PROJECT'S FOUNDING IN 1974. REVEREND GUTHRIE INVITED MODERN DANCE PIONEERS ISADORA DUNCAN, RUTH ST. DENIS, AND MARTHA GRAHAM TO PARTICIPATE IN SERVICES. IN THE 1950S AND 1960S ST. MARK'S RECTOR, REV. MICHAEL ALLEN PUT THE CHURCH AT THE CENTER OF THE DOWNTOWN ARTS SCENE AS WELL AS THE ANTI-VIETNAM WAR AND CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENTS. CURRENT RESIDENT ARTS PROJECTS ARE THE POETRY PROJECT, DANSPACE PROJECT, AND NEW YORK THEATRE BALLET. FORMER ARTS PROJECTS INCLUDED THEATER GENESIS, RICHARD FOREMAN'S ONTOLOGICAL HYSTERIC THEATER, AND THE INCUBATOR. ST. MARK'S CHURCH CONGREGATION IS STILL KNOWN TO BE SOCIALLY AND CULTURALLY PROGRESSIVE, AND IS THE SITE OF IMPORTANT LANDMARKS IN SOCIAL ACTIVISM, CIVIL, AND LABOR RIGHTS.

ON THE OCCASION OF PLATFORM 2018 REGGIE WILSON PREMIERES AN ALL NEW WORK. ....THEY STOOD SHAKING WHILE OTHERS BEGAN TO SHOUT IS A DYNAMIC TAPESTRY THAT CONNECTS THE PAST WITH THE PRESENT. THIS WORK IS INFLUENCED BY WILSON'S RECENT RESEARCH INTO BLACK SHAKERS, PARTIC-ULARLY PROMINENT SHAKER ELDRESS, MOTHER REBECCA COX JACKSON; THE IBEJI, AN ORISHA (GOD)

OF THE YORUBA RELIGION THAT IS REPRESENTED BY TWINS; THE PROBLEMS AND DYNAMICS OF DUETS AND PAIRING; AND HIS 1995 WORK, THE LITTLEST BAPTIST, WHICH INCORPORATED INVESTIGATIONS INTO THE DEEP SOUTH AND TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO - AN EARLY EXAMPLE OF HOW WILSON'S FIELD RESEARCH WAS SYNTHESIZED INTO PERFORMATIVE THEATER. WILSON PLANS TO REVISIT THE LITTLEST BAPTIST WITH AN EYE FOR RECLAIMING MOVEMENT HE CREATED AFTER RESEARCH TRAVELS THAT TRACED HIS FAMILY ROOTS IN THE US SOUTH, AND SPIRITUAL BAPTIST RETENTIONS IN TWIN ISLAND COUNTRY OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO.

DANSPACE WILL PUBLISH A CATALOGUE TO ACCOMPANY PLATFORM 2018. HISTORICAL RESEARCH, PERSONAL TESTIMONY, ORIGINAL ARTWORK, INTERVIEWS, AND HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPHS WILL UNCOVER THE INTERSECTING WAYS PLACES OF WORSHIP HAVE SHAPED RELIGIOUS, AFRICAN DIASPORIC, AND POSTMODERN DANCE PRACTICES OVER PAST CENTURIES. THE CATALOGUE, DESIGNED BY RAJA FEATHER KELLY, ECHOES REGGIE WILSON'S CHOREOGRAPHIC LOGIC AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY THAT REFLECT THE COMPLEXITY OF TIME, SPACE, AND MOVEMENT ACROSS THE AFRICAN DIASPORA.

IN WINTER, 2019 A SECOND ITERATION OF *DANCING PLATFORM PRAYING GROUNDS: BLACKNESS, CHURCHES, AND DOWNTOWN DANCE* WILL TRAVEL TO PHILADELPHIA UNDER THE AUSPICES OF PHILADELPHIA CONTEMPORARY. THIS WILL BE AN HISTORIC COLLABORATION USING THE LINES OF INQUIRY DEVELOPED BY WILSON IN COLLABORATION WITH DANSPACE PROJECT'S ARTISTIC DIRECTOR & CHIEF CURATOR JUDY HUSSIE-TAYLOR AND PROGRAM DIRECTOR LYDIA BELL. WITH PHILADELPHIA CONTEMPORARY'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR HARRY PHILBRICK, WILSON HAS BEEN IN THE PROCESS OF CREATING A VERSION OF THE PLATFORM THAT WILL RESPOND TO PHILADELPHIA'S HISTORY AND COMMUNITIES. THE PHILADELPHIA ITERATION OF THE PLATFORM WILL INCLUDE PARTNERSHIPS WITH HISTORIC BLACK CHURCHES AND PHILADELPHIA ARTISTS AND SCHOLARS. A POST-PLATFORM SYMPOSIUM WITH WILSON, ARTISTS, SCHOLARS, ARCHITECTS, WRITERS AND OTHER PARTICIPANTS FROM BOTH THE NEW YORK AND PHILADELPHIA ITERATIONS WILL TAKE PLACE IN 2019 AT DANSPACE PROJECT.









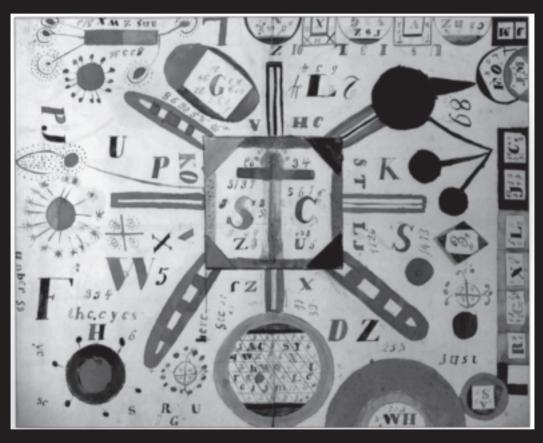












An example of "Shaker visual poetry," drawings the Shakers made under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

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# DANCING OROUND: INTRODUCTION

BY JUDY HUSSIF-TAYLOR

### **Beginnings**

Where are we when we stand, sit, dance, or kneel at 10th Street & 2nd Avenue in the East Village? What is this land where so many have planted, prayed, grieved, labored, organized, ranted, meditated, sung, and danced? Lenapehoking, Land of the Blacks, New Amsterdam, Bowery Village, East Village, the Lower East Side. Poet Julie Patton said, as we stood inside the sanctuary at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, "This is dancing and singing ground."

City sites are many-layered. This Platform began with one layer, that of St. Mark's Church Greek Revival architecture, and an old rumor that traveled from Allen Ginsberg to Steven Taylor to Judy Hussie-Taylor to Reggie Wilson, that African American worshippers sat in the balcony during the service. I asked former rector of St. Mark's, Winnie Varghese, about this a few years ago and she said that it was historically called a "slave gallery". This became a point of departure for the unfolding conversation with Reggie Wilson that spanned three years prior to the Platform—a conversation that would provoke a deep dive into the over 200-year-old history of the Church, and the known and unknown people and activities that shaped its transformation.

Dancing Platform Praying Grounds: Blackness, Churches, and Downtown Dance was set into motion in 2014 when Reggie's dance company Fist and Heel Performance Group performed his piece ... Moses(es) at St. Cornelius Chapel on Governor's Island as part of the River to River Festival. We began a series of conversations that led me to invite Reggie to curate the 12th Danspace Project Platform; Reggie, Program Director Lydia Bell and I began our research in 2015 and were later joined by Platform scholar-in-residence, historian Prithi Kanakamedala, and Curatorial Assistant and Managing Editor Kristin Juarez, all of whom have made significant contributions to the Platform.

Reggie's initial lines of inquiry provided the pathway for us and for the artists:

- What is the relationship between postmodern dance, religious architecture, and race in New York City and at other US sites?
- What are the implications of religiously affiliated spaces as homes for dance in New York: Judson Memorial Church, St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, 92nd Street Y, and Dia<sup>1</sup> Center for the Arts on Mercer Street?
- How did Civil Rights grass roots activism and organization in churches and community centers make way for new models for performance, dance, arts organizing, and presentation?

These questions were informed by Reggie's decades-long research into African diaspora dance, and religions, and his belief in the body as a vessel of knowledge. As Reggie notes in his conversation with Thomas F. DeFrantz, the Diaspora is not limiting or limited, and New York City—Downtown in particular—plays a significant role in the history of dance and its future.

The Platform's opening event, February 28, 2018, will take place in The Great Hall at Cooper Union, the same auditorium where Abraham Lincoln gave his seminal 1860 speech which is said to have catapulted him onto the national political stage. One hundred and fifty years later our first black president, Barack Obama, addressed New Yorkers standing at literally the same podium used by Lincoln, only a few blocks from St. Mark's Church.

The Platform events will take many forms. Reggie invited a racially and aesthetically diverse range of artists to create short new works in shared evening formats. They are: Keely Garfield, Beth Gill, Jonathan Gonzalez, Miguel Gutierrez, Angie Pittman, Same as Sister (Briana Brown-Tipley, and Hilary Brown), Edisa Weeks, and Ni'Ja Whitson. Fist and Heel will premiere...they stood shaking while others began to shout. Scholars Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Cynthia Copeland, Kanakamedala, and artist Emily Johnson were invited to create unique walking tours each week of the Platform. A five-hour symposium and love feast<sup>2</sup> on March 10 will weave scholarly presentations, performances, rituals, and feasting together over five hours (see full Platform program calendar on the last page of this catalogue). The catalogue is divided into three sections: Architecture, History, and Dance. Neither the Platform events or the catalogue are intended to set the record straight. What's proposed here, informed by Reggie's process, is how multiple histories and lenses can activate poetic, artistic, and choreographic propositions. How does history inspire generative speculation and empathic imagination? How might we conjure those who've moved on this ground before us?

### **Dance in Unlikely Religious Spaces**

Religious spaces as places for dance and performance in New York is a largely unwritten history. However ambitious we were, the vast history of St. Marks Church's site consumed the curatorial team and we weren't able to go as far afield as we had intended. We did unearth obscure bits and pieces of forgotten cultural history. I learned from Dia Art Foundation curator Kelly Kivland that the original Dia Art Foundation on Mercer just below Houston Street (which later became The Joyce Soho) was once a Sufi mosque run by the Dia founders Philippa de Menil and Heiner Friedrich. Their spiritual teacher, according to Susan Osberg, was Sufi master "Sheikh Muzaffer Ozak Ashki al-Jerrahi, leader of the Helveti-Jerrahi Order of Dervishes of Istanbul." He relocated from Istanbul to New York City with the Dia site as his spiritual center. Each of the three main prayer rooms along with the hallways were illuminated by Dan Flavin light sculptures. As Osberg describes, Dia's relationship to art followed a spiritual model, not a business model. Kivland's interview with Osberg is one of first published texts to address the role that the art center as a former

mosque played in providing low cost rehearsal space to postmodern dance artists in the 1980s, including rehearsal space for Laura Dean, widely known for her spinning pieces of the early 80s. Dia and Danspace Project were both founded in 1974 and many of the same artists who rehearsed at Dia performed at Danspace Project.

During the same time period, Ishmael Houston-Jones moved to NYC from Philadelphia and volunteered as an usher at Danspace Project. Supported by then director Cynthia Hedstrom who said "yes" to Ishmael's idea to organize the 1982 series *Parallels* at Danspace Project. He was interested in an emerging generation of black experimentalists including Ralph Lemon, Bebe Miller, Gus Solomons jr, Fred Holland, and Blondell Cummings. In 1985 *Parallels in Black* toured to Paris and London and the tour grew to include Jawole Willa Jo Zollar (DTW's Suitcase Fund and Henry and Barbara Pillsbury made the tour possible). Thirty years later, Houston-Jones curated a Danspace Project Platform on the 30th anniversary of *Parallels*. Houston-Jones is still curating at Danspace Project, organizing our annual DraftWork series and, with Will Rawls, curated the acclaimed Platform *Lost and Found: Dance, HIV/AIDS, New York, Then and Now* in the fall of 2016.

Other historically-important sites for experimental dance include Judson Memorial Church located on the west side of Washington Square Park. In 1950 Reverend Howard Moody initiated a radical program to reach out to artists in the surrounding West Village neighborhood. "I know of nothing more pressing to the future of the Protestant Church. . . than restoring spiritual vitality of the arts to the witness of the Church," Moody wrote. He welcomed visual artists, musicians, poets and dancers. The dancers would eventually create the Judson Dance Theater.<sup>3</sup> Today, Judson Memorial Church is still home to many community arts programs, including "Mondays at Judson" organized by Movement Research.

The 92nd Street Y was founded in 1874 as the Young Men's Hebrew Association dedicated to "the improvement of the mental, moral, spiritual, cultural, social and physical condition of young men and the fostering of Judaism." The 92 Street Y has been presenting dance continually from 1930 to the present beginning with Jewish folk dances and, for almost a century, has hosted every major modern dance choreographer and many historically-important moments including Katherine Dunham's New York debut in 1937, the first New York performance of Jose Limon's *The Moor's Pavane* in 1947 and the premiere of Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* in 1960.

These religious spaces have been and amazingly still are critical to the development of dance in New York City. As the title of the Platform suggests, blackness cannot be separated from these histories. Brooklyn Studios for Dance at the Cadman Congregational Church in Clinton Hill is the latest religious space to welcome dance and to join this idiosyncratic lineage.



Wright, Frank Lloyd (1867-1959) © ARS NY. St. Mark's-in-the-Bouwerie Towers project, New York City, New York, Aerial perspective. c. 1927-31. Graphite and color pencil on tracing paper, 23 3/4 x 15" (60.3 x 38.1 cm.) Jeffrey P. Klein Purchase Fund, Barbara Pine Purchase Fund, and Frederieke Taylor Purchase Fund. The Museum of Modern Art. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. © 2018 Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. All Rights Reserved. Licensed by Artist Rights Society.

### St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery

St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery was completed in 1799, the same year New York passed the "Gradual Emancipation Act." So who cleared the ground, laid the foundation, cut the stones and carved the beams? Were they enslaved individuals whose children would *gradually* gain freedom between 1799 and 1827? We know that the major construction projects of the city of New Amsterdam relied on enslaved Africans; up to 20% of African New Yorkers of the British colonial period were enslaved, and that 41% of city households held slaves. "Almost every businessman in 18th-century New York had a stake, at one time or another, in the traffic."  $^5$ 

As for singing and dancing, their *known* history on the St. Mark's site begins in 1911, when William Norman Guthrie became Rector, and until 1937 he conducted one of the most unusual episodes in Episcopal Church history. Guthrie choreographed dance services modeled on Zuni corn rituals and Egyptian sun god worship and employed theatrical lighting effects to illuminate his sermons. Kahlil Gibran was a member of the Vestry and read early drafts of The Prophet at the Church. Frank Lloyd Wright was invited to design artist housing on the site. Guthrie invited Harry Houdini, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and Martha Graham to lecture and perform. He also sold Church real estate to provide housing for the artists who were then being priced out of the West Village.

### Prismatic Histories: Abolition, Civil Right, and the Arts

Layers of history have a way of interconnecting past and present in surprising ways. Guthrie was not the only radical thinker in his family. He was the grandson of Frances "Fanny" Wright (1795-1852), feminist and abolitionist, reputed lover of the Marquis de Lafayette, idol of Walt Whitman, and a celebrity author and speaker in her time, who attracted thousands to her lectures in the 1820s. Wright championed equal rights for women, African Americans, and Native Americans forty years before the Civil War and a century before women could vote. She passionately advocated for free public education as essential to equality. "In April 1829 Wright bought the Ebenezer Baptist Church [located on the corner of Broome and Bowery], renamed it The Hall of Science and dedicated it to the acquisition of 'universal knowledge." She organized free classes and lectures in math, science, and medicine for people of all races, genders, ages, and classes.

Fanny Wright's rejection of organized religion and her advocacy of abolition, equality, free love, and birth control led to her vilification. In 1825, she published and petitioned the Congress with *A Plan for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in the United States Without Danger of Loss to the Citizens of the South*, whereby enslaved people could be educated, buy their freedom through collective labor, and be transported to Liberia and Haiti. To demonstrate her proposal, she bought and relocated enslaved persons from plantations (accounts differ on how many people she initially brought to the aspiring utopian community) and settled on land she purchased along the Wolf River in Tennessee to found Nashoba (Chicasaw for wolf). The commune lasted only three years and Wright almost died of malaria (the site was a swamp). No doubt even a brilliant and committed activist like Wright suffered from privileged naivety. However, when the site ultimately failed she apparently made good on her initial promise and helped to resettle the 30 African American residents of Nashoba to Haiti.

Wright's grandsons, William Norman Guthrie and Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, embraced controversial theosophical theories and seem to have borne their radical grandmother's influence into progressive universalist Christianity.<sup>8</sup> While universalist theosophists may have been well intended in their embrace of world religions and cultures, theosophy's cultural appropriation and Orientalism was then and is now problematic. Reggie touches on this a bit in his conversation with DeFrantz, talking about Ruth St. Denis' performances at the Church: "What Ruthie was doing with her global consumption; her incense dances, and goddess movements that was somehow acceptable. But I think Isadora with her tunics and lifestyle was not. The bishop banned [Isadora] from performing."

Danspace Project's lighting instruments have their precedent in Guthrie's "prismatic sermons," which employed numerous colored lamps mixed from a lighting board and synchronized with the homilies.<sup>9</sup> During Sun-God Services, the congregants responded to the Rector's prayers with "Thou art Ra, the Sun God." *The New York Times* reported, "green, blue, red, and amber shades played here and there in the church." (Does this make St. Mark's one of the oldest *New York Times* reviewed venues in the

<sup>[6]</sup> Lori Ginzberg, The American Radical, eds. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, Harvey Kaye (New York: Routledge, 1994).

 $<sup>\</sup>label{thm:converse} \begin{tabular}{ll} \begin{tabular}{ll} Frances Wright: American Social Reformer, ``Encyclopedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frances-Wright: American Social Reformer, ame$ 

<sup>[8]</sup> The Guthrie brothers were prolific writers and speakers; William Norman's archives are held by Harvard Divinity school.

<sup>[9] &</sup>quot;Unusual Lighting Effects Produced in Church," Popular Mechanics (June 1922).

<sup>[10] &</sup>quot;LIGHTS IN CHURCH REFLECT EMOTIONS; New System Installed in St. Mark's-in-the-Bouwerie to Create Air of Mystery. MANY EXPERIMENTS MADE Varying Tones of Color to Mark Different Phases of the Service," New York Times, October 16, 1921.

City?) The lights were designed by architect and designer Claude F. Bragdon, who also designed the Festival of Song and Light in Central Park in 1921.<sup>11</sup> Artist Josiah McElheny, inspired by Bragdon, recently created *Prismatic Park*, an ambitious installation with performances curated by Danspace Project during the summer of 2017 at Madison Square Park. McElheny and I were unaware of Bragdon's connection to St. Mark's Church when we collaborated on *Prismatic Park*.



Carol Mullins lighting design for Laurie Berg's The Mineralogy of Objects (2015) Photo by Ian Douglas.

In 1923 Guthrie opened The Body and Soul Clinic at St. Mark's with Manhattan psychiatrist Dr. Edward Cowles as director, staffed by six physicians and a group of ministers. "Two thousand people were treated in the first three months... Many children too poor for doctors received medical treatment at the clinic." In 1932 the Vestry ordered the clinic closed and when Guthrie refused the Vestry locked the doors.

William Guthrie's brother, Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, was a theologian, prolific writer and, for a time, the Rector of All Saints Church, now Saint Augustine's in lower Manhattan, which has an historically recognized slave gallery. In 1921, Kenneth Guthrie "printed an investigation of the slave gallery in what was by then a 'venerable but little known Church.'" In 1924 "the 100th anniversary of the Church [he] presented a pageant remembering the slave gallery. By the 1930s, Kenneth had opened a Lincoln Museum [at the Church], displaying among other artifacts a bill of sale for a slave, and an iron shackle." <sup>13</sup>

<sup>[11] &</sup>quot;Claude Fayette Bragdon," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude\_Fayette\_Bragdon.

 $<sup>[12] \</sup>text{``St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery Parish Profile 2016,''} \ http://stmarksbowery.org/welcome/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/PARISH-PROFILE.pdf.$ 

 $<sup>[13] \,</sup> Kimberly \, Nichols, ``The \, Brothers \, Guthrie: Pagan \, Christianity \, of the \, Early \, 20th \, Century, ``Newtopia \, Magazine \, (December \, 10, 2017).$ 

In 1930, in an effort to raise income for the Church, Guthrie engaged his old friend Frank Lloyd Wright (no relation to Fanny Wright) to design apartments to be built in the Church yard. Guthrie wanted something simple to rent at low cost to artists. But Wright responded with "a skyscraper apartment block: four then three octagonal towers...with cantilevered floors and hung exteriors of copper and glass." Wright wrote, "I believe the relationship between the old church and the modern prismatic building would be extremely agreeable." The idea was that the "old stone church would be surrounded by towers of light." Wright's grand design was unaffordable for the Church and never realized. The drawings for the St. Mark's glass towers are now in the design and architecture collection at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Guthrie also asked Wright to design a "colossal interfaith cathedral" a "temple of temples to uplift millions of people at a time." Wright used his innovative architectural concepts in future buildings.<sup>14</sup>

In 1959 Michael Allen became rector of St. Mark's Church. Allen came to the Church by way of the Civil Rights movement and his first action was to consolidate segregated Sunday services into one service for all people. He recounts that in the 1950s, there were few options for citizens to act on their commitment to equal rights. As a journalist for *LOOK* magazine in the 1950s, he was moved by his interviews with socially engaged Episcopal priests, converted, and joined the clergy. In 1963, while rector at St. Mark's, he participated in Civil Rights marches. Protesting the Vietnam War, he went to Hanoi with Jane Fonda in 1972. In the 60s, he asked a court in New York to assign some young men who had vandalized the Church to his supervision, then apprenticed them to union workers who specialized in historic building restoration.

In 1966, a diverse group of poets on the new performance scene fell out with the owners of their usual venue, the Café Metro. They relocated their Monday and Wednesday gatherings half a block north to the Church. The result was the establishment at the Church of the Poetry Project; the Film Project; the Theater Project, and, later, Danspace Project. Around this time, Michael Allen and sociologist Harry Silverstein applied for a Federal grant to support "Creative Arts for Alienated Youth". Through this program, the Church was able to hire artistic directors to curate and manage each of the projects. According to Bob Holman's oral history<sup>15</sup> the Film Project was the shortest-lived project due to its high equipment costs. During this time, St. Mark's was leasing the former Second Avenue Courthouse for \$100 a year from the City. They moved the Film Project to that site and the Project eventually became Film Anthology Archives and is still located in that building.

Stephen Facey began working at St. Mark's in 1967, initially to manage its ever-expanding arts projects. Facey also oversaw the Preservation Youth Project, an outgrowth of the earlier youth program. Facey managed fifteen young men who landscaped the gardens and made improvements to the Church building. Facey's essay on the fires at St. Mark's is reprinted here from Danspace Project's 25th Anniversary Book. Jimmy Fragosa started as part of the Youth Project at age 14 and is still the Church's Sexton. Anyone who has visited the Church in the last 40 years has undoubtedly heard Jimmy's whistling, singing, and piano playing as they've walked through the sanctuary.

<sup>[14] &</sup>quot;Frank Lloyd Wright, St. Mark's-in-the-Bouwerie Towers, New York Project (Aerial perspective) 1927–1931," https://www.moma.org/collection/works/305.

The history, along with the activism spirited by St. Mark's Church also lives with its congregants. During our research we came to speak with long time congregants Nell Braxton Gibson, Jeannine Otis, and Cynthia Copeland, along with the Church's new Rector Anne Sawyer. Nell Braxton Gibson has been a Civil Rights activist since 1962 and is the author of *Too Proud To Bend: Journey of a Civil Rights Foot Soldier*. In a meeting at a café on 2nd Avenue recently, Nell told us how she had first come to New

York from California in 1966 and attended Easter Sunday service with her husband Bert Gibson at St. Mark's. She was astonished to see so many women without Easter hats but learned that they had foregone new hats to collect money for the Movement in Selma. It was then she knew that this was her Church, and she has not missed an Easter service at St. Mark's Church since 1966. She recounted how the Black and Brown Caucus demanded representation during Reverend Allen's Sunday sermon in 1969. When the Caucus members walked out of the church, Michael Allen walked out with them and responded to their demands with \$30,000 for new programs to serve the local Puerto Rican and African American communities. One of those programs was to provide free breakfast for children in the neighborhood. Nell told us she learned how to organize the children's breakfast program from Afeni Shakur, mother of Tupac. Over the last several years, Nell and fellow St. Mark's Church parishioner Cynthia Copeland have led the Episcopal Diocese Reparations efforts serving on the Diocesan Reparations Committee which has initiated three years of reparations starting with the Year of Lamentations in 2018.

It seems important to note here that while we began with the idea that St. Mark's balcony was a slave gallery, research and recent conversations with Copeland and Kanakamedala have indicated that there are no specific historical documents to confirm this except the two renderings we first located depicting black worshippers in the balcony archived in the St. Mark's Church office. We learned from Nell that prior to 1959, there were two congregations, one black and one white, that met at different times on Sunday.

Dance critic Deborah Jowitt once wrote that the St. Mark's sanctuary is a palimpsest. A palimpsest, according to Merriam Webster, is a parchment or tablet used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased. It has come to refer to something having diverse layers but with aspects apparent beneath the surface. *Dancing Platform Praying Grounds* builds on the barely perceivable layers beneath the surface and will add yet another layer relevant to our time.

Welcome to dancing and singing ground. This is where we are.

 $<sup>[17]</sup> A feni \, Shakur \, was \, a \, member \, of \, the \, Black \, Panthers. The \, Black \, Panthers \, and \, Young \, Lords \, held \, meetings \, in \, Rectory \, basement. \, See \, http://stmarksbowery.org/welcome/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/PARISH-PROFILE.pdf. \, and \, Young \, Lords \, held \, meetings \, in \, Rectory \, basement. \, See \, http://stmarksbowery.org/welcome/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/PARISH-PROFILE.pdf. \, and \, Young \, Lords \, held \, meetings \, in \, Rectory \, basement. \, See \, http://stmarksbowery.org/welcome/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/PARISH-PROFILE.pdf. \, and \, Young \, Lords \, held \, meetings \, in \, Rectory \, basement. \, See \, http://stmarksbowery.org/welcome/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/PARISH-PROFILE.pdf. \, and \, Young \, Lords \, held \, Meeting \, held \, held \, Meeting \, held \,$ 

<sup>[18] &</sup>quot;A Call to the Diocese to Commit a Year of Lamentations," https://ednyreparationsblog.wordpress.com/author/ednyreparations/.



Dan Flavin, installation views, Masjid al Farah, 155 Mercer Street, New York. © 2017 Stephen Flavin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Carol Huebner Venezia. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York



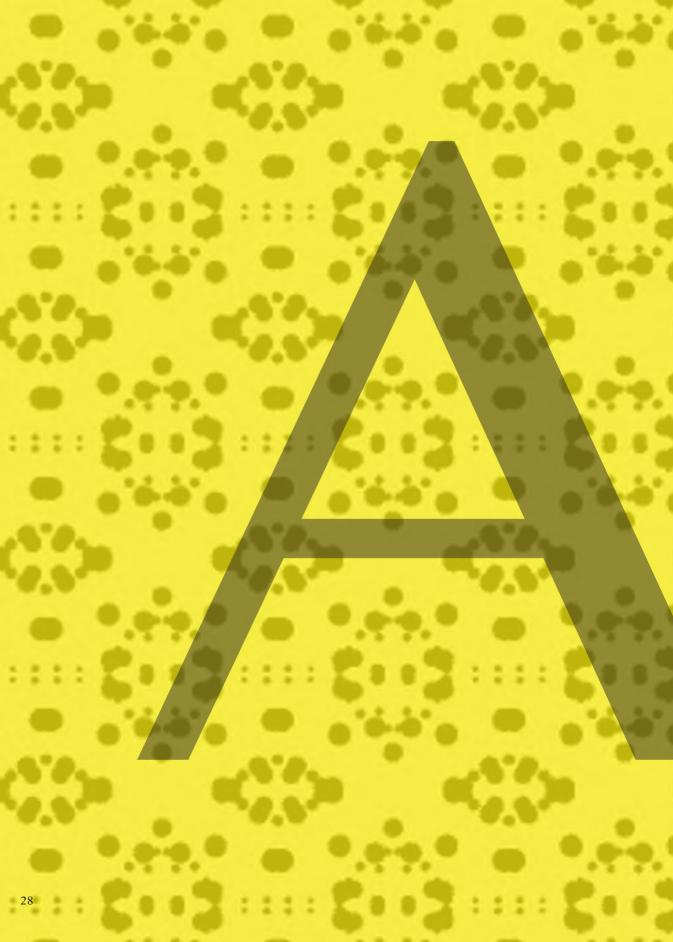


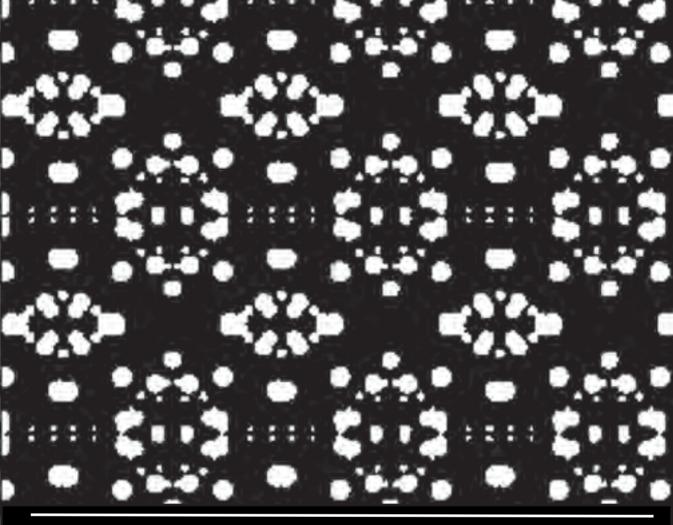
66 I OVF MY-SELF WHEN I AM LAUGHING. AND THEN AGAIN WHFN I AM I OOK-ING MFAN AND IMPRESSIVE "

**ZORA NEALE HURSTON** 

"REPETITION, TASK CHOREOGRAPHY, ACCUMULATIONS REVERSIONS\_ AND THE GRAMMAR OF POSTMODERNISM OMFSF C WILSON'S IN **OEUVRE** THF R A C GEOMETRY OF THE **BLACK ATLANTIC.**"

SUSAN MANNING





Buildings are not neutral, inhuman, or static. Shaping how bodies inhabit the land, they determine the ways people are continually brought together and often kept apart. In new practices in architectural history, buildings not only demonstrate aesthetic lineages, but they also reflect a society's labor and social practices. For choreographers, they demand a sense of choreographic logic. To interrogate architecture is to challenge its spatial assignments, disrupt its social machinations, and reimagine its futures.

