

BLACK DANCE, COMPLEXITIES OF A TERM

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Preface / Acknowledgments	4
Introduction	7
1. DISCOURSE ON BLACK DANCE	16
1.1 The African-American presence in dance	16
1.1.1 History of terminology	18
1.2 Zita Allen	21
1.3 Carole Johnson	23
1.4 Brenda Dixon Gottschild	26
1.5 Thomas DeFrantz	30
1.6 Conclusions chapter 1	35
2. PARALLELS	38
2.1 PLATFORM 2012: <i>Parallels</i>	38
2.2 <i>Parallels</i> presents	44
2.2.1 Preconceived notion of black dance	44
2.2.2 <i>Parallels</i> ' performances	47
2.3 <i>Parallels</i> discusses	55
2.3.1 Connection to the old <i>Parallels</i>	55
2.3.2 Curatorial Statement	58
2.3.3 Discussion on black dance during <i>Parallels</i>	59
3. PARALLELS CONTINUES THE DISCOURSE	65
3.1.1 The new consideration of black dance in <i>Parallels</i>	69
Concluding remarks	70
Bibliography	74

Dedicated to my mother, Ans Harterink, and my father, Ayhan Sirin, for their patience, their unconditional support in every way, and for making my studies possible.

Preface

During my Master Theatre Studies, of which this thesis is the final assignment, I did my internship at Danspace Project in New York City, during their PLATFORM 2012: *Parallels*¹, which was concerned with the theme of black dance. Assisting the curatorial fellow, it was my first encounter with the ins and outs of curating performance from up close. The art of curating in the performing arts is a topic yet to be explored by many strands of the performing arts. Many experts in the field of performance and theatre have already argued for a broader and more complex consideration of programming in the performing arts². To curate is defined as organizing an art exhibition³, but in many cases also seems to elaborately reflect on the choices made in programming with a focus on what the combination of different works together could mean, and to think about innovations in programming. Seeing the recent increase in curatorial practice in performance, it seems that at least in New York City many have taken up *curating* performance. The organizing of a curatorial intensive for performance at the Performa 11 Biennial (2011), the founding of the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance in 2010, and the mere fact that museums like MoMA and The Whitney Museum of American Art recently started employing performance art curators seem to be signs that performance in New York is already being curated.

¹ Danspace Project's official house style writes "platform" capitalized in the title of *Parallels*. However, when discussing *Parallels* as a platform in a generic way they only capitalize the first letter.

² See for instance the magazine *Frakcija* #55, (2011) entirely dedicated to the topic of curating performance, but also Spångberg (2010), and Hupkens. (2011)

³By Online Dictionary, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/curate>

After witnessing *Parallels*, I have come to the belief that many festivals/theaters, especially in The Netherlands, could benefit both qualitatively and quantitatively from *curating* their program instead of collecting a bunch of performances that fit a certain trend or audience or merely reflect the past season. On the one hand it gives a program extra substance, but on the other hand it is also a way of communicating directly with the spectator as a festival/theatre, and in such a way produces a more loyal audience. Moreover, and this is my main point, it seems that when performances are connected by a topic like race or ethnicity, it needs to be done with caution. In one of my previous assignments during my Masters I wrote an essay expressing skepticism about the programming of the Dutch festival *Dancing on the Edge*, a festival focusing on arts & culture from the Middle East. I attempted to point out how their approach to this ethnic topic was generalizing, first of all, and secondly, relied too heavily on a Western fascination with the exotic, the Other. It made me wonder whether a festival with such a sensitive topic as race or ethnicity could be legitimate at all and how a curator, festival, or theater could approach such that topic. This has been the trajectory that led me to write this thesis.

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Introduction

In 1982 Ishmael Houston-Jones organized a series of performances in New York City titled *Parallels* in which he wanted to show the diversity of what African-Americans were making in dance. Around that time, and still, Alvin Ailey was the most widely known African-American choreographer. On their own website, The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre (AAADT) claims that *Revelations*, made in 1960, went on to become the most widely seen modern dance performance in the U.S and abroad.⁴ Whether this assertion is true or not, we are safe to say that *Revelations* is one of the most performed modern dance performances. Ailey is therefore credited with making modern dance widely popular while at the same time increasing African-American presence in American dance. Because of his immense popularity and visibility, Ailey soon became what people thought of when thinking about dance by African-Americans or black dance, as it was often called at the time. In 2008, a U.S. Congressional resolution designated the AAADT “a vital American cultural ambassador to the world that celebrates the uniqueness of the African-American cultural experience and the preservation and enrichment of the American modern dance heritage.”⁵ This statement emphasizes the double function of AAADT: on the one hand it represented African-American dance, and on the other hand it represented mainstream modern dance. From these two standards Houston-Jones tried to move away. Firstly, he wanted *Parallels* to show that there are African-American dancers working outside mainstream modern dance in a more

⁴ Alvin Ailey Website, About Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, 50 years of Revelations.

⁵ Alvin Ailey Website. About Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre.

experimental, postmodern style. Secondly, he wanted to reduce the prevailing prejudices about African-American dance styles, and show that not all African-Americans danced the way Alvin Ailey did, or related to his work. Houston-Jones therefore focused on featuring African-American choreographers who were making work parallel to modern dance and parallel to what was considered as black dance, hence the name *Parallels*.

Exactly thirty years later, Houston-Jones organized *Parallels* again, this time running from the 2nd of February till the 31st of March at Danspace Project in New York City. Danspace Project is located in St. Marks Church in-the-Bowery where it presents new work in dance, supports a diverse range of choreographers in developing their work, encourages experimentation, and connects artists to audiences.⁶ The Platform series invites guest artist-curators to curate a series of performances; create catalogues and facilitate activities that contextualize the performances; and to provide residency, technical, and dramaturgical support for commissioned work.

In 2012, Houston-Jones thus revisits the topic of black dance, but this time frames it with the questions: “What is black dance? Does it exist? And assuming it does, what defines it?”⁷ Houston-Jones’s second question, whether black dance exists, points to the complexity of the term black dance. If there is black dance, what would it look like? Does it oppose white dance and in that case: what would white dance look like? Would black dance then be Alvin Ailey’s *Revelations*, or would Balanchine’s “jazzing up” of ballet also count as black dance? Could we recognize the blackness in a Balanchine piece? Or can black dance only be performed by black dancers? In that

⁶ Danspace Project website, About Danspace.

⁷ Houston-Jones, *Parallels* catalogue, 15.

case, is Alvin Ailey's choreography for the American Ballet Theatre not black dance? And if black dance could only be executed by black dancers, who can be defined as black? Does a choreographer/dancer with only one African-American parent still count as black? And what about a grandparent with African roots?

There have long been African-American dance pioneers: Josephine Baker and Katherine Dunham in the 1930s, Alvin Ailey and Bill T Jones in the 1960s, and Ishmael Houston-Jones with his original *Parallels* in the 1980s. A lot has changed through these decades, most notably due to the African-American Civil Rights Movement. American concert dance has also changed, moving through stages of modern dance and postmodern dance. During *Parallels* in 2012, these changes were specifically addressed through a lively connection between then (1982) and now (2012), and the meeting of an older and younger generation within the Platform.

Besides asking profound questions and complicating the discussion of black dance, the main focus of *Parallels* in 2012 was still the autonomous performances. The additional frame providing the context is an important contributor, but is not central to the Platform. As Houston-Jones says, his main focus for *Parallels* in 2012 was: "what the new generation was, whatever that means". Thus, the emphasis lies on the emerging makers and their work. Danspace Project is a venue for postmodern, experimental dance, and Houston-Jones is an artist, not just a curator, but an artist-curator; so what does his curating say about the subject? And maybe more importantly, what does it not say?

My interest in black dance can be traced back to my dance education. Receiving my formal dance training at a Jazz department, I was always interested in mixing as

many styles and forms of dance as I encountered. Being of mixed origin myself, both Dutch and Turkish, I have always been “halfway”, enjoying a mix of traditions, values, aesthetics, etc. In my dance education this translated into being so comfortable with the mix, that I never considered what came from where and what (possibly racist) history preceded it. I could place ballet or tap in a certain aesthetic, but that’s as far as I traced it. Encountering the issue of black dance in New York City got me curious as to what exactly clashed there, why, and what consequences it had for those involved.

For this thesis I have chosen not to pose research questions, but to state my goals and methods instead. My goal is to trace how the question of *what black dance is* has been answered, and what those answers imply. I aim to show the complexity of the term by looking at divergent expressions of what black dance might be, in and outside of *Parallels*, and in what has been written about black dance, to describe what makes it so difficult to define what black dance is. Finally, my goal is to show how *Parallels* is situated in the discourse on American black dance and what contribution it makes to the discussion. It is important to emphasize that the aim of this thesis is not to define what black dance is. I do not set out to point to a right or wrong answer, but aim to provide a record of how black dance has been defined, redefined, theorized and questioned during the past decades.

Since parameters keep changing over time, I deem an overview of the discourse on black dance up until today relevant. As long as there are inequalities disadvantaging African-Americans it will be necessary to keep examining the subject of race in dance. I would argue this is important precisely *because* the discourse appears to be at a critical time, when the sustainability of the question is in question (can we still

speak of black dance?). In an interview, this can be seen reflected in Houston-Jones' answer on my question about whether a third or perhaps even a fourth follow-up to *Parallels* would be viable. He responds ambiguously:

“Probably not. It [a follow-up] would be very different I think. I don't know. (...) There is sort of like this biological mixing, and there is more freedom and mobility. Freedom where to live and how to live.”⁸

Basically he's pointing out how the questions *Parallels* asks have become even more complicated. Integration has increased because of more freedom and the racial term black has in some cases become ambiguous, making it more and more difficult to talk about something like black dance, perhaps even impossible in thirty years. As an example Houston-Jones refers to President Barack Obama, who is considered the first black president, but is “the son of a White American woman and a Kenyan man. He was raised in the Kansas heartland, partly in the diverse state of Hawaii and partly in Indonesia. He does not share the history of having his ancestors being brought and sold in this country. He was elected in his forties and has not suffered the direct effects of Jim Crow, and violence”⁹ That means he does not come from a lineage a lineage that a majority of African-Americans do come from. With this example Houston-Jones again points out some of the complexities of the term black dance: Who has the right to claim blackness? What is it, and what is it not?

What should be kept in mind throughout this thesis is that *Parallels* is just one Platform discussing these questions and that although multiple voices within the program can be heard, they all come from a very particular scene for postmodern

⁸ Houston-Jones, Bora Sirin, Interview, April 2012.

⁹ Houston-Jones, *Parallels* catalogue, 18.

and experimental dance, a very small and progressive scene that is traditionally seen as relatively tolerant and open-minded. Furthermore, we should take into consideration the fact that executive director of Danspace Project, Judy Hussie-Taylor, is the one appointing Houston-Jones as curator, who is the one selecting which voices will be presented and which will not. For that reason, their voices should be considered a great influence in anything expressed through *Parallels*, and might even be seen as the “authors” of this project.

