



RELATIONS

BEBE

MILLER

ISHMAEL

HOUSTON-

JONES

RALPH

LEMON

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INTRODUCTION

Tara Aisha Willis

Relations grew from a brief conversation with Ishmael Houston-Jones (b. 1951), both of us exhausted and downing coffee while I described what I felt was my then new curatorial responsibility: crafting how the MCA Stage influences the performance “canon,” while staying true to my belief in finding other ways to declare our relationship to what precedes us. I asked Ishmael for his thoughts on being asked frequently to perform his early works or speak about experimental and improvised dance in downtown New York in the late 1970s through the 1990s. Was it because he is one of the few black dance artists from that scene and we are in a moment when history and the present are, rightfully, being examined for unconsidered perspectives?

I told him that I see him as a forbearer of my practices as a dancer and curator, among artists including Blondell Cummings (1944–2015), Fred Holland (1951–2016), Bill T. Jones (b. 1952), Ralph Lemon (b. 1952), Bebe Miller (b. 1950), and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar (b. 1950). Ishmael's response, like his improvisational performance style, was indirect yet practical: "You know, I've never actually *performed* with Ralph and Bebe. I'd love to do that."

For Bebe, Ishmael, and Ralph, though the historical and cultural contexts around their work over the last forty years require attention, even intervention, more crucial is the present. So, what if the answers to my questions aren't in a history lesson but a performance? What if the only way to understand the past is by looking at the artists' bodies at work today: how they conjure where they have been, continue to create together, and invent their next moves. Improvisation is a strategy for performing and making dances at which they are experts and one that can be trusted to bring out who they are and what they do—their tics and habits, their past work balanced on each flick of an arm with the immediacy of responding to the moment. Though they have never danced as a trio before, since that first conversation with Ishmael we have described *Relations* as a reunion. With shared history always just under the surface, their inventing a dance together in

front of an audience is completely new yet completely familiar territory.

The specter of race in the United States appears differently across their careers, and improvisation has been integral to their work from the beginning. Ishmael's contribution to this booklet describes the last time they all shared a stage—though danced separately—during his 1982 series *Parallels*, which examined the intersection of "Black America" and "non-mainstream dance." In his dance-archive *Come home Charley Patton*, Ralph Lemon writes of his body as a "distilled history" or "memory map," both in documenting his movement improvisations at sites charged with civil rights history and in the proscenium performance that toured to the MCA Stage in 2005.¹ His practice became more improvisational in the late 1990s, around the time he began interrogating his personal dance history and cultural context onstage.² Ishmael performed in his underwear in the MCA's elevator during a summer solstice celebration in 1998. Organizers of the festival of which the performance was a part, Rebecca Rossen and Asimina Chremos, described how "his nontechnical approach to dance and 'great methods for generating material' profoundly changed their vision of performance," especially in an improvisational exercise that pushed students to respond physically to divisive questions: "Have you had an abortion?" "Are you black?" "Are you gay?"³ Alvin Ailey's

iconic choreography for *Revelations* made a big impression on Bebe in the early 1970s, but it wasn't her thing. "There was a sense of choice that I wasn't talking about," she says of her developing relationship to her white modern dance background, "but I was definitely making one."⁴ Recently performing *In a Rhythm* (2017) in Chicago, she danced alongside her company, her influence on their movements most evident in how she glided and hiccuped her limbs across the stage, while Toni Morrison's voice went in and out of earshot, debating with Charlie Rose in 1990 about double standards for black authors.

We could mythologize them: Ishmael the punk, for whom labels like "black," "queer," or "experimental dance" aren't limits so much as malleable tools; Bebe the linguist, overlaying multiple articulations of her relationship to dance, culture, and society, and trusting what that intricacy unearths; Ralph the double agent, posing big, poetic questions while adroitly dodging answers in favor of something less nameable. But the possibilities within these improvised performances on the MCA Stage hinge on the intimacy, often at a distance, of their relationships with each other, not on those imagined figures. Among only a few choreographers of their generation and ilk who continue to make work, their relationship seems as much about mutual artistic influence as it is about friendship. I have looked to each of them as guideposts for what

dance can be, what choices black artists can make. We are not starting from scratch in the current dance landscape when we ask big questions by experimenting with dance, in part because these three have already been in conversation for a long time, along with many others. *Relations* continues that conversation, as Ishmael, Ralph, and Bebe navigate their craft, together. As Claudia La Rocco puts it in her contribution to this volume, may they close "the door on the expected thing" and find what is next.

- 1 Nicholas Birns, "Ralph Lemon's counter-memorials," in *Dance: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. André Lepecki (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 204–5; Ralph Lemon, *Come home Charley Patton* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 207.
- 2 *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training*, ed. Melanie Bales and Rebecca Nettl-Fiol (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 2008), 221–22.
- 3 Laura Molzahn, "Dance Notes: Keeping the Movable Beast Alive," *The Reader*, June 11, 1998, chicagoreader.com/chicago/dance-notes-keeping-the-movable-beast-alive/Content?oid=896506.
- 4 *The Body Eclectic*, 225.