Catalogue Editors

# ARCHITECTURE





## **CHANGING THE SUBJECT:**

MABEL O. WILSON ON AND PUBLIC SPACE MABEL O. WILSON

MABEL O. WILSON IN CONVERSATION WITH JULIAN ROSE

WHETHER UTOPIAN OR AUTHORITARI-AN, BUILDINGS-THE PLACES IN WHICH WE LIVE, WORK, DIE-HAVE ALWAYS REI-FIED SYSTEMS OF POWER. TODAY, WHEN CIVIC STRUCTURES AND URBAN SPAC-ES ARE INCREASINGLY AT THE CENTER OF POLITICAL DEBATES-WITNESS THE RESURGENCE OF MARCHES, PROTESTS, AND STRIKES IN CITIES AROUND THE ARCHI-GLOBE-ARTFORUM INVITED TECTURAL HISTORIAN MABEL O. WIL-SON TO SPEAK WITH SENIOR EDITOR JULIAN ROSE ABOUT THE POLITICS OF RACE, LABOR, AND ARCHITECTURE.

JULIAN ROSE: Architecture is one of the central ways through which politics enters everyday life. The buildings that surround us, the spaces and structures we inhabit, are all physical manifestations of the cultural beliefs and social systems that order our society. And as material things in the world, buildings can embody-with brutal directness-economic inequalities and labor politics. But architecture is also a potent political symbol, and sometimes architecture's symbolism collides head-on with its material reality—take the response to Michelle Obama's remark, in her convention speech last year, that she lived in a house built by slaves. She was met with disbelief: Right-wing pundits refused to acknowledge that slaves played any role in the construction of the White House, and even after numerous news organizations had confirmed that she was correct, Bill O'Reilly infamously weighed in with the absurd defense that the slaves who worked on the building had at least been provided with room and board. The history of architecture in America has always been bound up with the history of race, but how do we begin to address and redress this legacy?

MABEL O. WILSON: I would go further than that. I actually think the emergence of architecture as a modern discipline is itself inseparable from the problem of race. And by this I mean architecture as distinct from building—after all, people around the world have always built. I'm referring to a very specific, Western humanist notion of the architect as someone who thinks, who designs, who draws, but who

does not build. He is an intellectual, in other words, who works very abstractly, through reason, and is distanced from the physical labor of construction.

JR: You're describing the difference between the medieval mason, who is essentially a craftsman, working on-site to make a building with his own hands, and the Renaissance architect, who works remotely, producing drawings that are then sent to a building site to be executed by manual laborers.

MW: What's interesting to me is that this distancing of architecture from labor is part of a much larger early-modern epistemology, a whole new worldview that also produced its own ontology, which was, by definition, universal: the birth of the humanist subject. But of course that subject, the modern "Man," is not universal-it's exclusively European, and it was invented exactly at the same time that the era of European colonization was beginning. And so race is deeply embedded in the emergence of the modern world and the emergence of modern architecture-which becomes, in part, about the maintenance of racial hierarchy. If you look at colonial architecture, for example, it's about whiteness. It's literally constructing whiteness, creating a narrative about the history of culture through building that consolidates a European worldview. And America is a result of this process of colonization, the conquest of indigenous populations, and the slave trade.

JR: In the US, this kind of architecture was not only imposed from Europe as a manifestation of imperial power but was self-consciously adopted so that it could contribute to the project of nation building by constructing precisely that kind of legitimizing cultural narrative. Take Thomas Jefferson. A building like Monticello is obviously his effort to establish himself as the heir to European Enlightenment values—it's the archetype of the Neoclassical villa. But it's also an infamous manifestation of the very contradictions that America was founded on: It was a working plantation, run by slaves.

MW: It's fascinating that within the national narrative, within the narrative of the founding fathers, that other history gets completely repressed, because the two can't be reconciled. The paradox is that the liberal American

subject was being imagined at the same time that the American body was dependent on enslaved labor to construct its shelter, to be bathed, for food, for sexual pleasure. How do you account for Sally Hemings? To whom did she belong—herself or Jefferson? That was the problem.

JR: The fact that some of America's most revered architecture is literally the product of and the site of that kind of exploitation is obviously difficult for many people to grasp, because when we look at it that way, the building ceases to be an abstract political symbol and instead becomes a blatant embodiment of these very contradictions. So the tensions you're pointing out clearly have important implications for architectural history, for how we tell the story of monuments like Monticello or the White House, but I also wonder what they suggest for the practice of architecture today. You place architecture in such a central role—but of course it's at the center for all the wrong reasons. Does architecture's deep entanglement within a network of social, political, and economic forces grant it a degree of agency, a power that architects could leverage for good? Or will architecture always be more of a physical symptom, relegated to registering or enacting these forces and unable to resist or deflect them?

MW: I think architects need to be very cautious. Because architecture is such a pragmatic discipline, it's often assumed to be inherently progressive. When we have a problem to solve, we bring in the architects, right? And architects themselves tend to think in a very utopian way: "My work is going to make the world better." But I always feel that architects look into the future without really recognizing the current conditions under which they create. And the question for me is whether the techniques and theoretical frameworks of architecture, those disciplinary methods that are supposed to improve the world, are already part of the problem. We can't simply mobilize those tools without thinking about their origins. Other disciplines have already started this process-look at the way critical race theory took on the law. Going back to the civil rights movement, there was the assumption that the law would become a tool of justice, that the law was going to get rid of segregation. But then, as Cheryl Harris pointed out with her notion of "whiteness as

property," for example, there is also the way in which the law worked to assure inequality. I think architecture has been very late to the game in terms of gaining this kind of disciplinary self-awareness.

JR: I wonder, though, if there's still a utopian or at least positive possibility in the pragmatic side of architecture. I'm thinking of the current debate about the shortage of affordable housing in New York, for example. On the one hand, you could certainly argue that this is fundamentally a social or economic problem, but on the other hand, it still requires some sort of spatial solution. So do architects have a contribution to make, even if we admit that they can't single-handedly resolve the underlying crises of gentrification, homelessness, and housing?

MW: Well, again, I'm very skeptical of architecture as an agent of progress. Modernity saw architecture as a key part of the vanguard leading society forward—the promise of building better housing, better schools, and so forth. But of course this idea of a vanguard, of the civilized and cultured, is completely racial, emerging in the nineteenth century at the same time as nationalism and industrial capitalism, and modern architecture became an engine for sorting out the new spaces of the nation-state and the industrial city.

JR: So it's hard for you to think about architecture addressing a specific problem, say, urban housing, without first having a broader reckoning with its role in society?

MW: I don't think I'm quite what you could call an Afro-Pessimist, but I am beginning to fundamentally question humanism, and by extension architecture's role within it. Architecture has always propped up Man with a capital M, whether we're talking about the Vitruvian Man in classical antiquity or Le Corbusier's Modulor Man in the twentieth century, and architecture has always excluded other ways of being human. There's a brilliant theorist. Denise Ferreira da Silva, whose book Toward a Global Idea of Race [2007] asks whether there are other modes of existence-and other, more diverse kinds of subjectivity—that don't fall within the framework of humanism, and I've been thinking recently about what her ideas might mean for architecture.

JR: Perhaps those other ways of being in the world would entail other forms of community, which would have their own spatial configurations and require their own material structures? To be optimistic, in other words, wouldn't we need to imagine an alternative architecture at the same time that we imagine alternatives to humanism?

MW: Yes, there might be some forms of spatial practice that are more open, less gendered, less heterosexual, less white. But I think in order to get there, we have to do more than just recalibrate the rhetorics and representations and ideologies and practices that architects currently employ. I'm always an optimist, so I don't think it's all doom and gloom, but I do feel like we have to do some deep questioning about our field—we can't rush to solutions without thinking about how we got here. Architecture has always been an agent of power, perhaps not unwittingly, but unselfconsciously; it has been the means through which the powerful literally constructed their world. I mean, for God's sake, Donald Trump is a developer! And he has worked with some very well-known architects over the years.

JR: If only he'd stuck with that! I wonder, though-so far we've been talking mainly about architecture in the sense of building, but do architects have another kind of contribution to make that is more concerned with the intersection of the spatial and the social? At least in theory, architects have expertise not just in the design of structures but also in the organization of functions within them. Would a less ambitious but more immediately effective strategy be for architects to move away from utopian goals like reimagining the city, say, or inventing new types of housing, and instead focus on programming the projects they are already being asked to do in a more considered way? I'm thinking of the inclusion of public spaces or community centers in new construction in gentrifying neighborhoods. That kind of gesture obviously can't stop the relentless pace of gentrification, but maybe it's a means of ameliorating some of its effects?

MW: You can imagine that as one approach. Last fall at Columbia University, where I teach, we hosted a conversation, which included

Wolff Architects from Cape Town, about how architectural practices can influence the success or failure of the social aspirations of their projects. They showed a project in which a private developer had approached them about converting an existing industrial shed into a business incubator. Their proposal was to house the incubator, which was the moneymaker for the client, in the upper part of the shed, and use the lower level as a huge market, open to pedestrians, where locals, some of them informal traders, could set up shop to sell their crafts. After the building opened, they found that their aspirations for the market didn't necessarily match the owner's concept of what should be sold there. The client wanted crafts that were aimed at tourists-souvenirs and so on-and the architects saw it more as a space of opportunity for local artists, or people who wanted to establish their own small businesses. It's interesting to see how projects like that get negotiated, and where they succeed or fail in the long term.

JR: It's a dilemma: Architects might have innovative ideas about how a space can be used, but they rarely have the final say over what happens there.

MW: Gentrification may be one of those things that's beyond architecture, although I do wish architects were more aware of the need to join the conversation about it. I think the High Line is an absolutely amazing project, but it would have really worked only if Chelsea had remained affordable and accessible. Instead the project generated something like two or three billion dollars' worth of property value around it. The architects' intent was to create a viable public artery, but it became clear that that's not possible in the hypercapitalist node of global finance that is New York City.

JR: No one even lives in many of those luxury apartments. I've heard that some of them will never be furnished—and some never even finished! There are no moldings, no fixtures—just architecture in its rawest form as a place to park money.

**MW**: I call them space-deposit boxes. I should trademark that.

JR: You should! But your point about the High Line makes me wonder if the problem goes

even deeper. This is a terrifying thought, but has the same thing that happened to those apartments happened to urban space itself? That's far worse than the old complaint that urban space has been commodified, in the sense that it has been reduced to a space of consumption. Here space itself becomes a form of capital, so there's no longer a need for any kind of subject at all, not even as consumer. Are we at the point where any project in the city, even an ostensibly public one, becomes about generating value for developers?

**MW**: Yes, unfortunately.

JR: But can architects help fight that totalizing capitalization?

MW: Maybe. Mario Gooden and I actually gave a talk last year at Black Portraitures III, a multidisciplinary conference on imaging the black body organized by Deborah Willis and others, in Johannesburg, about the protest tactics used by Black Lives Matter. We argued that the civil rights movement had understood public space as contained and controllable, so its mode of protest was to transgress enclosure, to enter the space of control. But today you don't control space by establishing boundaries—you do so by regulating what flows through it. Space itself is more fluid, and so are mechanisms of control. Black Lives Matter have recognized this; we cited one moment where people were coming across the Brooklyn Bridge, chanting, "Shut the system down!" Today, to take to the streets means precisely that—to disrupt the system by preventing movement through the city.

JR: There has been a lot of discussion about how effectively Black Lives Matter have deployed social media, but I'm not aware of much conversation about their negotiation of urban space. You seem to be suggesting an opportunity for architects to contribute to that kind of strategic thinking, and some of those ideas are forcefully advanced in the *Critical Field Guide* for architects [2017] that you worked on. Did it grow out of this research?

MW: The *Critical Field Guide* grew out of a coalition that I helped to start called Who Builds Your Architecture?, which examines labor

practices in architecture. And that coalition itself was a response to the Gulf Labor movement in the art world. I remember looking at the list of signatories to Gulf Labor's first letter to the Guggenheim Foundation with a colleague of mine, Kadambari Baxi, and thinking, "Where the hell are the architects?" Why was it that artists were the only ones trying to hold this institution responsible for the exploitation of workers in the Emirates? We started informally asking our architect friends about labor practices, and they all just kind of said, "Of course we're concerned about it, but we don't hire the construction labor. That's the contractor, and the contractor has a separate relationship with the client, so we don't have any connection to the construction workers on-site." And when we asked them if they would sign a pledge refusing to work on projects that don't guarantee fair labor practices, none of them would, because again they said that was beyond their control. We almost got the sense that they didn't want to take a public stand for fear of future clients hearing about their position. So we realized that what Gulf Labor was doing wasn't going to work in our field, and because we hit that roadblock we ended up starting this much bigger project, which was essentially to start a global conversation about these issues and to educate architects about the role they play and the influence they could have. We talked to firms that had done a lot of work in the Middle East; we also talked to human rights groups and started reading a lot of their reports.

JR: Were experts from other fields already thinking about building and space, or was that a gap? I imagine that a lawyer for Amnesty International is not going to look at a labor camp in the same way that a trained architect would, for example.

MW: We were constantly surprised, reading reports by Amnesty and Human Rights Watch and other humanitarian organizations, by how much of what they were describing was actually about architecture, about where people were living, for example, or how they were moving through the city. And we thought, OK, these are clearly things an architect knows about. Those organizations work primarily through the law, so they are making legal arguments. But because those arguments are often built around spatial, material, architectural, and urban issues, we

were able to mine their reports and literally map out the processes and relationships they were describing so that we could start to figure out where the architect was in all of it. And so eventually we came up with a number of tactics that architects could begin to think through and deploy. For example, one of the things we've emphasized is that drawings aren't just documentation of an architect's vision—they're instruments of communication, and they convey precise instructions for building.

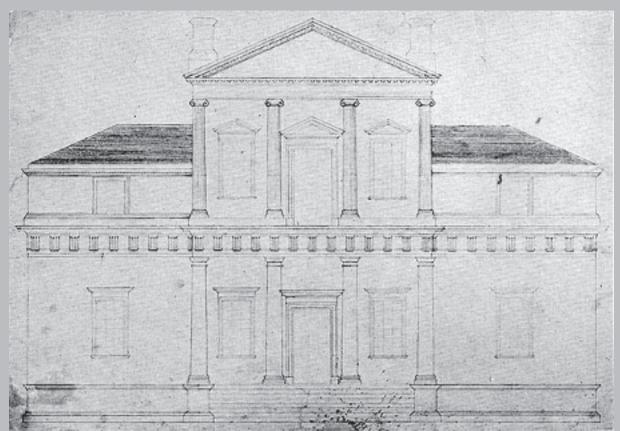
JR: That goes back to the idea we began with, that architectural drawings were the things that allowed architects to distance themselves from physical labor, to shift their own identity from that of craftsman that of intellectual.

MW: But if you think about it, if you design a building in a particular way, you will inevitably impact the person who's building it. And the drawing is actually a contract, in the legal sense, which directs the contractor and the workers. We tell architects that you always have to think about those things as you put a set of drawings together. Even if you think you have no connection to the way a building is built, through the execution of the drawing you're speaking directly to the labor of construction. You might feel alienated, but in the end you're always connected.

© *Artforum*, Summer 2017, "Changing the Subject: Race and Public Space," by Mabel O. Wilson and Julian Rose.



Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764-1820), The White House, Washington, DC, South Front Elevation, 1817, watercolor and ink on paper, 161/8×211/4".



Drawing by Thomas Jefferson showing the original front elevation of his home Monticello, located in Albemarle County, Virginia. Image from "Domestic Architecture of the American Colonies and of the Early Republic," by Fiske Kimball, New York, 1922, fig. 72. The original drawing is in Coolidge collection.

## PROFANE SACRED SPACES

BY Darrell Jones

**BACK OF THE DRAWER** 

Pops asked me to find a tax form in the back of the file cabinet. As I pulled the drawer open I caught, on the back edge of all the papers, a magazine with naked bodies. I snuck back at the most quiet time in the house (3:33am) to verify what I had glimpsed. Picking it up, I took special note as to how it was laid so that I could return it to the exact configuration. My fingers silently skimmed and pulled each glossy page. Positioning the page in direct line of the lying flashlight refracted vivid close ups on intersected body parts and descriptions about a process called intercourse. Arousal and information linked my continual return to this purposely found ritual.

12 STAIRS

When I was 11 years old, my father was behind me as I minced up the stairs trying on the gait and power of a young woman. HIS question was...WHY are you walking like THAT?

His question had an undercurrent of anger and twinge of disgust, but upon subsequent internal replays the deep seed of fear revealed itself. I had never heard my father scared. The fear in his gut evoked the fear in my body, and as I bounded up that remaining flight of stairs, I acquired my first embodied lesson in oppression and quest for liberation.

LORETTA'S IN ATLANTA

Andre was "carrying on" straight in line with the blaring bitch track. I secretly felt something bad was bound to happen with this display. Andre answered that concern with his body, responding with a slash of the arm or spin on the heel. There was a physical logic to his improvisation of hyper-feminine gestures. From a corner stairway, a disembodied voice egged him on. "YOU BETTER VOGUE BITCH!" and with the possibility that this witch dance had a form and following, my fear turned to provocation.

**JACKSON & HOMAN 3:33am** 

When I walked my first and only ball, I remember the commentator saying four things:

1)"turn off the music," which they did, I kept going...
2)"where did she come from?" (they like to change pronouns)

3)"she is feeling this'

4) and as I was finishing and coming off the runway he said "we got to get a category for this."

As I turned and made eve contact, I realized my initiation wasn't what I DID, but that I KEPT doing it. Staying with it changed the room.

**UPSTAGE RIGHT** 

Ralph has always been full of stories of rabbits throwing themselves into the jaws of generosity. Vivid lessons to the bounty of what might be perceived as acts of overt violence. During the last section called FURY, each of the ten times that I jumped and pummeled to the space of the ground "fuck you Ralph" echoed in my head. It was my beautiful mantra, a way to align with the intense physicality of what my body didn't want to do and transcend to the energy of its possibility.

#### **BETWEEN MY EARS**

We were working on a grueling piece called FURY.

After seeing the excerpt, my father spoke about an article the existential philosopher Camus had written called "The Myth of Sisyphus."

"One must imagine Sisyphus happy." -Albert Camus

The idea being, although condemned to the arduous task of ceaselessly rolling a rock, Sisyphus was alive.

This "aliveness" was an ah-ha moment, an alternative to just getting through the piece and a glimpse into the philosophical aspirations of the effort.

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#### STEPHEN FACEY

A

BEAUTIFUL

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onight is indeed about dance, then and now. Dence that takes you somewhere you've never been. This was the experience. I had when I first saw dance in this space. That is what so often Danspace brings to you, dance that is full of surprise, humor, conflict, exuberance, melancholy, and—ultimately for me—liberation. I've been asked to provide a bit of history about the arts projects at St. Mark's and to talk about this great and sacred space because both are so integral to the underlying aesthetic of the Danspace Project.

in the early '60s, the Rector of St. Mark's, Michael Allen, propherically understood the cultural and politioal ferment that we as a nation were embarking upon in his view artists were among the fen, in our society one views "doing theology". And that is the elsence. of what the ents projects at St. Mark's are all about The task that he gave us was to build an institutional contact in which arts and community projects could flourish. There were two simple and integrated rules: one, to "let people be," and two, to foster models of self-determination that would provide the freedom for artists and community people to collaborate, to experiment, and, yes, even to fail. Thus in the early '60s, there were jazz concerts in the west yard and film showings in the Parish Hall at a time when the city had banned so-called underground films.



5 Mink's after the fire, 1978. Plinto by Stephen Facey.



Simplest Facely, 1918. Prints counting of

#### A Beautiful Light Shines Through It

by Stephen Facey - from a talk at the SILVER SERIES celebration 12/20/98

¥.4

Out of this beginning the residential arts programs emerged in 1966. The start-up funding for these programs came from a government agency, the Department of Health. Education and Welfare. Two sociologists from the New School proposed a project to study the dropout community that was gathered around St. Mark's and which comprised a large segment of the audience here. Incidentally, the grant came from a subdivision of HEW known as the Office of Juvenile Delinquency!

The Preservation Youth Project was organized in 1967. It began as a summer youth-employment project to reclaim the ancient graveyards of St. Mark's for use as community parks. At the time, it was very controversial. Today it is delebrated as a pioneer project in orban preservation. In 1975 it became a full-time employment venture for 35 out-of-school, out-ofopportunity 19-year-olds of this neighborhood. The funding came from a pne-time NEA program known as City Spirit. I remember wordly that their request for proposals started with the sentence: "Art needs to be woven into the fabric of the community." We responded, "You've got it wrong. Art is the fabric of the community." What institutions like St. Mark's can do is to create the machinery for that weaving to occur. As we reach the close of this century and celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Danispace Project. and the 200th anniversary of this sacred space iveremain an evolving and thirting experiment in the integration of religion, arts, community and neighbolihood preservation.

A few words about the building. This Entropolarity Ween style auditory church—one room—is, designed so the most people can see and hear. Originally, it was an open space with movable benches. Over the years a fixed set of pews was installed. When Dansbace stained, half of the pews had been removed. Some people think that happened because of the arts programs. It didn't. The congregation removed those pervis in 1976 in order to worship in the round. The rest of the pevs were removed by the Preservation Youth Project in 1976 as a part of the upgrading of the church. The work was almost completed when St. Mark's was nearly totally devastated by a great fire in 1978. The Preservation Youth Project undertook its restoration, and this serene space reopened in 1982.

konography. A question we are often asked is, "Where is all the religious symbolism?"

For the first years of Danspace, there was a huge freestanding wooden cross on the altar steps. But when we began the project to upgrade the space for its present multiple uses, we decided that the church would follow what I understand to be a German idea of "kirche" which says that a church in a sense is nothing until there are people in it doing something. Thus, this Sunday morning the space was filled with religious elements as the congregation worshipped here. There were crosses and candles and other isonography. Tonight the religious symbols have been put away in preparation for another form of the celebration of life—dance.

Up in the balciny there is a Creation window, a nose window, which is new after the fire. In the day-time, a beautiful light hows through it, and there is an inscription under it. It is dedicated to a member of the Preservation Youth Project who died soon after the church reopened. What it says, and I'm paraphrasing a bit, is, "For all who build—this place dances,"

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Stephen Facey is Executive Vice President of The Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine. Formerly at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, he developed the institutional framework for the Arts Projects and organized and developed the Preservation Youth Project.

12 States after the line, 1978. Photo by Stephen Faces



14

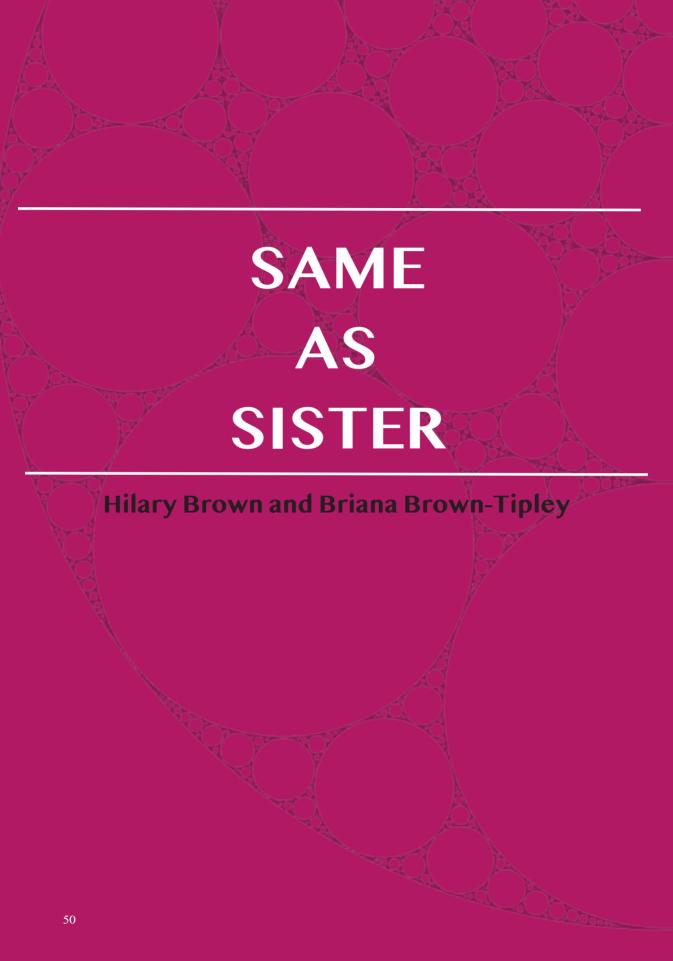
Stephen Facey's essay "A Beautiful Light Shines Through It" originally appeared in Danspace Project's 25th Anniversary Book, published in 1999 to accompany the Silver Series, eight weeks of commemorative performances held between December 1998-December 1999.

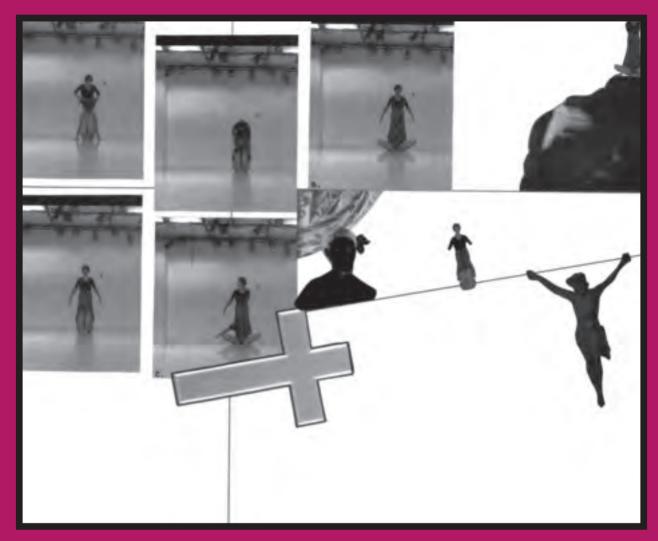
## "R H Y T H M IS THE THING"

**REGGIE WILSON** 

# "NOT WHAT YOU CAN SAY BUT WHAT YOU CAN LET SOMEONE KNOW"

**REGGIE WILSON** 



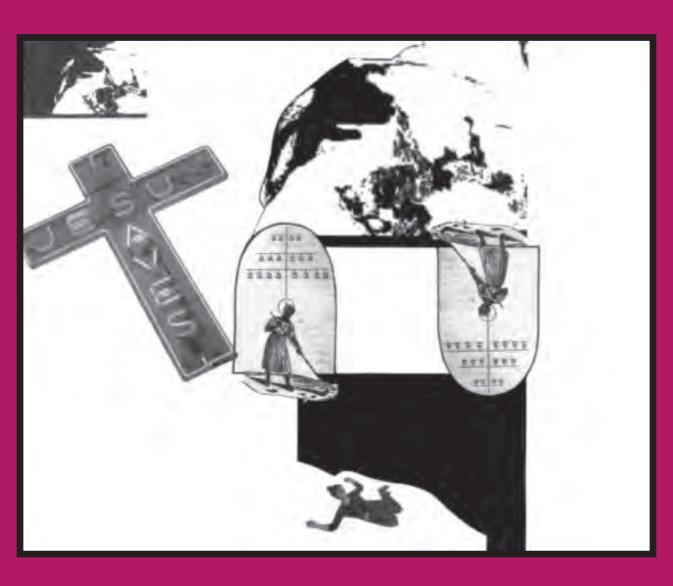


## THE GIRL SPLIT IN TWO

### THE SISTERS' ESCAPE







## THE MOURNING OF KATE

**OCTOBER 2016 - 2017** 

BY

TARA AISHA WILLIS

For this essay, we invited Tara Aisha Willis to reflect on her experiences as a performer in an event entitled, "the skeleton architecture, or the future of our worlds," which took place at Danspace Project on October 22, 2016, guest curated by Eva Yaa Asantewaa as a part of *Platform 2016: Lost & Found.* Sparked by Audre Lorde's essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," Yaa Asantewaa invited 20 black women and gender non-conforming dancers from different generations and dance genres to respond to the following improvisational prompts: the walk, the sermon, the flood, the haunt, and the planting. The artists that performed that evening were: Angie Pittman, Grace Osborne, Charmaine Warren, Davalois Fearon, Edisa Weeks, Jasmine Hearn, Kayla Hamilton, Leslie Parker, Marguerite Hemmings, Marjani Fortè-Saunders, Maria Bauman, Marýa Wethers, Melanie Greene, Nia Love, Ni'Ja Whitson, Paloma McGregor, Rakiya Orange, Samantha Speis, Sydnie L. Mosley, Sidra Bell, and Tara Aisha Willis.

We were interested in Willis' perspective as a dancer, arts administrator, and scholar working in and around Danspace Project and Movement Research, two New York City dance organizations that host performances in religious spaces known for their connection to the arts (St. Mark's Church and Judson Church, respectively). When we think of architecture in the way that Lorde invokes it, as a foundation but also as a site for change, what do the architectures of these dance spaces tell us about the individuals who have existed inside of them? Willis composed these reflections as she was in the process of moving from New York to Chicago, her hometown, to take the position of Associate Curator of Performance at the MCA Chicago. The italicized sections indicate Tara's memories of the October 2016 performance.

Many of the artists involved in that October 2016 evening have since gone on to form the Skeleton Architecture collective, who have come to view themselves as a, "A vessel of Black womyn and gender non-conforming artists rooted in the rigor and power of the collective in practice."

Lydia Bell Program Director, Catalogue Editor Danspace Project

#### WHERE WE LAND, WHERE WE FLY, OCTOBER 2016-2017 TARA AISHA WILLIS

SKELETON ARCHITECTURE OPEN RE-HEARSAL @ DANSPACE PROJECT 10.7.16

where or what are the roots in my body & heart, dug up from the wellworn wood of the floor or from deeper below—the histories, or at least the stories, that I've joined onto like just the next precious addendum, by being here, now? what pathways have I traced for the first and millionth time through space, across woodgrain, over ground, under sky? memories (some from before my time, before my witnessing; not proprietary, only recently property-holding) of lineages inherited and built out of dust and gravel by someone before me, that I will construct from nothing. or out of excess, for someone yet to come. four walls floor to ceiling and a set of endlessly repeating, morphing habits of body and of thought.