Approach

My research is located on the junction of the fields of cultural studies, ethnic studies and theatre studies, which I found echoed in the title of *Dance Magazine*'s review of *Parallels* in its entirety: “Is *Parallels* About Race – or Culture – or Dance?”¹⁰ My thesis will be based mainly on the study of literature that focuses on the consideration of black dance. A quick survey of the literature coming from dance/theatre studies shows that literature about black dance is more often descriptive of the experience and the performance practice than it is theoretical. Literature coming from cultural/ethnic studies has a stronger theoretical focus on cultural factors and contexts, but less on experience and performance practice. I find that using a theoretical approach combined with examples from the performance practice is essential, since a detailed look into some of the performances supports a better understanding of the discourse. Not putting the dance or the dancer central to any discussion of terminology of dance seems like trying to thoroughly analyze

¹⁰ Wendy Perron, *Dance Magazine*, 34.

something from a distance. Therefore I chose to incorporate examples and short analyses of performances where necessary in this thesis.

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on the discourse on black dance. I will examine the ways in which the term black dance has been discussed in literature and what complexities arise when defining black dance as a term. Although I will mainly focus on the writings of Zita Allen, Carole Johnson, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, and Thomas D. DeFrantz, as they are the only authors who have extensively discussed the topic of black dance *as a term*, I will start off with a brief overview of other writing on black dance, as it will provide the three authors whose work I studied with the necessary context. As the sole author I encountered who has interrogated *and* defined the term black dance, Carole Johnson's writing will serve as a starting point. Gottschild and DeFrantz both refrain from defining black dance, but in their explorations on the influences that African-American dance had on American (and world) dance and culture, they do contribute to the discussion on the term black dance. Gottschild mainly challenges stereotypes and shows the paradoxes in the terms black dance/the black dancing body through interviews with dance experts coming from divergent backgrounds. She doesn't try to come to scientific or theoretical conclusions, but focuses on the cultural image by encompassing "qualitative latitudes by choice of interviewees"¹¹. On ideological grounds Gottschild dismisses the term black dance, but also states the necessity of still using the term as a way to honor African-American contributions as long as racism exists. DeFrantz shares these concerns about the term black dance, but takes a more theoretical approach. I draw from both their conclusions.

¹¹ Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 12.

The second chapter of this thesis will elaborate the way *Parallels*, as one of the most recent events in postmodern, experimental dance and performance to devote itself to the topic, addresses black dance. The goal is to trace the complexities it touches upon and the way black dance is defined. On the one hand I will do that by focusing on the questions and discussion raised through how *Parallels* directly addresses the topic and on the other hand I will look into how some of the performances, inside the context provided by *Parallels*, contribute to the discussion on black dance and how they tackle a unifying definition.

In the final chapter I will show how *Parallels* can be seen as a new contribution to the discourse on black dance. How it builds upon and illustrates the preceding literature and offers some new perspectives. As I will argue, *Parallels* suggests that although the term black dance as an all-inclusive category is useless, there is a necessity to keep the term alive and a need for an accompaniment of a context or definition when using the term. Furthermore, it predicts that the discussion, in the way it is being held now, will not be able to be continued in the near future.

In this thesis I hope to elucidate the complexities at play when deploying the term black dance and the status of the discussion today. Moreover, this thesis is meant to reinforce the writing of those who have written before me, whose musings on inequalities in the dance scene and affection for black dance I share.



Front of *Parallels* catalogue 2012. From left to right: Reggie Wilson, Gus Solomons Jr., Regina Rocke. © Ian Douglas

Chapter 1 DISCOURSE ON BLACK DANCE

1.1 African-American presence in dance.

In her essay “What is black dance?”, written in the late 80s, dance journalist Zita Allen explores the ways in which black dance had been employed by dance critics up until that time. Allen fiercely objects to the ways in which writers subordinated dance by African-Americans and considered it as completely separate from concert dance by white dance makers. Describing her first encounter with the term black dance in the writing of dance critic Marcia Siegel, she protests that Siegel “lumped all Afro-American choreographers mentioned in it into a 38-page section of her 320-page book. (...) This tradition is one excellent example of the institutionalizing of the distinction between black dance and the rest of American concert dance which could be described as a form of cultural apartheid.”¹² Further into this chapter I will more elaborately discuss Allen’s consideration of black dance, but for now it is important to note that she points out the lack of recognition for the wide variety of dance by African-Americans in the general development of concert dance. For a long time, books attempting to describe concert dance perpetually ignored or discarded dance by African-Americans. Their achievements, no matter how expansive, diverse, or influential, were compressed into small chapters or paragraphs. This disproportion

¹² Allen, Zita. “Free to Dance” in *The Black Tradition in American dance*. 1989.

between their achievements in dance and recognition in literature also points out how dance by African-Americans was not considered part of American concert dance or dance history by many (white) people for a long time (and simultaneously constructed the whiteness of American concert dance).

There is for instance Lynn Fauley Emery's *Black Dance in the United States from 1619 to 1970* (1972), one of the first books that extensively documents dance by African-Americans, but one that according to Thomas DeFrantz placed African-American dance outside the mainstream of American concert dance.¹³ Although it is extremely valuable as a reference work, since it discusses so many African-American artists and their work, it didn't base the concept of black dance on anything other than race. Emery defined black dance in her preface as "dance performed by Afro-Americans in the United States"¹⁴, while in the same book Katherine Dunham, dance pioneer and activist from the 1940s onwards, defines it as "the dance forms of people of African origin".¹⁵ Later publications on black dance did the same: Alice J. Adamczyk's *Black Dance: An Annotated Bibliography* (1989) and Edward Thorpe's *Black Dance* (1990). These authors also didn't provide any other definition other than one based on race, which according to DeFrantz "insidiously compresses dance practice into an amorphous mass shaped by its variance to the dominant (white) histories of dance."¹⁶

However, from the late 80s onward the amount of literature considering the subject

¹³ DeFrantz, *Dancing many drums*, 190.

¹⁴ Emery, *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today*, ix.

¹⁵ Emery, *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today*, vii.

¹⁶ DeFrantz, *Dancing many drums*, 226.

increased. Besides giving African-Americans their rightful share in literature about dance, the writing also worked in retrospect, recognizing African-American contributions of the past. This turn in consideration didn't happen overnight, but following Allen we may conclude that broadly speaking there was less recognition for African-American contributions in American dance before Allen's essay, and that the book *The Black Tradition in American Dance* (1989), in which her essay was published, was the prelude to much other writing from that moment on. The title of the book indicates its claim about the inextricable connectedness of black dance and American concert dance. What this meant for the consideration of black dance will become clear in this chapter. First I will take a short detour through the history of racial terminology as it draws an image of the implications of the use of the term black.

1.1.2 History of racial terminology

The new insights and changes in viewing black dance were accompanied by new racial/ethnic terminology, as had been the case with previous introductions of new terms describing African-Americans.¹⁷ "Colored" was a common term in the nineteenth century, but was gradually replaced by "Negro" from the end of the nineteenth century on, because colored was deemed too generic (any ethnicity that was not European-American could basically be colored) and lacked the specificity that they found Negro *did* have. Famous black writers like W.E.B. Du Bois and

¹⁷ It should be noted, however, that the terms "Colored", "Negro", "Black", and "African-American" have always existed and have always been used, so I am describing here the acceptance and popularity of the terms. Miller, "Negroes or colored people?"

Booker T. Washington were amongst those to make a case for the new term. They argued it was a more powerful term than colored, helping African-Americans assert their pride of race.¹⁸ Continuing racism, however, and the contemptuous use of Negro, as well as the degenerated forms “Nigger” and “Niggah” by white people also gave this term a derogative connotation. Therefore, when the civil rights movement arose in the late 1950s, a new term was sought. Black became the new term that was promoted in the same way Negro was roughly 70 years earlier: to emphasize racial pride, and as a new, powerful term with which to reject the status quo; hence the slogan “Black Power”. The most recent term “African-American” was coined by Ramona H. Edelin, President of the National Urban Coalition, during a meeting with civil rights groups organized in 1988.¹⁹ They argued the switch was to give African-Americans a cultural identification with their heritage. Where African-Americans had consistently been viewed biologically and physically as a race, being viewed culturally as an ethnic group might decrease racial prejudices. Racial differences are often deemed immutable and discrimination on the base of ethnicity has been less frequent than that based on race.²⁰ Differing, however, from the previous adoption of new terms, was the fact that the switch to African-American did not so much focus on the negative qualities of its predecessor, as it did on the additional, positive qualities inherent in the new term. Therefore black as a term wasn’t dismissed like the terms Negro or colored were. Often-heard criticism of the term African-American is that the ties between African-Americans and Africa are not strong enough to refer

¹⁸ “Negro” and “Black” became capitalized after *The New York Times* announced to start with that, as an “act of recognition of racial self-respect for those who have been for generations in the ‘lower case’”. The term “colored” is usually not, since it is not a noun. Bennett, “What’s in a Name?”

¹⁹ Rev. Jesse Jackson is generally credited with making “African-American” a popular term. (Smith, “Changing Racial Labels”).

²⁰ Smith, “Changing Racial Labels”.

to and that the prefix Africa is too inclusive, because Africa's cultures are very divergent.²¹ Although African-American is considered a more politically correct term, mainly because it has the least racist connotations, several authors and polls show that there is no consensus amongst African-Americans for either black or African-American, but that preferences are more or less equally divided.²² More importantly, as Thomas DeFrantz points out, it is crucial who is speaking and to whom. In *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African-American Dance* (2001) he notes how he himself uses black or African-American dependant on who he is talking to; whether black or white, American or foreign, but also whether aware of its "implications in the United States, including a history of political and economic inequity, institutionalized social affliction, and spiritual resiliency."²³

This quick overview shows that the complexity of racial terminology still exists and that arguments for or against a certain term can be personal, although black and African-American are most commonly used nowadays. Bringing it back to dance terminology we lose the affix "American" when saying black dance, leaving "black" to be very generic. Furthermore, as DeFrantz points out, the use of racial terminology is usually adjusted depending on who is talking to whom.

²¹ See Butler' *Gender Trouble*, Negro History Bulletin, "What's in a Name", and Williams' "Myth making and reality testing" for more info.

²² See Mcworther, "Why I'm Black, not African-American", Siegelman, "What's in a Name", and Newport Gallup poll, "Black or African-American".

²³ DeFrantz, *Dancing many drums*, 100.

1.2 Zita Allen

Zita Allen holds her master in Dance History from the Department of Performance Studies at NYU and is a dance journalist. Her most extensive piece of writing is her book *Black Women Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement (African-American Experience)* (1996), of which the title indicates her focus on writing about African-American people and women in particular. The most notable piece of writing she produced specifically about the use of the term black dance is the previously mentioned essay “What is black dance?” With this essay she was one of the first to point out the fact that the term black dance was misused, even in institutions:

“Major federal, state, corporate and private funding sources have adopted guidelines with which to weigh black dance applications. Critics, wittingly and unwittingly, lump most Afro-American choreographers under this heading and make generalizations about the work of an entire segment of America’s dance community.”²⁴

Her argument is that there is a certain idea of what kind of dance African-Americans are supposed to do. She shows that there is on the one hand a lack of freedom for African-Americans to define their own culture, and on the other hand the institutionalizing (through funding sources) of a category that sets dance by African-Americans apart from American concert dance. Her essay is filled with examples of African-American choreographers explaining how their works can not be named black dance and examples of how critics used the term nonetheless as a label, to

²⁴ Allen, “What is Black Dance?”, 22.

illustrate how the term black dance has been used wrongly. Therefore, she concludes, for anyone – black or white – to define the term is presumptuous.

