

IMAGINING

A GIBNEY JOURNAL

ISSUE **3**

WRITINGS BY

Anthonywash.Rosado

Gregory King

Kiebpoli Calnek

Dani Cole

EVA YAA ASANTEWAA, EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

JANUARY 2021

With the turning of the year, we bid farewell to our friend **Dani Cole**, formerly Editorial Associate of this journal, who has moved on to graduate studies and fresh opportunities. Dani has been one of the most resourceful and forward-thinking members of the Gibney staff and a joy to know. Deep caring is the hallmark of every aspect of her work, and I can attest that the artists she has served as Artist Coordinator with Gibney's Performance and Residencies team have felt this, greatly benefiting from her empathy and diligence. I wish Dani much-deserved success and happiness!

Well, people, we have finally made it past 2020! Take a moment to pat yourselves on the back—but only a moment.

Normally, a new year would bring a bright sense of uplift, a quickened excitement for what might lie ahead. But, let me tell you, if what you're feeling this month is more low-key—or even apprehensive—who on earth could blame you? We've been through a lot. We've been through, in some instances, the previously unimaginable. And we're not done struggling.

Yet, we're here, and the work awaits. I'm just finishing **Alicia Garza's *The Purpose of Power: How We Come Together When We Fall Apart*** (One World, 2020), gaining an understanding of what Black Lives Matter activists mean when they say BLM decenters leadership. As co-creator Garza explains, Black Lives Matter is not "leaderless," as it has sometimes been described. It is leader-*full*, eschewing a focus on one or a few charismatic figures whose political or moral downfall or death could sink an entire movement. Instead, BLM fosters and supports widespread, equitable, collaborative leadership—an organizing strategy that we, in a fragile field like dance, might do well to adopt.

As the new year opens, I do feel good knowing that I am in community with the writers who appear in this edition of *Imagining*—**Anthonywash.Rosado, Gregory King, Kiebpoli Calnek** and...*wow*...Dani Cole! Writers of all kinds have been setting examples of courageous leadership since I was a wee child, and I didn't realize it, didn't even see my own writing as a form of leadership, until recent years. But there's a reason writers, as well as other artists, come under attack from authoritarian regimes: for the experiences they seek, the questions they ask, the stories they carry, the important changes that experience, questions and truthful stories make inevitable.

The idea for *Imagining* came about during the early days of the pandemic shutdown. But what could be seen—and, perhaps, experienced—as a substitute outlet for creative energy quickly proved itself to be a medium of resistance in its own right. I hope this journal can continue to be a gathering place and intersection of writer-leaders we need to hear from now.

Eva Yaa Asantewaa

Senior Director of Artist Development & Curation
Editorial Director, *Imagining: A Gibney Journal*



**THE
PURPOSE OF POWER**

**HOW WE COME TOGETHER
WHEN WE FALL APART**

ALICIA GARZA

EDITOR'S UPDATE

JANUARY 2021

Donald John Trump. Same as he ever was.

America. Same as it ever was.

The horrific attack on the U.S. Capitol building is the escalation and culmination of a cynical campaign of violent rhetoric designed to stir up irrational forces long simmering within this society—forces that, in the reign of Trump, have been brazenly inflamed and sanctioned. Much has been written about the events of Wednesday, January 6, 2021—what made them not only possible but inevitable; the deadly consequences; the political and legal repercussions; the personal testimonies of legislators, staff and journalists caught up in the crisis.

Like many of you, I have had much to say on social media. I will not rehash those thoughts but, as editor of this journal, I must acknowledge that we enter 2021 as we spent most of 2020—in apprehension, anxiety, frustration and anger.

2021 finds us grappling with a multitude of challenges—the ongoing, indeed worsening, COVID-19 pandemic; economic hardship for many; increasing threat to Black lives; climate change and environmental precarity; and, now, a violent coup attempt endangering US democracy. At the same time, we celebrate new successes where women, BIPOC and queer people have fought for and won greater agency, on the federal and local level, for progressive leadership, beginning the hard work of reversing four years of profound damage under Trump.

Imagining is an online publication for a readership of people who devote their lives to expansive thinking and generous creativity. Our values represent the bright possibilities inherent in human life and in collaborative effort, even within a deeply-flawed society born of and sustained in violence towards Indigenous and African peoples. Inside the vortex of white supremacy, many of us labor, through artistic expression, to share knowledge and create environments and tools for change. In honestly examining both the structure of oppressive systems and our complicity within their ongoing power, we seek to build a future that works better for everyone.

2020 has taught most of us some humbling lessons, and I cannot say with certainty how 2021 will shake out. But I do know that I stand with people who are eager for a new ability to respond—*responsibility*—as, bit by bit, we remake spaces as local as Gibney and as vast as the United States of America.

Eva Yaa Asantewaa

Senior Director of Artist Development and Curation
Editorial Director, *Imagining: A Gibney Journal*

whiny
dancer

BY ANTHONYWASH.ROSADO

Whenever I reflect on my dance journey, I chuckle at my memory of when I first questioned whether dance was for me. I was a sixteen-year-old drama major at Talent Unlimited High School, walking out of my bi-weekly Pilates class one winter morning. The dance department director asked me if I would consider double-majoring. Naively, I laughed at the suggestion. *Me? A dancer? I would have needed to start at 5. I am too old!!*

Or so I thought.

Fast-forward to Trinity College in Spring 2010. I was a freshman with two majors—one in Art History and one in Theater and Dance. Participating in my first performance exploration course, I unconsciously refused to use my voice. My body demanded liberation, and so I danced, I danced, I danced. I know God is good because, as I write this, the hairs on my arms rise, my cheeks warm, and my eyes fill to the brim with tears. As clichéd as it sounds, I found me.

Thereafter, I dove headfirst into global dance history. I began ballet and Kathak training. Whereas theater instilled in me my passion for performing, dance ignited my inner creator. Although a play's text might be immortal, dance is ephemeral. At nineteen, I knew what I wanted to be: a trail-blazing American dancer.

Dance archives and critiques provided ample resources to excavate stories of dance pioneers. Engulfed by my research on Mary Wigman, Martha Graham, Hijikata Tatsumi, Alvin Ailey, Yvonne

Rainer, and Pina Bausch, I wasn't fulfilled until I interned at Jacob's Pillow in Summer 2011. There I was, a bubbling Company Management intern embracing my privilege to witness weekly dance performances by international companies and engage with choreographers.

On a gray, rainy day I stumbled into the near-empty dining cabin and met Camille A. Brown—a most humbling experience. Cozy in her sweater, she was the sun I needed that day. We spoke of her performance, *Mr. TOL E. Rance*¹, and I relayed my longing for more non-white voices represented on Jacob's Pillow stages.

As I reflect on this moment with Brown, my 29-year-old self feels a pressure in my sternum. It's pressing me to reveal a truth that, invariably, remains clandestine, unrevealed by dance media and recorded history. What I most recall from my delightful interaction with Brown was my confusion. I was perplexed that staff and interns spoke of her as if she were "aggressive and bossy." I didn't have the language for it then, but I do now. Their words were racist microaggressions—not descriptions of Brown, but red flags connoting their inability to process a Black woman company director advocating for her creative vision. As an Afro-Boricua in academic and art institutions, during and after Trinity College, I can read and identify these microaggressions today. In more than one instance, I have been deemed "intense" and "pushy."

There are not enough discussions or books that could have prepared me for returning home, after my 2013 graduation, to navigate New York's dance

¹ [Mr. TOL E. Rance](#)

world. From 2013 to 2017, I took part in open performance calls and artist residencies with Chez Bushwick, Green Space, Center for Performance Research and Movement Research, to name a few. Now, to be “Other-ed” is an experience only translatable to those who encounter it daily, often many times per day. Yet, I will try to explain it for you.

Even though my skin is light brown, the curls I have been growing since March 2013—in order to never be mistaken for white again—amplify my North American and West African indigeneity. As my tresses grew, I was comforted to be perceived, by non-white communities, as a descendant of the African and American diasporas. However, in white dance venues where I worked, I confronted subtle anti-Black rhetoric along with audiences that were disproportionately white. My most visceral memory of being “Other-ed” in my dance journey was in Eden’s Expressway, a stunning studio in the heart of SoHo with ceiling high windows and rustically warped floorboards.