In his Curator's Note for *Platform* 2016: Lost & Found,<sup>1</sup> Ishmael Houston-Jones asks an unanswerable question: how can he "quantify a negative"?—the artists and artistry lost to the HIV/AIDS crisis, the found fragments of archive and memory, the present-tense facts of life and dance going on alongside one another. He evokes a bell hooks quote: "The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it's to imagine what is possible." The Platform per-

[1] Platform 2016:Lost & Found was curated by Ishmael Houston-Jones and Will Rawls and took place at Danspace Project from October 13–November 19, 2016. The Platform included over 80 artists in 28 events, including performances, conversations, a zine project, film screenings, and a vigil as well as a print catalogue: Lost and Found: Dance, New York, HIV/AIDS, Then and Now.

[2] bell hooks cited in Houston-Jones, Ishmael, "A Personal Reflection on John Bernd's Lost and Found; Scenes from a Life," in Lost and Found: Dance, New York, HIV/AIDS, Then and Now, eds Jaime Shearn Coan, Ishmael Houston-Jones,

formances and conversations were one answer to those questions: a reminder that performance is always simultaneously ongoing and eventual, a landing place with no resolution.

"The skeleton architecture or the future of our worlds," arose out of the Lost & Found Platform's proliferating questions. Through Eva Yaa Asantewaa's improvisational structure we—20 black womyn and gender non-conforming individuals—arrived together in the room. The evening took place days before the 2016 election. That month felt, in retrospect. like a turning point: both events reminders of how much more there is to do, how much has been done, how much is exhausted and rejuvenated. Maybe we can only bear witness to what's lost, a question that Brenda Dixon-Gottschild can't fully answer in words: "witnessing ultimately requires and points to action" or to necessity, as Audre Lorde would say.4

Eva took Audre Lorde's notion of poetry as the "skeleton architecture of our lives" as a starting point for creating this open-ended architecture, bringing us all together for a structured improvisation in a venue long tied to white postmodern dance histories. The end of Lorde's essay reads. "For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt, of examining what our ideas really mean (feel like) on Sunday morning at 7 AM, after brunch, during wild love, making war, giving birth, mourning our dead." The potency of her last line as a landing place lies in how she makes her argument felt rather than known: the ongoingness of the "skeleton architecture," bleeding quotidi-

Will Rawls (New York: Danspace Project, 2016) 14.

[3] Brenda Dixon Gottschild, "rainbow kids," in *Lost and Found: Dance, New York, HIV/AIDS, Then and Now*, 253.
[4] From Audre Lorde's essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"—both a black feminist manifesto of the 70s and 80s that I read and teach with regular religiosity and that was part of Eva's score for the *Skeleton Architecture*.

[5] Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2007) 39.

an moments into the most sweeping events. Lorde demands a shift in how we practice living itself—attending to the subtler, everyday structures of poetry, emotionality, power, and care beneath the more legible, hardened surfaces. That night, in a ritual of healing and living with wounds, we bore witness to each other, children and family, ancestors, dance families; our creative, loving, and sometimes deceptively disconnected lineages. We could hold ourselves up to the light with urgency, without asking each other—or allowing the audience to ask us—to congeal into ultimatums.

It was an invitation outward, to each of us in our silos across the dance landscape, and inward, into the space, into community and collaboration, into intimate difference. Into the site where it is/was/has been/will be—the here/now/then/there of St. Mark's Church, a site of intersection. How do we make sure that we keep this history re-making ritual in motion across the ages? One of the Lost & Found Platform's conceits was that of a "memorypalace"—anunfinished, evolving architecture in improvisational motion through non-linear time and space. What time/space coordinates did we arrive to and raise up in St. Mark's Church? An improvised negotiation of self and group in real-time, non-time, beyond time, every time, all time.6

This space holds the weight of a beautiful dance history, one that hasn't held our bodies—as whole beings—as well or often as I'd like to think, has held us up as precious only in a certain light, illuminating for us only some of our options, illuminating for others only some of our possible selves. I recently spent some time reading through Danspace Project Platform catalogues from past years, looking for traces of Danspace's history, and its poetry—hoping to explain how the twenty dancers involved in

the October 2016 Skeleton Architecture performance came to land in the cavern of St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery for an historic night. Among the endless list of artists who've brought their work into contention with these vast ceilings, symmetrical leveled altars, the wide plane of these pale wood floors, bounded by carpet; its audiences that assemble and reassemble, the same people circulating in and out of the years in different arrangements and timeframes, but always with overlap. An irrepressible babel of histories and knowledge were held forth in our bodies with each step, ground rising up and falling away over the passing minutes. All the dancers who have traversed this floor over decades, sent a gaze or the line of an arm up to the rafters. The dancers we don't see in our minds' eyes when many of us think St. Mark's Church, Danspace Project, dance in the East Village, "downtown dance," "experimental performance." proscenium stage creeps in across the church's mutable expanses even with that widening sprawl, even if by intentional omission or rejection. That bell hooks refrain: the function of art is to do more than to "tell it like it is," and more and more and then some, Nina Simone might groan, on another track. In my mind's ear in repetition, the landing place of the chorus in her iteration of "Tell It Like It Is": the spiraling high notes winding through that soul tune's verses, arriving again and again at that chorus, like heavy, old-fashioned machinery returning to work. A relief to land there, but a song about being kept out on the line in love, an ultimatum that awaits an answer. We showed up that night to tell it like it is, but also deep in not knowing, ready for futures to open out from the moment of arrival on stage: the wide-open abyss, dancing along a diagonal as if building a new topography within these walls, gesturing alone into the bright.

[6] Danielle Goldman, *I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010).

#### CAFE ORLIN ON ST. MARK'S PLACE A MONTH BEFORE IT CLOSES 9.14.17

those two hours in the hot-seat, we are together alone together. I hedge my bets, edge around the space, hold back from abandon, because it's possible to feel the history in the room, the kinship of which I feel a part, supported by, but have until recently in my life hesitated to take up fully. my childhood habits in rooms full of black folks surface, the physics of navigating my family's "upward" mobility before I knew what it was—my mixed family, endless affirmations of our exceptionalism, my inability to access AAVE<sup>7</sup> on cue (and a long list of failed code-switching moments), my capacity for moving through white spaces while tolerating ignorance "Improvised (shrinking with age). dance involves literally giving shape to oneself by deciding how to move in relation to an unsteady landscape..." One's social and historical positions in the world affect one's ability to move, both literally and figuratively.8

tonight, what Hortense J. Spillers might call the "vestibule of culture" is the room itself, or at least all we need to know. 9 tenderly in the light, all of us who have been here all along allowed to breathe and air out.

In the back of Danspace Project's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Book from 1999, (Cynthia Headstrom writes, we had "only an open room" to work with), I stumble across Barbara Bryan's young, circa-1999 face. <sup>10</sup> I feel acutely, like a post-show hug, the lineage of administrative laboring I belong to—leaning over/under the weight of events

[7] African American Vernacular English

and spaces that shape the direction of dance in NYC. Associate Director of Danspace at the time, and my Executive Director at Movement Research for the last several years, Barbara is poised in this photo to take on more than could be known at the time, visibly invested in a community that I now call one of my own. The photo sends me back and forward in time: the concerns and conversations swirling around Danspace Project in the 80s and 90s are so similar to and different from the present moment that the distance between now and then is at once sweet. bitter (love), and in part, illusory. "Any writing about the past is truly half-assed" and so, "maybe really we have to accept that exaggerated stories are in perfect shape," Emmanuel Iduma writes in the catalogue for Platform 2015: Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets, in his imagined memories as a Nigerian transplant at a 1970s Grand Union performance in SoHo.11 History and memory are always already speculative, falling off the present's edge into the to-come. A cryptic margin note in a notebook reminds me that Susan Manning unearthed a record of a performance by Pearl Primus and John Cage, evidence of histories we haven't yet begun to story-tell<sup>12</sup>—they never worked together again. Was a silo between black and white dance worlds affirmed that day? Another scribble points to Fred Moten: we evidence our stories because the evidence of black experience was systematically tucked away in plain sight, the site of each step layered thick, even as there are "corpses" on or underneath the thoroughfare."13

#### Reading the Platform catalogues is like coming back into a room you knew well as a child but only remem-

<sup>[8]</sup> Goldman, I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom, 5.

<sup>[9]</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003)

<sup>[10]</sup> Cynthia Hedstrom, "1980-83 Momentous Years" in *Danspace 25 Years*, eds. Douglas Dunn and Carol Mullins (New York: Danspace Project, 1999), 35.

<sup>[11]</sup> Emmanuel Iduma, "Fugitive Memories," in *Dancers Buildings and People in the Streets*, ed. Claudia LaRocco (New York: Danspace Project, 2015) 119.

<sup>[12]</sup> Susan Manning, *Modern Dance*, *Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) 172.

<sup>[13]</sup> Fred Moten, "Amuse-Bouche," in *Dancers Buildings* and *People in the Streets*, 87.

ber from pictures or a shadowy sense-memory of its shape, its wallpaper. Like looking through an old family album in which you recollect each cookout, trip, party, playdate, but never find a picture of yourself fully in the frame, just the back of your head at the dinner table, face hidden as you look toward the kitchen while everyone else smiles for the camera. I feel my place in this line of laborers of love, my complicated relationship to being-often-the only person of color in the room along that line, and my choice to continue trying to build along that diagonal, to create new structures in our field. I hope this jumble of citations and memories can serve as some connecting architecture between these moving parts.

Maybe this moving together/apart is the kind of newer, "nimbler physics" 14 needed to trace out some endless answering and answering and answering of the impossible question: what's been lost, what will we never know about what art could have been, and is the way art is now just as much because of those absences as it might have been because of those presences? How do so many of us—not yet dancing or even born during much of the HIV/AIDS crisis—respond to the gaps and cracks of lost lineages? Here we are, 20 black women and gender non-conforming dancers who have never before gathered together in this configuration. Gesturing in the present toward our shared past-tenses, our connected positions in the room are our connected locations in the field of dance are our connected aesthetic and familial lineages. There are disconnections here too, duets that start up but never finish.

We all arrived to do what we know as well as we know the cavities of our own heart muscles—practices we've each cultivated in different ways, in different worlds, all of us with a necessary overabundance of facility

[14]Will Rawls, "Letters and Numbers," in *Lost and Found: Dance, New York, HIV/AIDS, Then and Now,* 19.

on stage and in the field: teachers, caretakers, administrators, curators, scholars, mentors as well as dancers and makers. 15 Marýa Wethers, one of the Skeleton Architecture dancers, gave me my first dance administration internship; we later became coworkers at Movement Research. Her face, as a few of us sent our limbs in swirls and tumbles halfway through the performance, was both joyful and relieved. On this night, all our parallel, overlapping, adjacent pathways intersect in sudden syncopation and complex harmony. We show up with our ordinary selves, do what we know best, but unlike any other time before or after. The rulebook disintegrates: other knowledges take over from the score Eva created; trust taking the place of agreed-upon gestures for communication. Or rather, the creation of new ways of knowing. Old ways we had forgotten we knew. This place holds a first-time ritual for recognizing what is already there-between us, between the silos we occupy—even before we meet.

FUGITIVE NOTES FROM MY NEW OFFICE IN CHICAGO, ONE YEAR LATER 10.17.17

I feel like an island on the floor, unable to move a few feet from Kayla Hamilton. it seems too far a distance to traverse, my body to embedded in listening to disrupt its place in the world. Kayla and I hold each other eventually, taking the necessary time. we are the hum beneath the thrumming, diverging melodies of the group, ululating into the altar wall, holding themselves together in a processional that stays put but never stops grounding down, hailing up. the carpet beneath

[15] Soon after I would get to be the editor for Maura Donohue's academic review of the performance, where she more clearly points out this multilinguism (See Maura Nguyen Donohue, "the skeleton architecture, or the future of our worlds," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 27.2 (May 2017): 279-281). Edisa Weeks and I could not receive the Bessie Award for Outstanding Performer the cast received in 2017 because of our service on the selection committee. How many hats do we feel responsible for wearing before they start to collide and cancel each other out?

their feet; the wood sprawling out from our bodies. we witness them, each other through touch. sometimes being together looks divided; different needs being met differently, the boundaries blurring and extending past spatial proximity and physical touch. "You can be human by yourself but black don't go it alone. It's a social dance, unruliness counterpoised between riot and choir and our melismatic looting is with child, sold all the time, but never bought." 16

We hum and sing the chorus aloud, but I hear Diana Ross in my head -"Like the sweet morning dew, I took one look at you"—then Aretha Franklin, becoming Tammi Terrell—"And it was plain to see..." Marvin Gaye chimes in: "you were my destiny." more and more of us join the chorus, to different degrees (there is a lot of work to be done, not all of it in unison). I wonder which version we each hear, which memory echo we are covering. is it Mary J. Blige and Method Man, me alone in my room flipping between radio stations in 1995, no idea what a sample or a citation is yet? this singing together is another version(ing) of the song, one that doesn't exist yet, that is for us, by us, another kind of love song; it raises (to) the rafters, or sinks below ground; permeates cells as much as spirit.

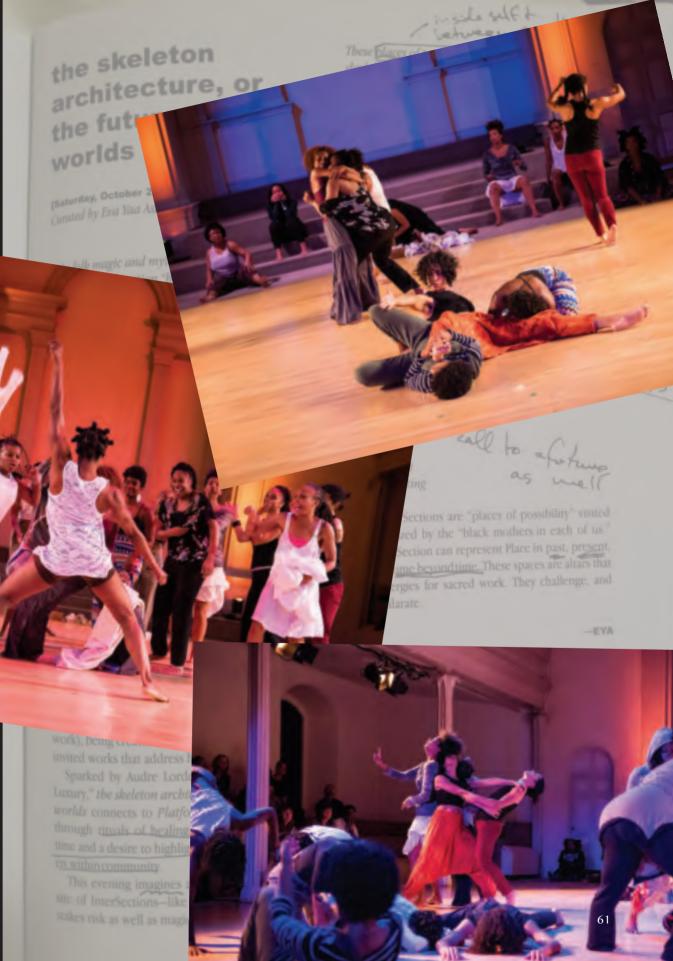
The right page of the centerfold in Movement Research Performance Journal for the 25th anniversary of performances at Judson Memorial Church is a close up of the legendarily welcoming church letter board, immediately recognizable to insiders: "GOD SAID 'WHOSOEVER.' THAT MEANS TRANSGENDER PEOPLE." On the left page, Nia Love perches unafraid, with a leg thrown into the wide open air, looking into the sun, halfway up the pole of the street sign for Harlem's 125th Street. Marjani Forté

[16] Fred Moten, "Amuse-Bouche," in *Dancers Buildings and People in the Streets*, 96.

keeps watch below, circumspect but at the ready. Nia is either about to fly toward or away from the photographer. Together, these full-page, face-to-face photos feel like a crucial mark in the history of the present moment. An imprint of work getting done, work to be dreamt up.

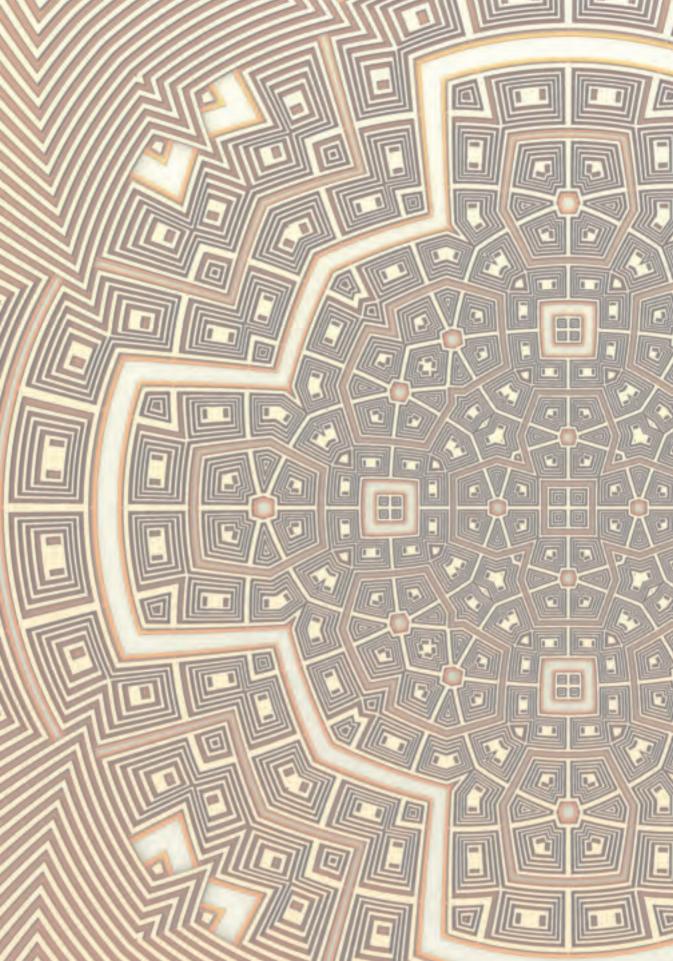


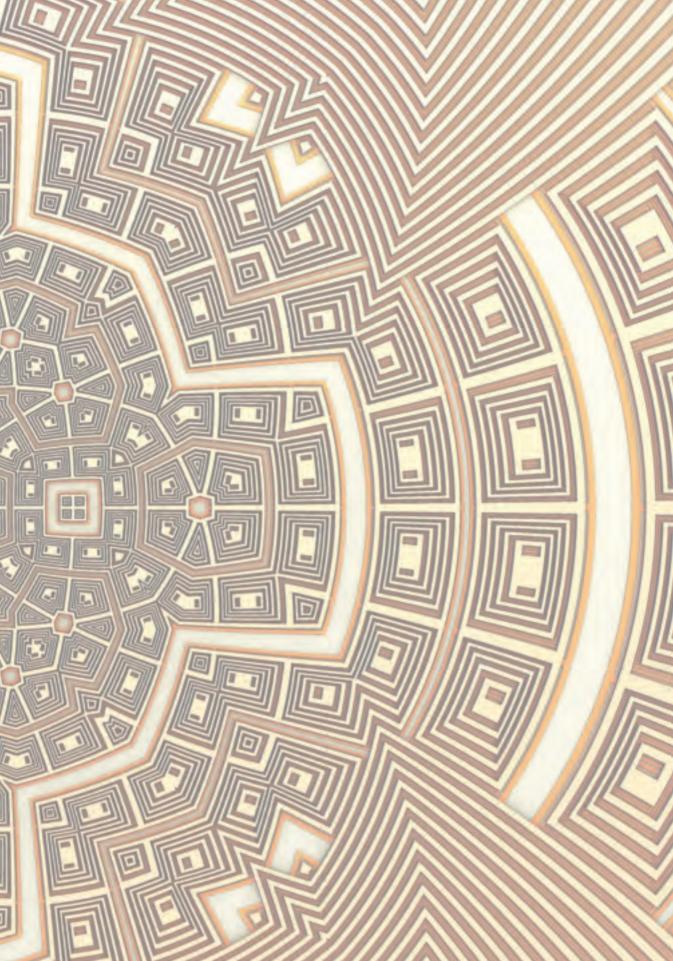
<sup>[17]</sup> Quote attributed to Rev. Bobbi Jean Baker, "Movement Research at Judson Church: A Portfolio of Process," *Movement Research Performance Journal* #50 (2017): 24.

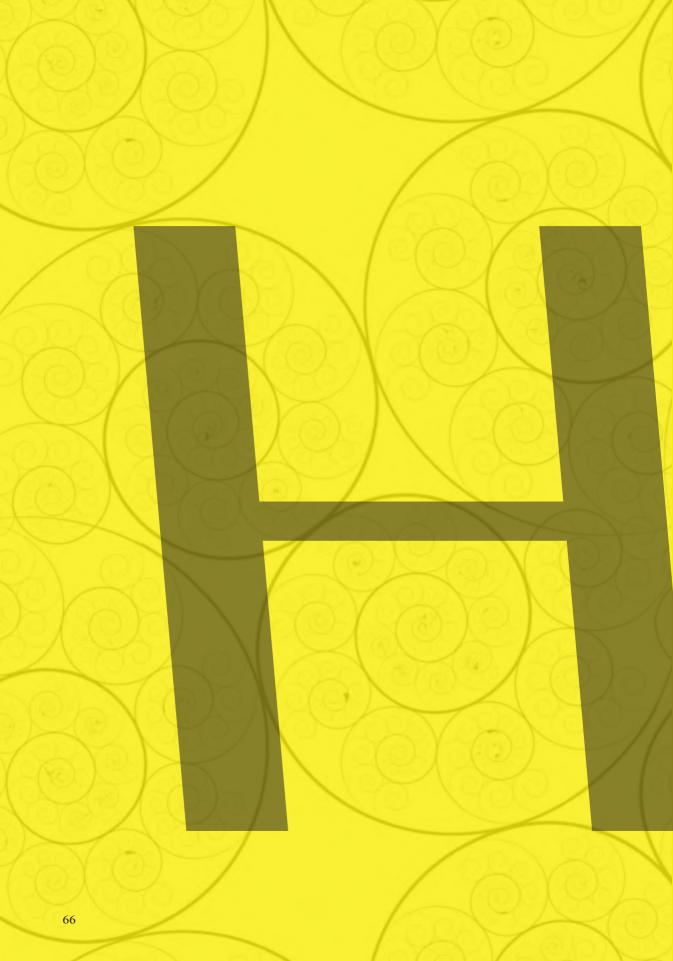












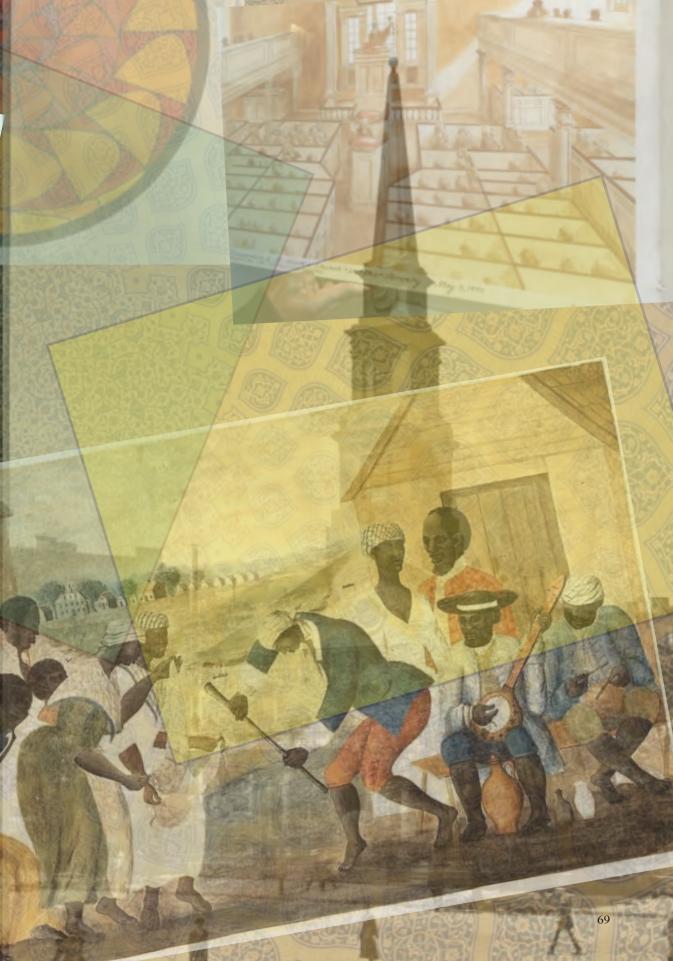


Layers of history can be excavated at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery—a relic of New Amsterdam; a neighbor to the Land of the Blacks that disappeared without a trace around 1712; a meeting place for the Black Panthers and the Young Lords; home to the avant-garde. Still, the lives at the fringes of the archival record prove a productive site for speculation and radical imagination. These lives provoke us to ask, how can layers of histories be mapped, and how are they mapped on the body?

**Catalogue Editors** 

### HISTORY





## ROUND TRIPs: NY-BOM-NY

BY RADHIKA SUBRAMANIAM

#### **FOOTWORK**

I have no memory of arriving in New York. No imprint remains in my mind of the first glimpse of the city: steel and glass glinting across the Hudson or the dingy fluorescence of Port Authority, a harried and low-browed Penn Station or the moment when the plane banks at JFK and intertwined fingers of water and land come into view. But of my first step outside, my recollection is crystal: an electric fusion of body and concrete. Some cities are sneaky like that, they evade the eye but snag your heel. Oh yes, I remember thinking at that instant, I have returned. As odd as it may seem to speak of return upon one's entry, the truth is it felt as if a muscle memory had awakened—as if a circuit from city to city, that had been disconnected during a detour in small towns, was suddenly reset. Cities teach you about movement and they have to because once you commit to urbanity, your vision fades.

In Bombay where I grew up, there are few cityscapes; every promontory or high-rise view sends you half out to sea. Whether you look across from the heights of Malabar Hill caressing Marine Drive to the big business towers of Nariman Point or down the Worli Seaface at the Mahalakshmi temple past the minaret of the Haji Ali dargah marooned at high tide, what you see are the gentle sweep of the city's bays. The city does not look at itself, not even through the barred windows of the packed commuter 'locals' as they rattle past monsoon-pocked buildings—not as a landscape and certainly not as an abstraction. On the occasional seaside promenade, those "eating the wind," as the expression goes, look out to sea before they plunge back into the entrails of the city streets, jostling, shoving, swept along. As a movie town, Bombay knows its camera angles: no long shots. In fact, no panoramic pans or other techniques that domesticate distance. The ubiquitous movie billboards, an art form unto themselves, whose giant heads and faces dwarf buildings and roads are the hint that the city images itself up close and personal. Such myopia can breed a kind of self-importance. When your view is at the level of pixel and pore, it's hard to see beyond to find any other relevance or reality. New York is similarly full of itself. And why not when the residents of these cities can imagine whole worlds in the space between the scent of an armpit and the pressure of an elbow?

You might think iconic edifices, soaring towers, and brash neon are inherently urban visual pageantry. Sure, cities indulge in display—and those places keen to produce instant modernities rely on these spectacular forms to signal their arrival even as they typically bank on old, oppressive regimes of labor to get there. Few residents, least of all precarious workers, can really step back enough to recognize these postcard views, the place has long since got under their skins. I myself lived in New York for years before I realized where one could provide a visitor with the classic view of the Manhattan skyline—even though the visiting African choreographer I took over the Brooklyn Bridge exclaimed, "what a walk!" rather than the anticipated "what a view!" And I had certainly been here a long time when I made sense of the comment heard in my local bagel store after a devastating accident on our block. A construction worker, who had obviously not been wearing a harness or any other safety equipment, had plunged to his death. "What can you say?" said the old guy shaking his head in commiseration as he stood waiting for his small regular and a plain with a schmear, "Indians aren't afraid of heights." The great ironworkers who built some of New York's classic towers and most of its bridges were, in fact, Mohawk construction workers who came from upstate and Canada. Many of their children and grandchildren follow in their footsteps but skilled and semi-skilled immigrants have also entered this line of work. Brownstone façade restorers in Brooklyn are often small South Asian businessesthis particular one that had lost a worker was Bangladeshi. In a series of slippages, my old neighbor had mentally welded Native American "Indians" with those from Asia, and in addition, had fused together the different countries of the Indian sub-continent. Columbus would have understood. So too, in quite a different way, would every South Asian proprietor resigned to calling his establishment an "Indian" restaurant no matter his national origins. New York will make you anything, even its original inhabitant. It will also jerk its most longstanding residents into feeling like they arrived only yesterday.

### **CONTACT IMPROV**

"No bagels, no doughnuts, that's why" says Ibrahim who hands me my coffee without being asked. One of an essential brigade of Afghan breakfast cart vendors who provide New Yorkers with an inexpensive morning kick, his presence anchors my routine. We exchange quick pleasantries, discuss politics in our shared part of the world and occasionally sing an old Hindi film song, all in the time it takes to make both coffee and change. I want to know why he wasn't parked at the corner as usual the day before. "It's because the bagel guy is Colombian," he offers as explanation. I am perplexed until I realize it had just been Columbus Day. Revoking the prize of his so-called discovery of the New World, Ibrahim had dispatched the old Italian explorer south of the border, letting him back in like any of the millions of other Latino migrants in the city.

Places get blind stitched together in New York through people's underground journeys. The alphanumeric cartographies of the subways propel the sort of navigation in which you don't really need to look around although you could consult a map if you must. You enter the train, and you lose yourself in your book, music or phone, if you're lucky and if you're not, you hang on to a pole for the duration of the journey, and out you emerge somewhere else in the city. This mode of mapping isn't that different from the way Catherine of Braganza might have added Bombay and Tangier to the dowry she brought King Charles II. Think of the courtier who plucked two names from a list of less important Portuguese possessions thereby connecting Asia to North Africa and both to England, his geographical acumen no better than ours which connects Brooklyn to the Bronx through the A and 4. A few years after Charles was gifted the swampy group of islands that was once Bombay, he acquired what was then the territory of New Netherlands from the Dutch. Its capital New Amsterdam was re-named New York in honor of the Duke of York, Charles's brother, who sponsored the mission. The eponymous Duke shrewdly named the counties of Kings and Queens after his brother and sister-in-law—and so Catherine, a Portuguese princess turned English queen, who hadn't travelled very far east or west, yokes my two cities together. New York has been nonchalant about its derivative name. Bombay, on the other hand, ceded its name both literally and in spirit to parochial chauvinism. Over the 1980s-90s, an expedient marriage brought together the national Hindu right BJP party and the far-right regionalist Shiv Sena party in the state of Maharashtra, of which Bombay is the capital. A crass, commercial, cosmopolitan city that embraced enough Indian languages to create its own argot became the site of xenophobic violence. In 1995, in an act of dubious nativism, the Shiv Sena changed the city's name to Mumbai. There are no stories of origin that are not also accounts of geographical revisionism and repressive self-deception.