Instead she calls for a “dialogue among those artists and scholars creatively involved with dance and the broader components – the socio-economic, political and cultural matrix. [...] similar to the prolonged and often heated discussion which engaged blacks in theatre and literature as they wrestled with definitions, searched for appropriate structures and identified the style and function of their art during the introspective 1960’s.²⁵” Her solution for getting rid of the detrimental effects of the use of the term black dance doesn’t lie in trying to create a definition for it, but in creating discourse, discussion, thought about it. Although the final sentence in the essay states that the question “What is black dance?” still needs to be answered, the writing leading up to it shows that what Allen deems important is not a straight up answer, but a discussion that further excavates the use and misuse of the term to prevent harmful meanings of the term. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, there was almost no written critique on the use of the term black dance before this essay. She does however refer to the efforts of a small group of dancers and dance scholars that became active in the 1960s and early 1970s and founded organizations like the Black Choreographers Association, the Black Dance Conference and the magazine *The Feet*, that amongst other things occupied itself with answering questions like “What is black dance?” However, these initiatives ceased to exist quite soon after they arose. Allen states that with their folding, the discussion of the use of the term also fell silent. She argues that 20 years later this discussion is still

²⁵ Allen, “What is Black Dance?”, 23.

much needed and expresses her hope for new forums that could facilitate this dance dialogue.

1.2 Carole Y. Johnson

Carole Y. Johnson is a performer, choreographer, teacher and arts administrator. She worked intensively with choreographer Eleo Pomare. Inspired by his stance on social issues relating to dance, she became an advocate for African-American causes. She was one of the dance scholars that became very actively engaged with black dance from the 1960s on, when the Black Power movement and Black Arts movement also peaked. She founded MODE in 1969, the Modern Organization for Dance Evolvment, a non-profit organization that was concerned with “providing services for black and third world artists in the dance field”²⁶. As a project of this organization, she launched the dance magazine called *The Feet* that ran from 1970 till 1973 and organized the First National Congress of Blacks in Dance in 1973. Johnson then relocated to Australia and took on the cause of indigenous dance there. She organized several courses that led to the founding of NAISDA, the National Aboriginal Island Skills Development Association, a program offering professional dance training to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and founded Bangarra Dance Theatre Australia, a dance company for the talented graduates of the NAISDA.

²⁶ Amin, Takiyah. Dancing Black Power?: Joan Miller, Carole Johnson and the Black Aesthetic, 1960 - 1975, 89-109.

During her time as editor for *The Feet*, Johnson, quite radically, defined black dance as following:

“The term ‘Black dance’ must be thought of from the broadest point that must be used to include any form of dance and any style that a black person chooses to work within. It includes the concept that all Black dance artists will use their talents to explore all known, as well as to invent new forms, styles, and ways of expression through movement. [...] Since the expression ‘Black dance’ must be all-inclusive, it includes those dancers that work in:

1. the very traditional forms (the more nearly authentic African styles)
2. the social dance forms that are indigenous to this country, which include tap and jazz dance
3. the various contemporary and more abstract forms that are seen on the concert stage; and
4. the ballet (which must not be considered as solely European)²⁷

As a category this definition is extremely broad, and therefore not very practical. In line with the ideals of the Black Arts movement in the 1960s, taking a political stance in art, Johnson stated that a political aspect, in this case freedom, should accompany any discussion or definition of black dance:

“Freedom is what all Black people are seeking...‘Black dance’ does not preach a

²⁷ Johnson, “What is Black Dance”, 2.

particular ideology...Rather than a particular style of dance this expression 'Black dance' indicates the particular historical time and the conditions in which Black people find themselves".²⁸

Through this quote it becomes clear that she aims for a definition that is concerned with black self-identification. Any work that is concerned with contemporary blackness could be named black dance, regardless of its technique, vocabulary or style. As such, expressions of black dance are not bound to a presumed black aesthetics, but are the various idioms as they are filtered through African-American dancers. Thus, according to Johnson, black dance is defined as the various styles or forms of dance with either roots in African culture or those styles or forms of dance that come into being as they have been passed through the experiences of the people of the African Diaspora. Therewith placing the black dancer at the center of her definition of black dance.

1.3 Brenda Dixon Gottschild

Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Professor Emerita of dance studies at Temple University in Philadelphia, is a cultural historian, performer and choreographer. Besides publishing scholarly writing, she states that her experience as a performer with several dance companies and as an independent choreographer/teacher enabled her to fuse practice and theory. She explains that she manages "to blur the divisions between these categories and play both ends against an interdisciplinary middle ground. Thus, in presenting my research I use my own dancing body to demonstrate

²⁸ DeFrantz, *Dancing many drums*, 10-11.

various performative and kinesthetic principles as I attempt to fuse the categories of lecture, performance, and discourse.”²⁹

Typically, her focus lies on black contributions to dance. She regards performance as “a highly charged, sociopolitical phenomenon” and claims to be on an ongoing quest to bring to the fore the African-American quotient in the American cultural equation.

In her book *The Black Dancing Body: a geography from coon to cool* (2005) she claims she doesn’t believe in the terms black dance or the black dancing body. Yet, the terms exist, which forced her to confront them to be able to overcome racism that often accompanies the use of the terms and to celebrate African-American contributions to American concert dance. According to her, black dance and the black dancing body are not adequate terms, because they do not describe anything specific, but are generic denominators. Moreover, she explains that traditions and cultures have been interacting and are therefore too mixed to be defined as either black or white: “It’s simply that the habit of racism has rendered us unable to put the fusion of American cultural creations into words from the vocabulary at our disposal.”³⁰

However, as much as Gottschild dismisses the use of the term black dance, she argues that as long as racism and white-skin privilege exist there is still a need for using a terminology of difference. Black dance is a term based solely on a racial marker about which she quotes jazz music scholar Sherry Tucker “Racists need race

²⁹ Brenda Dixon Gottschild website.

³⁰ Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 8.

to justify their racism, but non-racists also need race to be able to analyze racism.”³¹

This is the basic premise of Gottschild’s book. Her conclusion that to go beyond using the term black dance she needs to go through it doesn’t result in her own definition, but instead she cites, quotes, and interviews others from the dance scene to create a cultural image of how black dance is considered.

One of the recurring issues in this book, and as mentioned earlier in most of her writing, is the contribution of African-American dancers to American dance. She notes the lack of acknowledgement for their contribution, and sees it as part of her mission to reemphasize those contributions. She points for example to jazz dance where Africanist³² influences have been essential elements, but where it has been appropriated by European-Americans to such a degree that the Africanist contribution is unclear to many. She then wonders where the line is drawn between rip-off and cultural exchange. Noting that the complex process of the way any culture develops is exactly dependent on the exchange between different cultures, she suggests thinking of the issue in the following way: APPROPRIATION *leads to* APPROXIMATION *leads to* ASSIMILATION. Before assimilating a cultural aspect, the appropriating culture needs the cultural aspect that is being appropriated (in the case of jazz dance, for instance, free movement of the hips, shoulders, legs) to approximate their aesthetic approval (in the case of jazz dance mixing the free movement of the hips while keeping the upper body still vertically aligned, which is often considered a Europeanist aesthetic).

³¹ Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 8.

³² Gottschild introduces “Africanist” as including concepts, practices, attitudes, or forms that have roots/origins in Africa and the African Diaspora. Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, xiii.

She emphasizes the negative effect of this sort of appropriation as a base for harsh racism:

“On the black side of the equation, the assumption by the dominant, white culture has been (through custom and tradition) that, in order to gain legitimacy, black forms (and black folks, in all walks of life) need to take on white characteristics. (...) The more the culture that is regarded as inferior/auxiliary takes on the characteristics of the dominant culture, the more the dominant culture takes this move as proof of its superiority.”³³

Specifically relating this to the black dancing body, Gottschild explains that the black dancing body has also been scrutinized by white people through the lens and theory of difference. She argues that the popularity of techniques such as Alexander technique, Pilates, Klein and Trager show there is an increasing acknowledgement for differences in moving bodies. These techniques show that the issue isn't about inferior or superior bodies, but alignment, cultural movement choices, and habits, which imply that any body can learn any dance. Thus a black dancing body can learn any so-called white form through training, and vice versa. The bottom line in her statement is that equal does not mean the same; different types of bodies have an equal potential. Moreover, she points out that there is so much variation in the bodies of black people (size, shape, color, etc.) that speaking of *the* black dancing body is inaccurate. There are many negative stereotypes about bodies of black people, amongst the most pervasive ones “the finessed feet that blacks supposedly do not have, but need; and the bawdy buttocks that supposedly they have, but do not

³³ Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 22.

need³⁴, that Gottschild discusses and tackles through describing specific examples that show the opposite. In fact, the stereotypes are so pervasive, that even when the feet or buttocks are in accord with ballet aesthetics, some people still see non-workable feet. They have become literally blind-sighted by the stereotype. Gottschild argues that the black dancing body is not a biological imperative, but a sociocultural concept.

The same goes for the term black dance. It is a misnomer in the sense that it is used as an imperative, slapped on to anything black people do in dance, instead of recognizing the immense range of work that is referred to. Instead, Gottschild proposes to speak of “black dance aesthetics” (in this case specifically concerning the body): “solid contact with the earth; the ground as a medium to caress, stomp, or to make contact with the whole body; a grounded, “get-down” quality to the movement characterized by body asymmetry; an overall polyphonic feel to the dance/dancing body (polymetric and polyrhythmic); articulation of the separate units of the torso (pelvis, chest, rib cage, buttocks); and a primary value placed on both individual and group improvisations: All these are elements drawn from the Africanist aesthetic and perspective.”³⁵

She opposes the Africanist aesthetic to a European Aesthetic, which is “dominated and ruled by the erect spine. Verticality is a prime value, with the torso held erect, knees straight, body in vertical alignment (...) torso held still (and sometimes

³⁴ Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 59.

³⁵ Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 15.

purposefully rigid), the limbs moving away from an returning to the vertical center, with a privileging of energy and gestures that reach upward and outward”.³⁶

She explains how this opposition is especially notable in traditional forms of African and European dance, but less so in contemporary dance forms. Her point is that although these aesthetics are often related to black dance, they are not necessarily ascribed to a body with African roots or a body with European roots, but are culturally defined: “Black, white, brown, our dancing bodies are not racial constructs, but muscle memory constellations of cultural traits and tendencies.”³⁷ She states that a dancing body is not racially marked, but culturally. It is not born a certain dancing body, but shaped through its environment. Similarly, race doesn’t inform dance by African-Americans, culture does. Therefore she considers black dance a misnomer.