I arrived early on a brisk autumn evening in 2016, scheduled as the first of four choreographers, each holding a fifteen-minute tech rehearsal. With less than ten minutes until my rehearsal, I knocked on the closed door and waited perpetually-long seconds until a disgruntled woman demanded, “Who is it?!”

Startled, yet respectful, I replied, “Hello there. I am Anthony Rosado, a choreographer presenting work tonight.”

She cracked the door slightly ajar and flung her head out insisting, “Tech doesn’t start for another

seven minutes.” She shut the door.

Honey, the intake of breath that I filled my lungs with *not* to meet this person where she met me...

So, I sat a couple of steps up the staircase adjacent to the studio door. I figured, while I waited to get in, I could develop a structure for improvisation. Moments later, a woman—also white—and her five year-young son knocked on the door. The door was soon opened by the same greeter, whose eyes sparkled once she saw the new arrivals. The boy’s mother was another choreographer. *She* was politely asked to wait five minutes. Her kind son waved at me with two excited hands, one holding his action figure, and then his mother registered my presence. We waited.

Once the clock struck, I tensely sauntered into the room and began rehearsing my improvisational skeleton. For two minutes, I was bombarded with a cacophony of whispered gossip and the boy playing on metal seats, which creaked sporadically in response. Twice, I asked them to respect my need for silence, only getting mere seconds of peace. Ironically, only the boy respected my request and existence. I was invisible. After ten wasted minutes, I didn’t have any desire to give these people my body’s expression.

Finally, the series facilitator waltzed in. She greeted the other choreographers and everyone else, as they continued their mini-conversations.

Veiled behind my light-brown skin, I nixed my skeleton and invented an activity called “Standing

In My Truth.”² With my fifteen minutes up, I introduced myself to the facilitator and constructed my questions until show time. The audience was encouraged to stand if they attested to a statement I made and then sit. Each direction began with, “Stand if you...” The statements ranged from “...were born and raised in New York City,” “...own property in NYC,” and “...have faced a housing crisis in NYC” to “...have ever called the police,” “...feel safe around police,” and “...have a family member who was or is incarcerated.”

After my performance, a white gay male in the audience scrutinized me for not “making sure this was a safe space.” I asked the other participants if I had announced to them that I would ensure a “safe space.” Everyone nodded No.

I replied, “That is not my responsibility. I only curate spaces that encourage exploring lands beyond the boundary of our comfort zones.”

An attendee asked, “How did you come up with this?” I then vented my feelings of being ostracized during the tech rehearsal. At the evening’s end, the facilitator apologized.

Following the last time I performed at Eden’s Expressway, I continued applying to dance residencies. But since my work got less abstract, more inclined toward African and American diasporic storytelling, I couldn’t get accepted anywhere. So, in 2017, I shifted my creative goals to the production of visual art and curation. I had been curating art series since 2013, yet my fire to become an “American dancer” was

² [Standing In My Truth](#)

extinguished. My inner choreographer still yearns for the opportunity to construct dance spectacles. However, I keep encountering white women with power in the dance world who self-victimize and distance themselves from me whenever the topic of “Other-ing” or racism surfaces. I always end up being the antagonist. This constant, frustrating cycle has motivated me to write this piece, “whiny dancer.”

I first planned to interview Yvonne Rainer and Arthur Aviles in effort to parallel their dance journeys with mine. Because I am a gay man living with HIV, the three of us are connected by way of dance in the 1980’s. We were and are all affected by the loss of creators due to the USA’s HIV/AIDS response, or lack thereof, during the Reagan era. They lost friends, and I lost mentors. We all lost visionaries who would have *actually* diversified the demographic of the 2020 dance world. Unfortunately, countless dance makers were murdered by the USA’s purposeful negligence. My aim for “whiny dancer” was to brainstorm with Rainer and Aviles the strategies and solutions needed to prevent a post-COVID-19 era of dance similar to decades following the HIV outbreak in the US; to prevent a second wave of unsung dancemakers. Since life never occurs as planned, “whiny dancer” is morphing into something entirely different.

Let’s rewind a little bit, back to Fall 2019. At the end of a rehearsal³ viewing and Q&A with Rainer that I attended, most of the questions asked by the audience were in reference to her role as a pioneer of postmodern dance and the Judson Dance Theater collective in the 1960’s.

³ [Performa19](#)

Remember when I wrote how hypnotized I was by my college dance studies?

Hijkata Tatsumi, Pina Bausch and Yvonne Rainer's triumphs drove me to investigate and express what I was learning about movement theory and praxis. In short, I stan Rainer and, for a decade I idolized her, along with the "American dance" world, as a historical figure. That is one third of my life. I expected myself to ask her if she was inspired by Rudolf von Laban. Unbeknownst to me, my ancestors shook my hands and beckoned me to ask a question.

I inquired, "What ways did Judson Dance Theater attempt to include more Black and Brown voices in the disproportionately white experimental performance group?" Taken aback, she noted that non-white dancers were seeking employment in musical theater productions and in Alvin Ailey's company. She added that the group was voluntary and unable to pay its dancers. I was baffled.

I thought to myself, *Did she just give me a politician's answer? No way. Not Yvonne.*

The next day, she emailed me in an attempt to elaborate her end of our discussion, since it was cut short when the rehearsal concluded. To highlight her work against racism, she attached a pdf copy of her non-fiction short story which imagines the mythic figure Apollo time-warped to the present day, confronting racism. She informed me of the non-white dancers she has hired throughout the decades and reiterated her notion that Black and Brown dancers sought paid

opportunities in musical theater and at Ailey. Our email correspondence was mainly her defending herself and me backtracking to clarify how my words were not accusatory. We ended somewhat agreeably, both deducing that more needs to be done to include Black and Brown voices in the global dance world.

Fast-forwarding, I was curated to write for *Imagining: A Gibney Journal* in September 2020. Immediately, I knew that I wanted to map parallel histories of the effects of HIV/AIDS on NYC dance communities from the 1980s to 2020. My goal remains to offer strategies and solutions that shift the dance world's racial demographic⁴ in 2021 and beyond. To my dismay, Rainer instantly declined my proposal that we collaborate on this essay, accusing me of categorizing her into a group of people who have benefited from racism in the white-centric dance world. I did not. Yet, her reaction tells all. She must know that she benefits.

Why gaslight me? I asked her to help me brainstorm ways to spotlight the work of Black and Brown HIV+ dancers in NYC institutions and she refused my invitation; expressing that she has spent too long in her life accounting for her "evolving racial awareness" and is "interviewed out." She said she is the "wrong person for this venture."

Fact is, she is the right person. She must know that white people listen best to white people. She knows there is more fight to be fought. Because of her reach, she is absolutely the right person for this venture.

⁴ [Racial and workforce demographics in NYC Dance](#) (downloadable 2016 statistics)

“Venture” is an interesting choice of word. Is it risky or daring to include more Black and Brown HIV+ representation in the dance world? Even if we solely focus on NYC, is it dangerous or unpleasant to develop strategies and solutions that promote the aforementioned demographic change in dance?

Words are power.

The self-victimizing rhetoric Rainer used to gaslight me was basically a racist microaggression that I refuse to be silent about.

Why was I denied assistance? I can't tell Rainer's story or answer for her. But I can stand in my truth and tell my own story.

I believe she is genuinely tired of accounting for her complicity in Judson Dance Theater's discriminatory history, and that her grit and hard work are the sole reasons for her successes. Of course, as Ta-Nehisi Coates reminds us on page 42 of *Between the World and Me*⁵, the white body is protected and validated by the Black body. Since racism is an artificial intelligence that maintains the oppressions caused by white nationalism, “white America is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control [Black] bodies. Sometimes this power is direct (lynching), and sometimes it is insidious (redlining[, gentrification, and re-zoning])... The power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white, and without it, white people would cease to exist for want of reasons.”

Rainer's decision that she has done enough is an apathetic response that I never expected from someone I revered during my most formative years. The sadness I feel is overpowered by my drive to prove her wrong.

The beauty of my final email with Rainer is that she gave me the answer I needed all along. The most effective strategy is infiltrating dance institutions via respect and love; on a person-to-person level. The best solution is for us to make these spaces ourselves. If NYC dance institutions and media hire and promote Black and Brown dance makers at the same rate that we have seen since the 1960s, then the mid-2000's will repeat the historical and financial erasure of non-white dancers. It is up to us to thwart this cycle. Will you join me?

Email anthonywashrosado@gmail.com to share resources, testimonies, strategies and solutions.