Yet, I'm quite sure that it wasn't the English connection via Catherine that prompted my landlord's question to me, "Are you from London?" Every month, he would appear at the apartment looking like a bouncer coming to high tea to collect the rent in cash. "No, from India." He perked up, "Do they still live in trees?" Had I recently been back to the neighborhood in which I'd grown up, I might have been able to respond more aptly to this intriguing question. When my sister and I did return to our old home, it was more than thirty years since we'd lived there. Still in the same location was the little drug store of our childhood wherein we'd coveted cheap shiny things under glass while our parents bought such worthy items as toothpaste and soap. We told the young man behind the counter, probably the grandson of the old proprietor, that we had been former residents of the area and one-time regulars. "Ah, yes," he said, "It was a jungle back then." This about one of the most genteel areas of the city. Perhaps it had been leafier once but still lining the hill road were elegant, if somewhat shabby, apartment buildings. Could I have stepped into my landlord's imagination from one of the trees in the jungle of the head of the young man? It seemed that people were not only able to stitch together disparate parts of the city but equally able to make sense of the collision of disconnected fragments—and so a tenant you thought was a Londoner could just as easily be a Mumbaikar who had left her treehouse to be a New York-ar. Anything was possible. This acceptance of movement and reinvention is both thrilling and chilling; such freedom amid such oblivious disregard.

"Where are you moving to?" asks another of my many landlords as he hikes up the rent by a third. We are clearly to be priced out of the neighborhood whose elderly residents will probably soon be receiving offers to buy. When he hears my answer, he laughs, "Pioneering!" Yesterday's so-called pioneers are the unwitting vanguard of today's gentrification.

## **SLEEPWALKING**

The first time I heard the call rise in the dawn air was in my dreams or so it seemed, certainly in the shadow zone where past and present get a rhythm remix. More than a decade later, the call to prayer from the local mosque reaches my ears as a mixture of timekeeper and taken-for-granted friend. Former members of the Nation of Islam founded the mosque more than thirty years ago. The neighborhood had a tough reputation—crack dens, drug dealers and shootings. The mosque struggled to get established. At some point, so the story goes, the brothers had had it. They asked the police to close the crack houses. They also took matters into their own hands, mounting patrols that walked the block 24 hours a day and indeed for forty days and forty nights, escorting any potential buyer away from the dealers and driving the dealers out. Gradually, they gained control of the block and the congregation grew. Today, it has a new marbled façade that is a beacon for a motley mixture of West African, African American and Bangladeshi Muslims. For the rest, there is no lack of other small storefront churches and ad hoc prayer stations at which you can stop for a quick spiritual recharge on your way to and from the subway.

Within me, the call to prayer tugged at a much longer history of the urban azaan in Bombay. Contention over religious observances in public space is an old hot button issue in the city where colonial edicts calculated to divide and rule butt up against the maneuvering of contemporary politics. Only earlier in 2017, a prominent Mumbai Hindu musician complained against using loudspeakers for the call to prayer. This twitter objection set off a riot of commentary. The collective performance of prayer on sidewalks and streets or the amplification of prayers and sermons or processions in public space by both Muslim and Hindu groups has been the source of discord and been deployed as displays of aggression or might. Spatial and sonic sectarian battles are fought in the courts or in the courts of public opinion around such issues as the loudspeaker azaan, the right of mosques to allow their congregants to spill out onto the sidewalk to pray (the "public namaaz" issue) or maha aratis (a Hindu ritual offering turned into a large public event). As the twitterati and on-line commentators respond to the recent furor, many ask where else people would be allowed to disturb the peace of their neighbors with loudspeaker prayer—wasn't it ultimately a sign of pandering to minorities?!

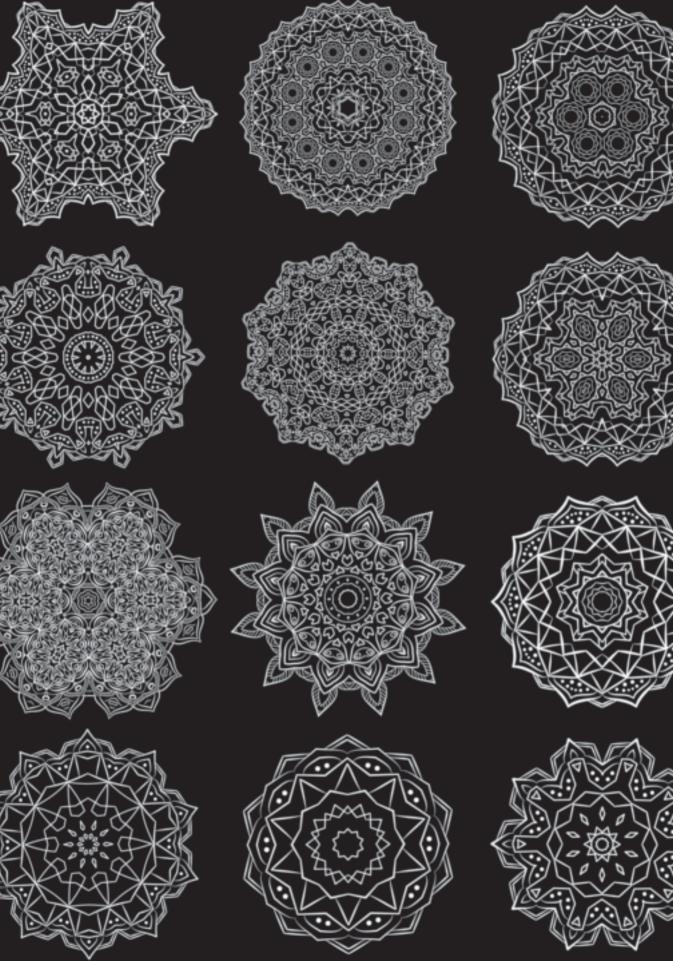
After 9/11, the NYPD began a program of surveillance of Muslim organizations that included NYC mosques ostensibly as part of an anti-terrorist campaign. They infiltrated them through "mosque crawlers" or informants who reported on the goings-on within, noting memberships and conversations and even trying to provoke people into making inflammatory comments that could then be used against them. The very establishment that had made the neighborhood I now live in safe enough to attract "pioneers" was targeted as the source of general insecurity.

### **SEA LEGS**

It's tempting to think of the strut as one of the city's signature moves—the walk, talk and swagger of aspiration that infuses the atmosphere around its bright lights—but the truth is the movement is really too large, too simple. You need to try something more sly and subtle: learn how to perform a whole routine while staying in place or how to move forward in a straight line while making about a dozen sidesteps and at all times, find the jitterbug of impatience to keep you on your toes. There's a lot of talk about freedom in cities and how you can march to the tune of your own drummer. Quite frankly, if you want to isolate your beat you would do better to find a less crowded stage. Cities insist on shared rhythms and movement. People sense the collective mandate and some beat time. Others must stay with the weaker accents. Stronger forces thunder in while quieter strains dodge and shift the stress. And soon you have a vast series of syncopated polyphonic rhythms that keep people in a kind of elastic interdependence. Not all cities have the same rhythm but every great city has a recognizable variation with its own shifting apertures and foreclosures. Shift your weight from one city to another and muscle memory will get you going but it won't ensure you find your balance.

Sea legs are what you need in island towns. Both Bombay and New York are more rightly called archipelagoes. At least seven islands were sutured together to make Bombay. New York has over 30 and although three might be prominent (Manhattan, Staten Island and the part of Long Island that makes Queens and Brooklyn), many others hold their own in its imagination—Ellis Island which processed its early immigrants and Rikers Island, its jail, to name just two. In reality, both Bombay and New York are amalgams of bits of land in an estuary linked very loosely to the mainland or indeed to the nation. It's ironic that in both cases, it took unspeakable violence to restore them to the national embrace: the riots, bomb blasts and political violence of 1992-93 in Bombay which allowed a regionalist rightist agenda to take centre stage, and in New York, 9/11 which, for a time, let the rest of the country champion this otherwise mongrel bastard city. Beneath the much-touted resilience of both places, these events exposed uneasy rifts and scars-shifting patterns of safety, regimes of surveillance of their own citizens, the awareness of what had been razed to build the very structures that had fallen. Urban identity is bound equally to stability and flux. Water flows through the toponyms of both cities—Minetta Brook, Canal Street, or the kills of New York a reminder of its old buried courses just as Bombay's causeways, breaches and vellards (from the *Portuguese vallado* meaning embankment) are testaments to its history of engineering hubris. In 2005, torrential rain in Mumbai caused extensive floods mainly because the Mithi River which would have acted as a storm water drain had long since been blocked by silt and sewage. The disaster that was Hurricane Sandy in 2012 was a reminder to New York that it was standing on very shaky ground indeed.

Writing in 1929 in *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud conceded that history couldn't be represented in spatial terms because multiple layers of history couldn't be depicted simultaneously. Urban space he ruled out as a particularly poor candidate for the mapping of history and memory because demolitions and reconstruction constantly transform the city and obliterate earlier signs. To the life of the mind however, nothing is lost even when it may be lost to our consciousness. And so, while the master of the memory trace warns us that radical urban erasures are irrecoverable, it is his very attention to the little slips that tumble through the lips of the unconscious that gives us another wayfinding strategy. In order to find the space between the urban conscious and the unconscious, historical fact and fiction, and memory and forgetting, mark the ways in which historical memory slips back through the crowded spaces of the city: attend to the surprise collisions, the chance contact, the odd joke, the Freudian slip. In fact, let yourself trip.





## ROLLING STRENGTH TRAINING EYE ATTUNING DANCE MAKING

CYNTHIA OLIVER

My cousin Merle and I were titillated when our great Aunt Thelma would come to pick us up and take us to church. She was a Pentecostal "holy roller" by my maternal family's Baptist standards. A Bible always nearby she could quote scripture at a moment's notice and had the cure for one's ills at the ready in the holy word. I was fascinated by her faithfulness, and in the sense of community at the parish. And more than all of that, the way the people moved when inhabited, struck, by the spirit. Built in a customary structure for small churches in the countryside of Norfolk, Virginia, the small white clapboard building had a sizeable middle isle from the entry door all the way to the altar. It was linear and direct, like most churches I had seen and offered a means to move toward holiness straight from the door. Or one could take a bit more time and carefully side step the direct route, prayerfully sit in the pew, receive the word of God and slowly make one's way up the isle to be saved. Merle and I sat quietly and waited with anticipation for the fervor of the pastor to enliven the flock I don't recall much of what was said in those long ceremonies where boredom often took over and daydreams filled my wandering mind as I looked out the long windows to the greenery outside. The beautiful impassioned singing took me places. The immediate world drifted away and left space for me to imagine a new one. I don't remember many people our age in the small congregation. So our presence seemed a bit of a novelty. And for me, having mostly been raised in my father's Catholic observance, the liveliness of the Pentecostal practices were riveting. They shouted back with feeling when their leader said something they agreed with. They hymned and hawed when a lesson was learned or they were rightfully chastised. "Yaaaas Lawd," "I hear you Lawd." "HmmmHm," or "Say it." "Tell em." The faithful were in conversation with the divine. That conversation was amplified with the body. As what seemed like hours would pass, and energy was slowly and rootedly building, one could feel the vibration in the room ramping up. And suddenly a shouting shaking, jumping, angular and swift body would be moved to first animate in the pew then swing into the isle and a way would be made for them to take over the center space. To move and receive spirit and the support of their fellow worshippers in the room. Or make their way to the altar and be blessed.

I don't remember anything about the denouement of these services. How things settled so that folks could calmly walk out, get in their cars and drive home, I don't know. I only remember the sudden shaking trembling, speaking in tongues. The fervent prayer rendered through the body. Aunt Thelma's practice took on a whole new meaning and I believe she knew faith and practice and gained wells of strength to go on as a black woman in the south on these days. Her public composure was thrown in sharp relief by that sanctity. In that small weekly gathering, she and fellow worshipers used the sudden surprising bursts of movement, that space of utterance, to garner what they needed to go back to the world where being on their knees was what they did in white folks houses with a mop or rag in their hands. Jumping, shouting—in every sense of the word, and sanctifying was what they did as free agents, celebrating their humanity in shared space. Like the underground boogie-down in larger cities for my generation, these houses of worship were spaces of renewal and strength. The ecstatic practices in places of relative safety offered one the solidity of center to be daring, and I dare say "experiment" in other areas of one's life.

The movement practices of my mother's kin spur me to ask: how might the way I decide to move be influenced by those early years? What about the movement in the intimate house of worship bolstered the confidence and sense of purpose Civil Rights, Black Power, and now Black Lives Matter activists have and continue to fight for? These movements pave the way for us to dream and live in our skin the way in which we do. I have no doubt that the "experimental movement" I engage in to this very day has its deep roots in the backwoods of Virginia as much as it has its obvious rhythms in the dance halls of the Caribbean from the other side of my youth and ancestry, or the club of my early (and mid and late) twenties. Hasn't the jumping, the shaking, the shouting, recognized in one space as performative choreographies always already been there? As cleansing? As ritual? As work? As salve? My life's work—the aesthetics of my choreographic practice, has been about attuning my eyes and embodied explorations to what is already there and offering those/these

ation, brought into focus for a different kind of attention. And in a different set of spaces. I'm looking at what we already do that is radical, persuasive, individuated, or group thought, divine and directed, moral and ethical. I am interested in this bodily, choreographic tool of communication suggesting that the things we see, those moments that we sit in, pass through, away to, over and around, in our communities, on the seemingly simplest of days, doing what we do, might actually be magic.





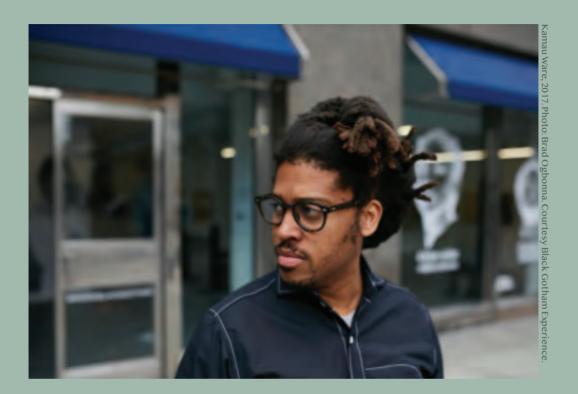


INTERVIEW

# KAMAU WAARE

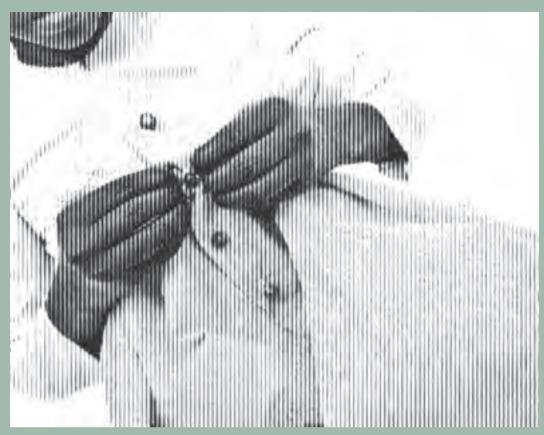
IN CONVERSATION WITH

LYDIA BELL



Kamau Ware is the founder of The Black Gotham Experience, a "visual and physical intervention in the cityscape," that illustrates the impact of the African Diaspora on New York City since 1625. Reggie Wilson and Danspace Project staff members went on Black Gotham walking tours over the course of summer 2017 as part of the River to River festival, while Ware was in residence in the Seaport District through the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council.¹ One of Black Gotham Experience's tours, "Other Side of Wall Street (1609-1680)," focuses on the creation of what was historically called "Land of the Blacks," a loose community of homes and farmlands around present-day Washington Square Park, located just outside the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam. In describing Land of the Blacks and how it came to be, Ware focuses in particular on Domingo and Catalina Anthony, free Blacks who were some of the first to settle there in 1643. In the following excerpted interview, Lask Kamau about the methodology behind The Black Gotham Experience and what it was that drew him to Domingo and Catalina.

Lydia Bell Program Director, Catalogue Editor Danspace Project



Kamau Ware, Catalina Dressmaking, 2015. Courtesy Black Gotham Experience.

Lydia Bell: Black Gotham is not your average-walking tour, as I experienced this summer. There's a way that you have to bring—you're expected to bring—your whole self to the tour. You have to access empathy and morality, modalities I'm more used to accessing in a performance setting. There is also an orchestration of bodies in space. How do you think about these experiences performatively?

Kamau Ware: Part of the scaffolding of the tours is that the walking footprint is actually fairly small. I've noticed that when we're going from place to place, there's this glorious buzz behind me. People are processing and talking to each other, and that's what I want. It makes the experience very personal to everybody who is on the tour. A lot of what we're talking about relates to trauma—to the extent that we don't talk about it. Not because we're bigoted, but because, how do you talk about bodies being burned alive in a pleasant environment? How do you bring up Emmett Till's body to a kindergarten class? A lot of what has happened has been traumatic—on both sides. Not to say that it's even. Of course one side has had more pain and trauma than the other. But even when you think about the inhumanity of slavery, there isn't necessarily an easy winner there. Every body loses more than you think. We don't talk about those things because it's painful and hard to unpack. But being able to unpack it in a communal setting, in a circle, where you can move from place to place to process itit makes it therapeutic.

LB: A powerful component of the tour was how you encouraged this question around moments of choice, especially in relationship to the first armed black rebellion in 1712. The choice to rebel, the choice to use violence—what is the threshold? You ask us to think about that in a personal way. When is violence the only way to express the value of human life and liberty?

KW: I ask people to get out of their heads and get into their hearts because I think that's where we get cut off a lot of the times. we think like the state. We don't think like humans. If you think like a human being, you cannot not acknowledge that if you have been enslaved and you're dealing with violence and psychological torture, and your options run out-at some point in time, the right thing to do is to rebel. And to let that resonate and let that be something you can appreciate. Not to say go and be violent, but typically—even though it's not the way America looks at it—Black people are not the most violent people in this hemisphere. We're not the ones mowing down sixty people because we feel like it. A lot of the violence comes out of the conditions we've been put in over centuries. Why would a pregnant woman named Sarah pick up a sword and go fight? Why would she do that? Clearly there was no other option.

LB: That's another powerful thing about the tour—the way you ground it in the experiences of individual people. At the beginning of the tour, you give each participant a card with the name of a historical individual who will come up during the course of the tour. Often when we think about history it tends to be very abstract. Grounding it in an individual and their experience gives a whole other way in. What's your process of researching historical individuals? Who speaks to you?

KW: Rob Penny, a mentor of mine who is now deceased, was a Black Studies professor and poet at the University of Pittsburgh. He's someone who had an influence on poet and playwright August Wilson. Wilson has written that Penny changed the way he wrote. One thing Penny told Wilson was, "Stop making them to speak to you." When Wilson stopped making his characters talk, and began to wrote down what they were saying. Similarly, spaces.

When I had the Process Space Grant from Lower Manhattan Cultural Council in 2016 I was doing a lot of writing and conceptual thinking on Wall Street. It was chilling being on Wall Street at night, on the sixth floor of an eleven story building, writing about people who were enslaved in New York, and I'm blocks away from where the slave market was. Often times at night there would be no one else in the building but me and the security guards, and I would feel literal chills because I could feel the presence and psychic energy of people who had not their stories acknowledged. It's not so much about who I find interesting—these people find me.

LB: I'd like to ask you about two people you spoke about on your tour, Domingo and Catalina. My basic understanding is that that they were free Blacks who were given land in 1643 in what is now the East and West Village. Can you talk to me about them?

KW: They were given land principally in what is now the West Village. Catalina and Domingo are right now, for me, a little bit of a private obsession. I've come across a number of records that suggest that they were married, and some that suggest they were not. I wonder what their relationship was, given that they have the same surname, and both got land on the exact same day. It doesn't appear that they could've been mother and son based on their arrival and their age.

LB: We don't have birth years?

KW: We don't have birth years, but there were individuals named "Domingo" among the first arrivals of Black people in the 1620s. Women began to come over here in more like 1635. There were a number of Black men that were here a decade before Catalina, but she got property before they did. It makes me wonder about her savviness, her connections, her vision.

<sup>[1]</sup> Sarah was an enslaved pregnant person when she rebelled in 1712. She was thereafter tried and executed.

**LB**: Do we know what happened to Catalina and Domingo after they were given their land?

KW: We don't. I believe that part of the reason they were able to become the first landowners was because of their pivot into Calvinism. They were likely coming from Angola, which would have already been a Portuguese colony for 60 to 80 years by the they were probably Catholic. I believe what they were probably Catholic. I believe what was go right into the culture of the people in power—she zealously embraced Calvinism.

I consider Catalina a matriarch for the Land of the Blacks. The same year she's married is the same year Queen Nzinga from Angola began aligning a military alliance with the Dutch to fight the Portuguese successfully. So I look at Catalina and Nzinga as these two powerful Black women from Angola fighting slavery in different ways. One militarily and the other is cultural.

**LB**: What were the boundaries for the Land of the Blacks?

KW: The Land of the Blacks spanned from the West Village to the East Village, and it grew from West to the East, past Second Avenue, including all of Gramercy Park and the northern part of SoHo. It would have expanded and shrunk in some parts. Some people might not have been able to pass their have. You also have people fighting to keep their property during the time when New Amsterdam becomes New York. And Peter Stuyvesant of all folks was advocating for Black people to keep their land

**LB**: Stuyvesant was advocating for Black landowners?

KW: He was, as of 1665. The British showed up demanding land, and the Dutch were not prepared militarily to defend themselves. Earlier, Stuyvesant had been an advocate for cultivating a more slave-based economy because he came from Curaçao, where they were changing tobacco crops over to sugar. But he was a victim of his own success because as he started using the port more as a trading post for slavery, it tipped off the British that this was an ideal place for a commercial hub. Then the Dutch got pushed out their land as well. Stuyvesant becomes a bizarre ally to Black land ownership because he actually owned enslaved people.

LB: Stuyvesant had settled in what is now the East Village; his family chapel was located where St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery now stands at Second Avenue and 10th Street.

KW: Yes, it's possible that his support for Black land ownership was self-interested, because he settled closely to the Land of the Blacks. But he also wrote that Black people had earned their land fair and true, and they should keep it.

**LB**: How and when was land seized from Land of the Blacks? What were those conditions?

KW: There's nothing written that says that the The Land of the Blacks ends at this date and time." But what I do see is that in 1712 after the rebellion on April 6th, New York passed a law saying that Black people could not own land. After the rebellion, the British were combing through the island, trying to find out which Black people were involved. And they found that some people were enslaved, but some were also free. I imagine that they feared that some of the men involved in the rebellion were hiding out in Land of the Blacks, making it—in many ways—the first Underground Railroad. In total Land of the Blacks existed for at least 69 years. It's possible some Black people continued to own land there after 1712, we don't know. This is part of stitching together a timeline—sometimes



Kamau Ware, Catalina & Domingo, 2015. Courtesy Black Gotham Experience

# "THE INFINITE PATTERNS WITH-IN THE PATTERN"

**RON EGLASH** 

# "E V E R Y B U C K E T GOTTA SIT ON ITS OWN BOTTOM"

**GRAND DADDY FRED** 

## CONVENIENT

A

## PSALM

BY NI'JA WHITSON Slaves did not need to be told that there were powers above their heads. Chattel slavery reinforced the perspective at every possible breath. The daily sun stretch of eye witnessed the repetitive gesture. Yes, Ma'am. No, Sir.

Even before there were words beaten into the wounded lace of back skin there were languages of inferiority requiring a slave to see their freedom above them. Through the thirsty gifts of air between wooden slats, a stolen human had to stretch hope to see above their irises as a possibility and not a tomb. Colonialism attempted to drown the idea of God beyond the sky; perhaps white folks knew a Divine earth close to them would surely not approve of their genocides, rapes, tortures, and thievery. So, they required God to be above them and out of reach. And what, then, of the slave or their descendant to be required in this God's house to sit between Him and their masters?

This is not a writing about history. It is about seeing.

The doctrines of what white people called God or Jesus strangely painted a picture that looked exactly like the pain of those they sought to conquer. Like a familiar servitude conveniently rescued in psalms.

Black people know the difference between those that look like God or those that look like not.

They knew then.

The very people who were asked to labor on their knees with the back of their heads tilted against the sky and faces planted in cotton rows.

The very ones who survived or whose people survived the bowels of ships as cargo or feed for hungry rats

Or feed for an unaccompliced sea bottom.

These believers were made to sit in the highest seats closest to the Jesus who watched the sweat of their suffering, He who would return to save them, lest they be joined in death first. What did it mean to sit closest to Him?

The slave galleries were not a punishment.

They were the only appropriate seats for the people most present to the hypocrisies of the word below and closest to the hand of God should He (She/They?) decide to extend it. White parishioners should have, indeed, extended their gazes upward as the presence of God was looking at them. Human and Black.

Lam not a Christian.

I am not a slave.

I am a Queer Black artist who is a descendant of slaves and the child of a preacher. There are crossroads in my marrow and I write from that place.

What does it mean to dance in these spaces where there are the spirits and ghosted eyes of slaves above you? What does it mean for me as a maker to look to spin in these places where there were closed corridors to the very people for whom my heart pumps blood? And while the galleries are no longer the sole looking place for Black people or People of Color, who is seen is still so often white.

This is a writing about seeing.

I await the descending staircase. Not because Black people (dancers, artists, thinkers, seers...) are any farther away from the Divine. No. I, like so many of us, have reclaimed the God on the ground and under our feet, including the one with a sun/son named Jesus. Or Obatala. Or.

I await the staircase that honors both ends and the refusal to occupy either as a required designation.

## EXCERPTS OF A RESEARCH REPORT ON

ST. MARK'S
CHURCHIN-THEBOWERY

BY PRITHI KANAKAMEDALA, PH.D.

**COMMISSIONED BY DANSPACE PROJECT FOR PLATFORM 2018** 

CUNY professor and performance studies scholar Edward Miller invited Danspace Project to participate in the CUNY Center for the Humanities Seminar on Public Engagement and Collaborative Research in 2015. Through that seminar, we met historian and scholar Prithi Kanakamedala, whose research interests include New York's free black communities in the antebellum period and the history of New York City. We asked Prithi to serve as the scholar-in-residence for the Platform, contributing a research report on St. Mark's Church that was distributed to all Platform artists. What follows are summaries of the research themes Prithi explored: Land, Slavery, & Stuyvesant (1650 – 1827); Slave Galleries & Church Architecture; New York's Free Black Communities (1783 – 1865); Guthrie and Modern Dance (1920s); Civil Rights and 1970s Activism.

Lydia Bell Program Director, Catalogue Editor Danspace Project

## Excerpts of a Research Report on St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery by Prithi Kanakamedala, Ph.D.

## Land<sup>1</sup>, Slavery, and Stuyvesant

Peter Stuyvesant (1610 - 1672) was a slaveholder and the last Dutch Director-General of New Netherlands, a trading colony founded in 1614, that stretched from Albany to Delaware. The capital of the Dutch colony was New Amsterdam (modern day Lower Manhattan). In 1664, the English took over and renamed the land New York.

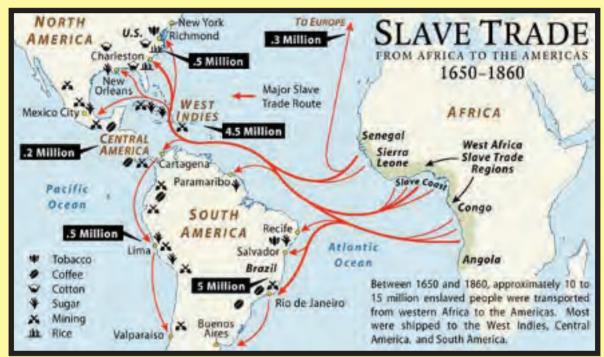
In 1651, the Dutch West India Company sold Stuyvesant a *bouwerie* (farm) which included a dwelling house, barn, barrack, a hundred and twenty acres of land, six cows, two horses, and two enslaved people of African descent for 6400 guilders. He lived there from English occupation until his death in 1672. Today's St Mark's Church-inthe-Bowery in the East Village is built on that land.

Enslaved labor was at the center of New Amsterdam's commercial success and enslaved people in the seventeenth century worked directly for the Dutch West India

Company. The first enslaved people arrived in New Amsterdam around 1627. They originally came from Africa and then the Caribbean. Note, historians have no engravings or sketches of enslaved people dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, there are later renderings.

Although Peter Stuyvesant's land originally lay on the outskirts of the city, it was sizeable enough to dominate the small Dutch colony of New Amsterdam. By 1917 (approximately three hundred years later), St. Mark's Church was in the heart of the city.