1.4 Thomas F. DeFrantz

Thomas F. DeFrantz is Professor of Dance and African-American Studies at Duke University and President of the Society of Dance History Scholars. He is a writer, teacher, choreographer, performer and director of SLIPPAGE: Performance, Culture, Technology, a research group that explores emerging technology in live performance applications. Similar to Gottschild, DeFrantz has found it advantageous to work both in the performance field and as a scholar: “As a musical theater choreographer moving towards dance theater, performance studies offered a methodology for thinking through my own aesthetic motives, as well as the process of documenting those of others. As I began to engage in graduate work, I became fascinated by the

³⁶ Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 16.

³⁷ Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 299.

many ways to imagine contexts for performance - including those that I continued to invent.”³⁸

In his book *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African-American Dance* (2001) DeFrantz points to the lack of documentation on the history of African-American dance, regrettably still the same observation Zita Allen made fifteen years earlier. His hope is to inspire others to further investigate African-American dance. He points to the term black dance as one of the difficulties scholars run into while exploring African-American dance. He traces the emerging of the term back to the 1960s as an invention of white critics that misused it to address work by African-Americans. Furthermore, in the political climate of the 1960s, with the Black Arts movement trying to define a black aesthetics and the Black Power movement trying to intensify community involvement, the use of the term further progressed. As DeFrantz explains, “some concert dance made by African-American artists for African-American audiences intentionally dramatized the shared memories, experiences, and aesthetic values of African-American people. These dances and their characteristic performance styles became known as ‘black dance’.”³⁹

He explains that performances that were completely different from one another, in the way they approached movement for example, were nevertheless considered black dance for the references they made to African-American culture. In addition, Alvin Ailey, without a doubt the most referred to African-American artist in studies concerned with black dance, serves as an example of the ambiguity surrounding

³⁸ Tisch School of the Arts NYU website.

³⁹ DeFrantz, *Dancing Many Drums*, 8.

such a categorization, as his work was often labeled black dance, while only a share of the works were directly concerned with African-American experiences.

In his essay “Black Bodies Dancing Black Culture. Black Atlantic Transformations” DeFrantz explores tropes of blackness. In the essay he again wonders to which extent cultural practices should be compressed into categories and whether something called black identity, that contributes to articulations of black dance, can be theorized. He continues to do so through Frantz Fanon’s “circle of dance that permits and protects” and through applying Paul Gilroy’s concept of the *Black Atlantic* (1993) to concert dance. He quotes Gilroy: “Black Identity is not simply a social and political category to be used or abandoned according to the extent to which the rhetoric that supports and legitimizes it is persuasive or institutionally powerful. ... it is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self. Though it [black identity] is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires.”⁴⁰ DeFrantz acknowledges that his dance, gestures, and words contribute to how he constructs his own black identity in the “circle of dance that permits and protects”. According to DeFrantz, there is “a core black culture, which includes the performative idioms of black expressive culture – music, oratory, fashion, game-playing, dance. All of these lie within the circle that permits and protects”.⁴¹ Moreover, when the circle with its core black culture is broken open for dancers to enter the unfamiliar, white space of concert dance, the dancer mourns the loss of intimacy of the circle and its principal formal feature of antiphonal call and response. “Here, the performer no longer dissolves into the crowd, thereby enacting a

⁴⁰ DeFrantz, *Black Bodies Dancing Black Culture, Black Atlantic Transformations*, 10.

⁴¹ DeFrantz, *Black Bodies Dancing Black Culture. Black Atlantic Transformations*, 11.

relationship of black identity in antiphonal call and response forms. The dancer offers stylized movements as objects to be casually consumed by immobile spectators.”⁴²

The feature of antiphonal call and response is in some way sought after by the dancer in concert dance.

Put very simply, the concept of the Black Atlantic is Gilroy’s understanding that Africans in diaspora have a shared culture. He uses the Black Atlantic as a tool for analysis to “produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective.”⁴³

Rather than simply connecting a subculture like African-American or Anglo African to the dominant national culture they find themselves in, Gilroy claims there is a metaculture for all Africans in diaspora, without denying each subculture its local specificity. He doesn’t speak of an all-inclusive sameness in this metaculture, but that instead of emphasizing difference, we could subtly analyze similarities in divergent subcultures that Gilroy calls “the changing same”⁴⁴, as these aspects have different expressions in each subculture.

DeFrantz states that the concept of the Black Atlantic is recognizable in concert dance as “a pervasive dissatisfaction with existing modes of expression; a need to remake concert dance. (...) The Black Atlantic gesture in concert dance intends to force its audience to presence, that we might see each other across the footlights.”⁴⁵

As the intimacy of the circle is lost, the audience is invited to somehow close the circle again, by shouting, stamping, mourning; anything that will show their proximity.

⁴² DeFrantz, *Black Bodies Dancing Black Culture*. *Black Atlantic Transformations*, 11.

⁴³ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 15.

⁴⁴ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 106.

⁴⁵ DeFrantz, *Black Bodies Dancing Black Culture*. *Black Atlantic Transformations*, 14.

He continues to explain that the aesthetics of this “core black culture” can be learned, and are thus available to the white dancer as well. The problem arises when the circle that then forms around a new, hybrid dance is misunderstood by the participant. The new participant often doesn’t understand its relationship to the circle. A new consideration of antiphony is then necessary: “...the globalization of vernacular forms means that our understanding of antiphony will have to change. The calls and responses no longer converge in the tidy patterns of secret, ethnically encoded dialogue”.⁴⁶ Locality has on the one hand complicated dance of the circle, but on the other hand, DeFrantz argues that these developments, when seen from the perspective of the Black Atlantic, are opportunities for scholars to better comprehend what happens on the concert stage. They are opportunities to research and document performance “and its vital impact on culture in re/formation.”⁴⁷

Returning to *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African-American dance*, DeFrantz explains how the search for a black aesthetics that happened in the 1960s was revived in the 1990s as Africanisms. “These qualities are not particular movements so much as compositional strategies that may inform any given moment in dance. As such, they are recurrent aesthetic imperatives that may be employed both by African diaspora artists and, significantly, by others following this tradition. While some scholars have resisted this theoretical approach because of its implication of a narrow and singular ‘African dance’ idiom, the identification of these conceptual traditions has created the most consistent approach to documenting Africanist performance across generations and geographies of African-American

⁴⁶ Quote Gilroy in DeFrantz, *Black Bodies Dancing Black Culture*. *Black Atlantic Transformations*, 14.

⁴⁷ DeFrantz, *Black Bodies Dancing Black Culture*. *Black Atlantic Transformations*, 14.

dancers and choreographers, as well as in work by others, including white Americans, Europeans, and Asians.”⁴⁸

His argument seems to be twofold: first, he argues that there is an Africanist aesthetic (or black aesthetic/Africanisms) consisting of qualities that are available to be employed by anyone, regardless of their skin color. Secondly, an important share of his writing focuses on documenting Africanist performance and celebrating/acknowledging Africanist presence in dance. As he states in the previous quote he finds using an Africanist aesthetic for documenting Africanist performance an effective tool. To be able to detect an Africanist presence in any dance work is to be able to acknowledge the vast contributions African-Americans dancers have made.

1.6 Conclusions Chapter 1

Altogether, previous explorations of the discourse on black dance show us that there has never been consensus about what black dance is, or how the term should be used. The writing about black dance has greatly evolved over the past decades. Whereas before the 1990s black dance got defined as a particular style, idiom, or as dance by Afro-Americans or African Diaspora people, more recently these definitions have been contradicted, though no author has come up with a new definition in the past twenty years. However divergent, something that all previously discussed authors agree on is that dance by African-Americans is underexposed and that more acknowledgement for their achievements and influences in dance is in order.

⁴⁸ DeFrantz, *Dancing Many Drums: Excavation of African-American Dance*, 18.

The discourse on black dance seems to be one that has become inextricably connected to race and racism. As the overview in the beginning of this chapter showed, publications concerned with black dance that don't question the use of this term, but base it solely on race, have contributed to placing African-American dance outside American concert dance. Besides these relatively old exceptions, there are no other definitions or discussions of black dance that do not show a certain awareness of the ambiguity that surrounded the term as it has so often formed the basis for racism.

Carole Johnson was one of the first to discuss the use of the term. Her incorporation of ballet, a dance form that strongly excluded black dancers, in her all-inclusive definition of black dance shows that she was aware of the lack of acknowledgement for contributions to contemporary dance forms by African-Americans. Her definition, with its good intentions for the African-American community, includes *every* dance form, thus missing its purpose as a practical definition of black dance. There is no specificity to the term except the fact that the dancer is black. Nonetheless, she was one of the first authors to express the understanding of black dance as something that is not bound to a certain form or style. Instead, by understanding black dance as dance as it is filtered through the black dancer, she puts the black dancer central to her understanding of black dance.

Zita Allen fiercely opposes the creation of any definition of black dance, as she sees the confining effects the use of the term has. To prevent these definitions from establishing themselves, especially from outside the African-American community, she calls for further exploration and discussion of what black dance is.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild and Thomas DeFrantz further explore both Johnson and Allen's arguments. Gottschild's most recent writing is especially focused on tackling stereotypes of the black dancing body. By showing that there are no bodily limits to dancers of African origin that should exclude them from any kind of dance, and that there is no imperative for all African-American dancers in the form of a label, she invalidates the term black dance. Yet she argues that a terminology of difference will be necessary as long as African-Americans are discriminated against.

Gottschild speaks of an Africanist aesthetic that DeFrantz also recalls in his work. He explores what constructs black identity, or in this case: what does black mean in black dance? He similarly identifies Africanist (black) aesthetic/Africanisms; an aesthetic anyone can choose to work with(in) or not.

Furthermore, what the paragraph on racial terminology in the beginning of this chapter has elucidated is that when using terms to refer to African derived people, it is of importance who is speaking and to whom. Historically (and still today), there have been white people imposing labels on African derived people or turning existing ones into derogatory terms. At least in the United States, the consequence has been that these terms have now become inappropriate to be used, at least for white people. DeFrantz's example of his personal use of the different terms confirms this sensitivity surrounding the terms as he explains how he himself takes into consideration the race of his listener or the awareness this person has of the implications the term has historically, when using either the term black or African-American.

“The unexamined shadows of women and people of non-white cultures are abundant ghosts in the history of Western art: Rather than list and measure all these missing bodies (of work and lack of work) here we may simply note that one of the center’s most consistent habits is making margins. Bodies of work that take movement as their subject and form are perhaps especially neglected since they can tell us so much about centering, and the function of centers, as ethical practice”.⁴⁹

Executive director of Danspace Project Judy Hussy-Taylor quotes Peggy Phelan in her introduction of the *Parallels* catalogue to underline Houston-Jones’ pull away from the centre/the mainstream, away from over-simplification and easy categorization, and at the same time the quote also suggests that dance itself is ethically revealing. Both of these statements pertain to this chapter about *Parallels*, as the main argument in this chapter is to describe how Houston-Jones, and therefore *Parallels*, resists over-simplification and easy categorization of black dance and how it uses movement to do so. In the quote above Phelan detects a certain quality in dance that gives dance a particular efficacy when it comes to ethical practices (such as the marginalizing of a minority). As will become clear in this chapter, the movement in the performances presented during *Parallels* helps position the performances in relation to the centre. I will show how one of the main goals of *Parallels* is to diversify black dance and how this contributes to questioning

⁴⁹ Phelan in *Move*. Choreographing You: Art and Dance Since the 1960s, cited by Hussy-Taylor in *Parallels* catalogue, 5.

unitary definitions of black dance. Instead of showing what black dance is, *Parallels* attempts to show what black dance *might* be. The first paragraph will give a short introduction of *Parallels*. In the second paragraph I will look at how the Platform addresses the topic of black dance through its performances in contrast to the third paragraph that focuses on how the Platform directly discusses black dance. In the fourth and final paragraph I will conclude that although *Parallels* presents no unitary definition, but rather tries to diffuse the definition, it does make reference to a kind of black or Africanist aesthetics.