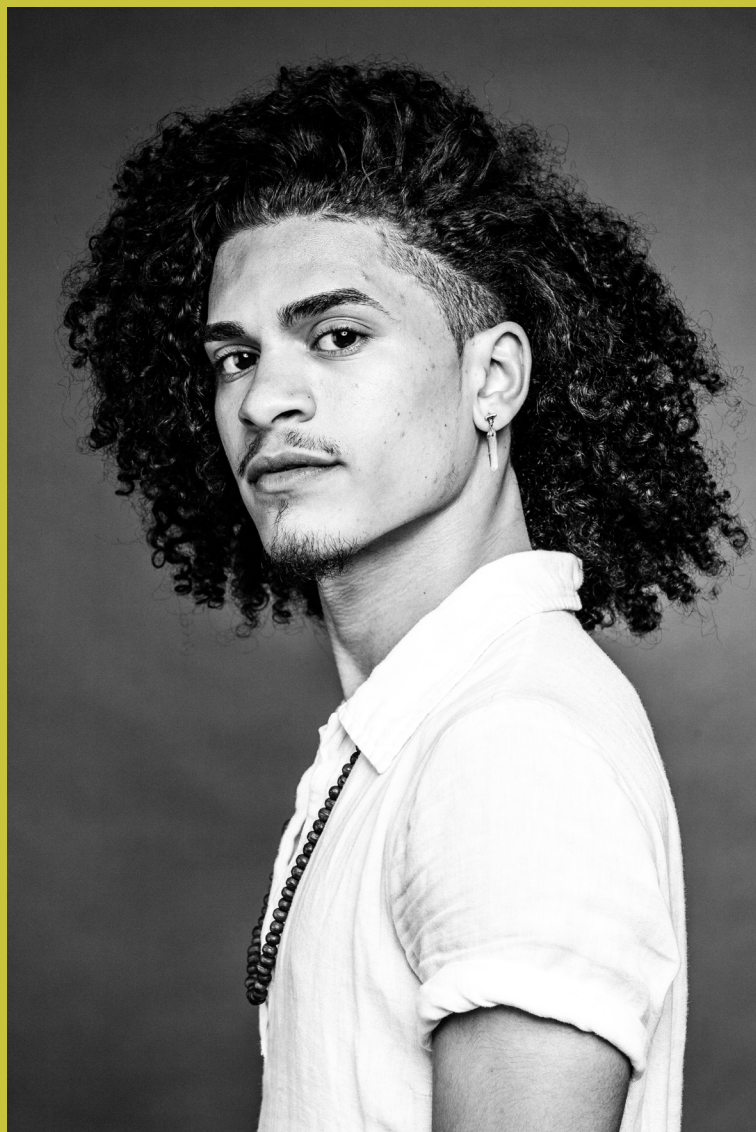


Photo of Anthonywash.Rosado by MengWen Cao

Anthonywash.Rosado is an Afro-Boricua Queer Nuyorican storyteller merging anthropological literature, visual art, interactive installation, and immersive performance; to share TLGBQ+ and BIPOC story-sharing methods. He/she/they produced and curated "Universal Humyn Love" at Make The Road NY, the "#NativeBushwick Artist Lecture Series" at Brooklyn FireProof, "en casa afuera" at The Loisaidea Center, and "PROGRESS" in Five Myles Gallery between 2013 and 2017. In this time Rosado produced art and social justice events with Starr Bar, Moodring, David & Schweitzer Gallery, WritingOnItAll, Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation, May Day Space, and Silent Barn. Rosado has published written works with Posture Magazine, Medium, Cultural Weekly, and The Tenth Magazine; and a history book with Arts in Bushwick. Rosado was Artist in Residence at The Loisaidea Center Fall 2017 to Spring 2018, Arts East NY in Summer 2018, and El Museo De Los Sures in Fall/Winter 2018. In addition to manifesting "ARCANUM" as the 2019-2020 Queer|Art|Mentorship Curatorial Practice Fellow, Rosado will premiere an exhibit that will gift autochthonous African and American storytelling technologies, titled "BoriBrasi," in Summer 2021.

Website: www.anthonywashrosado.com

Instagram: @anthonywash.rosado

Facebook: @anthonywashrosado

DANCE CRITICISM AS LEADERSHIP

A new approach to dance
curricula in academia

BY GREGORY KING

This essay is a questioning of how dance criticism could be used to lead the dance field if strategically centered within the curriculum. It proposes a collective reimagining to move beyond the status quo of aligning our values with Eurocentric norms. Traditionally, dance critics have been charged with the task of describing, analyzing, contextualizing and interpreting dance works. Here, I argue that critical voices should be situated throughout the academic curriculum in dance programs. I make a call to action, hoping criticism will be used to demonstrate ways in which dance can more equitably lead the field. Finally, I critique dance curricula and the need for a dismantling, a revising, and a retelling of dance stories.

The study of dance is capacious, allowing a broader, more critical understanding of not only how and why we dance, but what we know about dance, and who is impacted by the dance. I've attended and taught at academic institutions where students learn dance history, dance composition, and some studio-based courses through a jarringly narrow lens. Over time, and after becoming a dance writer, I was compelled to contemplate ways in which dance criticism could serve as a tool to equitably place the histories of dance--within a dance education context--at the forefront of the field, offering insight into how the artform could advance and evolve with rigorous discourse around non-Western forms, spaces where performances are celebrated, bodies that get centered on proscenium stages, who gets funded to dance, and language for best practices enabling inclusion and equity.

So what should dance programs be teaching, and why?

In *Dance Teaching Methods and Curriculum Design*, Gayle Kassing and Danielle Mary Jay¹ suggest that there is no widely accepted definition for the term *curriculum*. They explain that curriculum is often defined by its approach to education in relation to society and the specific objectives designated for a course of study. They assert that a dance curriculum consists of the subject matter of a particular dance form and can deal with a single dance unit or a four-year progressive plan. They hammer home the fact that a viable dance curriculum is indicative of the values of the dance community, acknowledging the need for both the learner and the society, bridging said values. But what will it take for the curriculum within dance institutions to move away from a centering of Eurocentric forms and when will there be a welcoming, an understanding, and an appreciating for the values of non-Western forms like Caribbean folk dances, hip-hop, capoeira, Bharatanatyam, and flamenco?

In a recent article for *Thinking Dance*, I cited models of dance criticism can be experienced from TikTok videos to reviews in *The New York Times*. These, and a plethora of other platforms offer relevant commentaries about dance in today's culture. Because of this, dance criticism must be an important consideration when thinking about the curriculum and the advancement of the field.

¹ Kassing, Gayle, and Danielle M. Jay. *Dance Teaching Methods and Curriculum Design*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2003. Print.

First task: a new paradigm for effective leadership

Imagine experiencing your dance education through a multicultural lens--detaching from that primary focus on the works and writings of white artists and scholars. That means questioning what is taught, what is written about dance, who is writing, and what all of this says about contemporary society.

Dance critics have been called gatekeepers of dance knowledge and translators of movement language. Therefore, we must ask whose aesthetics, whose language, becomes centered when white writers predominate in the field. We need to diversify perspectives in dance and its critical voices so that students will learn from this writing. Their curiosity, awareness and knowledge will be guided.

Dance criticism can certainly stand some criticism! We must reflect on:

- the predominance of dance writing that covers only Western dance forms such as ballet and modern dance
- the overwhelming number of white writers and scholars of dance
- the inadequacy of discourse and writing on dance that is filtered through the lens of white aesthetics and expectations

Dance education should embrace the works of critics whose breadth of understanding offers

progressive visions for the curriculum. These dialogues would impact course work, technique classes, conference presentations, studio showings, and classroom discussions, tightening the connections between research-based effective practices and academic matriculation.

Dance students benefit from theory, from an intellectual dimension to their work that assists them in thinking deeply about creative process and performance and informs their post-performance discussions. Criticism encourages evolved thinking, giving credence to what is possible in all dance spaces.

Does your current curriculum serve your Black students?

Students are asking questions, energizing discussions around the relevance of their study of dance. How is dance moving forward? Who can we look to for leadership? One possible answer is dance criticism.

The curriculum fails Black dancers by not providing the appropriate cultural foundations for learning. It does not offer a comprehensive understanding of the histories of people who look like me, nor does it deconstruct dress codes and hairstyle requirements that Othered me, and it downplayed the relevance of Black aesthetics. Dance histories from the African diaspora are ignored and seldom, if ever, taught. What's taught in conventional dance education shuns the magnitude and gravity of the impact of colonialism, segregation, domination and oppression.