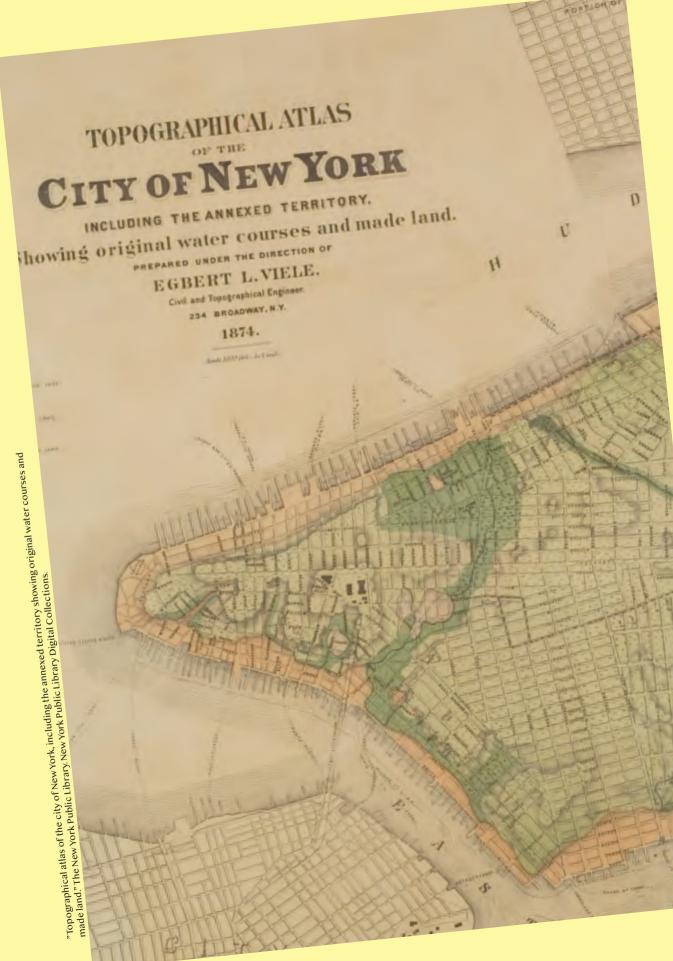
Slaver	<b>y</b>
	Occasionally, half freedom was possible. In 1644, eleven Africans petitioned for their freedom and this represented one of the earliest examples of a fre Black community in New Amsterdam. Paul Angolo, Big Manuel, Little Manuel Manuel de Gerrit de Reus, Simon Congo, Anthony Portuguese, Gracia, Pieter Santomee, Jan Francisco, Little Antony and Jan Fort Orange were forcibly kidnapped from Africa and the Caribbean and brought to New Amsterdam. William Kieft, who preceded Stuyvesant as Director-General, emancipated the men and gave them plots of land to farm as long as they paid an annual tax (30 schepel – an old Dutch unit of measurement, not standardized – of grain and a fat hog) and also worked for the colony when it was demanded. They lived in indentured servitude to the colony, while their children re-
	mained enslaved. Peter Stuyvesant, unusually, had forty enslaved people in his estate making him the largest enslaver in New Amsterdam. Stuyvesant asked the Dutch West India Company for more enslaved labor for the colony, that by 1664, nearly 800 people (or 10% of the population) were of African descent.
	Enslaved people were expected to build walls, widen roads, clear forest paths, and work on farmland.
	By the mid-eighteenth century, the average Dutch slaveholder enslaved one to two people of African descent and they lived in intimate living arrangements e.g. enslaved people would sometimes sleep in the kitchen.



Slave Trade From Africa to the Americas, 1650-1860.

## **Figures**

	<b>Enslaved People</b>	Free Black People	Total Population		
(Accurate numbers before 1703 unavailable)					
1703	700	0	4,666		
1746	2,444	0	11,717		
1790	2,369	1,101	33,131		
1800	2,534	3,333	60,000		



St	uyvesant
	New Amsterdam was the capital of New Netherlands, a capitalist trading outpost in the Atlantic world. It was run by a series of directors for the for-profit Dutch
	West India Company, who sold and traded, among many other things, beaver furs
	to the Netherlands.
	Peg-legged Peter Stuyvesant served as the company's last director from 1647 until it was finally taken by the British who renamed New Amsterdam to New
	York in 1664. Stuyvesant is credited with cleaning up New Amsterdam including broadening Broadway, preventing drinking on Sundays, and banning fighting in
_	the streets.
	As Director-General, Stuyvesant initially lived at Fort Amsterdam (today it's the site of the National Museum of the American Indian and the former U.S. Custom House). It was originally a large military structure intended to "protect" the
	colony from the indigenous Lenape. He moved to a large, two-story structure on today's Whitehall street before finally securing a land grant for a bouwerij or bowery or farm outside of the city's limits altogether in 1651. Today, that area of
	land stretches from 5th to 17th street and from the East River to Fourth Avenue.
	In 1660, Stuyvesant built his family chapel on the present-day site of St. Mark's
	Church. It is more than likely that Stuyvesant's enslaved laborers built the reli-
	gious structure, especially given the large number of people that he enslaved who were then forced to work within his home and as farm laborers on the bowery.
	In 1799, the same year New York State passed the Gradual Emancipation Act,
	its first piece of legislation dismantling slavery, Petrus Stuyvesant, Peter's
	great-grandson, completed work on the stone edifice of St. Mark's Church. It
	was one of the first independent Episcopalian churches in New York, separate from Trinity Church, another of the city's oldest Episcopalian churches, founded
	in 1696.
	Stuyvesant's bowery remained north of the city limits and part of the country-
	side until 1800. By this time, slavery had begun to be slowly abolished in New
	York.
	The bowery or farm was, like other parts of New York, systematically parceled off into smaller lots throughout the early nineteenth century. (Both Aaron Burr
	and Trinity Church, two of the largest landowners in lower Manhattan at one point in this city's history, also did the same in order to increase their income
	and address the pressures of rapid urban expansion and a growing population).

## Slave Galleries/ Architecture

Most of New York's oldest churches were segregated and their Black congregants faced a great deal of racism. For example, after the free Black community faced significant racism at Trinity Episcopal Church in 1809, they formed St. Philip's Episcopal Church – one of the oldest Black churches in the city which is now located in Harlem. Although people frequently ask if the upper galleries of many of the city's major churches were former "slave galleries", historians and community researchers have completed a significant amount of research in this area, and with the exception of St. Augustine's in Manhattan (formerly All Saints' Church), they have found nothing conclusive. Similarly, it is sometimes claimed that St. Mark's also had slave, or segregated galleries, but it is difficult to say with absolute certainty if that was the case.

## **Free Black Communities**

In the aftermath of the American Revolution (1775 - 1783), free Black communities grew in New York. Some were formerly enslaved and run away, some purchased their freedom, or were manumitted by their slaveholders. And some moved from other states to the city of Manhattan that was fast gaining a reputation as the center of capitalism. New York was home to two significant free Black communities: Seneca Village (today Central Park), founded in 1825, and Weeksville in Brooklyn (today on the border of Crown Heights and Bedford-Stuyvesant), founded in 1838. Free Black communities also lived in mixed neighborhoods, predominantly Manhattan's Five Points (today's Chinatown mostly), where they built their own independent institutions including churches, businesses, schools, and mutual aid organizations.

New Y	ork's Gradual Emancipation Laws
	It took 28 years for slavery to end in New York State, and it was the
	second to last northern state to abolish slavery.
П	In 1799, New York State passed its first gradual emancipation act. It
_	stated children born to enslaved mothers after July 4, 1799, would be
	free at the age of 28, if male, and 25, if female. Anyone born before that
	date remained enslaved in perpetuity. The law therefore protected
	slaveholders and did very little to protect the enslaved.
	In 1817, with mounting pressure to end slavery in line with other
_	Northern states, New York State passed a final act that stated slavery
	would end in 1827.
	On July 4, 1827 slavery finally ended in New York State. Black New
	Yorkers chose to celebrate on July 5, Emancipation Day, as a means
	of political protest and to protect themselves from racist violence.
	By this date, however, there were very few people of African descent
	waiting to be emancipated, especially in Manhattan. Most people had
	secured their freedom by running away, working with the New-York
	Manumission Society, buying their freedom, or negotiating their man
	umission.
	The majority of the free Black community lived in neighborhoods we
	know today as Little Italy, Chinatown, and City Hall. They lived in inte-
	grated communities with other working class New Yorkers.

## **Modern Dance**

In the late nineteenth century, Italians, Jewish people from Eastern Europe and Russia, Chinese people, and a continuing stream of Irish and German immigrants came to New York for a variety of economic and political reasons. Historians call this the second wave of immigration. They moved to affordable, working-class, immigrant neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side, and packed into tenement buildings for which very little city regulation existed. They were greeted with disease, poverty, unsanitary living and working conditions, and employment insecurity. These communities continued to live in this neighborhood well in the 1920s. In 1911, Dr. William Norman Guthrie came to St. Mark's and led the church until the 1930s. He introduced dance and the arts to the church.

## Civil Rights Movement and 1970s Activism

Deindustrialization, the effects of redlining (the Lower East Side plus the area around St Mark's Church was redlined), white flight, and a growing fiscal crisis typified New York in the 1960s and 1970s. Communities of color, including Puerto Ricans and African Americans (and in the 1950s before they were categorized as "white", Italians and Jewish people from Eastern Europe and Russia), held down their neighborhoods as police brutality, unemployment, lack of access to healthcare, sanitation, education and city services became the norm. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, congregant activists at St. Mark's, some of whom had been heavily involved in the Civil Rights movement, and with ties to the Black Panthers and the Young Lords, led a number of radical reforms confronting racial and economic injustice both within the church and in their neighborhood.



In 1975, the Preservation Youth Project began a full-time training program (with a library and free health clinic). Photo: St. Mark's Historic Landmark Fund.

## **Further Reading**

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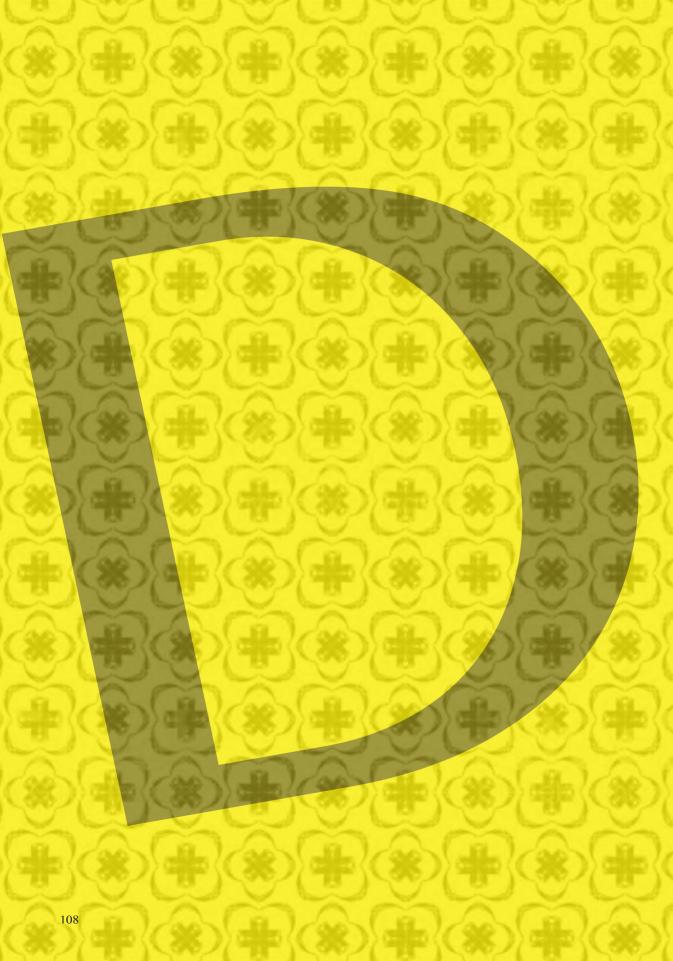


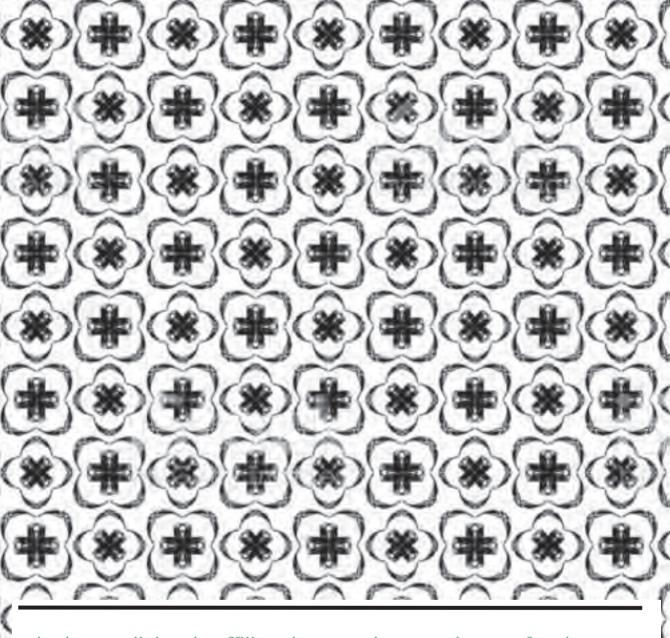












Why have religiously affiliated spaces become homes for downtown dance? How does religious architecture impact the movement within it? Distinctions between prayer and dance can be blurry. Kinesthetic explorations thread together the Diaspora, spirituality, and sociality into hybrid forms of anthropology, family history, and creative practice.

Catalogue Editors

D A N C E





## "YOU HEARD ME. YOU AIN'T BLIND"

**ZORA NEALE HURSTON** 

## "BIND UP YOUR WAIST"

**SOMETHING REGGIE HEARD** 

## REGGIE

# REGGIE WORK, AND BLACK POSTMODERN DANCF

BY CARL PARIS This essay reflects on my personal experience as a researcher on Reggie Wilson and his work. Emphasis is on his postmodern Africanist dance approach within the black postmodern dance frame. Also, with *Dancing Platform Praying Grounds: Blackness, Churches and Downtown Dance* in mind, the essay looks at ways in which historical issues around blackness and downtown dance emerge in this discussion. The word "Africanist" refers, here, to the conscious sourcing and prioritization of African and African American cultural elements in dance creation and performance.

**Background** 

I began following Reggie Wilson's work in the year 2000 while completing research I had done on earlier 1970s and 80s black postmodern choreographers Gus Solomons, Jr., Blondell Cummings, Joan Miller, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Fred Holland, Bebe Miller, David Roussève, Ralph Lemon, and Marlies Yearby. As I examined their biographies and careers, a common theme emerged: In choosing to create in the largely white experimental downtown scene, they faced pressures from some in the mainstream black dance to be "black choreographers" and create works that would further the cause of the black experience (on this issue see various writings by Houston-Jones and others named above in *Parallels: Danspace Project Platform 2012*). The artistic responses of these black choreographers to these pressures varied in accordance with their temperaments, politics, and backgrounds. But, in addition, their emergence within the wider shift in the 1980s from minimalist and analytical postmodern dance to pluralistic explorations of culture and the body through autobiography contributed to an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse downtown scene. This also meant that, even if they did not explicitly address questions around blackness in their dances, they often dealt with them in interviews, publications, and dance events.

So, in looking at this history in relation to the emerging black postmodern choreographers of the 1990s, I began to focus on the Africanist approaches of Reggie Wilson, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar (Urban Bush Women) and Ronald K. Brown (Ronald K. Brown/Evidence: A Dance Company). Their work reflected a broader new-age look to Africa and the African American experience as a basis for exploring culture, self and identity (including gender and sexuality) in ways that challenged old boundaries between postmodernism and mainstream dance. It was within this context that Wilson's strong emphasis on the postmodern sparked my curiosity about what that meant to him, and what that meant in terms of the black presence in postmodern dance.

**Getting To Know Him** 

I had attended many of Wilson's concerts over time, but my first personal contact with him was an interview in 2006. As this slender, personable man with dreadlocks talked about his work, I was immediately struck by a wry mischievous wit that seemed to delight in an oblique approach to answering my questions. Commenting on this, he admits, "I enjoy having deep and interesting conversations with people whose world centers on words." (His mother was briefly an English teacher, and later became a social worker.) "[But] I always have a certain frustration about having to explain my medium *through* words" [emphasis mine]. This answer surprised me because he seemed so agile with words, for example, in events like progress showings of his works, in post-performance talks, and in the playful way he titles some of his pieces. (Regarding the latter, my thoughts go to his evening-length work, *The Tale: Npinpee Nckutchie And The Tail of the Golden Dek* (2006), a clever title for a piece, which—as if I could even remember how to say it, anyway—turns out to describe a nightclub atmosphere and a pretty recognizable blend of black vernacular dances, including Chicago couples step dancing and the struggles of finding a mate.

As I get to know Wilson better, I realize that part of his obliqueness, that is, his dislike for using words to describe his dances, reflects his belief, as he puts it in our latest interview, that

- [1] Ishmael Houston-Jones, "Curatorial Statement," in *Parallels: Danspace Project Platform 2012*, eds. Ishmael Houston-Jones and Judy Hussie-Taylor (New York, NY: Danspace Project 2012), 15-24.
- [2] Sally Banes, "Introduction to Terpsichore in Sneakers," in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed., Thomas Docherty (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993), 157-172.
- [3] Carl Paris, "Aesthetics and Representation in Neo-Afro Modern Dance in the Late 20th Century: Examining Selected Works By Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Ronald K. Brown, and Reggie Wilson" (PhD diss. Temple University, 2008)
- [4] Carl Paris, Personal communication with Wilson, July 2006.
- [5] Ibid.

"in some ways, words limit the possibilities of meaning" for him. But, as I shall discuss later, this obliqueness, or what I also call his "open-endedness" helps us understand how and why he calls himself a postmodern choreographer.

### On The Africanist and Postmodern Aspects of Wilson's Work In the mission for his company, Wilson states that his aim is:

[to]create, research, develop, and present new performance work that investigates the intersections of culture and movement practices ... ., to draw from the spiritual and mundane traditions of Africa and its Diaspora by using the potential of the body as a valid means for knowing ... and to be a bridge between postmodern dance and the cultural heritage of African Americans.<sup>7</sup>

Wilson grounds this approach in a meticulously researched ethnographic process, which in many ways, follows the Africanist concert dance precedents of Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, although he makes clear that he has been most inspired by the Harlem Renaissance author Zora Neale Hurston's anthropological and creative approach to African American folklore. While studying at NYU, from 1985-1988, Wilson began to combine his ethnographic interests in African American folklore with a socially conscious and feminist sentiment. Also talking about this time period and the first few years of his career, Wilson credits the influence and mentorship of choreographers like Marlies Yearby, Bebe Miller, Ralph Lemon, David Roussève and Bill T. Jones. "[They] showed me there was a place for the kind of work I wanted to do," he states.<sup>8</sup>

It was also between 1989 and the early 90s that Wilson returned to his hometown Baptist church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin with the aim of reconnecting with the rituals and structures of his religion. In his solo *Introduction* (1996), he states that he especially wanted to study "the ways in which the black body worshipped ... how Ms. So and So moaned at the same time in church every Sunday and how Mr. So and So shouted up and down the aisle." Expanding on this work, he researched black religious and cultural practices (music, rhythms and songs) in the southern U.S. States of Arkansas and Mississippi (where his mother and father are from, respectively). He also went to Louisiana to study the influence of Catholicism on black culture, to Trinidad and Tobago to study the Spiritual Baptists, and various parts of Africa where he taught and gave workshops. Wilson states that over the years he has also drawn inspiration from other cultural elements he encounters on his travels. A recent example he gives are elements from the Alaskan, Yupik culture in his evening-length work *Moses(es)* (2014). 10

Quite fittingly, the name Reggie Wilson/Fist And Heel Performance Group reflects the impressive depth and breadth of this work. "Fist and heel" refers back to when African Americans were disparaged for worshipping and making music with their bodies (for example in the ring shout). Wilson also uses the term "Post-African/Neo-Hoodoo Modern Dance" as a stylistic descriptor to more specifically delimit what he calls "a holistic view of different parts of African American religions and cultural practices." We can see these practices in the remarkable detail with which Wilson creates his sometimes raw, sometimes haunting, sometimes-mystical arrangements of black field hollers, blues, and spirituals, which he and collaborating performers and vocalists typically sing live, a cappella as supporting connections and evocations for the dance.

So now, what about Wilson's postmodernism? First, Wilson is a postmodern choreographer, because he says he is. This is supported by nearly thirty years of declaring himself as such in print and in person. But, for the sake of the broader discussion on blackness and postmodernism, I want to focus briefly on postmodernism (or the avant-garde) as a historical, cultural, and philosophical discourse, which we can then use as a context to talk about informing artistic and philosophical movements, such as postmodern dance. In this historical sense, postmodernism is not exclusive of the black experience, as the dominant-culture mythos would have us believe. Rather it includes it, even if somewhat contentiously and

 $<sup>\</sup>hbox{\it [6] Carl Paris, Personal communication with Wilson, August 2017.}$ 

<sup>[7]</sup> See Reggie Wilson Press Kit, 2017.

<sup>[8]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[9]</sup> Carl Paris, Personal communication with Wilson, July 2006.

<sup>[10]</sup> Susan Manning, "Reggie Wilson and the Traditions of America Dance," *The Drama Review* 59:1, T 225 (New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Spring 2015), 18.

<sup>[11]</sup> Carl Paris, Personal communication with Wilson, July 2006.

ambivalently. As the cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues, both blackness and postmodernism self-articulate through their preoccupation with difference, restructure the normative colonial gaze, and disrupt in theories of value, aesthetics, and articulations of, say, beauty and intellectual pursuit. 12

Now, with regard to postmodern dance, as some dance scholars (like Brenda Dixon Gottschild) argue, even as the largely white avant-garde waged its revolution against traditional canons of dance, its aesthetic and intellectual linkages to evolving American mass culture discourse, politics, and non-Western influences (including Asian and African American) made it a fertile terrain in which appropriations and reconfigurations of traditional elements could occur. As evidence, Gottschild points to Africanist qualities like "the cool juxtaposed against the hot... opposing elements in open-ended, laid back improvisational structures, creating a dialogic interplay between performer and audience." Wilson opines similarly, pointing out in an interview with Claudia La Rocco, the tensions between traditions and experimentation—artists who receive credit for advancing an art form versus those seen (or dismissed) as working in traditional cultures, even when those cultures use the same innovations as experimental artists. Even when they invented them long before the so-called avant-garde.



Big Brick-a man's piece (2004) Photo by Antoine Tempè.

is no incompatibility between blackness and the postmodern, or between Africanist and the postmodern for that matter. Consequently, Africanist postmodern dance, like the black postmodern dance before it, can be understood as manifesting itself through its own corporeal, semiotic (symbolic), and performative representation, even as it deploys presumed European-American constructions of the postmodern.

So with the above in mind, I am saying that in his mission to "bridge" the postmodern with African and African American heritage, Wilson first alerts us to an a priori philosophical/aesthetic space between postmodern dance and black cultural representation. He then closes that space through a distinct articulation and praxis of it. This occurs in different

[12] Stuart Hall, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture," in Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues In Cultural Studies, eds., David Morely And Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York, NY: Routledge 2003), 465-475.

 $[13] \ Brenda\ Dixon-Gottschild, \textit{Digging The Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts}\ (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing, 1996), 49-52.$ 

[14] Ibid., 17-18.

[15] Claudia La Rocco, "Pre-Show Talk: Moses(es)," in Movement Research Performance Journal #47, ed. Moriah Evans (New York, NY: Movement Research Inc., October 2105), P10.





ways and on different levels. On the stylistic choreographic levels, he intertwines and/or juxtaposes the modern dance techniques of Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham and his personal movement style, including what he calls "natural partnering" (e.g., contact improvisation) with African/African American vernacular and social dances, and merges them with experimental compositional strategies. Regarding these strategies, he credits the influence of Cunningham's chance methodologies and abstract structures, as well as the work of David Gordon, Sara Rudner, Bill T. Jones and Twyla Tharp, and especially his teacher at NYU, Phyllis Lamhut, who he says encouraged him to use the creative process to experiment freely with ideas about time, space and thematic content. 16



The Tale: Npinpee Nckutchie And The Tail of the Golden Dek (2006) Photo by Christopher Duggan.

On creative and meaning-making levels, Wilson's process typically begins with indepth research into a topic that interests Wilson; and may take months, or even years to flesh out. <sup>17</sup> At some point, he then works out random movement through task-like structuring in collaboration with the dancers, separate from the music he will put to it later. According to Wilson, ideas may come from any number of sources, like playing something he saw in a Pina Bausch work against an element from an African or diasporic tradition. <sup>18</sup> Wilson makes this point to underscore that he is not particularly wed to maintaining literal or original meanings in these juxtapositions, rather in lacing and sequencing them to construct new performance structures and new meanings.

In Wilson's style, the dancing bodies (predominantly black bodies, also actors and/or singers) are diverse in type and training; in a postmodern way, integrating upright postures and highly technical dancing with relaxed and loose-limbed, every day movements like running, walking, stooping, rolling, and so forth. Yet, interestingly, and somewhat paradoxically, while Wilson's style allows for individual uniqueness and expression, the overall reading of bodies can appear utilitarian, subordinated by the broader conceptual and choreographic frame. Wilson explains this in the following way: "The dancers may have a story going on, but I prefer they just think about what's going on in their bodies from movement to movement ... I want them to get into that task-orientedness." 19

This last point brings us back to what I have described as Wilson's obliqueness or

<sup>[16]</sup> Carl Paris, Personal communication with Wilson, July 2006.

<sup>[17]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[18]</sup> Carl Paris, Personal communication with Wilson, August 2017. [19]Ibid.

open-endedness—his dislike of spelling things out—and helps explain why narratives often do not resolve themselves, and where his use of black cultural imagery and abstract choreographic structuring function in tension with or disrupt conventional associations of meaning and emotions. We see this at the moment a rousing African dance sequence in *Big Brick—a man's piece* (2004) gets interrupted by a more formalistic Cunningham-like sequence; or when an intensely mathematical movement patterning is used to explore resilience, endurance, or isolation in the face of racism in *Citizen* (2016).



Photo by Tom Brazil

It is also instructive that Wilson acknowledges that this tension operates within the way audiences understand and appreciate his dances. Likewise, some reviewers describe his dances as difficult to define: "too black to be postmodern dance and too postmodern to be black dance." Dut, solid in his postmodern conviction, Wilson explains his dances as "a form of questioning, more about inquiry than providing definitive answers" where he invites the spectator to construct his or her own meaning in accordance with his/her experience. What is interesting to me, though, is that, this notion of whether Wilson's work is black enough or postmodern enough suggests a false dichotomy. For, even as his open-endedness (e.g., "postmodern-ness") can blur the lines and confound in some ways, the work also possesses qualities that help to expand audiences; and in the process, announce important shifts in representations of blackness, both within and beyond the postmodern dance space. Important among such qualities are deeply humanistic and spiritual elements, which help me to talk about Wilson's work in another way.

On "Spirit" (Spirituality) As An Underlying Cumulative Presence in Wilson's Work I have written elsewhere that I understand, experience, and interpret spirit as a sublime force that is informed and inflected by my black church, cultural, and performative upbringing.<sup>22</sup> It is through this lens that I "read" (perceive, experience, interpret) spirit in Wilson's

[20] Susan Manning, "Reggie Wilson and the Traditions of American Dance," 21.

[22] Carl Paris, "Reading 'Spirit' And The Dancing Body In The Choreography of Ronald K. Brown and Reggie Wilson", in *Black Performance Theory, edf. Thomas F. DeFrantz, Anita Gonzalez* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 96-114.

<sup>[21]</sup> Carl Paris, Personal communication with Wilson, June 2007.





work, not necessarily as an explicit religious or ecstatic experience, although, as I shall discuss, he delves into that too. Rather, despite or perhaps in addition to his postmoderness, I read spirit as a distinct "cumulative presence," which is evidenced in the profound ways Wilson merges his ethnographic and artistic inquiry.<sup>23</sup> I refer here to the way spirit suffuses the scholarly almost religious rigor with which Wilson studies and stages the black cultural elements and themes, including his scrupulous, often stirring, arrangements of black rhythms and folk music, the meditative quality of his choreography, and the way he collaborates and engages community through his work. Let us consider examples of how this occurs.

Spirit in Choreography: Connections between religious and artistic spirituality are, perhaps, most identifiable in some of Wilson's early solos N/um (1989), Introduction (1996), and Vanitystarts@home (1999). Using his own dancing body, voice, and spiritual story in Introduction, for example, Wilson beautifully flattens the lines between dance portrayal and the actual ecstatic experience. Also, a favorite of mine, which recurs in several of his dances, is the device of a dancer sitting on his (or her) butt and moving forward to gospel or spiritual music with arms wrapped around the body. This image reminds me of when church folks I grew up with "got the spirit."

Spirit emerges in Wilson's duets, trios, and quartets, such as *The Dew Wet* (1997), *Pang* (1999) *Rise Sally Rise* (2000), and *Big Brick-a man's piece* (2004), featuring highly-technical modern dance constructions, which on the one hand, create monographic abstractions of a specific idea or notion, and on the other hand, play subtly with or challenge conventional gender roles and sexuality. One such work is *Rise Sally Rise*, an enigmatic trio of women, which seeks to capture a sisterhood, rising to adversity. Dressed in voluminous tattered dresses, the inference is that these women work in the fields, although it does not tell that story specifically. Still, there is something about the juxtaposition of abstract modern dance structures against the mournful spirituals and the steady intensification of the dancing bodies in relation to each other that communicates a sense of yearning that could culminate in ecstatic solace. But the piece ends before telling that story as well, not in a disappointing way, but evocatively and mystically.

Wilson's evening-length works tend to be the most theatrical and the most complex. Early works like *A Black Burlesque* (1995), *Black Burlesque* (revisited) (2003) and *The Tale: Npinpee Nckutchie And The Tail Of The Golden Dek* (2006) typically contain some of the elements described above in terms of how spirit interacts with theme and movement, but they also most comprehensively evidence the choreographer's studious dedication to the research-to-performance process. Some of Wilson's more recent works, such as *The Good Dance—dakar/brooklyn* (2009), *Moses(es)* (2013-14) and *Citizen* (2016) also maintain visual and aural spiritual elements from black expressive culture; however, these works emphasize abstraction and task-like repetition, instead of the theatrical narratives Wilson has used in the past.

Spirit As Collaboration: Collaboration is an important part of Wilson's artistic and spiritual identity. The very name Fist and Heel Performance Group and its history affirm Wilson's founding mission to work collaboratively with his dancers, performance artists, vocalists and designers. Since I began following the company, I have admired the substantial creative imprint of actor/dancer Rhetta Aleong (a native of Trinidad and Tobago) who has been working with Wilson since 1992, the vocalist Lawrence Harding (1993) who is from Sierra Leone, and the dancer Paul Hamilton (1999) who is from Jamaica. It bears mentioning, too, that, in one conversation I had with Aleong about spirit, she affirmed that a certain sense of God and spirit resides powerfully in the group's work. "But," she adds, "he does not force that on anyone, even though it is there." Equally important, Wilson has created major works in collaboration with various choreographers of Africa and the diaspora, including the Noble Douglas Dance Company of Trinidad and Tobago, Black Umfolosi of South Africa, and, more recently Andréya Ouamba of Senegal (for *The Good Dance—dakar/brooklyn*). These collaborations have helped to enlighten American audiences about the contemporary spiritual and

<sup>[23]</sup> In using the word "cumulative presence," I borrow from reviewer Michael Wade Simpson (2007) who, in contrasting Wilson's black postmodernist approach to Alvin Ailey's modern dance theatricalization of black expression, describes Wilson's performance of *Introduction, Jumping the Broom*, and *[untitled]*" as a "ritualistic [process of] theory and representation" that results in a kind of "cumulative spiritualism." Michael Wade Simpson, "*Introduction, Jumping the Broom*, and *[untitled]*," Yerba Buena Center (April 30, 2007). 2.