2.1 PLATFORM 2012: *Parallels*

Parallels Program (2012):

Week ONE	Feb 2 nd	Opening symposium, panel discussion - <i>The Artist's Voice</i>
	Feb 4 th	<i>The Protagonists: Documents of Dance and Debate</i> curated by Will Rawls. Video screening and debate.
Week TWO	Feb 9-11	Performances: Will Rawls - <i>Frontispieces</i> Isabel Lewis - <i>Synthetic Action</i>
Week THREE	Feb 16-18	<i>Three nights</i> Thursday: <i>Black Jam</i> curated by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar. Improvisations by: Samantha Speis, Hunter Carter and Marya Wethers.

Friday: *Where We're Calling From* curated by **Bebe Miller**.

Performances: **Gesel Mason** - *Work (in progress)*

Marya Wethers – *(w)hole, again*

Cynthia Oliver - *Boom!*

Saturday: *Black Dance* curated by **Dean Moss**.

Performances: **Young Jean Lee** - *Hitting Video from Song of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*

Pedro Jimenez – *Snoopy*

Ann Liv Young – *The Sherry show*

Week FOUR **Feb 23-25**

From the streets, From the clubs, From the houses.

Performances: **Regina Rocke** - *Boy Troubles*

Nicholas Leichter – *Twenty Twenty*

Niall Noel Jones - *forget it*

Darrell Jones - *Hoo-Ha (twister pump breakdown)*

Week FIVE

BREAK

Week SIX **March 8-10**

Performances: **Reggie Wilson & Souleymane**

Badolo - *Solo's Solo/"Basic III"*

(Introduction gestures)-now

a study that sometimes goes low

(so) and too deep (with changes in direction)

Dean Moss - *some elements raw, re-purposed, in progress*

Week SEVEN **March 15-17**

Performances: **Okwui Okpokwasili** – *Bronx Gothic*
Nora Chipaumire – *The Last Heifer*

After talk by Wangechi Mutu with Okpokwasili and Chipaumire on the 16th

Week EIGHT **March 22-24** **Performances:** **Samantha Speis - *The Way it Was, and Now (First Rendition)***
Marjani Forte - *Here . . .*
Kyle Abraham - *Boyz N' The Hood: Pavement*

Week NINE **March 27th** *This & That: Day of Walking, Talking, and Watching*

Performances: **Stacey Spense – *Trekking***
Thomas DeFrantz – *Performing Black*

Parallels on Tour **Discussion with Blondell Cummings, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Henry Pillsbury, and Barbara Watson**

Coining: An Evening of On-Screen Performance
curated by Will Rawls. Video screening and debate.

March 31st *An All Day Event, *The End* curated by Ralph Lemon.*

Art by: Nari Ward

Lighting environment: Roderick Murray

Performance by niv Acosta, Souleymane Badolo, Kevin Beasley, James Hannaham, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Low, April Matthis, Okwui Okpokwasili Omagbemi, Willow Parchment and David Thomson.

Parallels was a Platform series organized by Danspace Project that ran from the 2nd of February till the 31st of March 2012. During this period every weekend (except the 1st weekend of March) one or more shows were presented for three nights. In total there were twenty-four separate events accommodating thirty-three performances and several talks, video screenings, and panel discussions. As becomes clear, *Parallels* uses different ways to communicate with its spectator, verbally and non-verbally. Verbally through actively addressing the topic of black dance aloud during the events and in writing in the *Parallels* catalogue, but also non-verbally through the performances.

Parallels took place in Danspace Project, a venue founded in 1976 as a place to present contemporary dance. On their website Danspace Project defines its mission statement as presenting “new work in dance, supporting a diverse range of choreographers in developing their work, encouraging experimentation, and connecting artists to audiences.⁵⁰” The venue is located at the historical St. Mark’s Church in-the-Bowery in New York City.

Speaking of *Parallels* is inevitably speaking of Danspace Project, executive director Judy Hussie-Taylor and the curator Ishmael Houston-Jones, who are the prime communicators of the Platform. This is important to realize because it defines whose voice is being heard regarding the topic of black dance. Although Hussie-Taylor is officially the artistic director and in charge of curating, she invited Houston-Jones to guest curate, who in turn lent out some of his nights to be curated by others. The consequence being that many divergent voices contributed to the discussion on

⁵⁰ Danspace Project website, About Danspace.

black dance. Nonetheless it was Hussie-Taylor and Houston-Jones making the choices, which means their voices should be considered the most influential.

After having worked in programming performance as well as visual arts, Judy Hussie-Taylor became executive director of Danspace Project in 2008, and artistic director to the Choreographic Center Without Walls (CW²) that she founded in 2009, which is also part of Danspace Project and produced *Parallels*. The website states that CW² is “a new operating model to examine and reinvigorate dance presenting practices. The linchpin of CW2 has been the Platform series, which invites guest curators to facilitate multiple weeks of artist activities.”⁵¹

Ishmael Houston-Jones is a performer, teacher, author, choreographer, and curator of dance and performance. Houston-Jones started dancing in his hometown Philadelphia in the early 1970s. His focus was mainly on improvisation, which was a radical break with what was going on in the Philadelphia dance scene at the time. The scene was still very company-oriented, which meant that venues were primarily available for companies. In the late 1970s, after it became possible to manage as an independent artist/choreographer, he moved to New York. His work is still mainly improvisational, and frequently incorporates the spoken word. His work is often classified as postmodern, experimental dance.

⁵¹ Danspace Project website, About Danspace.

2.2 *Parallels* presents ...

2.2.1 the preconceived notion of black dance

As explained in the introduction, *Parallels* revisited an initiative from 1982 under the same name, which concerned itself with the same topic, also curated by Houston-Jones. In 1982 Houston-Jones gathered a small group of African-American dancers and choreographers making work outside of modern dance⁵² and outside of “black modern dance”⁵³. Among the artists Houston-Jones invited were Bebe Miller, Ralph Lemon and Blondell Cummings. In two weekends they showed their performances at Danspace Project. Following this series, The American Center in Paris invited Houston-Jones to come to Paris and perform the series there. In '87, in a slightly different configuration, they performed in Paris under the new name *Parallels in Black*.

According to Houston-Jones the American Centre in Paris had their reasons for changing it to *Parallels in Black*, mainly for marketing reasons, so the audiences would know something about what was coming. The program note read that “if there is an implicit ‘message’ to be gotten from the series, it would be that this new generation of black artists – who exist in the parallel worlds of Black America and of new dance – is producing work that is richly diverse.”⁵⁴

⁵² Commonly known choreographers of modern dance being for instance: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, José Limon.

⁵³ Commonly known choreographers of “black modern dance” being for instance Ailvin Ailey, Pearl Primus, Katherine Dunham.

⁵⁴ Houston-Jones, *Parallels* catalogue, 20.

Besides explaining the title of the series, the note states that by resisting two fixed centers, those of modern dance and black modern dance, *Parallels* meant to show the diversity of work made by African-Americans. This seemed to be the main focus of *Parallels* in 1982 and 1987, as it is one of the few curatorial notes that framed the series. In an interview in *Time Out New York* prior to the start of *Parallels* in 2012, Houston-Jones adds that after those performances audiences in Paris asked questions such as: “Why is this black dance? Is it black dance or not? Why were they calling it black dance?”⁵⁵ These questions seem to reveal certain presumptions about black dance that were more pervasive at the time. Houston-Jones confirms this by explaining that there was a funding issue in London at the time, where only black choreographers who were working in a certain Africanist aesthetic received funding. Houston-Jones with his program wanted to diffuse the notion of black dance by displacing the preconceived notions of black artists working in an Africanist *or* modern aesthetic. What becomes clear from this is that *Parallels* did not necessarily seem to have the intention to discard the term, since the series did present itself as performing black dance.

Returning to *Parallels* in 2012 there are some remarkable changes compared to the 1982 and 1987 *Parallels*. The questions posed by the Parisian audience have become part of the curatorial statement, making the discussion of what black dance is the center of the Platform. It seems that in 2012 the focus is still on showing the diversity in what black choreographers make, and that it’s not only trying to diffuse the notion of black dance, but also actively questioning the meaning and purpose of the term by asking: Does black dance exist? The original *Parallels* only presented

⁵⁵ Houston,-Jones, “What is black dance?”, 4.

nine performances in two weekends, while *Parallels* in 2012 presented five times as many, over a period of two months. Where the original *Parallels* only presented performances, the 2012 edition presented besides performances many additional events helping frame the performances. In such a way the new *Parallels* is not only able to show more, and possibly more divergent, performances, but also to build in more room for discussion and reflection on the topic of black dance. In our interview about *Parallels* in 2012 Houston-Jones summarized the essence of his curating: “Is there such a thing as black dance now and is that a relevant term anymore? I’m trying to answer that. I like having a question and letting the Platform answer it.”⁵⁶ In this posing of the question lies a much stronger suggestion of the term perhaps being irrelevant today than is present in the *Parallels* catalogue or during the live events. Furthermore, “Letting the Platform answer it” suggests that his questions and discussion will only work to complicate the definition, but is not set out to provide a definition. His curating basically works to invite each individual spectator of the Platform to create his/her own answer to what could be black dance with the perspectives offered by Houston-Jones.

Another notable difference with the 1982 version is the choreographers and performers themselves. When presenting a series concerned with black dance one might expect all of the artists involved to be black, but that is not the case. Although most of the performers *are* black, there are choreographers and performers presented that are non-black. Many performances are solos made and performed by black choreographers themselves, but a few are not and the group pieces are without exception all mixed (although those are all still choreographed by black

⁵⁶ Houston-Jones, Bora Sirin, Interview, April 2012.

choreographers). How does this influence the consideration of black dance? Are the non-black dancers dancing “white” in a “black” choreography? Do we have to distinguish black dance from black choreography?

1.2.2 *Parallels*' performances

Also new to *Parallels* 2012 was the inclusion of African artists and first-generation African-Americans in the Platform, as opposed to the original edition that exclusively presented African-Americans coming from a long lineage of ancestors being born in the United States and therefore sharing the same history and culture. According to Houston-Jones this exclusion of Africans in the first *Parallels* had to do with his ignorance as a young curator, and not knowing any Africans. He found it interesting to include them now, because their different background might inform yet another approach to dance and therefore offer a new perspective on what black dance might also be.