Most dance institutions require a student to excel in ballet and American modern dance in order to matriculate while relegating non-Western forms to the margins as electives. In a recent *Dance Magazine* article, dance professor Iquail Shaheed and I spoke about this time in graduate school saying his dance composition professor pushed him to explore his voice in the subject of Blackness. Sadly, it had to fit within the confines of white legibility. Sure, this was then...but it's still happening now. Let's eradicate the white gaze. Let's expand the viewer's lens, making the viewer aware of perspectives never contemplated.

Dance criticism, itself, is not without criticism.

If all dance critics were to adopt a model of multiculturalism in their approach to criticism, it would inform more nuanced worldviews, allowing criticism to function as a guide for the curriculum. Institutions would benefit from having dance critics work with educators in dance history and composition to reimagine objectives and assessments. This would help curriculum committee members make informed decisions about their programs, increasing the capacity for educators to identify and suggest evaluation methods. We must call for a collective re-envisioning to move beyond the status quo and start challenging the national standards of the National Association of Schools of Dance.

Yes, dance criticism is besieged with biases. Even more reason to use it as a litmus test to identify

exclusionary practices and highlight missing voices and deficient representation.

Dance criticism is intellectual problem-solving. It situates and questions the roles of art, artists, performers, audience and society. Let us begin a rigorous re-envisioning of what our young scholars and artists must know now as they prepare to shape the future of dance.



Photo of Gregory King by Dennis J Photography.

Gregory King received his MFA in Choreographic Practice and Theory from Southern Methodist University. He has performed with The Washington Ballet, Erick Hawkins Dance Company, New York Theatre Ballet, Donald Byrd /The Group, The Metropolitan Opera Ballet, New York City Opera, and Disney's *The Lion King* on Broadway. King is a dance writer and his response to the Dancing for Justice Philadelphia event, was published in *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies* and cited in the U. S. Department of Arts and Culture's 2016 resource guide, *Art Became the Oxygen*. In 2020 King was awarded a See Chicago Dance Critical Writing Fellowship and has been invited to present his research at several national and international conferences including Art and Activism in Aotearoa and Beyond at The University of Auckland, New Zealand.

As a choreographer, his works have been commissioned by Transformer Station (Cleveland, OH), Georgian Court University (Lakewood, NY), Texas Ballet Theatre School (Dallas, TX), Indiana University (Bloomington, IN), The Ammerman Center for Arts and Technology 16th Biennial Symposium (New London, CT), Current Sessions (New York, NY), and SPACES Gallery (Cleveland, OH), and presented at Dixon Place (New York, NY), The Kennedy Center (Washington D.C.), and Playhouse Square (Cleveland, OH).

He has served as dance faculty for Texas Ballet Theatre and Boston Ballet, as well as visiting assistant professor of dance at Temple University, and Swarthmore College.

Mr. King is an assistant professor of dance at Kent State University where he serves on the Anti-Racism Task Force, was a Provost Faculty Associate, and is the artistic director of the Kent Dance Ensemble.

www.gregoryaking.com

DIVINE
VERTICAL
LIBERATION

Black Bodies and the Healing Power
of Aerial Rope Dance

BY KIEBPOLI CALNEK

*Separate thou the earth from the fire,
the subtle from the gross
sweetly with great industry.
It ascends from the earth to the heaven
and again it descends to the earth
and receives the force of things superior
and inferior.*

— *Hermes Trismegistus*¹

It's Paris, 1879. Miss La La, a circus performer, hangs from a tent at Cirque Fernando, a rope gripped between her teeth². It's a risky display of impressive strength and skill, and it will bring this Black aerialist great acclaim.

It's New York, 2008. I'm one of still very few Black aerialists in circus, and I have created Black*Acrobat to be a beacon of training and performance opportunities for a diversity of oppressed peoples. If my Black*Acrobat existed in those times, its "spirited business competition and independence of mind"³ would have gotten me lynched from a tree or dragged behind a truck. Or both. A Black woman's body only matters... sometimes.

Aerial rope—both literally and as metaphor—is my medium for freedom, unveiling within me the power of what ancestor Audre Lorde called "the erotic."⁴

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emerald_Tablet
2 Miss La La - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miss_La_La_at_the_Cirque_Fernando
3 Ida B. Wells - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynching_in_the_United_States
4 Audre Lorde - Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power http://www.peacewithpurple.org/uploads/8/2/1/6/8216786/audre_lorde_cool-beans.pdf

I first got into aerial work while I was dating a dancer and was eager to experience a bit of what her life was like. I took various dance classes to acquaint myself to the rigor. Yet regardless of style, while everyone was stepping to the left, I stomped to the right, until I tried a free intro to aerial. In class, I took the sleek apparatus between my hands, twirling wrists so they were supported by another wrap of fabric. I drove my shoulders down and back, engaged belly button to spine, gripped tight while tucking knees up to chin, curling backwards into a ball, then straightening my legs upward into an aerial handstand! I knew, instantaneously, that I had found my erotic. In Lorde's view, the erotic is not merely a physical experience. It is a show of self-connection, joy and resilience in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and homophobic society.⁵ I'm more grounded in a topsy-turvy state than coping with the relentless transitions of surviving whiteness.

Climbing the *corde lisse*⁶ was a portal to a fresh sense of self and my capabilities. The smooth rope didn't care about color, gender, sex, age, class or ability. Unlike some human teachers, the rope does not have, and pass along, negativity about race, body type, or corporal expression. Corde lisse leveled the playing field. All bodies learned invaluable lessons--to shed indecisiveness, dissolve bad habits, strengthen core muscles. It was a complete head-to-toe workout, one that encouraged the dancer to focus on the breath while problem solving, three meters high, using just hands, wraps and feet. No net. That's Olympic Superhero status. Yet was the circus a safe space for Black, Indigenous, People Of Color (BIPOC)?

5 Ibid.
6 Corde lisse - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corde_lisse

Save childhood visits to The Greatest Show on Earth, Double Dutch battles or the Harlem Globetrotters, this was a pursuit outside my quotidian activities. With no small obsession, I sought guidance for my nascent aerial journey only to learn that there were very few Black aerialists. My search brought me to London for more intensive training where, sight unseen, I had agreed to an apartment swap with another rope artist. At the Circus Space, now The National Centre for Circus Arts, I was surrounded by circus professionals—one, a Black woman in a position of leadership and power at the school. Despite the oppressive financial burden of circus training and the clique-y nature of its community, I learned, with her support, that I could and should carve out a spot for myself.

Many cultures have stories of vertical planes—trees or cords—connecting the spirit world to the earthly, with energy and beings traversing these connectors in one direction or the other. The vertical rope can weave an umbilicus between heaven and earth, between the conscious and unconscious mind. These vertical connectors are the sites where bodies can release their inherited trauma.⁷ With this ancient, root knowledge, and need for a safe bubble, I created my performance production company, Black*Acrobat--love child of the Black Arts Movement and the Queer Trans, People Of Color (QTPOC) community incarnated through the container of aerial circus.

For Black people, the rope, of course, bears a troubling memory out of the ancestral past—

7 Trauma release (PTSD) - Bessel van der Kolk, M.D. (25 September 2014). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Publishing Group. ISBN 978-1-101-60830-2.

lynchings, brutal mob violence meant to intimidate and control the Black threat to white people's economic, political and social power. Many Americans have not been taught that lynchings were treated as entertainments, like picnics, for white families.⁸ Did you know that, only in 2020, was a hanging noose—intended as a threatening sign—declared illegal in New York State?⁹ The Black body holds many memories. The body remembers.

Through choreography, I learned, I can control my internal experience. Memories flex muscles; muscles, too, flex memories. As I integrate and manage memories, my brain develops new neural pathways.¹⁰ It's possible to reset both one's physical structure and one's nervous system.¹¹ And this has the potential to heal wounds, insecurities and psychic stagnancy that have ancestral origin.¹² Wielding a length of rope—an object long used to denigrate and murder Black people—we can experience a freedom and boundlessness uncommon in everyday life. I take that reclamation of power very seriously.

Yet, I had questions!