<sup>[24]</sup> Carl Paris, Personal communication with Wilson, March 2009. See also "Wangena—the birthday concerts," Program, 2000. [25] Carl Paris, Personal communication with Wilson, June 2007.

experimental African dance trends and culture of these choreographers.

Spirit As Community: In March 2009, Wilson told me that when he thinks about spirit, he thinks about community. In part he is talking about community in the context of his religious roots, his hometown church, and his family. But, as an artist, teacher, and choreographer he also brings that spirit to his residencies with students and lecture/workshops. "Community Shout" and "Education + Communities" are two recent interactive workshops, which use his field research as a source for people of different backgrounds to explore how the use of Africanist elements like the ring shout, black folk songs, and rhythms can relate to their own memories, songs, and community experiences. In addition, it is also both interesting and pertinent that Wilson has said his work is not political. By this he means he does not strive to make overt political statements. Certainly, a review of his works and his explanations about them show that he is interested in how human stories, ideas, and culture interact with each other more than the political statement they may might make. Nevertheless, one could surely argue, as I do, that, like the inquiring quality of his dances, this interactive work contributes in a political way by fomenting cross-cultural understanding, and in turn, social justice.

In sum, by interpreting spirit in Wilson's work, here, it is also my hope that I have shed some light on its significance in his ability to carve out a unique place as a black postmodern dance choreographer. For me this sense of "place" speaks to a wider potential to explore blackness across the black dance, postmodern dance discourse. But it also, obviously, helps me connect to a few final thoughts about the other reason for this writing: Danspace Project Platform 2018.

Some Concluding Thoughts

With the march of time, downtown dance spaces have become more diverse in their performance and spectatorship and black postmodern dancers have been an integral part of that history. By the time of *Dancing Platform Praying Grounds: Blackness, Churches, and Downtown Dance*, Wilson and Danspace Project will surely have generated many interesting arenas for choreographers to explore around postmodern space, praying, and blackness. In our last conversation, Wilson stressed that not all the choreographers will be black.<sup>28</sup> I took this choice to be pertinent to his stated interest in exploring questions around "what it means to belong or not want to belong," as well as, "what processes, other than his own, might lead to looking at blackness."<sup>29</sup> It will surely be exciting to see what the combination of artists, scholars, movers and shakers come up with. For while questions like "what is black dance, and can black dance be postmodern dance?" will, no doubt, linger beneath the surface, there will be new questions too, ones more specific to millennial sensibilities. My guess is that the results will be varied, provocative, and inquisitive, much like the work of the Platform's curator, Reggie Wilson.

<sup>[26]</sup> Berkeley RADICAL 2017/18 Season: Reggie Wilson (Joining Generations), Calperformances published in Sept 12, 2017. Youtube, retrieved December 27, 2017 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2g4TdWVFqfM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2g4TdWVFqfM</a>. See also Reggie Wilson, Fist And Heel Performance Group. Retrieved December 12, 2017 <a href="https://fistandheel.squarespace.com/home#/educationcommunities/">https://fistandheel.squarespace.com/home#/educationcommunities/</a>

<sup>[27]</sup> Carl Paris, Personal communication with Wilson, July 2006.

<sup>[28]</sup> Carl Paris, Personal communication with Wilson, August 2017.

<sup>[29]</sup> Ibid.





Every year in my class at University of the Arts, we watch the seven-minute clip of Reggie Wilson's *Introduction* available online. We pull down the screen, turn on the projector, and shut off the lights. Wilson stands alone on a stage, stationed in the center of a pool of light. Maintaining a steady rhythm with his feet and voice, he tells the audience about his research into African and African Diaspora spiritual practices. In the course of two minutes. Wilson takes us with him from New York City to Zimbabwe, listing the various airports and stops along the way. He cuts back to his research in the Mississippi Delta and the Caribbean, interjecting new rhythms and sounds sourced from each place as he goes. Wilson juxtaposes his physical travels from place-to-place with the spiritual travels practiced by members of the Zionist Church he meets in Zimbabwe, who use "rhythmical aspirated breathing" to travel through the spirit-world. The clip ends and we turn the lights back on, but Reggie has done for us something akin to what those breathing practices might do—we haven't left our seats and yet we have traveled.

Sara Ahmed writes, "An idea can travel all the more by being cut off from a body." This sentence grabbed and jolted me—what about dance, I thought? If dance, which might not be "by" a body but certainly occurs between bodies (among other things), doesn't move ideas well, what does it do? I thought of Reggie, who in *Introduction*, makes links—not between ideas, but between particular knowledges. These knowledges are not individuated or claimed—they multiply and move. Multiple knowledges accumulate in a single body that refuses to be single. They travel beyond a self, and in turn, move us beyond ourselves.

See, sometimes I go to church to see dance and sometimes dance takes me to church. Actually, that's exactly what my students said when I asked if they remembered Wilson from the artist-talk he had given the year prior: "Yeah, we remember him," they said—"He took us to church." I didn't go to church growing up and don't now, but from what I know, going to church is a ritual where people gather around a common belief in the divine, the ineffable, the unknown. Dance, like church, requires devotion and a cyclical return to the spectral by way of the material, i.e.: the body, lived experience, practice. We've got to show up and spend time in the place together (again and again) before we can get to the somewhere else.

If what dance makes possible will somehow always exist in the particular liveness of particular bodies in a room together, I want to know, how can dance keep traveling to more bodies, more rooms? Watching that seven-minute clip of *Introduction* in a classroom in Philadelphia full of young dancers and artists, and participating in the discussions that ensue, help me get closer to that link between the material and the mysterious that dance (and church?) know something about.

<sup>&#</sup>x27;Sara Ahmed, "Useful," Feminist Killjoys, posted on July 2017, https://feministkilljoys.com/2017/07/useful/.



BY LAUREN BAKST

## 15 MERCER STREET

KELLY KIVLAND IN CONVERSATION WITH SUSAN OSBERG



Dan Flavin, installation views, Masjid al Farah, 155 Mercer Street, New York. © 2017 Stephen Flavin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Carol Huebner Venezia. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York

Originally a firehouse dating back to 1854, 155 Mercer Street is a 15,000-square-foot building in SoHo's Cast Iron Historic District of New York City. Today, blending in with the gray, unabashedly upscale retail facades that have monopolized the neighborhood's rapid commercial development over the past decades, it is hard to believe that the building was also once a generous host to many artists who were pivotal to downtown dance. This history begins in 1976, when the city put the building up for public auction, and an interesting turn of real estate events led to a deed restriction limiting its use for modern dance only. In 1978, the building was purchased by Dia Art Foundation, a non-profit who was becoming well-known at the time for its radical support of artists—from La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela to Walter De Maria, Donald Judd, and Robert Whitman, among others—who were making work that transcended the traditional museum by envisioning projects that were grand in ambition, scale, and scope.

Founded in 1974 by German art dealer Heiner Friedrich, Philippa De Menil (Sheikha Fariha Fatima al-Jerrahi), and art historian Helen Winkler, Dia's original charter supported all aspects of contemporary work including literature, performance, visual art, as well as religious and philosophical ideas. After many trips to Turkey to visit Sheikh Muzaffer Ozak Ashki al-Jerrahi, leader of the Helveti-Jerrahi Order of Dervishes of Istanbul, Friedrich and De Menil converted to Sufi Islam in 1979. At this same time, they began sponsoring trips of Sheikh Muzaffer, and his dervishes, to the United States. There soon became an increasing need for a consistent space to host the Sufi

[1] In 1976, the City of New York put 155 Mercer Street for sale at public auction. Upon notice, the dance critic and long-time community activist, Doris Diether, led the Manhattan Community Board 2 to enable a deed restriction on the building that limited its use to modern dance performances, rehearsals and educational activities. The intention was to allow choreographers Alwin Nikolais and Murray Louis to acquire the building at auction for their dance company, however they were outbid by Dia Art Foundation, and the non-profit organization took possession in 1978.



Dan Flavin, installation views, Masjid al Farah, 155 Mercer Street, New York. © 2017 Stephen Flavin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Carol Huebner Venezia. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York

ceremonies, therefore in 1980, Dia Art Foundation offered Sheikh Muzaffer the 155 Mercer Street building as a permanent venue.

Masjid al-Farah, an "avant-garde Sufi lodge for the ages" opened its doors in 1981, with bathrooms renovated for ritual washing and Persian carpets placed throughout. A commissioned series of untitled Dan Flavin light sculptures provided each floor, and even the stairwell, with a fluorescent glow of various colors. Here, Sheikh Muzaffer would hold *dhikr*, a ceremony for the remembrance of God, every Thursday. A Dia press release from 1980 describes the Jerrahi *dhikr*. "Unlike the gentle turn of the Mevlevi, better known as the Whirling Dervishes, the Jerrahi's *dhikr* moves in a powerful way and unfolds itself in a breathtaking and mysterious ritual of swaying and bowing movements... of chanting in unison the names of God to the accented beat of drums and the wailing of the reed flute. The ceremony of the Halveti-Jerrahi follows the traditional form of *dhikr* and is intended to remind the participants as well as the spectators of the brotherhood of all human beings."

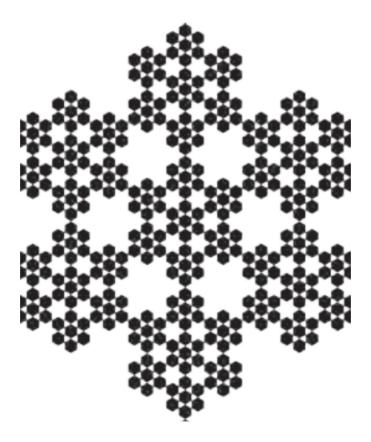
In February 1985, Sheikh Muzaffer passed away unexpectedly at the age of 69, and Masjid al-Farah moved to a smaller building in New York City's TriBeCa neighborhood. Soon after, Dia's staff moved into the second floor of 155 Mercer Street. To remain compliant with the deed restriction, Joan Duddy, a former dancer and Dia's then administrator, actively sought ways to utilize the building for modern dance. She offered the first floor to choreographers, providing rehearsals for two-hour periods at no charge, and as Duddy once shared, "soon the building was deluged with people

[2] Alexander Keefe, "Whirling in the West," *Bidoun* 23 (Winter 2010), http://bidoun.org/articles/whirling-in-the-west. [3] In 1979 and 1980, Dia Art Foundation hosted two previous visits of Sheikh Muzaffer Ozak and his dervishes in the United States.

wanting to know how they could get in to work there-mostly young artists, just out of school and eager to make their mark in the dance world. But there was also Laura Dean-who was not just out of school, having already made quite a mark as a choreographer and composer. Laura was looking for a rehearsal space to replace her small studio in Chelsea and we designated the third-floor space to her company, which was fitting as a signature element of her choreographic technique took inspiration from the Sufi whirling technique."

Within one year's time, the building quickly became a pillar of the downtown dance scene, fostering a community of artists. In 1986, Duddy and choreographer, Susan Osberg, initiated and co-curated the Salon Project, an annual fall event that featured new work by choreographers. Running until 1995, the Salon Project presented works by over ninety choreographers in all stages of their careers, including Arthur Aviles, Molissa Fenley, Bill T. Jones, Ralph Lemon, Susan Osberg, David Parker, Lucio Pozzi, Sara Rudner, Muna Tseng, and Anna Sokolow.

In 1996, 155 Mercer Street was purchased by the Joyce Theater Foundation, and was the site of Joyce SoHo until 2011 when the deed restriction was lifted.



What follows is an interview with Susan Osberg, who was not only pivotal to Dia's dance program at 155 Mercer Street, but a Sufi, who participated in *dhikr* at Masjid al-Farah.

\* \* \*

Kelly Kivland: How did you first become involved with Sufism?

Susan Osberg: I had visited Himalayan Books, located just below 14th Street, and

I met a Sufi there. I didn't know much about Sufism, but he told me that his Sufi Master Adnan was going to be in the city soon to teach a workshop. I decided to attend the workshop, and as a dancer, I was taken with how the movement puts you into an incredible, meditative state. Sufis are known for ecstatic dance, repetitive turning to the left, what is known as "whirling." It is not the only practice. We do a lot of spontaneous dancing from the heart. Instead of you making the dance, you're moved. You might say, okay, that is just good improvisation. But it's not. It's really that you let that energy move you and let that energy express you. You give yourself over. You're taken or possessed. You are one with spirit.

KK: How does one embody giving yourself over?

SO: Sufism is the path of love, and it's the path of the winged heart.

And everything is done in service and your body is a vehicle for God, Allah. You are a vessel, and you have to keep yourself in good shape, you have to eat well. Purity is a very important thing, and

service is ultimate.

KK: You know a great amount about Dia's history at 155 Mercer Street,

and the past activities there. Can you share how you first came to

visit the building as Masjid al-Farah?

SO: My first encounter was a special event when Sheikh Muzaffer was

in town. This was 1981, I believe. The Sheikh had just published *The Unveiling of Love: Sufism and the Remembrance of God*. I decided to visit when I was in the city, because I lived in Vancouver then. *Dhikr* was a weekly ceremony there on Thursday nights that was

open to the public.

KK: Can you describe the Masjid al-Farah as you encountered it?

SO: The third and top floor was for *dhikr* and it was completely covered

with Persian carpets. A Dan Flavin light sculpture was installed in a skylight, which cast a green-blue light into the room. The second floor was where we met the Sheikh and had Sufi teachings and stories. On the ground floor, a generous feast would be laid out after a *dhikr* ceremony. Every floor had a different Dan Flavin light sculpture installed. All the bathrooms were outfitted with troughs for the ritual washing. In order to go into a mosque, you have to

wash the mouth, the hands, and the feet.

KK: Can you describe the ceremonies at Masjid al-Farah with Sheikh Muzaffer?

SO:

SO:

KK:

My first and current Sufi master, Adnan Sarhan, is from Baghdad. He spends summers at his Sufi Foundation of America in New Mexico and travels around the world teaching. He has an improvisational approach.

However, Sheikh Muzaffer Ozak was a Turkish Sufi and he led a ritualized ceremony, where the dervishes, or those on the Sufi path, wore traditional robes and some wore pointed hats. It was a special occasion and the costumes and hats were for his benefit. The sheikh sat with us on the second floor and told Sufi stories.

During the ritual dance, on the third floor, the men were doing a spiral chanting into the center, and then back. It was a really slow thing. The men were separated from the women. As a woman, I had to wear a headscarf, which I didn't do with my teacher. However, in this tradition, the women were segregated—in a positive way, in a balance, so I stood chanting "Allah Hu" on a sheepskin rug, which is traditional chanting in dhikr meaning "God is and ending with Haqq-truth." There is another traditional chant, La ilaha illallah, meaning "There is no God but God," which speaks to the essence of Sufism. The women, we must have all been chanting, because when you do Sufi chanting you don't break up into harmonies. You become one voice. The men's movement comes out of the sound and I think there was a drum. It's very deep and sacred, and feels very ancient compared to the path that I was on, which was more spontaneous and not so ritualistically contained. I remember a beautiful, large circle and the Sheikh was in ceremonial robe. minding the ritual spiral of men. After the dhikr, we went to eat. The food came down to the first floor and the tables were laid out. We all had a fabulous meal. And that was every Thursday.

KK: Can you tell me more about the spiritual experience of *dhikr*?

Allah moves you. And the whole purpose is to be of that feeling of love, and of that generosity and of that service. Service is the highest thing you can do as a Sufi. And that's probably why the art was served in a particular way. It wasn't a business model, for Dia, necessarily. It was a spiritual model.

After Masjid al-Farah had moved, and you encountered the building again as a Dia space, what was the feeling of the building? Was there any spiritual resonance?

SO:

When Joan Duddy first started to initiate dance in the building, it had a lot of that vibe in there. A lot of it, because, that's what she created. Both Sufism and Joan emphasized companionship rather than hierarchy. As Sufis, we practice spiritual parity and gender equality. We seek to build a community based on the divine teachings of those who love each other. It was very interesting in the beginning, because Laura Dean, who did whirling in her choreographic practice, was upstairs on the third floor. And, I did a lot of whirling downstairs. And, while Joan was not a Sufi, she had a wonderfully open heart.

When I asked Joan if she would be willing to initiate an informal performance series of choreographers, to share new work and create community, she said, 'Sure why not?' After the performances, we continued the ritual of putting dance and food together in a spirit of generosity. We called it the Salon Project.

KK:

You began curating the Salon Project with Joan in 1985. Can you share more on the first performance, as you remember its inception and realization?

SO:

I invited friends to perform. Located on the first floor, the audience faced the garage doors and the Dan Flavin light installation, with its green and yellow fluorescent tubes, was behind us. That was the continuity. The idea of the Salon Project came out of the Sufis. We would put on a show, have a feast, and then we would hang out together. It really came out of how we can share, share this work. But it also came from Joan, as she wanted to be of service. To our surprise, it was an instant success and we knew we had to do more.

KK:

The Salon Project became a regular event and ran through 1997. I imagine it was built on long days, and even nights, of logistical preparation. What support structure was in place during its nine years of success? Can you also share how you curated the series together with Joan?

SO:

Joan brought in the first funding for dance at Dia, a grant from NYSCA [New York State Council on the Arts], and soon we had an annual event. The artists submitted tapes, and we chose four choreographers or companies. Those chosen were each given their own weekend to present work in the fall. The choreographers received publicity, a fee, and a tape of their work. Our programming for the Salon Project was inclusive and eclectic.

There were pioneer companies like Anna Sokolow, visionaries like Yves Musard, performance memoirists like Muna Tseng, former

students of mine at Bard College like Arthur Aviles (Bill T. Jones/BAAD! Bronx) and Richard Siegal (William Forsyth/The Bakery-Paris), Ann Carlson's vocal solo narrative and awesome dancers, like Felicia Norton. There were many, many more. It was a chance to work on work, to be in process, to hone your craft. Because it was a time that still emphasized process over product, some of it was fantastic and some of it failed.

KK: The building was also active with rehearsals as well as rentals during this time?

Yes, in no time, the building was humming with constant rehearsals as well as with other new artist's series presented by The Field, New Dance Alliance, and Dance Now. The subsidized rehearsal spaces provided opportunity to generate new work. This activity was definitely because of the confluence of two things: the need for reasonable affordable space for dance, which Dia provided, and Joan Duddy, whose devotion to dance came from being a dancer

We sadly lost Joan on November 7, 2015. I am honored to have had a chance to get to know Joan, and she continues to be of great inspiration to me. For those that did not have a chance to meet her, can you provide us with how she embodied her role as Dia's first dance curator and producer, and what that meant to downtown dance, and the greater dance field, at the time?

Joan did not call attention to herself, but truly enjoyed facilitating artist's work and had the wherewithal to make it happen. The ground floor was the performance space, and she would guard the entrance door, watching every show, every night.

Dia's Executive Director at the time, Charles Wright, just smiled and didn't bat an eye when the offices on the second floor were used for dressing rooms, and the floors were covered with bodies stretching to get ready for the performances at night. It was easy to feel a part of this community in an egalitarian way, where stars like Molissa Fenley could cross paths on a daily basis with artists who work in prisons and psychiatric institutions like Tamar Rogoff.

Before her passing, Joan and I were re-united with tapes from the early days at 155 Mercer Street. A Celtic historian and writer once told me that we get our history of wars, of Kings and Queens, but what really matters is what happened, the people who made it happen, and the overlooked details. How one little piece can show how the whole thing came together. That's what counts. That's what we look for later.

SO:

### SO:

### ARTISTS, CHOREOGRAPHERS, DANCERS WHO PRESENTED AT DIA ART FOUNDATION 155 MERCER STREET. NEW YORK CITY

## 1986-1995

Mark Abbott, Geulah Abrahams, Mary Abrams, Carlo Adonolfi, R. Justice Allen, Richard Allen, Santa Aloi, Jonathan Appels, Homer Avila, Arthur Aviles, Rae Ballard, Eric Barsness, Nuria Olive Belles, Maher Benham, Karen Bernard, Carolyn Bilderback, Lisa Marielle Bleyer, Marika Blossfledt, Wendy Blum, Janet Bogardus, Gina Bonatti, Martha Bowers, Lynn Brown, Christopher Caines, Wally Cardona, Barbara Chang, Carol Childs, Carol Clements, Caitlin Cobb, Elinor Coleman, Ellen Cornfield, Steven Craig, Pat Cremins, Fred Curchack, Seán Curran, Ruth Currier, Brenda Daniels, Javier De Fruots, Eva Dean, Laura Dean, Lisa Deppe, David Dinolfo, William Douglas, Eric Dunlap, Judy Dworin, Mary Eaves-Mitchell, Sari Eckler, Estelle Eichenberger, Larry Ensign, Molissa Fenley, Chris Ferris, Cheryl Flaherty, Sharon Fogarty, Marjorie Folkman, Carol Fonda, Gia Forakis, Ari Frankel, Nimrod Fried, Nan Friedman, Anahi Galante, Rosanna Gamson, Keely Garfield, Eva Gasteazoro, Gina Gibney, Tony Gillotte, Keith Glassman, Craig Goodman, Errol Grimes, Sally Gross, Tim Hadel, Satoshi Haga, Anne Hammel, Bryan Hayes, Susan Hefner, Karen Heifetz, Sally Hess, Mardi-Ellen Hill, Irene Hultman, Paula Hunter, Michael Ing, Kristin Jackson, Andrew Jannetti, Christopher Janney, Suki John, Bill T. Jones, Eileen Jones, Kevin Jones, Paula Josa-Jones, Joy Kellman, John Kelly, Junko Kikuchi, Hetty King, Mitch Kirsch, Andrea Kleine, Carol Kueffer, Robert LaFosse, Regina Larkin, Heidi Latsky, Shelley Lee, Ralph Lemon, Beth Leonard, Jeff Lepore, Ross Lewis, Marijeanne Liederbach, Sondra Loring, Laurie MacFarlane, Marisa Madrona, Barbara Mahler, Amiel Malale, Fiona Marcotty, Andrew Marcus, Marta Marta Dance, Nina Martin, Tim Martin, Jim May, Kelly McDonald, Gloria McLean, JoAnna Mendl Shaw, Rick Merrill, Mark Minder, Maxine Moerman, Momentum Dance, Ann Moradian, Ben Munisteri, Yves Musard, Regina Nejman, Dani Nikkis, Kay Nishikawa, Felicia Norton, Sao Nunes, Jody Oberfelder, Rubin Ornelas, Susan Osberg, David Parker, Joy Parker, Karen Pearlman, Sarah Perron, Amos Pinhasi, Lesley Powell, Lucio Pozzi, Neta Pulvermacher, Molly Rabinowitz, Linda Rappaport, Laurence Rawlins, Theresa Reeves, Marta Renzi, Mark Robison, Renee Rockoff, Tamar Rogoff, Amy Sue Rosen, Frank Roth, Sara Rudner, George Russell, Heide Sackerlotzky, Chivas Sandage, Bessie Schonberg, Emily Schottland, Mary Seidman, Jane Setteducato, Lynn Shapiro, Stuart Sherman, Ton Simons, Erroll Simpson, Lorna Sinclair, Sarah Skaggs, Andrea E. Smith, Lynn Snelling, Anna Sokolow, Beth Soll, Murray Spaulding, RoseAnne Spradlin, Irène Stamou, Laura Staton, Jeanette Stoner, Sandi Stratton-Gonzalez, Valerie Striar, Michiyo Tanaka, Nancy Topf, Muna Tseng, Samghi Wagner, Randy Warshaw, Edisa Weeks, Dominique Weibel, Jeremy Weichsel, Jeffrey Werbylo, Lynn Wichern, Kathy Wildberger, Cydney Wilkes, Scott Wixon, Meg Wolfe, Nami Yamamoto, Yoko Yamanaka, Leslie Yancey, Wai Mei Yeun, Keith Young, Nancy Zendora.



Frances Wright in the New Harmony dress



Frances Wright in her last years

## HOLY MOLY

BY KEELY GARFIELD



Keely Garfield. Photo by Cyrus Ra.

There is a West African proverb: "When you pray, move your feet!" When I am dancing all the muddy world—with its sliding rocks, its valleys and peaks—give way, and I leave footprints in the sky. The air around me is also inside of me. As above, so below. Heaven and earth are one. Sounds nice and neat. But it is no mean feat to bridge distance, or to see things from more than one point of view. To be solid and completely insubstantial at one and the same time. Opinion is this way. Someone is said to have asked Mother Teresa, "What do you say to God when you pray?" Mother Teresa replied that she didn't say anything at all, she just listened. "What does God say to you?" someone asked. "God doesn't say anything, God is listening too." So said Saint Teresa of Calcutta. I say, dancing is listening.

<sup>[1]</sup> This proverb has multiple origins, tracing back to West Africa as well as to the Quakers. The proverb is also a mantra to Civil Rights leader and Congressman John Lewis.

We were dancing together in a studio that I don't much care for. A small rectangle of space, with a remote high ceiling, concrete walls, and narrow lozenge-shaped windows framing them at the top. The room felt submerged, a cement fish tank. Outside, sunlight and shadow bounced off the traffic, and spilled onto the walls above our heads, traversing them in waves. We swam in it, every cell illuminated. We were getting nowhere, so I let everyone go early but stayed behind. I prayed that something would happen, moving my feet this way and that. I traced something of a diagonal, down left to up right. Retracing patterns over and over again, writing in sand. As soon as I left the spot, ghost water rushed in, erasing my steps, leaving no authentic trace. Memory is this way. A dance is only what you remember.

I remember my daughter when she was three. Her father had made her a beautiful dolphin out of sand on the beach that day. How she wailed at the sight of the helpless creature being eaten alive by the devil hungry ocean on its way back from being out. Right in front of her eyes! The very nature of things, how it really is. The light filters in and is gone. I do my best to leave a mark.

Tracing the diagonal again. This time a leg bends, an arm crosses, and out of nowhere, a leap of faith of sorts. Eight minutes go by at the bottom of the sea. It will take us weeks and weeks to recover this treasure. Rehearsal is this way. Tracing and retracing necessitates circling back. A kind of mandala emerges. I hear about the puffer fish on the ocean floor, who works twenty-four hours a day, seven days straight, making a mandala out of sand to attract a mate. All this for sex. And why not? Life is the thing! Even a fish longs to make a mark.

Ancestors leave breadcrumbs. My great-great-grandfather, William Daniel, came to Ireland from Jamaica in the 1800s. His ancestors were Nigerian. William Daniel's religion was different from mine. I wonder about his mother. I wonder if she danced. What she prayed for? Pray it never happens. Pray it does. "There is a body—there is not a body/ This is me—then again it is not." Monk Hanshan inscribed this on a rock in the Tang Dynasty, and left no clue behind as to his real identity, or exactly when and where he may have lived, or died. My ancestors are not exactly forthcoming, but I am theirs anyway.

Pray for rain. In the barn, a deluge hits the metal roof hard and drowns everything else out. I can no longer hear my own directions. Listening, now with our eyes, we soak each other up. Dancing is this way. We are all drowning here together. Me, with my knees threatening to bottom out. Molly not yet beached by that big baby in her belly. Raja forever blowing bubbles. Paul in the deep end. Emma, not yet on the horizon. Amidst the torrent, the backdrop of silence and stillness is there, and gives me pause. I am a praying mantis meditating all day long, a granular dolphin dissolving, a puffed-up fish whose hope floats.

Rumi wrote, "The wound is the place where the light enters you." The Sanctuary at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery is home to the Rose Window, a stained-glass circle containing one spiral going forward, and one spiral coming back, representing life and growth. It is my custom to sit in front of it, to steel myself before I perform in the space. Peering into the window is like looking in a bottomless well of sunlight. It reminds me of an Enso, another embodiment of spiritual realization. The Enso's circle remains open, suggesting the possibility of further movement, and the validity of incompletion. Drawn in one broad stroke, once rendered, an Enso is not improved on in any way, perfectly encapsulating a single moment in time. Dancing is this way.

A river of tears runs through it all. In the end, you see white women and black men. I am not getting any younger. He is not from around here. This is not a real theater. There is trouble afoot. My father might have been racist. Not half and half, my children are whole. I can't breathe underwater. There is work to be done. Some say, Mother Teresa was no saint. I don't believe in good or bad dances. Sandcastles are built in the air. I keep an ear to the ground. Listen! Can you hear us dancing?

I go around and around. As my body spins, naturally, so does my mind. For some reason, I imagine a piranha's strong jaw and teeth closing in, and I turn towards this awareness. Vanquish iniquity! This mandala I am making with the help of my friends is a wellspring of faith. A wishing well. It saves my soul. Dancing is this way.



