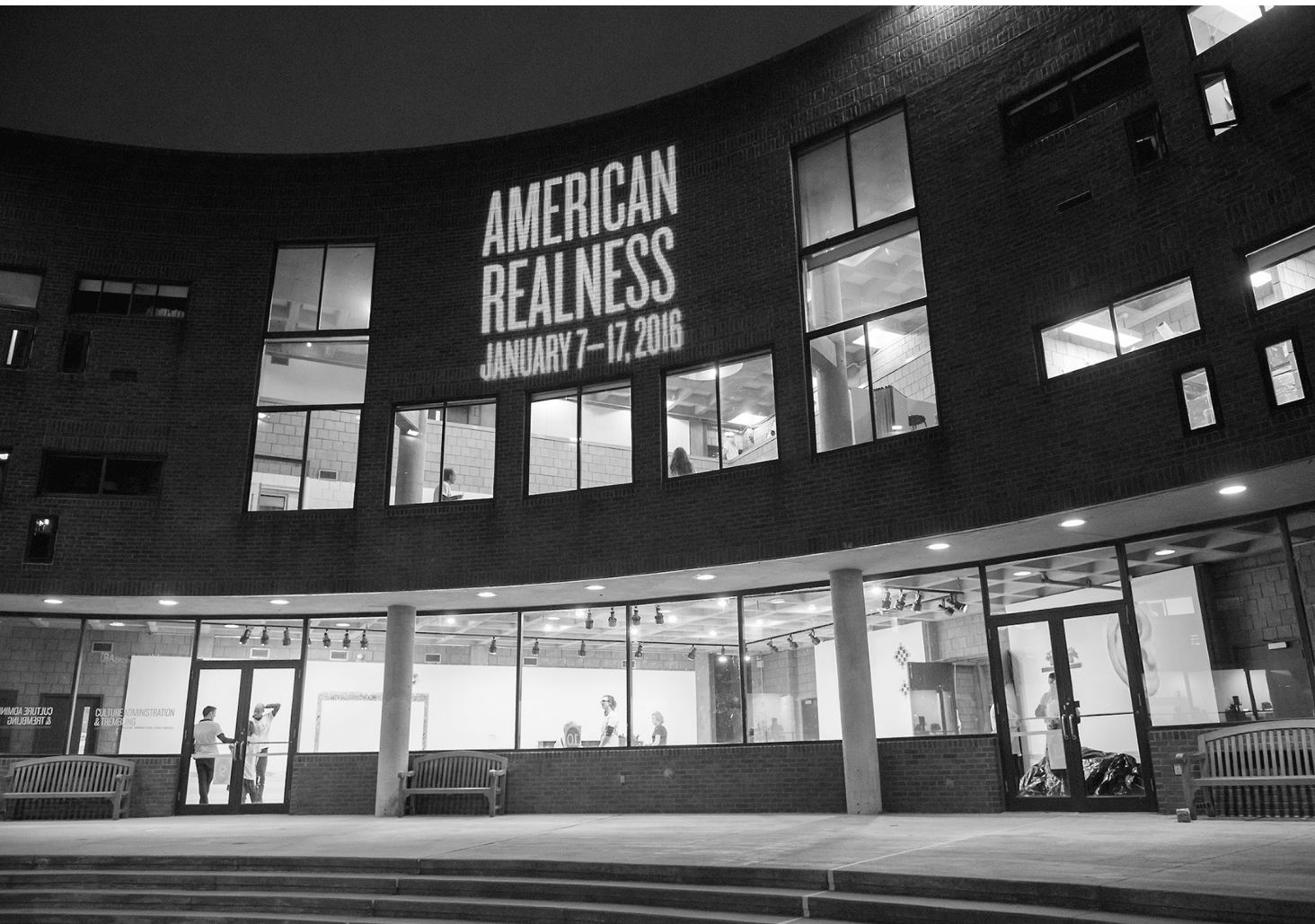




American Realness,
Abrons Arts Center,
New York, 2016.
Photo: Ian Douglas

THOMAS F. DEFRA NTZ

I AM BLACK

(you have to be willing to not know)

The discourse of race in contemporary performance falls apart when whites try to understand black performance.