Weren't African Americans stolen from their families and exploited in sideshow as oddities for whites to gawk at?¹³

8 "picnic, entertainment lynchings" -

<https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/question/2004/january.htm>

9 NY noose law - <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/laws/PEN/240.31>

10 Neuroscience of Exercise: Neuroplasticity and Its Behavioral Consequences - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5081452/>

11 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motor_control

12 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Body_memory

13 "stolen, exploited oddities" - <https://face2faceafrica.com/article/the-muse--brothers-two-black-albinos-kidnapped-and-displayed-as-freaks-in-u-s-circuses-in-the-1900s>

Otherwise, don't you need to be born or wed into a family of traveling curiosities?

Wasn't a desire to join the circus always connected to a threat to run away?

If you proudly stated you did circus for a living, who would take you seriously?

What were you doing with your privileged life?

Getting free.

Living as a Black, queer, woman—a triple threat of intersectional marginalization—I wield a rope as an object of liberation. My body rises up in the air on a rope-- but with my own agency and for a different purpose. I'm not asking permission for my own liberation. Those who wish to suppress us know we're invincible. As the Black lesbian feminist group, Combahee River Collective, points out in their Statement, "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."¹⁴

The rope's knots remind me that I am bound to something larger than myself. It is paradoxical that the spotlighted visibility and vulnerability of the circus aerialist is both a source of threat to a Black body and a source of liberation for that body.

For Black people to regain and maintain our psychic sovereignty, our artists will need to offer us space to mourn and to rejoice—a Black renaissance of

14 Combahee River Collective Statement - <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>

transformation and release--and build that into our experiences of visual design, performance, music and literature. What stories of Black resilience will now burst into radiant view and evolution? While contemporary mainstream media has started to knit Black history with fantasy, horror, and science fiction for thoughtful spins on repugnant past events, our American Black folktales assured us that we could already fly.¹⁵

I expect to see a surge in surrealism and comedies because of the current times. It is painfully absurd that a brutal murder of yet another Black person in America¹⁶ spurred white people to rub the willful ignorance out their eyes and decide to post black squares on social media¹⁷, donate a few dollars to BIPOC, and hastily update mission statements to include diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. It took a white man in the aerial community eleven years to finally apologize to me for his aggressive insults when I had the audacity to send him a casting call seeking POC aerialists. The circus world wasn't as tight as I naively hoped, yet intrinsically knew. The cognitive dissonance is shocking enough to make me either laugh or cry.

This period of time is usually described as a twin pandemic—the coronavirus and police violence setting off an uprising against the disease of white supremacy and racism. I've watched that uprising suddenly create opportunities for artists from underserved communities as institutions of many kinds have sprung to address, or at least appear to be addressing, inequities. It makes me wonder, though, if white capitalist institutions will truly push

15 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_People_Could_Fly

16 George Floyd - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing_of_George_Floyd

17 black squares - <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/02/black-out-tuesday-dominates-social-media-millions-show-solidarity-george-floyd>

through their discomfort and share resources while building infrastructure—equitably and sustainably—for the health of all.

Rope, compared to silks, has little corporate value.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it has spiritual value—and thrill. Acrobatics elevates and suspends the dancer on vertical planes unachieved in ordinary life. Aerialists reach operatic levels of unrestricted, three-dimensional, emotive spectacle that takes your breath away. By depicting QT-BIPOC achieving what seems impossible, audiences are inspired to feel they too can reach what has been deemed unattainable.

It is critical for spectators of color to see someone who resembles them. We project ourselves—our character and identities—upon the performer. In a way, that opens up new prospects for us. The alchemy of Black circus transcends European classical technique. It opens up new vistas for the performer and the viewer, folding in additional disciplines such as burlesque, pole dancing, ritual, sports, martial arts and more. The Black stories we craft today become mythologies for our future.

Our resilience rests in our connections. The first erotic function is the power of deeply sharing any pursuit with others. That resultant joy forms a bridge and lessens the threat of difference between people.¹⁹ Teaching rope dancing to women has taught me something important. When a woman learns to change her perception of what is possible for her, to trust her gut, without apology,

this knowledge spills over into her everyday life and, therefore, into the lives of others. People are forced to look beyond my fluid identity labels and respect our differences as they learn from my expertise.

This inspires understanding, compassion, and presumably, progress. As Toni Morrison reminds us, “the function of freedom is to free someone else.”²⁰

Healing my body, then, has healed my mind, transforming a narrative of Black suffering into restorative agency and action. Aerial rope dance chose me; the catalyst that ultimately chooses you might be different but, I hope, just as intoxicating.

Aerial rope has taught me to demand and expect the best—of myself and of this world. To be of service by holding the truth of our trauma while honoring our persistence. Striking balance will loosen the tension of embedded emotional coils, liberating us as whole beings in harmony with the world, and within ourselves. “If you surrender to the air you can ride it.”²¹ We are destined for radical freedom.

¹⁸ <http://sideshow-circusmagazine.com/circus-skills/aerial/corde-lisse>

¹⁹ Audre Lorde - Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power http://www.peacewithpurpose.org/uploads/8/2/1/6/8216786/audre_lorde_cool-beans.pdf

²⁰ Toni Morrison - <https://www.essence.com/feature/toni-morrison-tribute-function-of-freedom-former-intern/>

²¹ Toni Morrison - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Song_of_Solomon_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Song_of_Solomon_(novel))



Photo of Kiebpoli Calnek by Terri Brindisi

Kiebpoli Calnek (they/them), a non-binary queer Black creative, born and raised in New York City/Lenapehoking, has generated nuanced performances and artistic direction seeped in poetic somatic elements for over two decades. Their social enterprise, Black*Acrobat, produces interdisciplinary shows aimed at sharing stories of and for fringe communities accomplishing the unexpected by acknowledging and celebrating authentic visions, voices and viewpoints through research, access, and collaboration.

As a guest contributor in 2014 for Oprah Winfrey's *O Magazine*, Kiebpoli penned, "How It Feels... To Be An Aerial Acrobat." While living out West, Kiebpoli nurtured film, stage, and literary relationships and in 2018, the concept of Queer & Trans Love Stories (QTLS) was born at a writing residency in New Mexico's Peñasco mountains.

Kiebpoli's works received generous funding and support from Elizabeth Streb, Astraea Foundation, Asian Arts Initiative, and The New York Foundation for the Arts. They are a member of the Lincoln Center Directors Lab, SAG-AFTRA, and Actors' Equity Association.

kiebpoli.com

When I am ready. Notes in Crip time.

BY DANI COLE

Content Warning: discussions of ableism, racism, pain, and death

Begin poem.

pain at midday, wondering what symmetrical means
now that I am asymmetrical

(but I was always asymmetrical)

maybe your back can hold the weight of the sun
while your right arm
tries to bend again

but it could be over ambition
framed by a spine, a nervous system once
normalized
the curves that match your sun, not the sun

End poem.

As I type this with both hands on a MacBook Air, I sit on a two-person indigo couch facing a credenza with metal handles. My partner is to my left, practicing Mandarin, and plants line the window sill. They don't appear to need water at the moment. My thick, wavy brown hair, not washed, is pulled back in a bun at the base of my neck, bangs curling from the humidity outside. My skin is paler now that it is December; the faint yellow, a mix of my Japanese-American father and overabundance of carotene, is revealed as the tan from pandemic Prospect Park fades. Oversized olive turtleneck with a few fibers tugged out of the seams. Relaxed jaw, chin tucked slightly towards chest, eyes drooping as they re-read and read again.

At the base of my neck, C6 or C7, an intangible thickness begins and travels into my shoulders. I have only been writing for nine minutes! For a moment, I stretch my collarbones to the sides and back by drawing my shoulder blades closer together; my right ulnar nerve twinges, followed by a vibration in my right ring and pinky fingers. This gives me pause. *Hello? Are you there?* I am typing, but no feeling associated with keys on the computer. Shit. In the pause, my knees begin to pulsate. More accurately, they throb with incessant rhythm. Feet are nowhere. Though, maybe I have ankles today? Lethargy asks me to lie down. My body, I, asks me to lie the fuck down.

The plants actually do seem thirsty. I imagine getting up. I do get up.

Pause.