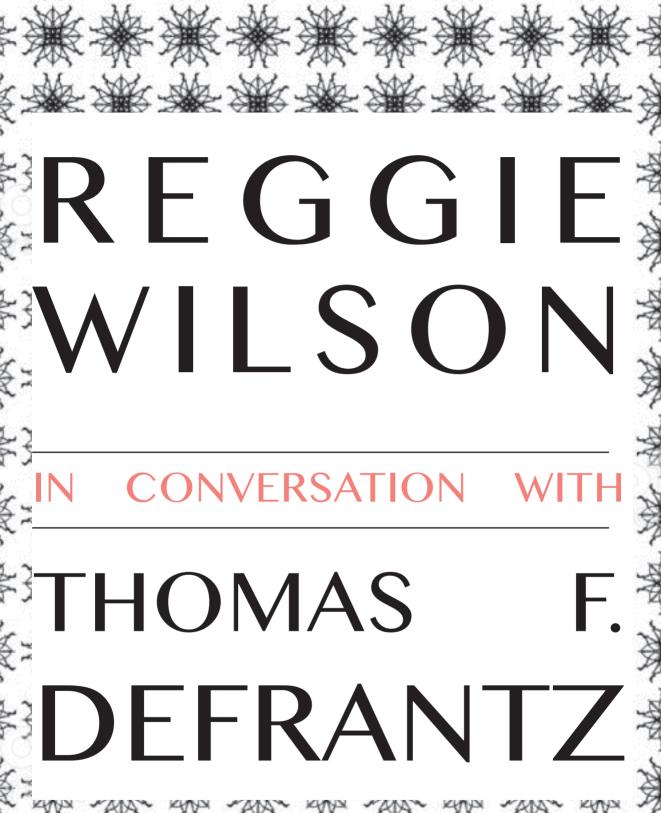
Keely Garfield and Reggie Wilson. Photo by Tom Brazil

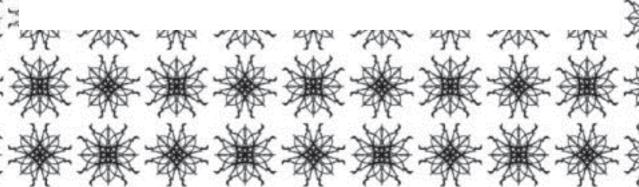
"PFAS AND CORNBREAD A FIGHT HAD PFAS KNOCKFD CORNBREAD SIGHT OUTTA **CORNBREAD SAID** THAT'S ALRIGHT I'LL BE BACK TO-MORROW NIGHT"

REGGIE WILSON (MAYBE LOIS J. WILSON) AFTER LOUIS JORDAN (BEANS AND CORNBREAD)

# "IF YOU ARE SILENT ABOUT YOUR PAIN, THEY WILL KILL YOU AND SAY YOU ENJOYED IT"

**ZORA NEALE HURSTON** 





Such a pleasure to talk to Reggie Wilson about his creative craft, interests, research imperatives, and sensibilities! I've surely enjoyed thinking through Reggie's work and experiencing his dances over the years; the opportunity to engage him around this 2018 Danspace Project Platform enlivens me immeasurably. What follows is an edited transcript of a long conversation we had by telephone October 1,2017.—**Thomas F.DeFrantz** 

**Thomas F. DeFrantz**: Reggie, you're curating now! Tell me about this Platform and what you're up to here.

**Reggie Wilson**: The Platform fits into an ongoing thinking and mission about postmodern dance, and stems from two basic questions: Who is Reggie? What is Danspace Project?

I wanted to take on these two ongoing questions, consciously and unconsciously. And then the corollary questions: What's the relationship between postmodern dance and African Diasporic culture? What is the relationship between Protestant Christianity and African Diasporic religion? These questions keep bubbling up for me. I think these questions were much more pointed in the early 90s, and the name of my company actually came out of this period: Fist and Heel— questions that are both political and anatomical.

All together, these have been very productive questions that have allowed me to encounter the world. I can find the Diaspora in Portugal, in Korea, in Alaska, in Bharata Natyam, Zar, Assiko... Isitshikitsha or Amabhiza. Diaspora is not this little thing—speaking historically, choreographically, politically. I wanted to place my own Diasporas alongside those of Danspace Project.

### HISTORY OF DANSPACE PROJECT AND ST. MARK'S CHURCH

**RW**: Danspace is in many ways a crucible of postmodern, contemporary dance. But how did St. Mark's Church become a space for dance? What is its history; how did it get started? What is this thing about religious spaces like churches becoming the homes for downtown dance? After all, a lot of folks are doing interesting things in performance that don't seem to belong in church.

Ruth St. Denis performed in St. Mark's Church. Isadora Duncan was banned from performing in the Church. Yiddish theaters were also in the area. So it is not just since the 1970s or 1980s that there was dance in the Church. The Church itself dates back to the Dutch colony. And before Stuyvesant came in there were also free black communities in this area of New York. When we started researching this history, Judy [Hussie-Taylor, Executive Director & Chief Curator of Danspace Project] shared a rumor that the balcony in the Church may have been used as a slave gallery [historic term], raising questions about who built St. Mark's, and who attended its earliest services. All of this information is folding into the Platform as material the choreographers are to deal with.

Normally these are the sorts of questions that I deal with creatively, and I thought, "Can I find a wide range of choreographers with a range of dance aesthetics to deal with these issues in a number different ways?"

**TDF**: This raises two questions for me. One is about researching the Church, and one is about your research in general. Let's continue with the Church.

RW: St. Mark's Church still has a very active congregation. We can't have dress rehearsals in the space on Wednesday nights because they have Wednesday night services. At noon, if you're there for workshops, there's the longest bell toll that goes off, the rest are every half hour. Amazingly, it's the longest continuous site of Christian worship in Manhattan. We still don't know if it was ever a Native American sacred ground before it was a church. But your question raises the point that many people don't actually realize it's still a church. I think they feel it's kind of like Limelight.¹ But St. Mark's was never deconsecrated, it's a fully functioning church.

[1] Limelight was a New York City club that opened in 1983 in a deconsecrated Episcopal Church and was a staple of the downtown nightlife scene in the 80s and 90s.

**TDF**: When was the church built?

**RW**: Wow, that's a big question. Originally it was the Stuyvesant family chapel in the 1600s back when New York was New Amsterdam. The white settlers pushed Black folks to the borders of the city as a defense against the Native folks. The present day structure went up and was consecrated around the late 1790s.<sup>2</sup>

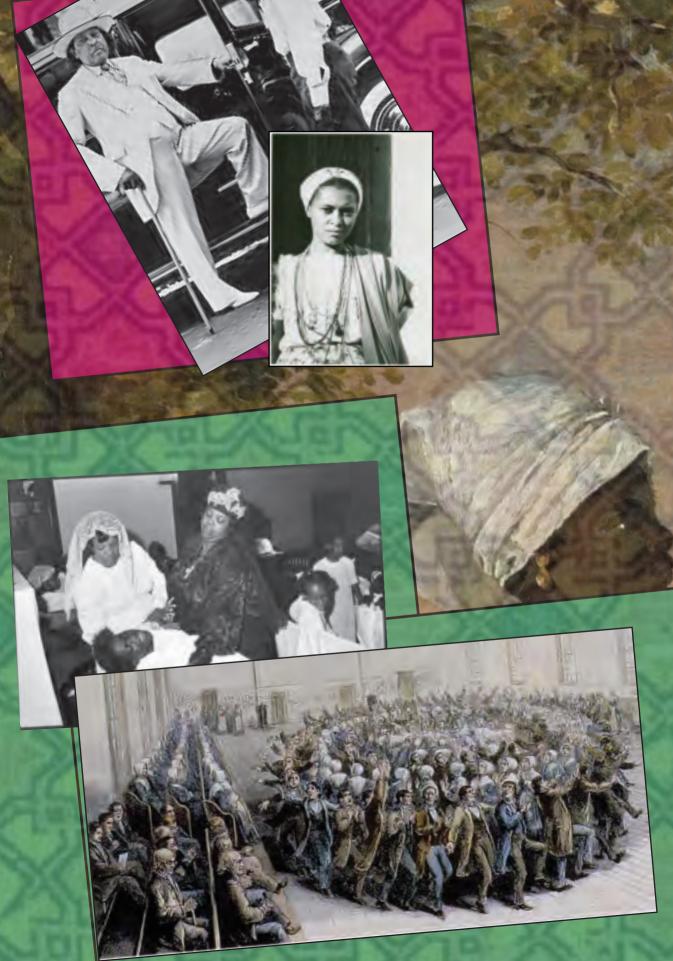
As part of our research we got in touch with Kamau Ware who does walking tours called the Black Gotham Experience, looking at slavery in downtown Manhattan. His project is reclaiming and re-finding the histories of Black people and slavery in New York, because it's largely hidden and unwritten. On the tour there's actually nothing to very little there. Even the site where there is a marker for the slave market is actually on what is landfill. The owner of the building that actually sits on the site didn't want the plaque on his building, so the plaque was moved across the street and a park was built around it. So there are even politics in tracing the histories. The tour asks us to think about what could slavery have looked like, or what MUST slavery have looked like in a colony like New Amsterdam, as well as early New York, when it was a commercial hub. It's a different image of slavery than 'King Cotton.'

Slaves would have spoken multiple languages, and they had different and numerous skills. They were blacksmiths and welders, skilled artisans. It's a different history than what I had thought about slavery in the United States. In our research, we came to realize that histories are located two blocks away, or that a plot for an activity would've been right here. Walking tours activate history, this is what I also think choreographers can do; this is what I think dance can do. We also have scholar Prithi Kanakamedala looking into this history of the area to provide information to our Platform choreographers.

**TDF**: Let's return to the modern dancers in this history: Ruth St. Denis and Isadora Duncan. When were they in the church?

**RW**: In the 1920s, they were invited because of the rector, William Norman Guthrie. This raises a couple of questions. One, in terms of

[2] St. Mark's Church was incorporated as the first Episcopal Parish independent of Trinity Church in the New World. St. Mark's Church was completed and consecrated on May 9, 1799.





dance history, what were they doing at Danspace? Well, it was part of what the rector was doing. He was a theosophist. He was trying to combine aspects of religion, movement, ritual, and the body. What Ruthie was doing with her global consumption; her incense dances, and goddess movements—that was somehow acceptable. But I think Isadora with her tunics and lifestyle was not. The bishop banned her from performing.

### **UPBRINGING & BLACK TRADITIONS**

**TDF**: A downtown person today who goes to dance performances might not consider religious histories to be important. But you've always been asking these questions about African American religiosity. How important is it to you?

RW: It's been important to me personally because I grew up Baptist, and I think the Black church has been a strong repository for Africanist practices in the United States. And so that was my most direct link in looking at the part of Africa that could have been passed on directly to me through the Mississippi Delta up to Milwaukee and then on to New York. What is actually mine? Especially in my encounters with my African friends. There's this formal African religion and culture, and there's this stuff that people don't consider African, it's just who they are and what they do. Church seemed to be one of the clearest places to look for that.

**TDF**: What other things that are "African" but not seen as such?

RW: Food, as in what parts of the animal are eaten, and how things are put together, you know in recipes and meals—okra, cornmeal, grits, jambalaya, "chitlins," gumbo. Linguistics—so clear in the work of Zora Neale Hurston. She was such an expert at capturing African American turns of phrases and syntax. Social dances, to some extent. But I wasn't in a home that took their kids to the nightclub, so I didn't grow up in the juke joint. I did witness and want to move in the drill teams, and in double-dutch that my cousins did. But the one I seemed to be slathered in was the church—the long-metered hymns, songs, and the offertory, the organization of the different bodies, groups and auxiliary boards. My research led me to Trinidad and Tobago, to Zimbabwe, to think about the food and the dance. Food anthropologists think about how food tasted differently—Hoppin' John, heirloom varieties, etc.;

and we're trying to get that flavor back. That's what I'm trying to do with dance. Church has served as a concrete tool to analyze and think about parallels and similarities in cultures throughout the Diasporas.

### SONG AND DANCE IN THE BLACK CHURCH

**TDF**: But Black church practices are also always changing, how do you make space for that?

RW: In my thinking and my work, I usually take too judgmental of a perspective: the key one being around my idea of what a shout used to be. What did old time religion start to signify? Gospel songs change from shouts, to Gospel into praise music and Inspirational. It has continued to get reactivated, and there have been "new" shouter movements like "holy rollers"/Pentecostal and "sanctified" that were reintroducing rhythm and trance into worship services. Shouting was seen as being uncivilized, too "African," and undignified. Those were parts of culture that were buried and hidden so that Black folks could seem respectable.

Dr. Bernice Reagon Johnson, from Sweet Honey in the Rock, talked about how church songs changed from the "I" to the "We." When I went back to church I noticed how much "I" was used in the devotional songs (Dr. Watts Hymns). This was as individual searching and agency towards a responsibility to the community. In my experience of the Inspirational songs all of the we's are trying to "construct" community. This happened after the civil rights movement and now it's rampant. When I was doing my own processing and analysis on this, I realized there's a shift going on from individual agency through ritual process to some kind of imagined groupey-ness, which has a lot less to do with trance, possession, and ancestor reverence.

**TDF**: It's interesting because we can understand the importance of this sociality; that "we," meaning Black people, need to operate as a group, especially in the eras like now. Post-Reagan, post-neoliberalism, we've seen the failing of individualism. Politically we can see the importance of working as "we" and hopefully now we can make room for LGBTQAI+. And that there can be a lot of "I"s that don't have to be the same. So organizationally this works for social justice movements. Do you think that the Black church might model this kind of change?

RW: Maybe not in a sociological kind of way, but in a spiritual kind of way, you can't heal someone else. You actually have to go inward. I don't know how consistently these models work in other applications. But they make sense to me if you think about social dances—hip-hop, voguing, even the trance and possession of the Kalahari. Where there's a strong group sense going on, but an individual can shine. This is different from the I, I or the me, me of individualism you were referencing. The conundrum is that it can look and sometimes feel like a contradiction, but as a healing power, there's a nurturing and a building when you start looking inward.

**TDF**: So it's making space for the individual within the group to "shine."

**RW**: And that seeking, that searching serves the benefit of the community. It's not just to serve the self.

**TDF**: Let's think about the role of liturgical dance, and praise dancing in the Black Church today.

RW: Where I grew up there were no instruments—only piano, organ and voice, and maybe a tambourine. When I went back down South, there were drums, bass guitar, brass—all kinds of instruments. It was like a juke joint compared to the model I had in my head. It cracked open my thinking about what can happen from one generation to the next; when people move away into what we call Diaspora. When they stay in their local "home" they evolve and shift, but when they transplant they often try to lock down what was; the fight to maintain memory.

**TDF**: Going back to liturgical dance, it's now an industry, and you can take classes on how to choreograph liturgical dance. In the Bronx, in Brooklyn, it's now a large part of the Black church.

**RW**: It is now an acceptable form of dance in the church, but when I grew up it wasn't. Bodies were not acceptable. Dance was not seen as an appropriate venue for faith. I gave a talk on the Ring Shout at my old church, looking at that practice as the foundational beginning of the Black church. The congregants were really interested. I was showing them video that pointed to how we as African Americans are part of this larger construct connected to Africa. And the superintendent of

the Sunday school came in late and was livid, saying it had nothing to do with "the Blood of Jesus", etc, etc. And the members actually shut him down. I realized then that something had changed.

One of my dancers was part of the liturgical dance in his church, and that was a bonding experience for us. But for me, in liturgical and praise dancing there is rarely a connection between "shout" dancing as a physical, kinesthetic, movement that has traditionally happened in the Black church. I think liturgical dance is more connected to concert dance and interpretative dance. It's often more like pantomiming. Though I'm a financial sponsor of liturgical dance in my church.

When I performed a version of *Moses(es)* in a sculpture garden in Milwaukee, we worked with the Jazzy Jewels. They are senior line dancers. Which is so much more interesting as a kinesthetic argument, than my experience of liturgical dancing.

That said, I do love gesture, and I often call myself a hyper-literalist. So I wouldn't say that liturgical dance should stop. I came to dance from swing choir and musical theater. Everyone has got to start somewhere, right?

### **DOWNTOWN DANCE AND BLACKNESS**

**TDF**: What's the role of downtown dance and Blackness in this political moment? How are these concepts imagined now?

**RW**: Blackness [pause]. Over the years my dancers have been, and currently are primarily Black folk from all over the globe, with some white dancers in the mix, as well as others if we're listing. We have conversations about how something "is" African and actually talk about its specificity from West Africa or the Caribbean or elsewhere, as elements that are not only from an African American perspective. I've been able to have access to the world through the African Diaspora. Blackness is global; it's not limiting, or limited.

**TDF**: What about downtown dance?

**RW**: Downtown dance is literally in relationship to Ailey, Philadanco, Dallas Black Dance, Graham. I'm not sure what to do about the "up-

town dance vs. downtown dance" binary. "Downtown dance" is also connected for me to growing up in the Midwest and then going to NYU, where people were taking classes from Jawole [Willa Jo Zollar] and not Juilliard. It actually used to be weird and uncomfortable for me to go above 14th Street, maybe 23rd Street max. And "contemporary dance" was what the Europeans were doing. Now, everything is so murky. When I talk about my research in "postmodern dance" I'm really talking about Judson Dance Theater, Grand Union, maybe Twyla [Tharp], Laura Dean and—pushing it—Bill T. [Jones] and Arnie [Zane].

**TDF**: What attracts you to this kind of postmodern work?

RW: It's what I came into. In my junior/senior year of high school I was introduced to [Martha] Graham. And then I got to New York and it could all just be thrown up and fucked with. I just became fascinated with the games, the structure, and the play. Part of this is something Phyllis Lamhut gave me, and she was from Nikolais, which is also hard to pigeonhole as uptown. Nikolais is still Modern, but those lines are blurry and weird. I still haven't gotten away from things I learned from Sara Rudner, Richard Colton—the Twyla folks, David Gordon. I still don't have a name for what I learned from Ohad [Naharin]. It's not Gaga, I guess, but proto-Gaga. Sometimes I think that "uptown" or "downtown" just refers to company size or structure. So those terms, what are they really doing and how are we using them? For me I'm using them more geographically, and for the binary difference of up and down.

**TDF**: But what is downtown dance if it's not about Blackness, and what is Blackness and performance if not downtown dance in 2018? We went through the 90s and 2000s thinking these modes were foundationally separate. But now we got to this political moment, and this crazy environmental situation of the 2010s. We know more.

**RW**: I don't know if WE know more. I know more personally. I refuse to be responsible for more than myself. And I guess many of us do know more.

**TDF**: I think we can make a list of white people who know more. These curatorial/platform/ cross-pollination projects are happening with Black people at their centers; white people are not just talking but listening.

RW: Yes, we are not just ancillary parts of the project of downtown dance, but that's also why I didn't want to have just Black choreographers participating in the Platform. I can ask, have you had Black dancers in your company? Have they changed the way your dances have been perceived? And generally speaking, curating this Platform has raised some interesting sets of propositions. I have started to call the choreographic contributions "dance essays." Given the parameters of its intentions, what are arguments the choreographers making? Who are they in relation to these ideas, questions, problems, histories?

For example Edisa Weeks, Angie Pittman, Beth Gill, Jonathan Gonzalez, and Miguel Gutierrez are all coming in to one of the events [The Dossier Charrette: a series of working dance essays]. They all have different aesthetics, histories, with different assumptions about performance, experimentation, race, Blackness, churches. And it's not only about the Black church, but that central topic is still at the table. I'm still sussing out the relationship of the church to postmodernism.

### PRAYING, SPIRITUAL PRACTICE, & RESEARCH

**TDF**: What is your relationship to prayer?

**RW**: [Pause] Prayer? Why would you ask me about prayer?

**TD**F: Well, because it's part of your title for the Platform. You talk about praying grounds.

**RW**: Oh, PRAYING.

**TDF**: Isn't prayer the thing that's being activated by praying?

**RW**: Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes...NO [laughs]. I make the distinction between prayer versus praying. This comes from some evolution in my thinking about what they call "prays houses." Scholars used to think it was praise, spelled p-r-a-i-s-e. Then it was changed to p-r-a-y-s. So it was a house that you went to pray in, there was a ritual act.

**TDF**: But you could've titled the Platform "prays house," instead you've used praying.

My way of holding this information about praying is connected to what the shout has been misinterpreted, or misunderstood, or misconstrued as—from a lot of different contexts, not just today. As black folks, having an Africanist way of relating to community and relating to spirit was really different than European kinds of structures. This is how I tend to explain it: the idea is that there's a ground... a place, where the community comes together—where people clap, drum, or make a lot of noise so they can EITHER move into a trance state, and then they go and visit spirits and communicate with spirits. Then they come back, and they can share that information with the community. OR, they clap, they drum, and they make noise, until their ancestors or the spirits hear that, and realize there's a party over there. And they jump into that body and they come in and can communicate. Praying is not about supplication and begging for. Praying is communicating, meaning that you're asking/talking to entities—or powers, or spirits, or the universe—for information about something really specific and concrete. For me it's a technology. It's a way of communicating with spirits so that you have more information, so that you can go about your business.

**TDF**: So prayer is an act of communication, or an activity of communication?

RW: It's an activity. I guess I am trying to suss out the difference between prayer and praying. These are grounds—a place—where an activity happens. The activity is a religious activity that for black folks ended up being called the ring shout. But it was also called Spiritual walking or Jacob's ladder, I've recently heard of a practice called rocking. It had many names, sometimes it wasn't called anything at all. Sometimes it was the offertory, when you're walking around the church and the spirit gets built up. For me, it's an Africanist practice that's about communicating spirits to get information. It's not about asking if you said your prayers last night. It's not about lighting a candle. It's not about going to a wall and sticking something in it. Again it relates back to Zora [Neal Hurston] in my head, it's a more kinda "hoodoo-ist," conjuring kind of term.

For some years now I have been investigating Mother Rebecca

Cox Jackson (a Black Shaker) and I have been wondering and researching, what's the connection, if any, between Black praise/prayer, shouting, and the Shaker traditions? When the body is used as a tool for divination, how are the Shakers and the Spiritual Baptists (from Trinidad and Tobago) sharing actual vocabulary?

**TDF**: Do you have a spiritual practice and what is it?

**RW**: I do, and that's private...confidential [laughing]

**TDF**: That's interesting; you're someone who is interested in other people's spiritual practice, but you don't want to talk about your own.

**RW**: I rarely ask people to tell me directly about their "beliefs," it's often more about their practices and actions. I do go into religious contexts and settings that people have already set up for themselves. They have a church, or a prayer group, and often that's public. But maybe research is my religious practice. Going back to Zora and Africanist practices, sometimes I realize I think I need to be initiated into some of these things, these ways of life. I have had people who trust me, gave me access, but that came with a responsibility. And my desire to avoid unwanted responsibility is very strong. Trying to carry the weight of a full time company, and running a nonprofit is a full time job—searching for the money, work, rehearsal space, performers – keeps me occupied. If I'm going to be baptized as a Spiritual Baptist, and moan (what I interpret to be a form of initiation), and do all those things ... it comes with its own set of responsibilities. For example, going to church, doing offerings for "X" number of thanksgivings a year. A lot of traditional Africanist practices are extremely time consuming with very heavy responsibilities. I think dance is also like that. If I'm going to get on stage and perform, I have to keep up with certain things: my body, my energy, my technique, etc.

### THE PLATFORM ITSELF

**TDF**: Let's talk about the Platform.

**RW**: OK, to start, I wanted to put the idea of Blackness in the title. Race is too theoretical. So even if the Blackness doesn't show up in the





final Platform performances, literally, we'll see. This is just an opportunity to see. So take the title of the platform: Dancing Platform Praying Grounds: Blackness, Churches, and Downtown Dance. I imagine the Platform like a shout house or prays house. But what if the title said "Race and Religious-Affiliated Spaces?" There's no catch in that. We're always asked to talk about our relationship to our Blackness. I've wanted to figure out how to do this for a long time. Well clearly for me, if you're white and thinking about Blackness, you're going to have think about your whiteness, your Latino-ness, etc. Do you have a conscious relationship to Blackness? Have you thought about this thing before? Deeply?

Taking on this curatorial role has me asking: what about what I do has actual value outside of my own practice? I think choreographers tend to be compelled by questions. We are trying to figure things out. As a result, I think the Platform will be an unfolding conversation. I have asked choreographers to respond to the research we've been doing on slavery and free black communities in the East Village, the history of St. Mark's Church and its role in activism, as well as its relationship to modern and postmodern dance. Some are being asked to respond and revise quickly in the Dossier Charrette; others have been commissioned to create new work. Fist and Heel will perform a new work ... they stood shaking while others began to shout. There will be walking tours each week of the Platform, along with a symposium that considers the history of site and memory, the story of blackness and downtown dance, and a "How To" on navigating a Platform.

I think I like to be thought of as a researcher, a lay anthropologist. Right now I'm calling myself a Kinesthetic Anthropologist. I believe choreographers are smart, and dancers are smart, and people who make performance work are smart, and we do our thinking and research in a lot of different ways. For each piece how I do the research varies dramatically, as does the amount that is visible to the audience. Sometimes it can be a disservice to the work when viewers are expecting to see some particular research subject visualized a particular way. For me, research is an organizing and developmental device. Arguably, I may be doing more research than other dancers and choreographers but it may be because I was taken out of doing other people's dance early in my career due to injury. It's a very different challenge to track the research that's coming out of the studio than tracing the research that comes out of other situations.

So then, what is dramaturgy? That's part of what this Platform is about for me also. I think the curatorial practice—or, possibly, a dramaturgical practice—is an act, it's a thing. It's not just housed in a person, within the dramaturge, but also in what the dancers, the choreographers, and the director does. And you also have the venue and its staff. There are so many elements providing layers of context, meaning and history.

**TDF**: Why did you take on this curatorial role?

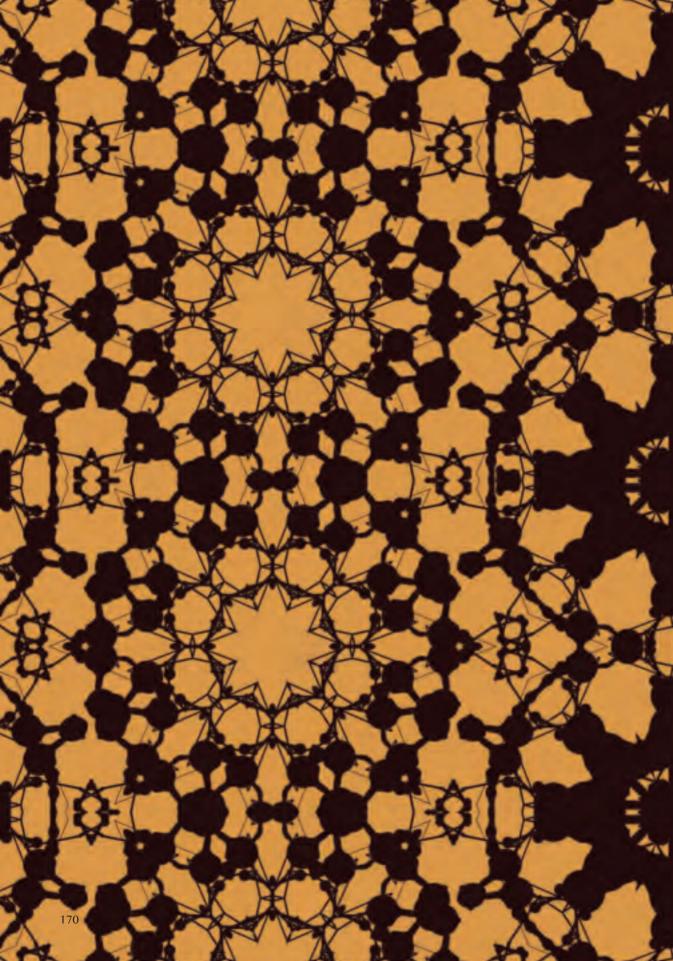
**RW**: I was asked. And then asked again. And now maybe it's become a selfish reason. But it's to try to raise the value that choreographers are given in the world. For me it goes back to the mind/body schism. What I perceive to be the hierarchy of the written word over the body. It's also connected to how we consider African cultures. A corrective. Cultures that at one time would be called illiterate, we might call these early and ancient cultures non-literate. Acknowledging these cultural practices and artifacts are supremely structured, and are organized to deeply process information.

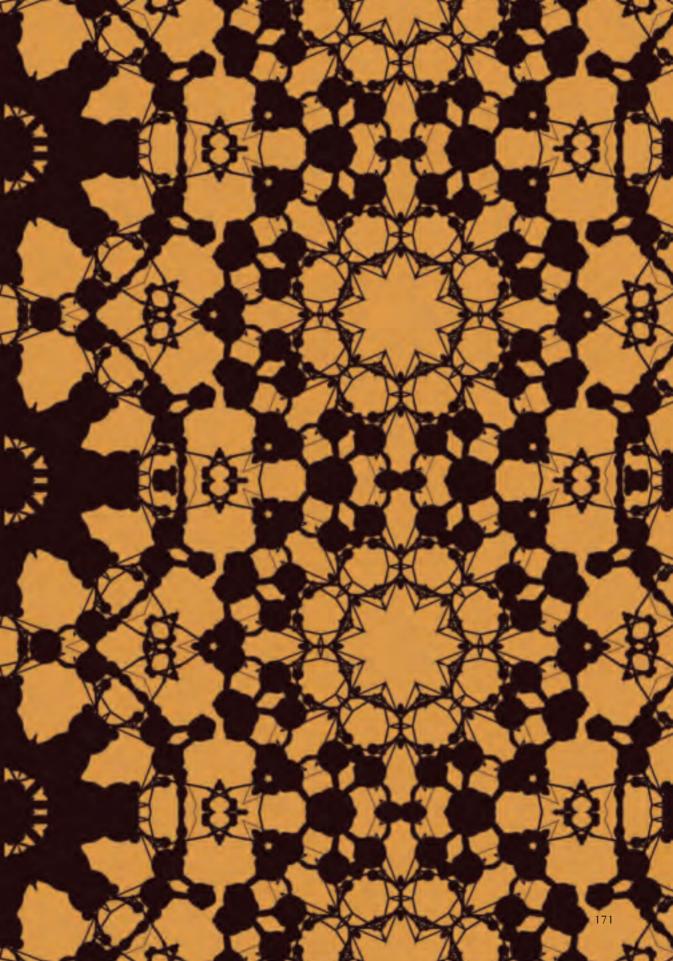
My latest revelation: the term we call 'oral tradition' is a misnomer because it's still focusing on this idea of words. As in, "I pass this practice on to you with words." But a lot these practices are communicated not in words but in color, in rhythm, in pattern, in gesture, action. Communicated in so many ways that have absolutely nothing to do words. Once again we've undervalued the thing, even in dance, and choreography, and kinesthetic practices. Such as with the Spiritual Baptists in Trinidad and Tobago, they have been considered "illiterate," and "the lowest of the low." But they often have memorized long tracks and chapters of the bible (a clear oral tradition). But there is also a specified way that once you Moan (become a member of the community) and you pray, you're given certain colors, certain tools, and certain things and skills. Say a woman is wearing a brown gingham dress, that communicates that she is "a worker in the vineyard," she has this particular skill. The traditions that work with all of those systems we just call 'oral traditions.' It's much more than that we are trying to catch.