Contemporary black performance is saturated with experience and complexities that evade easy affiliations or knowings. This dialogic manifesto–lecture–performance offers strategies for acknowledging how artists of color and their collaborating audiences of color operate in several keys simultaneously but are inevitably compelled to reduce their work and experience to the unknowable, shameful category of “race.”

Music playlist as witnesses/listeners assemble in the space:

“Spirit” by Earth, Wind, and Fire

“Black Sweat” by Prince

“A House Is Not a Home” by Luther Vandross

“Liftoff” by the Robert Glasper Experiment

“Sweet Life” by Frank Ocean

“Akel Dama” (“Field of Blood”) by Meshell Ndegeocello

Before the event, the speaker moves among the group, chatting with the gathered: “How are you? What have you seen lately? Any good restaurant recommendations?”—general chitchat. The speaker approaches the speaking area but before sitting sets up rules of engagement for our time together. Continuing conversationally with the gathered, the speaker notes some points: the text is a bit polemical but intended not as a screed but rather as a provocation. There are ten points to discuss here, but they are not positioned in an ultimate order. We will stop after three points for questions and discussion along the way.

The speaker sits at a laptop on a small table and adjusts the music to indicate the beginning of the event.

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I. STOP USING BLACK DANCES AS EMPTY REFERENTS.

Again, and again, dances created in black environments are shared and then later used in contexts that have little reference to breathing black people. You drop the stanky leg or the nae nae into your contemporary performance project. It's supposed to feel hip and aware or funny and ironic. You vogue or j-sette to demonstrate your of-the-moment ability to get down with the kids. Just stop it. You don't understand what those dances are for or how they operate or what they can do. It's like playing with fire, and it's embarrassing at the same time. Dangerous and sad; pathetic. The thing that you do—your version of that dance—is already something else, many times removed from its native capacities, and yes, but it still rankles. Art is not real estate, and experimental performance is all about blurring boundaries and making provocative assemblages, right? “Why can't we wear blackface, or do a bad tap dance to cite presentational flatness? Why can't I do a ‘black girl strut’ to demonstrate my sass and verve in my work about the mysteries of primal white femininity?”

Black asks back: why does our creativity have to feed your imagination in that way? In order to work with black dances you have to respect them and the people who create them. To show your respect: Look, but do not touch. Witness, but don't try to participate without living in the culture. Let's have no more “hip-hop” or “ball culture” moments that are supposed to confirm urban dance cool, or are supposed to confirm some resistant, alternative approach to sound and gesture. These dances and their musics rise up in circumstances that deserve more attention than you trying to “bust a move” in your gallery installation. And the worst of it is, inevitably you are not very good at doing these dances, because if you were, you would know that they don't belong in these larger structures where they are lost in the wilderness as empty referents.

Black creativity arises within a constellation of living that has everything to do with imagining together forward. Rewind: Black creativity imagines forward together, arriving as a group process of reflection and rejuvenation. Sometimes that “forward” means landing on television or in widely distributed social media; then the music and dance can create robust economic possibilities, like Big Freedia's versions of bounce music. But that bounce music lives in two places at once for a while, in the queer black communities that developed it and also in the mostly white hedonistic clubs that venerate it or are smugly curious about it. The two places tussle for prominence, and guess what? The white space wins out every time, because we know that, in time, we will make more black form, but the moment to cash in on a possibility of microcelebrity is always right now. There's no use holding the dance back. But you, white artist you, can do better and not just suck on the black titty or dick you find nearby because you think it's cool. Let the bounce music bounce, and enjoy it as best you can at home or in the club. The burdensome history of black dances in front of white audiences definitely means that “dropping like it's hot” in the underground theater at American Realness or at PSI or MOMA demands more response than a self-satisfied smile at our cool. It actually

I AM BLACK



demands working toward social justice outside of the confines of contemporary performance. Black social dances, misplaced into theatrical contexts, do that: they reference the problems we all live with. But if you want to play with this fire, you must do more than just reference the problems—you need to get out and join the protest lines, or live in the communities that produce these dances.