Visual descriptions are hopefully becoming a more common practice. Recently, I have been in numerous Zoom rooms within the dance community (performances, talk backs, advocacy gatherings) where visual descriptions are a strongly suggested part of introductions. Note: I am uncertain if this suggestion comes from disabled+ people. My inkling is that it took someone with knowledge of disability to suggest it and that it was likely a disabled+ person, whether they inwardly and/or publicly identify as disabled+ or not. Note within a note: I define disabled+ as people who identify as disabled, chronically ill, neurodivergent, and/or all other identifiers that may or may not directly use the term "disability." There are linked resources relating to disability by disabled+ people

included at the end of this. I do not use footnotes anymore, hence the notes; they can be missed by screen readers and sometimes aren't included in audio recordings. Tangential sidenote: The chat in Zoom also isn't necessarily accessible.

Regardless, visual descriptions can include a variety of components. Clothing, glasses, hair color, skin color, background that fits in a Zoom rectangle. More often than not, I practice and have experienced people including identifications that are not necessarily "visible" and should not be assumed, ever. Relationship to disability, queerness, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, age, spirituality, current state of bodymind, affiliations to groups, etc. People can share out various identifiers along with descriptions of their current, living image. They can share what is outside, what is inside, and the ways in which those things may interplay into transitions and expressions. This is a choice-making process. What is shared may change depending on the space and to whom a person is sharing their description with at a given time. It is both an improvisational and, perhaps, a planned act; choreographic structure in the description may remain, but there is always a tinkering with regards to the moment from a current POV. Note: Choice-making is sometimes misconstrued and inaccessible due to various identifiers and by what is "visible" to others, others who are in and hold power. Continued murders of disabled+ Black people by the police is an example. Misconstruing and inaccessibility equals harm and premature, wrongful death.

Audio description can be similar to visual description in addressing a variety of components.

Audio describers, in forms of professionals and/or friends, share what they see from a specific POV. There is no 100% objectivity, although there can be training and focus on things separate from personal preference. Identities and oneness mix into what is shared within the boundaries of time before the audio describer must move onto detailing the next movement or image.

Check in with your body. Take the time you need and desire to move and/or not move in a way that feels supportive to you. This can happen at any moment you are reading and/or listening to this. It can potentially happen at any moment of your existence, if the space you are in is not harmful or will not enact ableist harms as a result of your check-in.

Existing in our bodies is not disruptive. Some examples of ways to somatically check-in without emphasis on breath and ableist language are included at the end of this.

I rarely share with a space that I am disabled+. If there is a check-in about accessibility, I will share what I need in that space. Sometimes I censor this. I shouldn't, but I do. *Do I really want to take time?* Actually, probably. But, my bodymind sensations and relationships to chronic illness and disability are likely not vocalized unless I am with disabled+ community. Even in those spaces, we do not necessarily discuss our medical histories, trauma, identification with disability, etc. We check in about what we need. Captions? Cameras off? *This should always be an option.* Repeating what

is shared? People sharing their name each time before they speak? Reading the chat out loud as it is populated?

How can we get what we need and desire even if it is not here now? No one should be forced to articulate disability and medical backgrounds, if someone even has medical care. There should be ample space to share and realize access. This isn't a utopian dream. It's movement in multiplicity. The time for this should be built into any gathering. Checking in is **Crip time:**

Begin Quote.

Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires re-imagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of 'how long things take' are based on very particular minds and bodies. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds.

End Quote. From Alison Kafer, author of *Feminist, Queer, Crip*.

The first time I felt safe to lie down while on a specific Zoom meeting and laugh about my double chin, a symptom of releasing pressure on my C6, it was a good day.

Begin Description.

My name is Dani Cole and I am the Artist Coordinator at Gibney. Tonight, I am speaking to you from unceded Canarsie-Lenape land in what is known today as Brooklyn, NY. I am a white-skinned cis woman. My brown hair is pulled back in a ponytail and frizzy bangs fall across my forehead. I wear salmon-rimmed glasses and a soft, light-blue sweater. Behind me is a canvas with mountains and a lake my grandfather painted in the 1980's.

End Description.

People aren't hiding. We aren't fully welcome.

The movement field, whether balletic, somatic, or experimental, is not in support of all bodies. It does not cherish, hold, and move with the outsides, insides, between, transitions, expressions, timings, and actualizations of all bodies. When I was in college, and at most institutions, policies state that if I missed a few ballet classes I would be penalized through a grade reduction. If I have "sick days," a privilege in full-time jobs for "legal" people in the U.S., they are limited. *Sick as abnormal and fleeting?* I remember concern from teachers about how weak I seemed and how I couldn't jump high. I was consumed by doing dance to the "best of my ability" that I did not realize violations of my rights, safety, and desires as a disabled+ person. I still get wrapped up. So do my friends who don't identify as disabled+. *What is happening on the inside? How does that translate out, ideally to actualizations of access?* Now, I ask myself that unconditionally, even if it is not shared out. Yet.

even if it is not shared out. Yet.

It is not any teacher's fault that I momentarily chose to jump again at risk of harm to my body. The complexities of my "keep on going" live in the intermingling of my continued embedded ableism and racism. It was my choice and privilege to attend a degree program where epicenters of movement were primarily ableist. It is the drugged and candied hope of a linear "better." Note: drugs, deemed legal and illegal by governments, and medical support can be crucial parts of accessibility. It was some teachers' generalized ableism and racism shrouded by concern based on what they knew about disability and appearing frail. And, most pivotally, it is movement virtuosity primarily framed through Western, white, nondisabled, and hypermobile (shoutout to Hyp-Access and their work with hypermobile+ people and research) practices and performance.

If I wanted to study East Asian forms, pivot my interdisciplinary work as a conduit for access, and learn from disabled+ peers like I do now, I would not have been in any dance department, let alone pursuing any undergraduate degree, in the U.S. My flare ups may not be as exacerbated as they are now. I live with guilt and continued confusion about how I trained and moved in some movement modalities. I do not want my future students or any person to hold this in their bodies as well.

Note: Jumping is something disabled+ people can do. If we jump, we jump by choice. Jumping is not just from one or two feet. A tenet of Disability Justice is honoring and cherishing the way every body uses expression and existence counter to

ableism and other isms. Jumping harms when it is a part of monolithic mandates for "success" and virtuosity. Productivity harms when it exists in time antithetical to people's bodies.

There is an updated working definition of **ableism**, as of January 1st, 2021:

Begin Quote.

A system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normality, intelligence, excellence, desirability, and productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person's language, appearance, religion and/or their ability to satisfactorily (re)produce, excel and "behave." You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.

End Quote. A working definition by Talila "TL" Lewis, developed in community with Disabled Black and other negatively-racialized people, especially Dustin Gibson.

When I am invited to share visual descriptions, when I am welcomed to check in without a required way of responding, when both of these among many other accessibility practices go without question, the multiplicity, complexity, and ever-fluctuating, constantly changing existences in

realized. The plants are thirsty. But, they know Crip time well. They know Crip time is not waiting on something or someone. It is existing. Gradual, sudden, explosive, growing, sometimes without, cut off roots-leaves-limbs, incubating, porous, supporting, falling, shriveling, sometimes dying, decomposing...

I don't get up. I don't imagine getting up until I am ready.

End of Dani's text. A non-exhaustive, brief resource list follows. All links follow short descriptions and are hyperlinked.

Mia Mingus. Asian-American Transformative Justice and Disability Justice advocate and activator. She has a more active Twitter and Instagram.

<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/>

<https://twitter.com/miamingus>

<https://www.instagram.com/mia.mingus/>

Talia A. Lewis' blog. Community lawyer and consultant on the cutting edge of intersectional thought, creator of the only national deaf prisoner database. <https://www.talilalewis.com/blog>.

Duston P. Gibson. Disability Justice he[art]maker, educator, founding member of **Harriet Tubman Collective.** <https://www.dustinpgibson.com/>

Hyp-Access. Audre Wirtanen and Laura Tuthall. Working at intersections of Disability Justice, science, education, and somatics. <https://hyp-access.com/about>.