There was for example the performance *The Last Heifer* by Nora Chipaumire, born in Zimbabwe, that offered an approach that was new to *Parallels* and could be seen as reflecting from an Zimbabwean perspective on the question: what is black dance? In her solo, performed on a small, square stage with spectators sitting on all sides, she slowly and repeatedly circles the stage barefoot, her body mostly in deep lunges, bent over from the waist. Her fists are clenched throughout most of the piece, and she twists and turns them in isolation. All of her movement is slow, yet powerfully executed and comes across as tensed, which, together with the exhilarating percussion music and moments of silence, evokes an almost spiritual atmosphere. Her appearance is an unusual one. Her head is shaved, except for a bun of hair on

top of her head, and she wears an all black costume consisting of a pantsuit (that with certain movements reveal her breasts) and a short jacket with a very high, stiff collar. The central staging, the ritualistic, spiritual atmosphere and her appearance make her a powerful and unattainable being on exhibit; a superior creature that is only to be gazed at.

The program note reads: *“heifer/hefar/Noun: A young female cow that has not borne a calf. Urban Dictionary. Insult. A prodigiously large female, usually from Kentucky. Fat. Cow. Bitch. Obese. Ugly. Heffer. Woman. Fat Cow. Pig. Porker. Slut. Whore. Chubby. Heffa. Hoe. Hog. Skank.”*⁵⁷



Nora Chipaumire in *The Last Heifer* © Ian Douglas 2012.

⁵⁷ Program note Nora Chipaumire from Danspace Project Website.

As many elements of the performance work to subject Chipaumire to the gaze of the audience, the audience inevitably projects the text from her program note onto Chipaumire. She seems to confront and tackle the definitions given of heifer with her powerful presence. Although there could be elements of traditional Zimbabwean dances pointed out in the performance, the whole setting as a concert dance would be very unusual in Zimbabwe⁵⁸. By the stage set up and centering of Chipaumire to emphasize the gaze, she seems to play with that given and reframes traditional elements. Through making connections between various practices she seems to explore what it means to be black. What happens to these Zimbabwean elements on the concert stage? How is the African woman on display perceived?

With this work Houston-Jones presents, besides foremost an autonomous work of art, diversity in dance coming from Africa. Since there is relatively little African experimental dance touring outside Africa, this work shows a different, lesser-known kind of dance coming from Africa. Broadening the idea of what kind of dance comes from Africa also broadens the possibility of what black dance could be and who is meant by black. Who can make black dance? Does black dance refer only to the dance by African-Americans? By incorporating artists like Chipaumire from Zimbabwe, but also Caribbean artists like Cynthia Oliver in the program, Houston-Jones broadens the idea of who might be meant by black.

Specifically giving rise to the discussion of what could be defined as black was the evening curated by Dean Moss. Appointed by Houston-Jones to organize one

⁵⁸ The music, the deep lunging, the bent over shapes, the repeating form, are all elements of Zimbabwean traditional dances. See Asante's *The Jerusarema Dance* and Berliner's *The soul of Mbira* for more info.

evening of performances, Moss invited exclusively non-black artists. In the *Parallels* program Moss states in regard to his performers that even though none of them is African-American, he nonetheless considers them black based on their otherness and their role as the outsider. In order of appearance he programmed Young Jean Lee, Pedro Jimenez, and Ann Liv Young. The first and last are well known artists in the downtown dance scene in New York City and are known for their experimental and often controversial performances. On Moss's evening Young Jean Lee's contribution is a short video called *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* that is projected on the back wall of the church. Initially the screen is black and only a conversation about the making of the video is heard; people in the sound clip discuss the way someone should be hit. When the actual images come on Jean Lee's face is in close up. She is being hit in the face repeatedly, but only the impact of the hit, as her face slams back, is visible. The shot of the hand actually slapping her is cut out each time. The sound of the hand smashing into her face each time she is hit *is* audible though, while in background men's voices sing a Buddhist song. At a certain moment the seemingly endless repetition of real violence with the contrasting, peaceful chanting becomes uncomfortable to watch. It looks like it is actually hurting her as Jean Lee cries and becomes more and more shaken up.

Jimenez's piece starts out in the dark while we hear him roaming around the theatre space (also behind the audience) while stamping and producing eerie growls and animal like noises. These growls are interspersed with male voices shouting commands in an authoritarian tone. When the lights finally go up, we see Jimenez has started running around the stage in circles naked, holding a yellow flag that

reads "Peace". While running, his facial expression is on permanent over-the-top happy.

Young's piece is a one-woman show in which she comes on stage painted in blackface, and consequently starts to provoke audience members with uncomfortable questions and comments such as: "Sir, you are gay, aren't you? That's almost the same as being black", and addressing an African-American woman in the audience: "Are you offended by me right now? Because you know that my face is painted. I am actually white underneath. Look, I can just wipe it off." At a certain point a woman in the audience provoked Young by asking her whether she was even aware of the history of minstrelsy in the United States, upon which started a heated discussion that eventually ended in Young calling the audience member names and angrily screaming in her face asking what the woman's problem was. Besides these conversations with the audience, she also sang two songs, which she clearly announced by stating "I want to perform for you", with which she indirectly displaced the rest of her performance as not *actually* performing. Yet, she was dressed up and offending some of her spectators in ways that overstep some boundaries as to what a performer can get away with.

In this way Young pushes the boundaries of what is and is not performance (and in her case what is and is not the self). Jean Lee's "real" violence and Jimenez's unconventional performance also push these boundaries of performance. Because of their nonconformism the three are considered the controversial Other, which Moss in the program note writes could be compared to the otherness of black identity.

What does it mean to be the outsider? By posing it like this, the Platform once again revisits the question what black is or more specifically, what it is that makes a person

black besides their skin color and suggests that the black in black dance does not necessarily have to refer to black people.

Secondly, the heated discussion between Young and the girl is an example of how the evening recalls another controversial discussion, namely that of self-determination. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the history of racial terminology has been complicated by the contemptuous labels used by white people. More gravely is the horrific history of minstrelsy, where white performers painted their faces black to perform degrading stereotypes of African-American people. African-American people being defined instead of being able to self-define has continued to be a tool of oppression for a long time after slavery ended. For someone to paint his/her face black without addressing in some way the history of minstrelsy can therefore count on outraged responses. Having three non-black artists perform their work in a program that is concerned with black dance seems to evoke discussion about who is allowed to represent black identity. Carl Paris, official *Parallels* writer-in-residence writes in his blog post about that night: "I personally had a problem with equating the works of these artists with exploring black identity".⁵⁹ Paris' remark also draws attention to the discussion on how to explore (and represent) black identity. We could wonder whether the intention was to really explore black identity or to explore the representation of black identity and who has the right to do so and how.

With these and previous examples of performances the connection to black dance was relatively apparent or communicated through program notes. There were,

⁵⁹ Paris, Danspace Project Website, Blog. "Writer-in-Residence Carl Paris on Three Evenings".

however, also performances with which this connection was much more indirect or perhaps even non-existent. Isabel Lewis's *Synthetic Action* for example didn't have any direct reference to black dance. Her performance was a more conceptual piece in which twenty or more dancers from various ethnicities and technical training warm-up their bodies. The whole performance consists of the dancers coming on one by one and performing their own warm up, whether in Horton, Limon, Pilates, hip-hop, or release technique, and when finished leaving the stage one by one again. It questions what performance can be and explores what is contained in a preparation of the body for dance, relating to the self and space. Yet, because the performance is framed by the *Parallels* questions, the spectator of this piece might start looking at body differences or maybe wonder what a set warm-up from a certain technique means for different body types. Or by seeing Horton, Hip-Hop, or just jazzy warm-ups amongst the ballet or modern dance warm ups, we might start wondering what influence African-Americans had on the white-dominated dance scene. These are, however, not very apparent connections in the work that the work itself invokes, but rather arise from the curatorial question: what is black dance?

On the same night, the second performance by Will Rawls, *Frontispieces*, seems to make more explicit references to black dance. His choreography is set in a décor of cardboard cutouts of German Shepherds, each dog painted or decorated differently. The German Shepherds could be seen as a reference to the African-American Civil Rights Movement. This social movement was formed to fight racial discrimination against African-Americans since there was no law that protected them. During a civil rights protest by African-Americans in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, the police let German Shepherds loose on protesters in an attempt to overpower them. Footage of

these attacks was broadcast on national television and aroused rage and disgust in other parts of the country. Soon after this incident, a civil rights bill passed that granted African-Americans equal rights. In an interview, Rawls explains: “The dog painting was a means to reinsert a sign of racism and subjugation, despite the fact that by electing a black President the U.S. was experiencing a triumphal moment. It was a means to "not forget" - American politics tends to have a short memory, and I couldn't swallow all of the self-congratulatory discourse that was circulating around electing the first black President.”⁶⁰ The dogs sprang from this idea for an earlier work and were reused in *Frontispieces*, where this meaning was not as fixed. Here, the cardboard dogs came to mean other things as well and he only kept the original ideas of Jim Crow and civil rights as a potential for association.

Rawls' dancing between the dogs could be called task-oriented and pedestrian, with lots of poses, but always organic and with a very exact placing of his movements, almost as if “voguing” the air. At one point he undresses down to his underwear and starts a cheerful, upbeat dance routine directed towards the audience. He has a tuft of hair hanging out of his briefs that bounces to his dancing and could be seen to emphasize the isolated movement of his pelvis. Opposed to the rest of the very modest and introverted solo, this routine's presentational character and seduction stands out. Rawls is blatantly trying to catch everyone's eye, flirting his way to full focus. In this section, his movement is rhythmic and he makes repetitive, deep bends.

⁶⁰ Rawls, Bora Sirin, Interview, July 2012.



Will Rawls in *Frontispieces* © Ian Douglas 2012

2.3 *Parallels* discusses

2.3.1 Connection to the *Parallels* 1982

As stated in the introduction Houston-Jones organized *Parallels* 2012 to look and see what the next generation in black dance was. On the other hand he also wanted to make a connection to the 1982 *Parallels*. He states, “I was always interested in the younger emerging people, but also in looking back and seeing what happened back then, to broaden the scope. I wanted some of the original archival films to put the work in the context. Especially the people who weren’t around at that time, to see what was happening then in terms of postmodern, experimental dance by African-Americans.”⁶¹

⁶¹ Houston-Jones, Bora Sirin, Interview, April 2012.

By organizing an event in the same place, with the same name, *Parallels 2012* evokes comparison to the *Parallels* in 1982. Not only do they correspond topically, many of the original *Parallels* artists returned to the Platform. In the mean time, they have become teachers and mentors besides being performers, influencing the next generation. Certain events in the program were explicitly dedicated to drawing a comparison between the two *Parallels*. The audience is thus invited to join in to figure out what has changed in thirty years.