Thomas DeFrantz's
*i am black (you have to
be willing to not know)*,
American Realness,
Abrons Arts Center,
New York, 2016.
Video: Marin Sander
Holzman

2. STOP TRYING TO UNDERSTAND MY BLACKNESS.

This is not about race. Race is shameful; critical race studies confirm this again and again. Race doesn't exist, right, but racism perseveres and continues. Yes and yes; structural white hegemonic patriarchy; institutional racism, yes and yes. Blackness is more complex than race, the thing that doesn't really exist. Blackness has to do with an approach, like this one, to discourse to gesture to art to family to expression. To life, *l'chaim*. Blackness is indeed incomprehensible, and it is entirely real and everyday. It has to do with outsidership in white contexts and nothingness in black spaces; yes, because in black spaces no one is black because we stop being black except in relation to you. Of course. But in black spaces we don't "just exist" without race, because that is not a possibility in the context of this planet or in the context of contemporary performance. There is no outside of race, as there is no outside of history. But race is not blackness. Blackness does; blackness inspires; blackness confirms and consecrates. Race inhibits; it constrains. It shuts down. Blackness allows for. For love. When you talk about race,

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and you know you're trying to talk about blackness but you don't understand blackness, that's when it happens. Your extra blink of the eye and the recoil in the body; you know there is something funky about the way you just said *race* or the way you're still thinking about race. This is not about race. It's probably about your lack of agility and your inability to do anything in the face of overwhelming social inequality. What can you do about race? Probably not much. But why can't you understand blackness or black people? Because, frankly, it's just too complicated for you. The people who understand any aspect of black life also understand that it is unspeakable and best expressed in resistant creative acts. Yes, as in music and dance, but also in concerted social and political action, in banking, in being stopped by the police, in being shot by the police, in suspicion and mistrust and in love. At least in love and in the bitter tongue that could make such love possible. The bitter tongue. If you want to better understand blackness you have to better understand the bitter tongue.

3. DANCE IS NOT REPRESENTATION; IT IS ACTION.

About the discourse on stillness and minimalism in contemporary performance, well, just no, not for black people. We're not representing as a black woman standing still; we're standing still. We're standing still before we have to bust out and affirm our being within your line of sight, our being among each other. Slowing down to be quiet is a bourgeois response born of white privilege; who else can afford to be ironic, especially when what is at stake is about an opportunity to confirm life? I will not be quiet when my life is again and again put on the line. I will not be "postminimal cool" because some sort of paronomastic stillness is the theatrical trend for bourgeois white theater. I will not waste an opportunity to confirm my presence with my dance. And yes, dance is life in demonstration, a precious moment to share possibility among. We get these opportunities infrequently, even those of us in this room who feel jaded or "done" with contemporary performance or American Realness. Black art isn't done. It believes in itself and the possibility of consecrating a moment in execution. It isn't trying to reshape its history or make a rupture with an errant past that left things out of its formation. Black art isn't trying to "get it right" because our parents "got it wrong." We don't make postmodern dance to protest modern dance. We make hip-hop because we need the art in the present moment. Not because we're mad at bebop or swing. Not because we have to say "no" to some detail from before. We live in what came before, always; we never forget being enslaved or being disavowed. We're not engaged in white privilege. White privilege is this weird narrowing of attention to a tiny detail, like the arch of a foot or the geometric expansion of form into an accumulative choreographic task. Black art works in the entirety of exchange at once, in choreopoems or classical jazz or ball dancing at a cotillion. The action of black performance is comprehensive; it doesn't represent something; rather, it is many contradictory things at once. It's not representing itself; it's doing something, right now. Black dance and black performance

aren't trying to stand in for themselves, or represent their manner; they are doing/demonstrating/making/enlivening. Right now. The dance will not be denied; let the dance do for itself. Resist focusing on an aspect and try to feel the whole of it. The whole of it makes the moment important and remarkable. The dance of black performance is action.