Disability Justice Primer by **Sins Invalid.** Analysis, history, and context for growing DJ movement. Based on work by **Patty Berne** and **Sins Invalid.** Includes major suggestions for accessibility. <https://www.sinsinvalid.org/disability-justice-primer>

Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time. Ellen Samuels. Disability Justice Quarterly. <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/5824/4684>

Queer/Crip Time by **The Queer Futures Collective.** A workshop from June 2020. Located at the bottom of the page. <https://www.queerfutures.com/livestream-conocimientos>

ROTATIONS. An exploratory online workshop space and collaborative movement practice challenging understandings of artistry, disability, and access. <https://www.rotations.dance>

Access-Centered Movement. Creating intersectional access to somatic-movement, dance, art, events, and therapeutic services through education, outreach and classes. <https://accesscenteredmovement.wordpress.com/>

Somatic Access. Steps and language for including the nervous system as a part of accessibility by **Marika Heinrichs.** <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJt0enaAPE9/>



Photo of Dani Cole by Lorena Jaramillo, from jill sigman/thinkdance's Motion Practice

Dani Cole is a movement artist, educator, writer, activist, and arts administrator based on unceded Canarsie-Lenape land in what is known today as Brooklyn, NY. She founded the collective Mobilized Voices/MO B I V in 2018 and currently works as a collaborator with jill sigman/thinkdance and ECHOensemble. She worked closely with Eva Yaa Asantewaa, Sarah A.O. Rosner, and Beau Banks as the Curatorial Associate, Artist Coordinator and Editorial Associate at Gibney and is the Associate Manager for the 2020 New York Dance & Performance Awards, The Bessies.

Dani's work centers body politics, the interdisciplinary, and place. With the body as a

three dimensional sphere — movement, text, and sonic vibration weave together into reflections on what was, what is now, and what is imagined in process. Access is pivotal to her process, the language she is moving in and towards with collaborators — listening, dimensional knowledge, trust.

In the past, Dani's solo and group interdisciplinary works have been shared through the 92Y, TADA! Theater, Mana Contemporary, Actor's Fund Arts Center, Bridge for Dance, Access Theatre, and the Emelin Theatre. Her dance piece, don't go back. where? received the Alpha Chi award for "most outstanding researched work" while she was a student at Marymount Manhattan College. Dani was part of the 92Y's Dance Up! next generation of young choreographers. In 2020, she was the commissioned choreographer at The Steffi Nossen School of Dance. In 2018 + 2019, she was a Choreographic Resident at Mana Contemporary, a leading national in-process art museum, and at the San Francisco Conservatory of Dance.

Recently, Dani has shifted away from choreographic orientations to focus on facilitation, shared spaces with co-determination, and a focus on access in process — with her collaborators in M O B I V and the public. She is often teaching — embodied writing workshops, yoga for disabled and non-disabled bodies, and is an educator on guest faculty at various schools and studios.

Dani has traveled to South Africa to meet with fellow student activists in advocacy for the decolonization of education and has been an ambassador for the Foundation for Holocaust Education Projects since 2009. danicoledance.com

BOOK MARKS

**Julia M. Ritter's *Tandem Dances:
Choreographing Immersive Performance***

(Oxford University Press, November 2020)

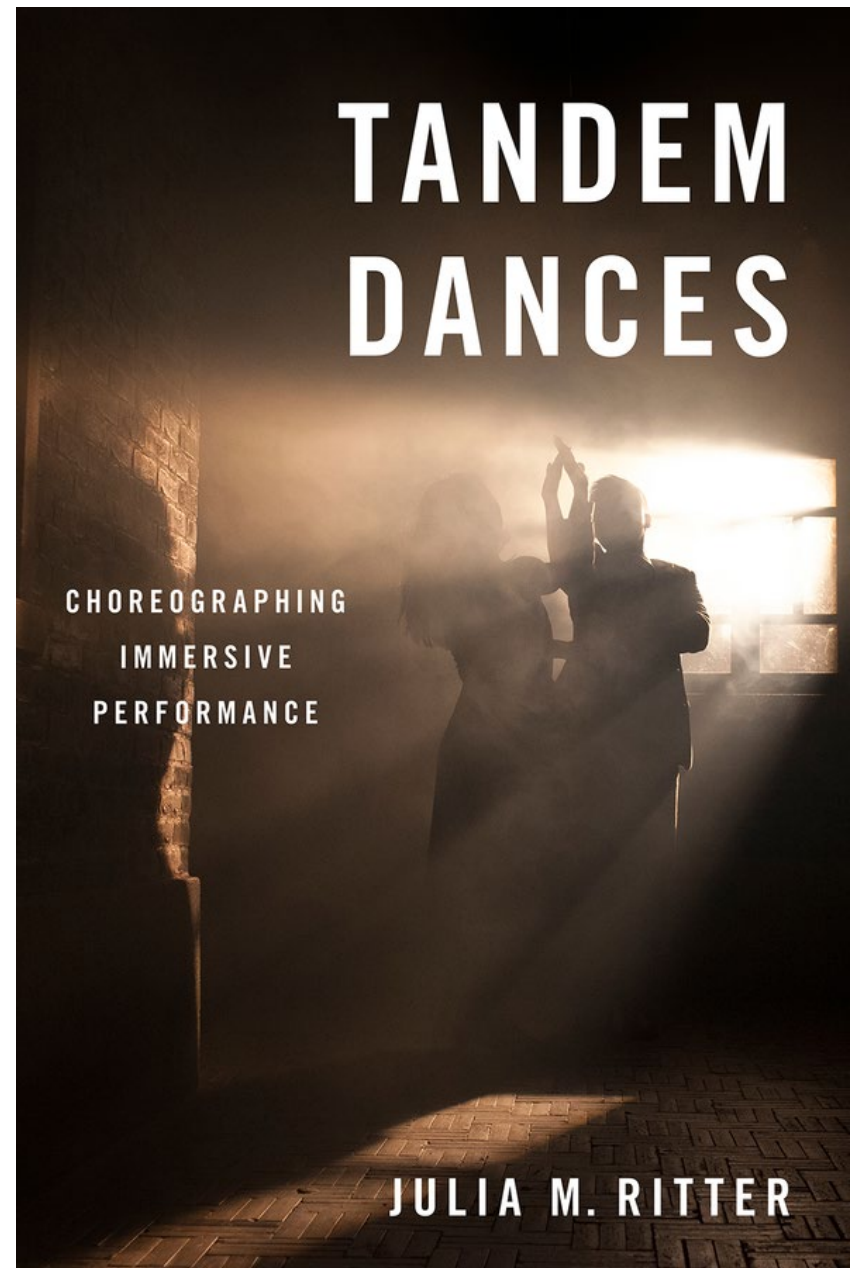
BY EVA YAA ASANTEWAA

The discipline of dance does not have a monopoly on choreography any more than it has a monopoly on movement. Rather, choreography is a versatile practice that has been and can be adopted, adapted, and applied by different individuals across multiple contexts, ranging from the aesthetic to the utilitarian.

— Julia M. Ritter, from *Tandem Dances: Choreographing Immersive Performance*

The use of darkness in *Sleep No More* is not about fear—it is about slowing down the bodies of audiences . . . if they get through the space too quickly, then it loses its layers of complexity. If the audience can see too far ahead of them, then there is no reason for them to go there . . . the darkness slows the audience down so they are wary, curious. This way, [audiences] tune into the tempo of the piece and are able to experience its layers of complexity. The scenes and performers are important, but the impact of the work comes from the way everyone moves through the space.

— Interview with Felix Barrett, director of *Sleep No More*, in Ritter's *Tandem Dances*



We think of immersive theater—for instance, Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More*, choreographed by Maxine Doyle, or Third Rail Projects’ *Then She Fell*—as particularly vivid, interactive performances in which audience members collaborate with artists in creating their own heightened theatrical experience. In Tandem Dances: Choreographing Immersive Performance, dance scholar Julia M. Ritter argues that these participatory “actors” are, in fact, acted upon by the intentional force of choreography, shifted from being passive spectators of theatrical material to themselves becoming a critical part of that theatrical material.

Ritter—the chair and artistic director of Dance at Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University—opens her study with a look at the origins of choreography as that practice is understood in Western theatrical dance traditions of the 16th and 17th centuries. Choreography, then, while not yet named as such, was a matter of the assignment of a person’s place in society and the instruction of the public in the comportment associated with varying degrees of status and power. The word, which only came into use in the 18th Century with the professionalization of dance and an emergent division between elite spectators and the lesser-status performers who entertained them, derived from the Greek *khoros* (chorus) and *khoregus* (director of dance, song and text) of many centuries earlier with the additional root word *graphein* (writing) suggesting the drafting or notation of movement.

It is in the 19th and 20th centuries that the word and role of choreographer took on renewed urgency as singular makers such as Loie Fuller

and Isadora Duncan were hailed as innovative authors of new vocabularies and extraordinary performance. Ritter next looks at the provocative avant-garde artists of two eras—from the Futurists and Dadaists through to the postmodernists of the 1970s who further broke down the hierarchy between performer and spectator, replaced technical polish with everyday movement, and experimented with alternatives to showing work in formal theaters.