EXCERPTS FROM CURATOR'S STATEMENT
FOR PLATFORM 2012: *PARALLELS*,
DANSPACE PROJECT, NEW YORK¹

Ishmael Houston-Jones

So it was in 1982 when I was newly arrived in New York from Philadelphia where I'd performed with Group Motion

Media Theater (a company led by two former members of the Mary Wigman ensemble in Berlin) and studied

improvisation with Terry Fox, African at The Arthur Hall Afro American Dance Ensemble, modern (Horton) with Joan Kerr as well as contact improvisation and one semester of ballet. I asked Cynthia Hedstrom, the director of Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, if I could curate a series composed of a group of "Black" choreographers who were working outside the Mainstream of Modern Dance. All those definitions seemed so simple to me then. To me "Blacks" were the descendants of West Africans who were brought to the Americas as slaves in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. They may or may not have voluntarily intermarried with Native Americans or less voluntarily interbred with the majority population. They were all "freed" by the end of the 19th century but suffered discrimination in the form of Jim Crow laws, the inability to vote, or to use the same public facilities or acquire equal education as the majority population. They could not marry whomever they wanted, and they suffered real violence and death in the struggle to correct these inequities. They also invented Spirituals, Gospel, Blues, Jazz and Rap. That's who "Black" folk were to me then.

I did not consider folks from other parts of the Diaspora: not the Caribbean and no, not Africa.

What was "beyond the mainstream" was somewhat trickier to define. The Judson Dance Theater (1962-64) is usually cited as the watershed moment in Dance History when traditional concert modern dance gave way to a period of more experimental post-modern dance with Merce Cunningham seen as the intermediary figure. However, most often in the history of the Judson era the contributions of Black experimentalists are either invisible or relegated to a footnote of the more "serious" post-modern choreographers.

...

In Merrill Brockway's 1980 Dance in America PBS special *Beyond the Mainstream* the only non-white person who appears in the hour is Kei Takei. Were there no African-Americans working beyond Brockway's mainstream? Ditto for Michael Blackwood's 1981 documentary, *Making Dances*, featuring the work of Trisha Brown, Meredith Monk, Lucinda Childs, David Gordon, et al. (Blondell Cummings is seen performing in a clip of Monk's *Education of the Girlchild*.)² This same cast of

choreographers, with a few variations, shows up in Sally Banes' 1982 book *Terpsichore in Sneakers*. Apparently, in a dance movement that began in the impassioned defiant days of the 1960s and proclaimed from the stage and in manifestos that dance was a democratic form for everyone, "everyone" was a rather limited concept.

What I think I meant when I approached Cynthia Hedstrom, was that as a Black dance maker, I didn't feel the same spiritual connection with Alvin Ailey that I did with, people doing contact improvisation or folks dancing at the Palladium and the Pyramid Clubs or b-boys and girls break dancing on cardboard in the streets, or those bizarre New Wave Drag performers or even many graffiti artists, or punk musicians. Of course seeing Judith Jamison performing Ailey's *Cry* was one of the events that made me want to dance in the first place and I could come to my feet and clap along with the finale of his *Revelations*. But aesthetically what I wanted to make and perform was as far away from those classics as were *Giselle* or *Les Sylphides*. So I brought together two weekends of shared programming to declare, as I did in my program notes,

"I chose the name *Parallels* for the series because while all the choreographers participating are Black and in some ways relate to the rich tradition of Afro-American dance, each has chosen a form outside of that tradition and even outside the tradition of mainstream modern dance . . . 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."

It's been thirty years since Blondell Cummings, Fred Holland, Rrata Christine Jones, Ralph Lemon, Bebe Miller, the late Harry Sheppard, Gus Solomons jr. and I performed on the first *Parallels* series at Danspace Project. It's been twenty-five since Jawole Willa Jo Zollar joined us on the *Parallels in Black* tour to Paris, Geneva and London. Now Bebe, Gus, Jawole along with David Rousseve, Cynthia Oliver, myself and others are on the faculties of major university dance departments. In the first *Parallels* series I was making the case that to be a contemporary Black dance maker, one did not have to be a direct descendant of Ailey. We were coming from Cunningham, Nina Weiner, Monk, Contact Improvisation as well as African and

American Black Dance traditions. Now many of those traditions are part of the Modern Dance canon; dance students have been exposed to those forms and to us as teachers.