PAUSE I — QUESTIONS

The speaker asks for questions from the listeners. The speaker asserts that we will take our time, and there will be at least three questions before we continue. Typically, silence ensues. It lasts awhile. Tentatively, questions from the audience arrive. One person tells us all that she listens while she tries to understand. She thinks of Claudia Rankine and Citizen, which suggests some similar lines of dissent that are usually unvoiced. "It helps to hear these thoughts voiced," the listener says. Another person notes that, "If race is a construct, then doesn't assuming a white-black dichotomy evoke a continuation of a lie?" More silence, a bit more uncomfortable. Someone else asks, "What kinds of questions did you expect?"

The speaker offers no answers to these questions, which are not really questions.

The speaker continues.

4. BLACK REFERENTS ARE EXCEEDINGLY COMPLEX.

Black performance shimmies and careens across perceived boundaries and containers to construct ineffable moments of connection. Hip-hop quotes Walt Whitman and Angela Davis; black competition dancers sample ballet and Hollywood African jungle dancing. The references are always dizzying and impossible to untangle. They mean to be. If you can explain it easily, it probably isn't very good. Black performance resists being "on the nose," but more important, it embraces its emergence from contradictions. Black life is entirely contradictory, and our art amplifies that mode of reality. We don't really do simple, and by the time you get to contemporary performance in the twenty-first century, well good luck. Yes, you might see a black woman dressed as a domestic throwing plates angrily against a wall, or maybe a person tap dancing while a fire hose douses them, and you might think, oh, I get it now, that's clear. But that's not really the most interesting tactic that black art engages. Not the images that you can narrate, but the unimpeachable actions of performance, in the embellishment or the fillips of gesture that call attention not to themselves but to the importance of the present moment: these are the referential gestures that allow black performance to expand beyond itself. So, it resists your ability to contain it or know it. It is a moving target. Fugitive. Of the group, in motion, unsatisfied, curious, and oh yes, bitter, always bitter. If it seems happy to you? You're not understanding what it's doing. The complexity of black life drives performance outward, and there is always more than meets the eye.

DEFRANTZ

5. BLACK PUBLICS KNOW THEMSELVES WELL. WE SHARE EXPERIENCE.

We make funny faces.

We'll see ourselves in the spaces of contemporary performance—well, not that often—and we notice each other. We notice each other because we are so few, and when we catch each other's eyes and we know this truth that we know we are so few so let's start there, in the so-called mixed context where the audiences are overwhelmingly and almost exclusively white. Then there will be three of us among fifty or fifteen among five hundred. But the thing about black is that we see each other; we're not invisible to each other; we see it and that seeing may be a comfort, or it may be a time I pull away, or toward, or maybe a sense that, "Well, at least I won't be the only one to see whatever crazy shit is going to happen onstage that is racially awkward." But sometimes it's more like, "Okay, there's somebody else here, but maybe they're kind of crazy and we're going to have to actually deal with whatever it is we're about to see." None of us want that dealing part; it's just really, really hard, having to deal with racism staged as social diversion or as an artistic choice. So instead, we might smile, or nod, and turn away quickly; we pretend we're not there but we always know we are here, always knowing as a part of what it is to be in the place of being black, yes, I am black, and yes, I pretty much always know it.

"But I get tired and I haveta come offa the floor." That comes from *colored girls*, one of the love poems, and that line speaks to me because so often I have the thing that I call "white fatigue," and yes, it's a thing, and yes, every black person has it at some point, when we just can't stand to have to talk to another white person now. Not now. This is a real thing; this really happens, and it's because in the relationship of white privilege to blackness there's this overwhelming sense of need, and expectation, to understand how to be in relationship to, and to ask questions without an answer, and to try to be close . . .