After a brief discussion of the performance form known as physical theater, Ritter swings into the digital environment which has vastly remade how artists can tell stories and orchestrate participation. Now, due to the global pandemic, which this scholar could not have predicted, many more of us have become full citizens of digital space—not just tweeting and posting to Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok but teaching, learning, holding a day full of business meetings and reaching out to friends, family and colleagues around the globe. It’s a fair thing to question how digital technology has begun choreographing us and how choreographers, shut off from stages and other indoor spaces, might boldly use digital technology, as in video games, to further enhance the narrative opportunities and transformative experiences of immersive performance. What ethical questions surround this subtly potent choreography?

Ritter explores how choreography—invisible or unsung—operates beneath the surface of immersive theater works. She looks at an early example of the form, though not deemed “immersive theater” at the time, Fiona Templeton’s *YOU—The City* (1988) which deployed Templeton’s “clients” (not participants or audience), one by one,

around a variety of Manhattan neighborhoods, solidly engrossed and invested in relationships with its performers.

Ritter considers how our bodies respond to performers, especially in close quarters, and to the performance environments of immersive theater/performance as the result of choreography as it is broadly defined. She writes, "Spectators, as subjects of choreography, are not only sensing their own kinesthesia in motion, but are also watching, and even feeling, the dance of others in the space with them, including the performers and other audience members." She opens her discussion of *Then She Fell* with a dynamic, powerful description of Rebekah Morin's performance as The Red Queen—and three guests' instinctual and dutiful performances in the queen's chamber. One of these guests, of course, was Ritter, and it is her surprising release from the sobriety of academic writing—the ivory bones beneath the flesh of experience—into sensory, emotional storytelling, with details our bodyminds can see, hear and feel, that makes *Tandem Dances* suddenly spring to life. Gratefully, this reader felt herself fully immersed in the experience *and in* Ritter's excitement in reporting it.

Later in her study, Ritter draws insights from *Then She Fell* to examine the role of precise replication of choreographic details over the numerous times performers of immersive work engage their audiences. This exacting attention to the sameness of detail appears to be less an aesthetic choice than a functional one, choreographically. Third Rail Projects' Tom Pearson tells of his puzzlement when a particular spectator refused to sit in the chair

he pulled out for him. The simple movement of arranging the chair should have worked as it always did. Seeking what made this one occasion different from so many others, Pearson scrolled through his memory of all aspects of the scene to find what could have been different this time. Eventually, he discovers it—an otherwise negligible, unconscious change and one that, if it was indeed the true culprit, I find fascinating.

Again, it is in moments like this that Ritter's book persuades—much in the way that excellent immersive performance invites, engages and persuades.

I will admit, now, that I have taken part, as a spectator, in several Third Rail Projects productions (and even appeared, a couple of nights, as a paid performer, reading Tarot, in one of their events), but I have never attended *Sleep No More*. On the whole, I am less a fan of spectator participation in actuality than in theory, and maybe this very issue of being choreographed—manipulated—in space and time below the threshold of conscious consent explains my skittishness. Ritter's analysis of the how of *Sleep No More* makes Barrett and Doyle's collaboration sound like pure genius with not only immediate but long-lasting psychological influence. She's careful to raise critiques such as reports of *Sleep No More* performers being sexually abused by spectators and, generally, to question immersive performance's centering of white, Western aesthetics and inattention to the access needs of disabled and neurodivergent spectators.

I recall Black playwright Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview*, which won a 2019 Pulitzer Prize. Though

not mentioned by Ritter, *Fairview* audaciously plays with form and takes a sharp turn for the immersive late in its unfolding. But—now here’s another admission—I liked it because, as a Black woman, I could stay seated and watch while white audience members were made to follow the playwright’s directions. Although I sat, I was not unmoved. I experienced—at once—a sense of smugness, a separate and keen awareness of that smugness and a heightened sense of my Blackness. All of us BIPOC—Drury’s necessary accomplices—witnessed the self-consciousness of spectators who self-identified as white bearing the invasiveness of displacement and unwanted visibility and scrutiny. Now, that’s some choreography.

EDITORIAL TEAM



Eva Yaa Asantewaa (pronouns: she/her) is Gibney's Senior Director of Artist Development and Curation as well as Editorial Director for *Imagining: A Gibney Journal*. She won the 2017 Bessie Award for Outstanding Service to the Field of Dance as a veteran writer, curator and community educator. Since 1976, she has contributed writing on dance to *Dance Magazine*, *The Village Voice*, *SoHo Weekly News*, *Gay City News*, *The Dance Enthusiast*, *Time Out New York* and other publications and interviewed dance artists and advocates as host of two podcasts, *Body and Soul* and *Serious Moonlight*. She blogs on the arts, with dance as a specialty, for *InfiniteBody*.

Ms. Yaa Asantewaa joined the curatorial team for Danspace Project's Platform 2016: Lost and Found and created the *skeleton architecture, or the future of our worlds*, an evening of group improvisation featuring 21 Black women and gender-nonconforming performers. Her cast was awarded a 2017 Bessie for Outstanding Performer. In 2018, Queer|Art named one of its awards in her honor, and Detroit-based choreographer Jennifer Harge won the first Eva Yaa Asantewaa Grant for Queer Women(+) Dance Artists. In 2019, Yaa Asantewaa was a recipient of a BAX Arts & Artists in Progress Award. She is a member of the Dance/NYC Symposium Committee and the founder of Black Curators in Dance and Performance.

A native New Yorker of Black Caribbean heritage, Eva makes her home in the East Village with her wife, Deborah, and cat, Crystal.



Dani Cole, she/her, is a Lenapehoking-based (what is known today as NYC) Japanese-American movement artist, educator, writer, activist, and arts administrator. She founded the collective Mobilized Voices/MO B I V in 2018 and is a collaborator with jill sigman/thinkdance and ECHOensemble. Previously, Dani served as the Curatorial Associate & Artist Coordinator at Gibney, and the Editorial Associate for *Imagining: A Gibney Journal* with Editorial Director, Eva Yaa Asantewaa. Dani has traveled to South Africa to meet with fellow student activists in advocacy for the decolonization of education and has been an ambassador for the Foundation for Holocaust Education Projects since 2009.

Dani's work centers body politics and the interdisciplinary. With the body as a three dimensional sphere — movement, text, and sonic vibration weave together into reflections on what was, what is now, and what is imagined in process. Navigating 15 years of dance training based on western white-supremacist, ableist thought — that the classical ballet and hypermobile body

is the "Dance" body — Dani is in the process of dismantling her role in perpetuating self and systematic harm to her body and collaborator's bodies. Access is her process, the language she is moving in and towards — listening, dimensional knowledge, trust. She is in the process of authoring her first poetry zine and is Gibney's in-house writer, creating digital articles and interviews about presented and community artists.

In the past, Dani's interdisciplinary works have been shared through the 92Y, TADA! Theater, Mana Contemporary, Actor's Fund Arts Center, Bridge for Dance, Access Theatre, and the Emelin Theatre. Dani was part of the 92Y's Dance Up! next generation of young choreographers. She has been commissioned by and held residencies at The Steffi Nossen School of Dance, Mana Contemporary, the San Francisco Conservatory of Dance, and Chen Dance Center.

Recently, Dani has shifted away from choreographic orientations to focus on facilitation, shared spaces with co-determination, and a focus on access in process — with her collaborators in M O B I V and the public. She is often teaching — embodied writing workshops, yoga for disabled and non-disabled bodies, and is an educator on guest faculty at various schools.



Photo of Monica Nyenkan by Jakob Tillman

Monica Nyenkan is a Black queer community organizer and arts administrator hailing from Charlotte, NC. She graduated from Marymount Manhattan College, with a Bachelors in Interdisciplinary Studies. Currently based in Brooklyn, NY, her artistic and administrative work focuses on creating equitable solutions with and for historically marginalized communities in order to make art more accessible. In her free time, Monica loves to watch horror films and share meals with her friends and family. A fan of educator and historian Robin Kelley, Monica firmly believes the decolonization of our imaginations will help facilitate a more radical and inclusive way of living.

IMAGINING
A GIBNEY JOURNAL
JANUARY 2021