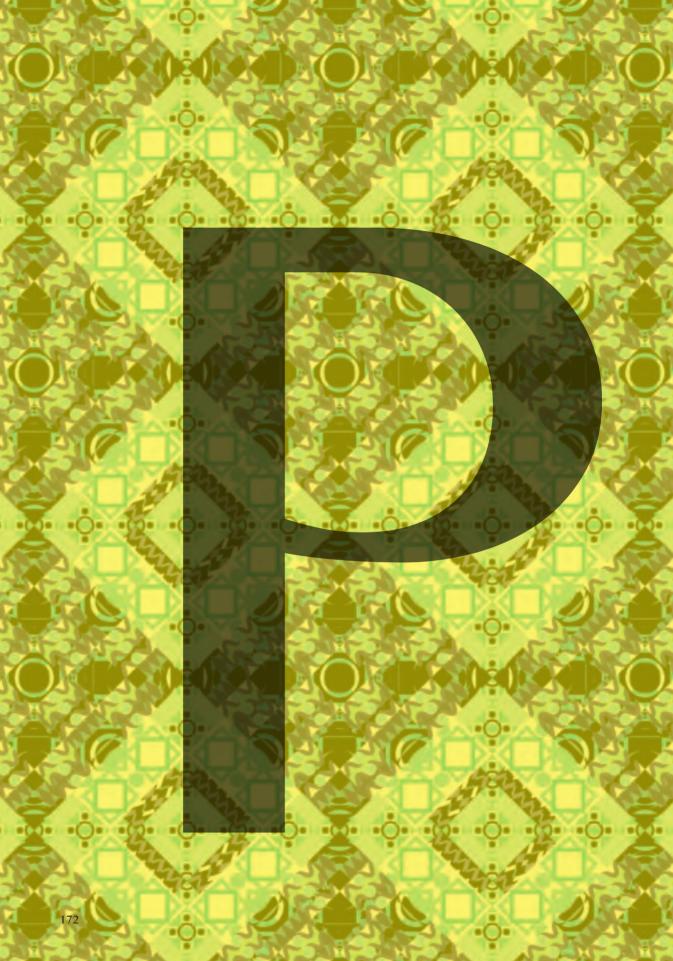
For me, it goes back to what we as choreographers do and the power that we have, consciously and unconsciously, to process this information. And then to take the responsibility of actually doing something with it. This is why I feel like curating is a bit of advocacy.

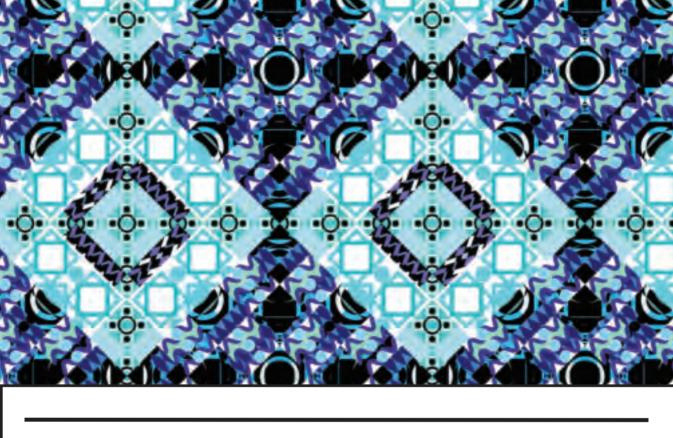




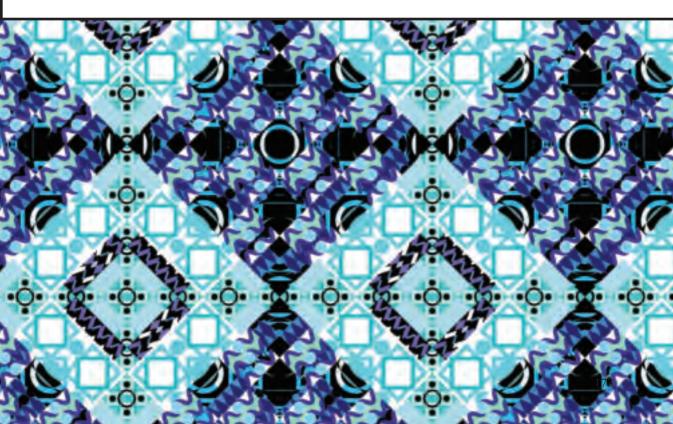


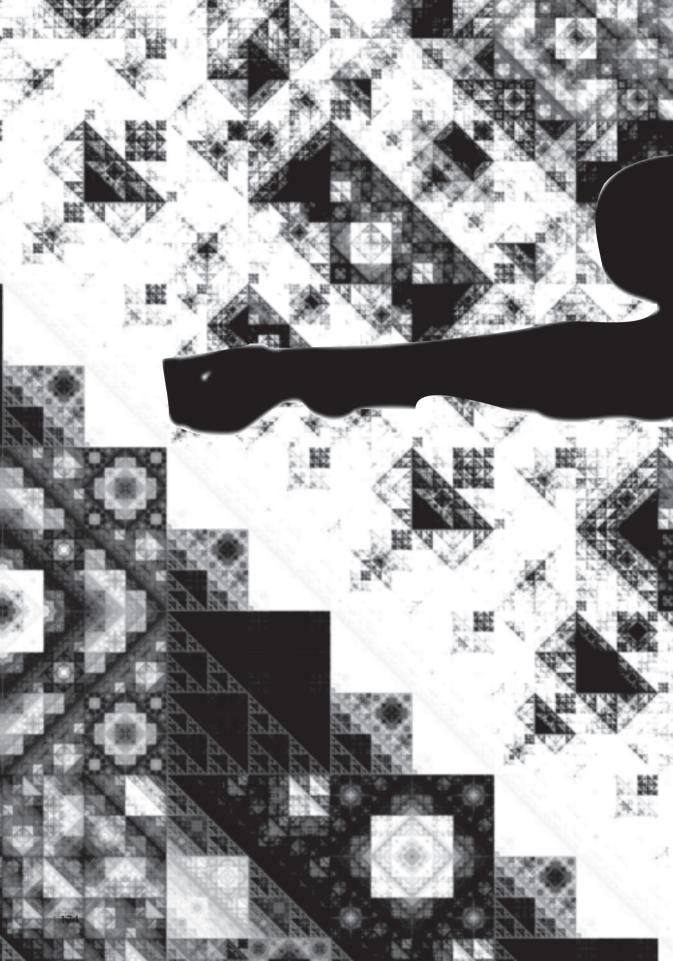






# P R O G R A M







# **SCHEDULE OF EVENTS**

### February 28, 5PM

Walking Tour #1: East Village with Cynthia Copeland This tour's focus is on Copeland's perspective as an historian, East Village resident, and a parishioner of St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery.

### February 28, 6:30PM

Platform 2018 Opening Event

Co-presented with The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art The Great Hall at Cooper Union (7 East 7th Street)

The opening event will take place in the historic Great Hall at The Cooper Union—the same auditorium where Abraham Lincoln made his famous speech against the expansion of slavery. Danspace celebrates the release of its 12th Platform catalogue with words, movement, and song featuring Platform 2018 curator, choreographer Reggie Wilson.

### March 7, 5PM

Walking Tour #2: East Village with Prithi Kanakamedala Kanakamedala's tour delves into her research interests including the Black Atlantic, New York's nineteenth-century free Black communities, and the city's historic material culture.

### March 8-10, 8PM

The Dossier Charrette: a series of working dance essays by Beth Gill, Jonathan Gonzalez, Miguel Gutierrez, Angie Pittman, and Edisa Weeks. Evolving over three nights, artists each present their own 10-minute artistic response to a research dossier compiled by scholar Prithi Kanakamedala. Each evening is followed by "refraction and reflection" between the artists and Wilson.

### March 10, 11:45AM - 5PM

Bell & Water: a symposium is an afternoon of sharing, information, and talking. It will be comprised of three parts and artistic interventions: History of Site and Memory, Story of Blackness and Downtown Dance, and How to Navigate the Platforms. Participants include: Eva Yaa Asantewaa, Lydia Bell, Cynthia Copeland, Emily Johnson, Kristin Juarez, Prithi Kanakamedala, Raja Feather Kelly, Thomas J. Lax, Ernest Julius Mitchell, Ali Rosa-Salas, Radhika Subramaniam, Judy Hussie-Taylor, Charmaine Warren, Reggie Wilson.

### March 14, 5PM

Walking Tour #3: East Village with Emily Johnson This walk includes the neighborhood surrounding St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery and Cooper Union, considering our relationship to land and the Indigeneity of New York.

### March 15-17, 8PM

A Shared Evening: Keely Garfield Dance, Same As Sister/Briana Brown-Tipley & Hilary Brown, Ni'Ja Whitson. Keely Garfield Dance presents Mandala from *Perfect Piranha*; Same As Sister/Briana Brown-Tipley and Hilary Brown present *The Exciting Event...*; Ni'Ja Whitson presents *Oba Qween Baba King Baba—Excerpt One.* Each evening will be followed by a discussion with the artists.

### March 21,5PM

Walking Tour #4: Harlem with Brenda Dixon-Gottschild Dixon-Gottschild hosts Brenda's Way, a tour of New York City's Harlem neighborhood, where she grew up. With Wilson's Platform interests in mind, and with the unique perspective as someone who grew up in New York City and danced here in the 1960s, she'll share personal memories of the neighborhood, her childhood home, the church she attended, in an afternoon where history meets memory.

### March 22-24, 8PM

Reggie Wilson/Fist & Heel Performance Group present ... they stood shaking while others began to shout (World Premiere). Performed by Wilson's Fist & Heel Performance Group: Hadar Ahuvia, Yeman Brown, Paul Hamilton, Raja Feather Kelly, Clement Mensah, Gabi Silva, Annie Wang, and Michelle Yard. The performance includes live vocal components performed by two of Wilson's longtime collaborators, Rhetta Aleong and Lawrence Harding.

Unless otherwise noted, all performances and events take place at Danspace Project, located inside St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery at 131 East 10th Street.

## **BIOGRAPHIES**

Lauren Bakst is an artist and writer living in New York. She works in, with, and through dance, approaching the situation of performing as an object of inquiry.

Lydia Bell is Program Director at Danspace Project. In 2016 she co-curated the Bessie award-winning A Body in Places Platform with Judy Hussie-Taylor and Eiko Otake. She has contributed to publications such as Judson Now, Museum and Curatorial Studies Review, and Movement Research Performance Journal and has spoken nationally and internationally about her work. Lydia is a graduate of the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance at Wesleyan University.

Cynthia Copeland is a public historian and interpretive specialist focused on Afro-American, American, urban, and museum studies. She is president of the Institute for the Exploration of Seneca Village History.

**Thomas F. DeFrantz** received the 2017 Outstanding Research in Dance award from the Dance Studies Association. He directs SLIPPAGE: Performance, Culture, Technology, a research group that explores emerging technology in live performance applications. He has taught at the American Dance Festival, ImpulseTanz, Ponderosa, and the New Waves Dance Institute, as well as at MIT, Stanford, Yale, NYU, Hampshire College, Duke, and the University of Nice. He contributed a voice-over for a permanent installation at the Smithsonian African American Museum. De-Frantz believes in our shared capacity to do better, and to engage our creative spirit for a collective good that is anti-racist, anti-homophobic, proto-feminist, and queer affirming.

**Brenda Dixon-Gottschild** is an award-winning author, dance historian, and Professor Emerita of dance studies at Temple University.

For 22 years **Stephen Facey** served as the Executive Vice President of The Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine where he had administrative responsibility for the Cathedral's array of cultural, educational, and social outreach programs. He also coordinated the Cathedral's preservation and capital improvement initiatives. Formerly, at St. Mark's Church In-the-Bowery, Mr. Facey developed the Arts Projects at St. Mark's (comprising Theatre Genesis, The Poetry Project, and Danspace Project); and, the Preservation Youth Project, a work and training program for young residents of the Church's Lower East Side neighborhoods. Stephen holds an A.B. in English Literature from Boston University and a Master in Public Administration from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

**Keely Garfield** is a choreographer, dancer, teacher, and curator. Born in London and based in New York City, Garfield is the artistic director of, Keely Garfield Dance (KGD), which has been widely commissioned and presented at theaters and festivals nationally and internationally. Garfield is a 2017 Guggenheim Fellow, and has garnered several Bessies for her work. Alongside her choreographies for KGD, Garfield has made work for other modern dance companies, theater, musicals, ballet, film, MTV, site-specific projects, schools and universities. Garfield is an integrative yoga therapist and Reiki Master focusing on wellness for dancers, and works in oncology and hospice. A spirit of philosophical inquiry and compassionate concern unites her dedicated engagement in all her endeavors.

**Beth Gill** is a Guggenheim, Doris Duke Impact and Bessie award-winning choreographer based in New York

City since 2005. Through a steady exploration of aesthetics and perception she has produced a rigorous body of work with evolving interests in abstraction, psychology, theater and dance. Her formal and exacting works are toned with the themes of alienation, objectification, female sexuality, rage and obsession. Gill has been a Princeton Hodder Fellow, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Extended Life Artist in Residence, New York City Center Choreography Fellow and a 2012 FCA grant recipient.

Jonathan Gonzalez is an artist based in his native New York City. His creative endeavors intersect choreographing performance, music, curation, and design. He has been a New York Live Arts Fresh Tracks Artist in collaboration with EmmaGrace Skove-Epes, BAX/Dancing While Black fellow, BAX/SUBMERGE! artist, Diebold Awardee for Distinction in Choreography & Performance, POS-SE and Bessie Schonberg Scholar, as well as a nominee with the Rema Hort Mann Foundation and Bessie Awards. He has most recently performed in the works of Tania Bruguera, Ligia Lewis, and Cynthia Oliver. He is a faculty member with Queensborough Community College.

Miguel Gutierrez's current fascination is thinking about how being a queer Latin-American dance artist relates to the legacy of (predominantly white) abstraction. This will be the conceptual framework for a new group piece for Latinx performers called This Bridge Called My Ass. Other current activities: a cabare show called SADONNA (sad versions of Madonna songs), running LANDING – an educational and mentoring program at Gibney, touring the Bessie award-winning John Bernd project (co-directed with Ishmael Houston-Jones), touring as a musician with Colin Self in Jen Rosenblit and Simone Aughterlony's Everything

Fits in the Room, writing a TV show with his sister about their family, writing a second book, and working as a Feldenkrais Method practitioner. www.miguelgutierrez.com

Judy Hussie-Taylor is Executive
Director and Chief Curator of Danspace Project. She serves as a faculty member and advisor to the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance (ICPP) at Wesleyan University. Since taking the helm at Danspace Project in 2008 she has developed the critically-acclaimed Platform series, which features new contexts for dance presenting. She received the first ever Bessie Award for presenting in 2017, and a Chevalier de les Ordre des Art and Lettres in 2014.

Emily Johnson, a director/choreographer/curator, originally from Alaska and currently based in New York, will lead a silent walk through the East Village of Manhahtaan in Lenapehoking, homeland of the Lenape. Since 1998, Emily has created work that considers the experience of sensing and seeing performance. Her dances often function as installations, engaging audiences within and through a space and environment-sights, sounds, smells-interacting with a place's architecture, history and role in community.

**Darrell Jones** has performed internationally with a variety of choreographers and companies such as Bebe Miller, Urban Bush Women, Ronald K. Brown, Min Tanaka, and Ralph Lemon. Darrell has received choreographic fellowships from MANCC, Chicago Dancemakers Forum, and is a two time Bessie Award recipient for his collaborative work with Bebe Miller Company and his most recent research in (e)feminized ritual performance. Darrell is presently a tenured faculty member at The Dance Center of Columbia College in Chicago where he teaches classes in dance technique, performance and improvisational practices.

Kristin Juarez is co-editor and assistant curator of *Dancing Platform Praying Grounds: Blackness, Churches, and Downtown Dance.* She is currently completing her doctorate in Moving Image Studies at Georgia State University.

Prithi Kanakamedala, Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Bronx Community College of the City University of New York. Her research interests include the Black Atlantic, New York's nineteenth-century free Black communities, and the city's historic material culture.

Raja Feather Kelly (Choreographer, Director, Performer and Visual Artist) Artistic Director of the feath3r theory. Kelly can be seen in the work of Reggie Wilson/Fist and Heel Performance Group, Keely Garfield and Kota Yamazaki. He is former a company member with David Dorfman Dance, Kyle Abraham/Abraham.In.Motion, and zoe|juniper. Kelly received a 2017 Princess Grace Award for Choreography. He is 2017 Bessie Schoenberg Fellow at the Yard on Martha's Vineyard, a 2016 NYFA Choreography Fellow, and received the 2016 Solange Mac Arthur Award for New Choreography.

Kelly Kivland is associate curator at Dia Art Foundation, where she has worked since 2011. At Dia, she has curated François Chaignaud & Cecilia Bengolea (2017), occasions and other occurrences hosted by Isabel Lewis (2016), Steve Paxton's Selected Works (2014), Lisa Nelson and Steve Paxton's Night Stand (2013); and was assistant curator for Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument (2013) and Yvonne Rainer (2011-12). She has also commissioned Artist Web Projects by Laylah Ali, Daniel Lefcourt, as well as Nick Mauss and Ken Okiishi. She holds a Master's Degree from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.

**Cynthia Oliver** is a Bessie award-winning choreographer who has danced with David Gordon Pick Up Co., Ronald K. Brown/Evidence, Bebe Miller Company, and Tere O'Connor Dance. She has performed in theatre works by Laurie Carlos, Greg Tate, Ione, Ntozake Shange, and Deke Weaver. She holds a PhD in performance studies, and is a professor in the Dance Department and Affiliate in Gender and Women's Studies and African American Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She is the author of numerous essays and the book, *Queen* Of the Virgins: Pageantry and Black Womanhood in the Caribbean (2009).

Susan Osberg is a choreographer, dancer, and director of Workwith Dancers Company. She was a co-founder with Joan Duddy of Dance Across Borders and The Salon Project at Dia Art Foundation. Her choreography has been performed internationally, including at Danspace Project, where she has also served on the organization's Artist Advisory Board. She was a Professor of Dance at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. Canada, New York University, and Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson. She teaches Dance as Ritual/Dance as Performance annually in France. She lives in Beacon, New York, and Maine.

Carl Paris holds a Ph.D. in Dance and Cultural Studies (Temple University) and a Masters Degree in Dance Education (NYU). He performed major roles with Olatunji African Dance, Eleo Pomare, Martha Graham, and Alvin Ailey. He taught and choreographed throughout Europe and in Spain, and received Spain's National Dance Award in 1995 in recognition for his contribution to the art and pedagogy of dance, as well as dance courses at California Institute of the Arts, NYU, Temple University, Long Island University, and MIT. He has published several articles in leading dance and theater journals. He

currently teaches courses in Africana Studies at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

**Angie Pittman** is a Bessie award-winning dance artist, dance maker, and dance educator. She has performed her own work at Gibney Dance, Movement Research at Judson Church, BAAD!, Danspace Project, among many other New York spaces, and has performed in work by Ralph Lemon, Tere O'Connor, Jennifer Monson, Antonio Ramos, Jasmine Hearn and others. Angie holds a MFA in Dance and Choreography from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with a graduate minor in African American Studies. Angie's work resides in a space that investigates how the body moves through ballad, groove, sparkle, spirit, spirituals, ancestry, vulnerability, and power.

**Julian Rose** is co-founder of the design studio Formlessfinder and the Architecture Editor of Artforum magazine. He received his Masters of Architecture from Princeton University and his BA from Harvard University in Art and Architectural History. With Formless finder, Rose has completed design projects at a variety of scales for clients ranging from The Museum of Modern Art and Design Miami to Blue Hill restaurant. Rose has written extensively on art and architecture, contributing essays to exhibition catalogs on artists such as Sarah Oppenheimer, Andrea Zittel, and Valie Export, as well as numerous articles to publications such as Log, Artforum, Perspecta, and *October*. Rose has taught architectural design and history at Columbia University and Princeton University.

Same As Sister (S.A.S.) is a New York City based performance collective founded in 2013 by choreographers Briana Brown-Tipley and Hilary Brown. They collaborate in the fields of contemporary dance and theater, and experimental music and video to explore the complexity of human behavior and its inherent uncanniness. Their cross-disciplinary works have been presented at Centre d'Art Marnay Art Centre (2017 Artist Program Residents), Movement Research at Judson Church, CRAWL at 22 Boerum Place, BRIC Arts | Media House (2015 BRIClab Residents), New York Live Arts (2014-2015 Fresh Tracks Residents) and Brooklyn Arts Exchange, among other venues. Sameassister.squarespace.com

Radhika Subramaniam is a curator, editor and writer with an interdisciplinary practice that deploys such platforms as exhibitions, texts and public art interventions as conscious forms of knowledge-making. She is interested in the poetics and politics of crises and surprises, particularly urban crowds, cultures of catastrophe and human-animal relationships. The Director/Chief Curator of the Sheila C. Johnson Design Center (SJDC) at The New School, she teaches in the School of Art and Design History and Theory at Parsons School of Design. She is currently working on an experimental narrative nonfiction titled The Elephant's I.

Kamau Ware is a multidimensional creative blending complementary yet disparate disciplines as an Artist / Historian. He is best known for his flagship storytelling project, Black Gotham Experience (BGX), a visual storytelling project founded in 2010 that celebrates the impact of the African Diaspora on New York City through a series of walking tours and graphic novels. Kamau's Black Gotham Experience has been recognized by The Atlantic and The New York Times, Columbia University's History in Action Project Award and Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. Ware has also received prominent commissions, including a public art display in New York City's Financial District.

Edisa Weeks is a Brooklyn, NY based choreographer, curator, maker and performer. She formed Delirious Dances to create multi-media interdisciplinary works, that merge theater with dance to

explore our deepest desires, darkest fears and sweetest dreams. She's had the pleasure of working with Annie-B Parsons Big Dance Theater, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Co., Dance Brazil, Jane Comfort, Jon Kinzel, Muna Tseng, Reggie Wilson Fist & Heel Performance Group, Sally Silvers, Spencer/Colton Dance, among others. She is a member of the Skeleton Architecture collective and teaches technique, improvisation and choreography at Queens College. deliriousdances.com

An award-winning interdisciplinary artist, performer and writer, Ni'Ja Whitson (MFA), has been referred to as "majestic" and "magnetic" by the New York Times, and recognized by Brooklyn Magazine as a culture influencer. They have received honors across disciplines and collaborate with notables in experimental and conventional theatre, dance, visual art, and music, while engaging writing residencies at notable institutions such as Hedgebrook and Bogliasco. Their published works include national and local print, such as Contact Quarterly, Area Chicago, FNews Magazine, and the upcoming Routledge Anthology: Queering Adaptation. Whitson will be a featured writer of the 2017 BAM Next Wave reading series curated by Danspace.

Tara Aisha Willis is a PhD candidate in Performance Studies, NYU, and Associate Curator of Performance at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. She dances in a collaboration between Will Rawls and Claudia Rankine, and works by Kim Brandt, Megan Byrne, and Yanira Castro. She was a 2009 Dance Theater Workshop Van Lier Fellow, 2016 Chez Bushwick Artist in Residence, co-curator of the Movement Research Festival Spring 2016, and received NYU's 2017 Stefanos Tsigrimanis Artistic Scholar Award. She has edited for Women & Performance and

TDR/The Drama Review, and co-edited, with Thomas F. DeFrantz, a special issue of The Black Scholar on dance.

Mabel O. Wilson teaches architectural design and history/theory courses at Columbia GSAPP. She is also appointed as a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Research in African American Studies and co-directs Global Africa Lab. Her design and scholarly research investigates space, politics and cultural memory in black America; race and modern architecture; new technologies and the social production of space; and visual culture in contemporary art, film and new media. Her transdisciplinary practice Studio And has been a competition finalist for several important cultural institutions including lower Manhattan's African **Burial Ground Memorial and the** Smithsonian's National Museum for African American History and Culture (with Diller Scofidio + Renfro).

Reggie Wilson/Fist & Heel Performance Group includes Hadar Ahuvia. Yeman Brown, Paul Hamilton, Raia Feather Kelly, Clement Mensah, Gabi Silva, Annie Wang, and Michelle Yard. ...they stood shaking while others began to shout includes live vocal components performed by two of Wilson's longtime collaborators, Rhetta Aleong and Lawrence Harding. Reggie Wilson (Executive and Artistic Director, Choreographer, Performer) founded his company, Reggie Wilson/Fist & Heel Performance Group, in 1989. Wilson draws from the cultures of Africans in the Americas and combines them with post-modern elements and his own personal movement style to create what he often calls "post-African/ Neo-HooDoo Modern dances."

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His work has been presented nationally and internationally at venues such as Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York Live Arts, and Summerstage (NYC), Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival (Lee, MA), Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (San Francisco), UCLA Live, and Redcat (Los Angeles), VSA NM (New Mexico), Myrna Loy (Helena, MT), The Flynn (Burlington, VT), Contemporary Arts Center (New Orleans), Dance Umbrella (Austin, TX), Linkfest and Festival e'Nkundleni (Zimbabwe), Dance Factory (South Africa), Danças na Cidade (Portugal), Festival Kaay Fecc (Senegal), The Politics of Ecstasy, and Tanzkongress 2013 (Germany).

Wilson is a graduate of New York University, Tisch School of the Arts (1988, Larry Rhodes, Chair). He has studied composition and been mentored by Phyllis Lamhut; Performed and toured with Ohad Naharin before forming Fist and Heel. He has lectured, taught and conducted workshops and community projects throughout the US, Africa, Europe and the Caribbean. He has traveled extensively: to the Mississippi Delta to research secular and religious aspects of life there; to

Trinidad and Tobago to research the Spiritual Baptists and the Shangoists: and also to Southern, Central, West and East Africa to work with dance/ performance groups as well as diverse religious communities. He has served as visiting faculty at several universities including Yale, Princeton and Wesleyan. Mr. Wilson is the recipient of the Minnesota Dance Alliance's McKnight National Fellowship (2000-2001). Wilson is also a 2002 BESSIE-New York Dance and Performance Award recipient for his work The Tie-tongued Goat and the Lightning Bug Who Tried to Put Her Foot Down and a 2002 John Simon Guggenheim Fellow. He has been an artist advisor for the National Dance Project and Board Member of Dance Theater Workshop. In recognition of his creative contributions to the field. Mr. Wilson was named a 2009 United States Artists Prudential Fellow and is a 2009 recipient of the Herb Alpert Award in Dance. His evening-length work The Good Dance-dakar/brooklyn had its World premiere at the Walker Art Center and NY premiere on the Brooklyn Academy of Music's 2009 Next Wave Festival. In 2012, New York Live Arts presented a concert of selected Wilson works. the Revisitation. to critical acclaim and the same year he was named a Wesleyan University's Creative Campus Fellow, received the 2012 Joyce Foundation Award for his new work *Moses(es)*, and was named a Doris Duke Performing Artist. In 2013 Moses(es) premiered and along with his work CITIZEN (2016), on the Next Wave festival; both continue to tour.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First, our gratitude to the choreographers, dancers, artists, scholars, and writers for their generous and generative contributions to this Platform and catalogue. You lead the way.

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Thank you to Harry Philbrick and Kerry Bickford from Philadelphia Contemporary and Partners for Sacred Places for your partnership. We look forward to seeing what unfolds in Philadelphia in 2019.

Abundant thanks to Rev. Anne Sawyer and the Vestry of St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery for ongoing collaboration and for being a home to the arts.

And last, but not least, we thank the named and un-named generations of individuals who've danced, sung, prayed, planted, labored, and served others on this spirited ground at 10th Street and 2nd Avenue, New York, New York.

Platform 2018 Editorial Team (Judy Hussie-Taylor, Reggie Wilson, Lydia Bell, Kristin Juarez)

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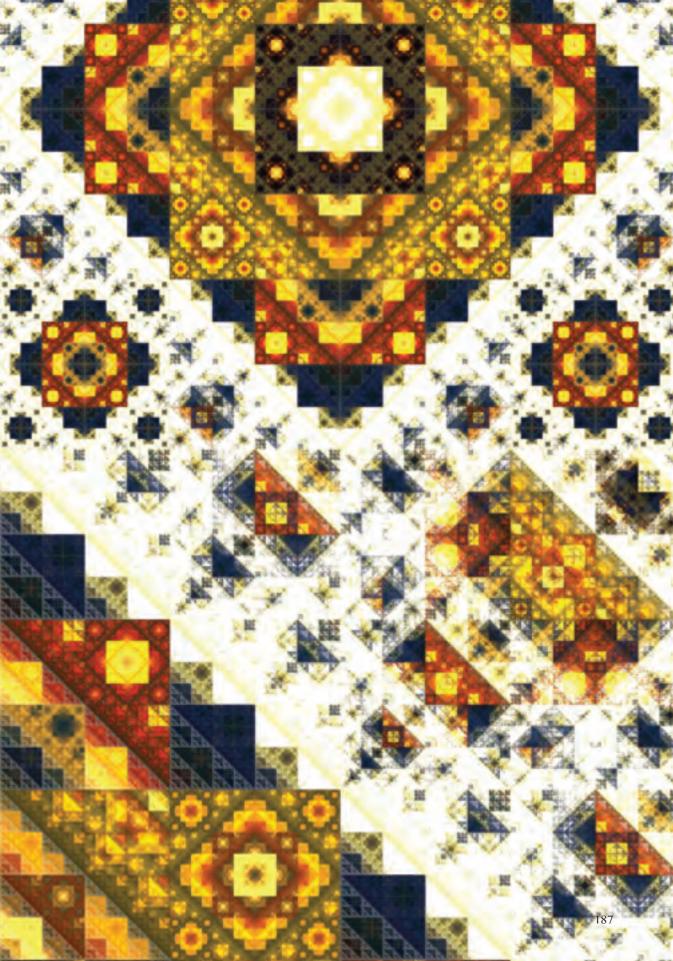












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"YOU'RE WALKING. AND YOU DON'T ALWAYS REALIZE IT **BUTYOU'REALWAYS FALLING** EACH STEP, YOU FALL FORWARD SLIGHTLY AND THEN CATCH YOUR-FROM FALLING SFI F OVER AND OVER, **FALLING YOU'RF** AND THEN CATCHING YOURSELF FROM FALLING AND THIS IS HOW YOU CAN BE WALKING AND FALLING THE SAMF TIME"

**LAURIF AND FRSON** 

"I THINK IT PISSES GOD OFF IF YOU WALK BY THE COLOR PURPLE IN A FIELD SOMEWHERE AND DON'T NOTICE IT. PEO-PLF THINK PLEASING GOD IS ALL GOD CARES ABOUT. BUT ANY FOOL I IVING IN THE WORLD CAN SEE IT ALWAYS TRY-**INGTOPLEASEUSBACK.**"

ALICE WALKER, THE COLOR PURPLE