To try to be close, to want, because we need those things and we think we need these relationships but the timing is off sometimes, and while I want to be at the performance, I just don't want to have to explain myself and my blackness to you right now; I don't want to explain that I'm sad that there's only three of us here and that I know both of them already, the other two; or that I don't know them at all, but I know that one of them is very dandy while the other is a child looking for herself in the world and not sure how to deal with the fact of her own blackness. Because we have to learn how to deal with it, and there is no instruction book, but there are regulations, codes, there are expectations and there are things that one can and cannot do.

Now some of you white people listening to this or reading this are my friends, and please, do know that this friendship is a real thing. You know good and well that this "white fatigue" isn't about you, and that our friendship is like any other: at times it needs to be reset like any relationship, maybe for an hour, maybe for a day, or for a month. We're not talking about an impossibility of deep friendship, finely honed. But still, sometimes that thing arises anyway, when blackwork emerges and you and I see



it too differently. Your eyes narrow and you shift nervously back and forth and ask if I saw it, the blackwork, and then you look to see how I will respond: as your friend who knows you and whom you know generally, or as a black person who will support the possibility of the group. What choice do I have? Both circumstances are real; they both matter. Can you try not to make me choose? I actually know you're my friend when you refuse to make me choose. What does that mean? We can never talk about the work, the blackwork that you don't like? Maybe it means that you have to listen more than you might with your white friends. You have to learn to listen and not speak.

And I don't like all the work I see, but who cares, this isn't about me being separate from the possibility of a black moment, a black collective action. And when we do together go in a black group to see blackwork among a white audience, and we sit through those uncomfortable moments when the white people don't understand what to do or what's happening, or why something is funny, or why something is absolutely brilliant, we turn to ourselves to enjoy anyway, and we soldier on through the performance, to the lobby, through the halting conversations, and back into the imaginary group of black spectators who didn't come to the show but might have loved it if they had.

And sometimes we see blackwork as a black collective, and it's an entirely different story. This is rarely experimental work like what might be shown in American Realness or in any of the other venues of APAP because these are not black places or even temporarily black spaces. Those experiences emerge at the HBCUS and are probably created by smaller groups of artists you've never heard of and will never know, who make work and burnish it and share it and charge the air and remind us to reset our sense of shared possibility and how our temporary shared sensibilities matter.

M. Lamar's
DESTRUCTION,
American Realness,
Abrons Arts Center,
New York, 2016.
Photo: Ian Douglas

DEFRA NTZ

Because our shared sensibility does matter even if we only need it now, or on such rare occasions. We have so very few opportunities together as black folx. I think we want more opportunities, and this might be what the twenty-first century portends, more black experimental work among black audiences that enjoy convergence in unexpected places, like here. But it's hard to know because white privilege and white power and white hegemony and white racism are so strong, are so ever-present. How would we craft our own festival and prepare it for us and not our mixed, mostly white norm? How would we ever honor our dance at the family reunion as more valuable than a show at Henry Street Settlement among the white tastemakers? How would we?

6. BLACK FAILURE IN PUBLIC IS PROFOUND AND IMPOSSIBLE.

Black failure can't. Failure is such an important trope for queer performance and for a lot of contemporary performance. We stage the failure because in doing something poorly or badly we also stage the recovery, and the recovery is a huge part of what being queer or being marginalized, outsiderized, seems to need to remind itself of in order to persevere. Failure has been theorized effectively in several directions—we know that, and the authors: the late José Esteban Muñoz and many others: Jack Halberstam, Roderick Ferguson. Queer white failure and maybe Latina malapropisms have to do with a certain kind of performative identity politics. But black failure is something else that we don't ever truly encounter in performance. The reasons are obvious: black failure implies the possibility of black success, and that is something that none of us are comfortable with. Something like black expertise or excellence might be realized in dance through, obviously, Alvin Ailey or the Urban Bush Women or the Dance Theatre of Harlem and Misty Copeland. And yet, in those instances we tend to feel suspicious of that sort of success and expertise. Jaded and smarter than achievement, we think that sort of excellence is empty: shiny, and vacuous, commercial. (Unless we go with our families and we actually cheer along with the group that black people could actually do such things.)