Parallels opened with *The Artist's Voice*, a conversation between a curator at The Studio Museum in Harlem, Thomas Lax, Ishmael Houston-Jones and the visual artist Wangechi Mutu. The program also contained a presentation of several video clips of early work by Houston-Jones. The second event of the Platform was a film screening by Will Rawls where video clips of the original *Parallels* were shown, accompanied by discussion between Rawls, Houston-Jones, *Parallels*-participant Blondell Cummings and the audience. One of the topics was how their work was received in 1982 and how it was considered radical for several reasons. For example, Houston-Jones elaborated on how his inclusion of the spoken word and Ralph Lemon's use of projections and the mere fact that he and Holland did contact improvisation as black men was something that was very uncommon. During *Parallels 2012*, there are several performances where black men do contact improvisation together, and mixing divergent disciplines like text or visuals in the theatre nowadays happens more often than not. Rawls' event ended with a recording of a fierce debate in 1983 between postmodern "stars" Bill T Jones and Steve Paxton about postmodern dance, which demonstrates some of the considerations of African-Americans making postmodern work.

Another instance in which voices of the past were present was during Three Evenings, in which Houston-Jones gave away three nights to be curated by others. Two of those were given to original *Parallels*-participants Bebe Miller and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, the third was the one described previously and curated by Dean Moss. Zollar's night was based on improvisation and started off with a screening of Houston-Jones and Fred Holland's duet from the original *Parallels*, which was improvised. Consequently she brought out Marya Wethers, Samantha Speis and Hunter Carter to improvise to assignments she gave on the spot. Finally, Zollar started improvising herself and invited 1982 *Parallels* participants to join in, which they did. Wethers and Speis both performed their own choreographies on other nights, which emphasized the emergence of a new generation learning from the old.

During *This & That, A Day of Walking & Talking*, an event with several performances and debates, a conversation was held about *Parallels in Black*, the series held in Paris, by Houston-Jones, Cummings and the initiators from The American Centre in Paris, Barbara Watson and Henry Pillsbury. This conversation focused on what it meant for the Parisian audience, because the audience had primarily seen mainstream work by African-Americans up until that point. A last connection to the past was made during the closing event on the 31st of March, *An All Day Event. The End*, curated by original *Parallels* participant Ralph Lemon. During this day, ten performers each performed an hour of their own improvisational score within a sculptured landscape, "a congregation of objects", designed for this event by visual artist Nari Ward. Lemon and Houston-Jones were amongst the performers.

2.3.2 Curatorial Statement

This next part of this thesis will elaborate on the Platform's direct addressing of the topic. How do the curators, Danspace Project, panelists and presenters discuss black dance? In what ways do they define black dance or discuss the complications of defining black dance? My main resource for this information is the *Parallels* catalogue, a one hundred and two pages thick magazine containing essays, thoughts, and other writing on the topic plus (archival) documents and images by Danspace Project and the curators/participants of *Parallels*.

Houston-Jones curatorial statement on the first pages of the catalogue starts with a series of questions. He invokes Brenda Dixon Gottschild's question in *The Black Dancing Body*: "What images come to the mind's eye when the term black dance is used (...) This has been my conundrum while curating this Platform. How would I have answered her question? For me does 'Black Dance' even exist? And assuming it does, what defines it? Is the term 'mainstream Black Dance' an oxymoron? What would it mean to push beyond its mainstream if it does exist? (...) There is an extensive, diverse and complicated legacy of artists of African ancestry making work here in the United States. But that lineage, like any cultural family tree, might have common roots but many branches spreading in a multitude of directions. And culture is not static. Styles, fashions, definitions, allegiances, commonalities and inspirations shift over time."⁶²

His essay immediately establishes that he and the Platform consider the term black dance a problematic one because of its ambiguity. The first problem arises with the

⁶² Houston-Jones, *Parallels* catalogue, 15.

label black. In his essay Houston-Jones explains the issue by referring to the example of Barack Obama is considered the first black President of the United States. This example was not set out to deprive Obama of a title, but to show that his mix of European-American and African blood gave him a different cultural background than the majority of African-Americans, so that the label black is referring to a different cultural background in this case. Therefore Houston-Jones is showing that what is referred to by black can be multiple things, and does not necessarily refer to the cultural background of the majority of African-Americans.

2.3.3 Discussion of black dance during *Parallels*

This paragraph will elaborate on how other presenters besides Houston-Jones addressed the topic of black dance in the Platform. The two I will discuss in this paragraph are Will Rawls, presenter of two movie screenings and debate, and Thomas DeFrantz, presenter of the performance lecture *Performing Black*.

Besides performing his solo *Frontispieces* three nights, Will Rawls was also asked to present two nights of movie screenings and write an essay for the *Parallels* catalogue. His voice therefore had a strong presence in the Platform. The first film screening, as a kickoff of the Platform, reflected on the decade of the 1980s *Parallels* and was attended by Houston-Jones and Cummings as interviewees. The second screening, towards the end of the Platform, was concerned with “performances made for film, video and projection formats that take a broader view of performance to include fictionalized self-portraiture, music videos, and web TV serials. Questions are raised about self-representation in relationship to black identity and branch into

areas of gender, sexuality, queerness, economics, pop culture, and politics.”⁶³ In this last screening Rawls calls attention to the ways in which artists approach themselves in their work. He screened, for example, a YouTube clip called Queen of the Lesbians, containing an approximately 16-year-old girl of color stoically singing about sex, women and her vagina while standing in her bikini in front of her webcam, or the YouTube clip called Queen of the Vagina, containing an approximately 45-year-old woman of color singing the same songs, but with slightly altered lyrics to create heterosexual versions. The clips are popular videos on YouTube and arouse much discussion, precisely because of the remarkable ways the people in the videos present themselves, which is an opportunity to reflect on the issue of self-representation, specifically with regards to black identity, in works of art.

During the first screening Rawls elaborates on the video clips of the original *Parallels*: “Looking at this collective of black artists in the early eighties and how their concerns and the things that they bring on stage with them break the idea of pure task oriented movement and that there begins to be a little bit of associative objects, associative gestures, things that come from personal history, narrative. And blending those with a real sense of the body.”⁶⁴

Additionally, in the *Parallels* catalogue he writes: “In watching these dances, I have the strong impression that movement for movement’s sake would not suffice to encapsulate each body’s potential for meaning. It is an historical moment when the

⁶³ Danspace Project, Winter 2012 program, 12.

⁶⁴ Rawls, recording of *The Protagonists: Documents of Dance and Debate* (first video screening during *Parallels*), 2012.

purity of post-modern dance is diluted by an influx of strategies and objects that break it open; this fracturing coincides with the appearance of a black avant-garde.”⁶⁵

These thoughts connect the clips of the 1982 *Parallels* to the second half of the screening that night, namely a conversation between post-modern big shots Bill T Jones and Steve Paxton.⁶⁶ When Paxton starts talking about a problem of authenticity he finds Jones’s work presents, the conversation turns into a heated debate about what movement research actually should be about. Paxton, being the founder of contact improvisation, accuses Jones’s work of being pretentious, by using an eclectic array of movement, including the balletic *arabesque*, which did not stroke with the post-modern course at that time. Re-reading Rawls’ remarks on the black avant-garde making its appearance in post-modern dance, a different question comes to mind, very accurately posed by cultural theorist and writer-in-residence for *Parallels 2012*, Carl Paris, on Danspace Project’s blog: “What did African-Americans bring to the white-dominated postmodern dance that challenged or disrupted an assumed kind of acultural and apolitical ideology, as well as the ways in which black choreographers assimilated that ideology, and how blacks and whites (including critics, programmers, and performers) responded to these differentials?”⁶⁷

Rawls is hesitant to unify the group as representatives of a “new black aesthetics”, mainly because the work is too diverse. Blondell Cummings, interviewee during the screening, addresses this point of discussion by recalling her reaction to people labeling her work black dance during the old *Parallels*: “I didn’t think of it [her work]

⁶⁵ Rawls, *Parallels* catalogue, 68.

⁶⁶ Recording from Movement Research Studies Project, December 1983.

⁶⁷ Paris, Danspace Project Website, Blog, “*Writer-in-residence Carl Paris on The Protagonists: Documents of Dance and Debate*”

as black dance. I just thought we were doing our own thing, and we happened to be black.”⁶⁸ Although Cummings also elaborates that she felt being black was an integral part of her and therefore also always part of her work, her quote exemplifies the feeling that many African-American performers have, namely that they don’t feel their work can always be rightfully named black dance.⁶⁹

Yet, Rawls identifies the breaking with pure task oriented movement as opening up associations, personal narrative, and a real sense of the body as new black subjectivities that the original group of *Parallels* participants brought to the post-modern stage. His essay rests on this split between representation of blackness and of non-blackness; “In speaking through dance, they hovered between abstraction and individuality in an obsolescent relationship to representations of blackness. These works were antagonistic in nature but resisted the role of a protagonist, thus the process of identifying them, or identifying with them, was confronted with the fiction of its own accuracy.”⁷⁰

In this manner, Rawls, following Houston-Jones, too sees the diversity in African-derived work as the reason a new black aesthetics or black dance has become more difficult to frame. Yet, at the same time he speaks of blackness as strategies that can be employed. In his essay in the *Parallels* catalogue and his lecture performance, which was an extension of this essay, Thomas F. DeFrantz similarly elaborates on features of African-derived performance: “a percussive attack; an exploration of concurrent, highly complex rhythmic meters; an engagement of call-and-response

⁶⁸ Cummings, recording of *The Protagonists: Documents of Dance and Debate*, 2012

⁶⁹ For instance in his essay in the catalogue, Rawls quotes Ralph Lemon and Bebe Miller as they “attest to being more comfortable with the notion of choosing when and how they create works relevant to their experiences as African-Americans”, 75.

⁷⁰ Rawls, *Parallels* catalogue, 69.

between dancers and audiences; sophisticated structures of derision that are simultaneously personal and political; and above all, an overarching cool, palpably spiritual dimension to the performance.”⁷¹

As mentioned before in the previous chapter, DeFrantz calls these hallmarks Africanisms that, when tapped into by artists, cause a feeling of blackness to emerge. He notes that the artist’s racial identity is of no matter in this, which means anybody could make black dance and that people of color aren’t always interested in these aesthetic strategies. In an interview on Critical Correspondence, an online Movement Research publication, he discusses his lecture performance, adding that there are a lot of people who are mixed race in 2012, and that there is more focus on aesthetics as ideology or concepts than on visible markers of blackness nowadays. However, he expounds this point of view by saying that this way of looking at aesthetics is not necessarily meant to emphasize the *application* of Africanist aesthetics, but more to *recognize* it when it’s already there.⁷²

This statement recurred in his lecture performance *Performing Black*. During this mix of theory and practice he pinpointed some Africanisms with the help of a PowerPoint presentation. Besides discussing them, he also performed some of them. For instance, when lecturing about complex rhythmic meters, he put on his tap shoes, put on music, and performed the Africanism together with his assistant Shireen Dickson. Another evident example put into practice was the call-and-response tradition. He created a chatty ambiance, where interaction between audience and performers was stimulated by asking questions while performing. At one point he

⁷¹ DeFrantz, *Parallels* catalogue,, 62.