Maybe *failure* would be better sited in experimental contemporary performance; and yet how could a black person ever fail on stage? She can't, really, because the fact of even being in front of a white audience is the success and the preemptive success before—that a white audience is compelled by some reason to sit quietly and encounter black people doing things in performance. Well, already there's an achievement of sorts. Black failure becomes an oxymoron and an impossibility in performance, and this is something else that makes white citizens highly uncomfortable. You know that the thing you are seeing is special in whatever encounter, and you're not comfortable enough with black agency to make space for black failure. There's just no such thing.

But what you are really trying to be in the presence of, of course, is black Joy, and that is something that you will never encounter. I think it drives you crazy, but you don't have access to black Joy because black Joy is never never never revealed in mixed circumstances when we know there are white strangers present. In mixed company, black Joy is mitigated and adjusted, modulated.

Yet black Joy is possible, and it is revealed in performance. Maybe not in contemporary performance, but at those sites that probably don't interest us here. Those sites are the church sanctuary, the high school dance, the dance school recital, the everyday places where art and life collide and produce possibilities that are partitioned off from experimental, contemporary downtown performance. Those places are not valued for producing art for the ages, and so those places thankfully escape white scrutiny. But what this also means is that you haven't been in the presence of black Joy, and I don't know if you ever will. Black Joy is a counterpart to the bitter tongue that permeates black performance. Black Joy is held back. Especially in mixed company.

PAUSE 2 — QUESTIONS

The speaker asks for questions from the listeners. Usually, several come quickly. One night, someone asks, "What about the particularities of dance? Don't gestures theorize existence differently from language? How is dance different from, say, theater?" Another asks, "Does black Joy exist in relation to whiteness in a way that black doesn't? Is black Joy about a release, or a reprieve from whiteness? Where does black Joy live?" The questions become more layered and nuanced. "What could space for black failure look like? How could we make space for black failure?" And another listener jumps in, "Is this about the fact of mostly white critics? Are we talking about the effects that a powerful critical elite hold over forms of creativity?" The speaker notes the questions and parries slight responses to a couple of ideas. But mostly, the speaker asks the listeners to stay invested in the journey already begun . . .

The speaker continues.

7. OF COURSE THIS IS PERSONAL, AND NO, IT ISN'T ABOUT YOU.

It's not just about me, either; in fact, it was never about me any more than it was ever about you. My blackness is no more a part of who I am than your whiteness is. These are existential categories of being set in motion long ago and perpetuated by our inability to do any better about it. We haven't figured any of this out really, not structurally, so here we are.

But don't get it twisted: this isn't about you doing something wrong. It's so much bigger than that. So hats off when you trying to "say the right thing" or "do the right thing." But that's not what this is or what it's about. You can't solve this by acting a different way, or making different friends, or presenting different work. You have to figure out how to get out of the way. But that's hard for you to do. You have so little experience of that, and so little training in it. Every tiny bit of possibility or recognition of power that you gain, you feel is yours. And so you never wanna let any of it go. You earned it, you think, but in that weird white privilege you forget about the structures that produce another and that produce black and that produce blackness. The structures of white privilege that produced black performance in a certain way—and definitely in the way that it operates here—but not in its entirety, not always, not everywhere. Black per-

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formance was before and will be after. How you are in relationship to it is what we're talking about here, and you have to decide what that is, and what you want that to be.

Are you a tourist? An ally? A naive? An unwilling receptor? Wait, did you go to college? Did you read Du Bois or Morrison, or Ellison, or Baraka or Sanchez, or hooks? When you read, did you get quiet? Did you?

Wait, there we go, making it about you; this isn't about you. But this is always about you, isn't it? My talking about me is somehow about you. (*sigh*)

Just this, then: I don't represent all black people or all black art. And yet there are black people and there is black art. I don't represent nothing either, and *me* without *we* is something like an individuated nothingness. Black is collective action, and blackwork is going to be about the group, not the individual. The group makes space for the individual, but the group knows itself to be, ontologically, connected.

8. THE COLLECTIVE IMPULSE MEANS THAT QUALITY IS BORNE OUT BY THE GROUP.

In black performance, the group decides how the performance feels or what the performance does. This *doing*, again, is really what there is. Black performance isn't trying to solve a historical possibility that might allow for some sort of weird newness. Black performance is trying to solve the moment in a way that encourages an unexpected relationship and encounter.

Critics have an impossible place in black performance. There's no obvious tradition of black criticism because there's no need for it. The criticism for black performance came in the moment when the performance happened, in the moment when the performance realized itself, or didn't. It does no one any good to say that so-and-so didn't do well, or someone else made a bad lighting choice, or someone else's costumes looked baggy in all the wrong places. What matters is how we felt in the room, and whether something unusual was able to happen. If it didn't happen, well, that's the breaks and sometimes it doesn't; but usually it does because we all have a responsibility to the performance when it is in motion, and we know that our energy is part of what makes it work, what makes it special, what makes it valuable.

White critics—well forget it, they just have no chance here when they're trying to say that the performance seems unruly or the choreography seems shabby; they're just missing the whole point of what the performance is trying to do. The last thing the performance is trying to do is satisfy a white gaze; that's at the very bottom of the list, especially in black contexts, but even in white contexts. What white critics fail to understand again and again is that black gesture is always concerned with the momentary possibility and release of connection—always, always, always—even in the context of experimental downtown performance and American Realness. The embellishment that surprises and allows the air to change temporarily—to drop in temperature or rise up unexpectedly—this is the value of the performance. It doesn't matter whether this occurs amid all kinds of props and technology or within an empty space and a person



sitting at the piano and a film showing on the wall. What the performer is able to do in the performance is what makes the performance black.

In black performance, we tend to know the performer. This is why we came to see the performance in the first place. We know Savion in a certain way, and what he does enlivens us collectively. We bring our knowing of him or our curiosity about him to the room, and the room is charged because of this special relationship. We know Misty Copeland, we think, and we appreciate her jumps in the *Firebird* more because we understand that her arrival in that place demonstrates possibility.

Black experimental performance has a hard row to hoe because of this always already in circulation knowing of the person who's going to do the thing that will help us reconsider. We don't tend to go to stuff that we don't know, not because we're not curious or performance doesn't matter, but because having a relationship to the other people in the venue and in the circumstance is a huge part of what the performance is for.

So weird performances can happen in black spaces, but they will likely go unremarked until someone claims the relationship to the performer and spreads that word among the group. When we know that this is supposed to be some sort of blackwork, we go, and now we can allow the performance to emerge among us. We want to participate; it is part of our art practice. We don't like to go to shows where we don't have any responsibility to the thing on the stage. That's just another tradition of going to theater or seeing a show. That's how white work works. I think.

Keyon Gaskin's
its not a thing,
American Realness,
Abrons Arts Center,
New York, 2016.
Photo: Ian Douglas

DEFRA NTZ

9. I MAY BE QUEER, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN
THAT I WANT TO BELONG TO YOUR TRIBE.

The intersections really matter! It's not just one identity, or another identity; it's all of them simultaneously and on top of each other. Is it simultaneous? Hell yeah, it really is, because it all shifts so quickly in the tiniest bit of gesture from being women to being black women. From being queer women to being queer black people to being working-class, black, queer people, to being disabled, to being disabled, wealthy, bourgeois Jack-and-Jill black, to being black queer from Milwaukee to being black queer from Oakland to being black straight from Atlanta to being straight to being a straight dude to being trans. Okay, yes, liquid modernity, modernity without end, always in flow.