⁷² DeFrantz, “Thomas DeFrantz in conversation with Michael Bodel”, 1.

invited audience members to imitate poses by black dancers projected on a video screen, telling them they are performing black right there, thus reminding the audience of the accessibility of black identity and performance. At the same time the ease with which the largely white audience was asked to step in and perform black could be interpreted as drawing attention to the notion of appropriation. There have been many white dancers in history copying the dances of black dancers without crediting them. They incorporated the styles of black dancers with success on the stages, while the black dancer was condemned to be the unnamed teacher. Part of his lecture performance seems to focus on that notion of this invisible black force that is behind so many aspects of popular culture, and of course especially dance. Through a detailed look at the Africanisms and highlighting the Africanist Aesthetic present in performance in so many different ways, while the (white) viewer participates, DeFrantz seems to teach the audience a lesson in recognizing the black presence in performance.

Chapter 3

Parallels continues the discourse

Broadly speaking, *Parallels*, as one of the most recent contributors to the discourse of black dance, has continued the discussion where the authors discussed in this thesis left off, highlighting some aspects of their discussion, rejecting others, and introducing new ones. Besides *Parallels* as one entity, the performances individually and Houston-Jones as a curator have their own specific relation to the discourse. In this chapter I will explore these distinct relations.

Houston-Jones seems to have as a main goal to show a diverse group of black choreographers. He never elaborately discusses any black dance aesthetics in *Parallels*. Whereas DeFrantz (especially in his lecture performance during *Parallels*) and Gottschild address this frequently in their discussions, Houston-Jones focuses his attention less on the specific tropes of blackness and more on showing the diversity in who is meant by black and what black dancers make. By doing that he puts the focus more on the work and the makers and less literally discusses the things that might make dance black. Consequently, he leaves it up to the spectator to decide to which extent a performance could be black dance.

Each individual performance in *Parallels* has its own way of connecting to the discourse. Because this thesis is not able to elaborate on all of them, I have chosen to elaborate on the performances that represented the extremes of the way the performances during *Parallels* can relate to the discourse. Hence, they represent the

whole program, as the performances that are not discussed fall in between these extremes or relate in similar ways to the discourse.

Chipaumire's experimental traditional dance very clearly presents black dance aesthetics in ways DeFrantz and Gottschild have described: a "get-down" quality, articulated isolation of bodyparts, solid contact with the ground, and unmistakably, a spiritual dimension to the entire performance. We could consider Lewis' performance of the divergent technical warm-ups as presenting the flip side of the coin. Her performance does not specifically use black dance aesthetics in any way. This also coincides with DeFrantz's perspective as he noted that not all black choreographers may be interested in black dance aesthetics, or Gottschild's similar perspective as she notes that black dance aesthetics are aesthetics that are culturally constructed and therefore available to anybody, which too points to black dance aesthetics being an aesthetics of choice.

Rawls' performance relates to several parts of the discourse. First of all, it aligns with Johnson's definition of black dance as it presents a political stance that connects to contemporary blackness. The cardboard dogs referencing African-American political history, even only as potential for association, could make it black dance. Secondly, it could also be black dance based on its use of black dance aesthetics in parts of the performance. The cheeky routine where he more or less seduces the audience contains movement that could be recognized as having an African origin similarly as mentioned above with Chipaumire: the isolated use of his pelvis, the repetitive, deep bends, etc. However, in the end, Rawls' performance evokes the question where the whole discourse on black dance keeps beginning and ending: what makes a performance black dance? The dogs and the routine are just small parts in the whole

performance, so the question becomes whether these parts are sufficient to evoke the label black dance.

Finally, besides Houston-Jones and the performances, how does *Parallels* as a whole relate to the discourse? By presenting a rich diversity in what is being made by African-American choreographers, *Parallels* shows, in accordance with Allen, Gottschild, and DeFrantz, that creating a unitary definition of black dance, that defines all of these dances, is impossible. Carole Johnson's all-inclusive definition, which includes "any form of dance and any style that a black person chooses to work within"⁷³ does not seem to comply with *Parallels* thought either. First of all, not all the performances in *Parallels* are made by black choreographers. Secondly, as recurred several times in the chapter about *Parallels*, some of the participants were opposed to all of their works being labeled black dance. Moreover, for example Lewis' work shows that *Parallels* presented performances in which the content would only be associated with a black experience because of the topic of the Platform and its framing of the performances, a fact that makes labeling them black dance too far fetched.

Yet, there is still something to say for Johnson's definition. Although her definition of black dance didn't have a lot of power as a denominator, its implications nonetheless connect to the way *Parallels* addresses black dance. By proposing to consider contemporary dance or even ballet as black dance, Johnson opposed the earlier presumption that black dance was bound to a particular form or style. That is a conclusion the other authors and *Parallels* draw as well. More specifically, Johnson implied that black dance was dance as it had been passed through the experience of

⁷³ Johnson, "What is Black Dance", 2.

African-Americans. Although *Parallels* doesn't exactly agree with black dance being *any* experience by *every* African-American dancer, its understanding of black dance seems to be based on a similar assumption; namely that black dance is always related to a black experience in some way and found its origin in black people.

As DeFrantz elaborately discussed the use of an Africanist aesthetic, both outside and inside *Parallels*, he spoke of *recognizing* that aesthetic, as it is already present in practically every dance form or style. The artists of *Parallels* explained and showed how they can choose to work with this aesthetic or not. However, these aesthetics *did* find their origin in a black dancing body at some point. Moss's night is an example of how all the perspectives on black dance during *Parallels* consider dance to be black dance when it has somehow passed through the experience of black people, as the performances that night were related to otherness or to the role of the outsider. Although Moss's consideration of black dance was a metaphorical one, it is nonetheless based on an experience (that of being the outsider) that he finds part of being black. However, being the outsider is not a characteristic exclusive to black identity. The question then becomes whether one considers it to be enough of an essence of black identity to be explored in that way. Blogger Carl Paris' problem with this night for instance shows the differences of opinion on this matter. As a case for what is or is not black dance, Moss's night may therefore not be very convincing, but it nevertheless once again strongly reaffirms *Parallels* suggestion to think about black dance from the broadest point of view. This way of concerning itself with the topic of black dance connects all the way back to Zita Allen's call for an ongoing dialogue as to what black dance is, not in order to define

it, but to prevent racist use of the term and, as Gottschild and DeFrantz also repeatedly argued, to celebrate the Africanist presence in American concert dance.

3.1 The new consideration of black dance in *Parallels*

Besides relating or not relating to the existing discourse, *Parallels* also introduces some new views. By constantly making connections to the 1982 version, *Parallels* highlighted what has changed in thirty years and indirectly highlighted the fact that these changes run parallel to those of dance and performance in general. Multimedia in performances, which was somewhat of a novelty in 1982, has become part of many performances in 2012. This change is a development that occurred in the entire field of dance and performance in the past thirty years. Houston-Jones' emphasis on this development specifically in the context of black dance calls attention to the fact that African-Americans have been part of the development of the field of dance and performance in general.

Specifically concerning the consideration of black dance, black men improvising together has lost its radical character, showing that the idea of what it is black people in dance can do has changed. Also, the inclusion of African, biracial and non-black artists shows *Parallels*' new consideration of who or what could be meant by black. As Houston-Jones and Rawls both indicated with their examples of Obama, who or what is meant by black has changed in comparison to, for instance, the time of the 1982 *Parallels*. Black identity has been diversified and is not necessarily referring to an African-American identity. *Parallels* brings forth the idea of black dance considered from the broadest point of view, not necessarily dependent on race, but based on black experience nonetheless.

What can be concluded from this is that what has changed is that the discussion has progressed to a stage where it is mostly concerned with questioning the term black dance and opening it up to new perspectives, whereas in 1982 the prime function was to invalidate presumptions about black dance that existed. Moreover, what Houston-Jones personally seems to propose, by leaving the decision to which extent something is black dance up to the spectator, is that the discussion about black dance is distancing itself from fixed ideas about black dance.

Concluding remarks

Parallels was a platform that was foremost concerned with autonomous performances. Nevertheless, as I have shown in this thesis, through the way it contextualizes these performances with additional programming like talks, debates etc. and the publication of the catalogue, *Parallels* can be considered a valuable contribution to the existing discourse on black dance. However, *Parallels'* contribution to the discourse was a whole Platform, whereas the existing discourse consist out of documententation that is easily accesable. To better serve any further continuation of the discourse in the future, this thesis has therefore pieced together the ways in which *Parallels* can be placed in the existing discourse on black dance and how it continues this discourse.

What this has brought to light, first of all, is that there is no unitary definition of black dance. The understanding of what black dance is has been confused. Through presenting divergent interpretations of black dance and performances that relate to these interpretations in different ways, *Parallels* tackled fixed meanings of black dance. It has become clear that using the term black dance has become meaningless when not defined at the same time. Since the Platform leaves deciding whether a performance is in fact black dance or not up to the spectator, the term has been pushed into the personal domain. There is no way to speak about black dance in general terms anymore. Moreover, taking into consideration the history of racism, especially the role of terminology, it even seems inappropriate to use the term black dance when not defined (especially as a white person), because it would not refer to anything other than the race of the dancer.

We have seen that in every discussion of the term, the issue of racism and its long history are always part of the discussion too. Similarly, when the term black dance has been used to label performances, it inevitably separates those performances as being different from whatever other dance, for instance as the opposite of white dance. As Gottschild argued, as long as there is still racism towards people with African roots, there is still a need to use and discuss black dance and related terminology. We can conclude that the dismissal of the term is ideal, but that it is still necessary to use a terminology of difference, not in order to separate, but to be able to oppose racism and acknowledge the contributions black people made to dance. Moreover, in many cases there are terms that more accurately describe what is meant, such as “Africanist Aesthetic”, often used by DeFrantz, or “new black aesthetics”, discussed by Rawls.

The discussion of these more specific terms also shows two of the main issues of black dance *Parallels* addressed: The first is that one of the problems with the term black dance is that the label “dance” has the tendency to encompass an entire performance, while the label has proven to describe little of the performance and raises the question when something is “black enough” to be called black dance. Aesthetics denotes more of a style or way of doing, that could refer to parts of a performance. Saying a performance uses a certain kind of aesthetics does not impose a label that might exclude it from also being something else.

The second issue that speaks from these new terms is that what black means changes. Anyone attempting to define black dance would have to consider that what is understood by black has changed and will keep changing. As black dance was once coined to refer to dances made by African-Americans, *Parallels* involves African, Caribbean, and even Hispanic/Latino and European-American dancers.

Some of those claim black, others don't, but the important thing is that *Parallels* shows that there is no consensus on what black refers to.

As I have mentioned in the beginning of this thesis, *Parallels* is part of a very specific niche in dance and performance of which the work is experimental and of which the artists and audience are generally known for their broad-mindedness. The research in this thesis was limited to this niche. There might have been different conclusions if this thesis focused on other scenes. For instance, how would the outcome of this thesis change when the subject was the popular dance scene? Or: how has the discourse on black identity in works of art progressed in the scene of visual arts or that of theatre?

Another interesting direction for further research would be to look into the use of terminology outside the United States. During the research for this thesis, I encountered little scholarly writing from countries outside the United States that have large minorities of people with African roots. It would be interesting to investigate if there exists a discourse on black dance in those countries and whether that has progressed similarly to the one in the United States. How does for instance The Netherlands consider its black citizens from Surinam and the Antilles when it comes to dance? Or how does it consider a black influence in dance at all?

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