The intersections are concatenated and always in motion. So black isn't one thing, and being a black queer "one thing" in your affinity group is not very interesting or even sustainable. I can't be a black queer aesthete as though my bourgeois light-skinned-ness isn't born of a midwestern masculinity that pulls back on a sense of propriety. When Du Bois wrote *The Philadelphia Negro* in 1899, he confirmed how place variegates; your shorthand of "black" to mean—what exactly? Black contemporary artists? Well, your shorthand falls way short of usefulness.

We don't want to be seen as one thing on your board, as no one identity is more important than the other. Or no one identity can remain the only one that matters in this circumstance. And the facts don't tell the story; the story is constantly being reshaped by Ferguson, by Staten Island, by Cleveland, by Waller County, Texas. I've never lived in any of those places, not exactly, and yet I've been there. When I gave a lecture in St. Louis recently and mentioned Ferguson in my remarks, I felt the chill of disassociation shudder through my body. That tribe was constituted variously in front of me as I spoke about black social dance and improvisation. My reference to its bulbous reassemblies confused us all, mostly me. Not mine to cite, not here, I knew, the moment the words came forth. I am not a singularity in myself as a *black queer* or *black artist*. I am not necessarily of St. Louis, even as I might know that place as I know Indianapolis, Indiana, where I grew up. Our places in our tribes shape and reshape, but please don't assume that what you think you know of me is all that there is. It's probably just all that is there for you, and that's not the same thing.

PAUSE 3 — QUESTIONS

For a final time, the speaker again asks for questions from the listeners. By now they become enthusiastic with queries, surely prepared during the last rounds of manifesto delivery. They ask, "What do you define as black performance, or black dance, or black art? What are its boundaries?" "When you reference yourself inside the story of Ferguson, and claim some forms of blackness are not yours to cite, what are you trying to do? What is that about? What about the place of the experimental, and what it might mean to be an experimental black artist? To work in a place outside of what we know for black? What is this 'groundedness' that distin-

guishes black performance? Where does the knowledge of black performance emerge? How does one claim it? Is it acculturated? Are you talking about belonging to a group? Whose blackness is this—is it entirely American? Where is it to be found? What about dual identities, or mixed race identities, or ‘brown’ performance? Why do you have ten points to share? What did you expect? And what about ‘place’ as a resonance for black performance? Where is black place?”

The speaker listens and makes notes. At times the speaker interjects affirmative notions of listening and taking care of the concerns of the listeners. Again, the speaker doesn’t answer the questions so much as acknowledge their usefulness and generative qualities.

The speaker continues.

10. YOU REALLY DON’T GET IT, AND IT’S NOT YOURS TO HAVE.

Maybe one of the hardest things to reckon with is how the black performance is not yours and you can’t have it. It’s not for you. Because the thing that you can recognize is so much more flattened and simple, linear, cause-and-effect, tidy even in its messiness. Black art is imbued with multivalent experiential and theoretical dissidence, and it is resistant in its conception as a thing against something else—against white patriarchy, white racism, white privilege. The work stretches and pulls outside of itself, constantly brushing through the world and social lives as impossibilities not to be taken for granted but rather as sites of subjection, sites of coercion, sites of abject neglect and impoverished possibility. By way of rank comparison, your structured accumulations or task-based works are incredibly empty and flat to us, something like what children might do before they understand the impossibility of sticking to a plan, of knowing that tomorrow will come, of childish half-truths and tiny satisfactions. Rather than ecstasy or conjuring.

But art is not competition, and comparison sucks. To survive the rift that is of our own making and nothing that any of us did, that tempers the air we breathe and colors the conversations we have, we have to dissemble. Which is, of course, what all experimental artists want anyway: the dissolution of boundaries that make one thing unavailable to another.

And yet, American Realness is white privilege and black subjugation; its echo in the halls of this building surprises none of us and enrages us far too little.

You saw a black performance, sort of. You saw something and ached to be let in on its purpose and its achievement. You wanted to feel it, in something of the way that black people might. Because you knew there was more to it than what you saw or heard, or your limited means to take it all in at once.

But just because you are kind-hearted, please don’t expect me to explain it to you. That’s not my job. I am black. You have to be willing to not know.

End.