So here we are, 2012; it's a new century. The President of the United States is the son of a White American woman and a Kenyan man. He was raised partly 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 bought and sold in this country. He was elected in his forties and has not suffered the direct effects of Jim Crow, and violence. Still, most Americans, of whatever ethnicity, refer him to as "the first Black President" though no one can deny that were it not for his job title and the security with which it comes, in many circumstances, in many localities, he would be treated like just another "Brother" on the street. This is to say; the definition of who is "Black" has changed. Who has the right to claim "Blackness?" What it is, and what it ain't? But in some ways it is still the same.

Again, that "mainstream" designation is still thornier.

After the rebellion of Judson in the 60s and the maturing of some of those artists making their experiments in choreography fit opera house stages, there was a shift away from New York to France and Belgium and Austria. Then it was Asia, then new dance coming out of Africa. Then a swing back to New York or was it Eastern Europe? And to who knows where it is now. Is there a "mainstream" to be beyond any more? As the African-American choreographers of my generation have continued using their progressive ideas to make new works and to disrupt the canon, whom can we identify as the next generation who will wreak havoc on the status quo? In the age of Obama does it mean anything to be either, or both, a post-modern dance maker or a Black dance maker? Is there a group of young Black choreographers breaking away from whatever the mainstream is now?

For PLATFORM 2012: *Parallels*, I want to keep looking forward, while remaining cognizant of our shared pasts (plural). Of course, it goes without saying, that any platform, no matter how comprehensive a curator tries to be, will always exclude more than it includes. Some of

those choices were determined by factors as banal as time and money—never enough of either in the arts, particularly with dance. Having lived and worked in Lower Manhattan for most of the last 30 years, I admit to a New York bias in what I've seen and thus chosen. And again (lack of) funds for travel determined some choices. But I forced myself to make some challenging decisions that reflect back on what my dance interests are and what I see as work that is advancing the form onward.

- 1 Reproduced from the catalogue for the Danspace Project series PLATFORM 2012: *Parallels*, curated by Ishmael Houston-Jones in February–March 2012. Edited by Judy Hussie-Taylor and Lydia Bell.
- 2 Italics added for emphasis.

ISHMAEL

Ralph Lemon

Shaman. A person regarded as having access to, and influence in, the world of good and evil spirits. Typically such people enter a trance

state during a ritual, and practice divination and healing.

He shows us his ass, he shows us his dick, his fat, his skinny, he shows his fear, his rage, he shows us his wisdom . . .

He's never read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*; at least he hadn't by 2011.

1982. St. Mark's Church, Danspace Project. I meet Ishmael Houston-Jones. What a name, Ishmael, like from *Moby Dick*, Melville, I think to myself. Coming from Minneapolis I mispronounce Houston as "Houston" (like, Houston, Texas). "Houston-Jones," he corrects me.

He calls my dance *Wanda in the Awkward Age*, from 1981, "a black dance," and I tell him that that is absurd. He says that it is OK that I disagree and asks me to be part of an event he is curating at St. Mark's Danspace, called *Parallels*. A grouping of a (imagined) black downtown dance community, seven of us. He was feeling lonely, he said. Sure, why not, I said.

1987. On tour. Paris. Dancing at the American Center. Ishmael, Blondell Cummings, Fred Holland, Bebe Miller, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar are all here. I'm captivated watching the whole show from offstage, everybody's very different dancing points of view. Offstage (every night) Ishmael seems to be yawning, or not watching at all. I can't take my eyes off his dancing. He scares me a little. I don't understand why he dances the way he dances, like he's mad at somebody, with an odd kind of grace.

1987. Rimini (the place where Fellini was born). Fred Holland, Ishmael, and I are performing. (I have brought along my twelve-year-old

daughter, Chelsea, who has completely fallen in love with Fred, of course.)

Ishmael danced tonight in only his underwear and worn-out black combat boots, bodysurfing over the empty chairs of the small audience in this tidy outdoor plaza, in this quaint Italian port town. I think he frightened the few who were there. I thought he was crazy.

1989. I watch Ishmael dance with his mother on TV, PBS, *Alive from Off Center*, and for a moment I want to be Ishmael, I want to dance with my mom. "Dance your little heart out Chucky," his moms says! Fuck him, I say to myself, with abandoned envy.

1995. Performance Space 122. Tonight I watched Ishmael catch flying spit, Keith Hennessy's spit, gobs of it, right in the center of his mouth, again and again. Like he was in love, making love. I haven't seen anything as artfully violent on stage since then.

2010. Just saw the reconstruction of *Them* at PS122. I missed the original version in 1985, probably because I was at a Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane show, or maybe Molissa Fenley, or maybe a Charlie Moulton extravaganza, the superstars at the time. Damn, it was disturbing, vital, poignant, raw, and still timely. In 1985 I was going to ballet class every day. Enough said.

2011. At Judson Memorial Church, Yvonne Meier (Ishmael's ex of many years back) asked Ishmael to strip naked and roll around in a pile of dirt and he did. And then he put on a skirt made of bags of walnuts and she told him to jump up and down. And he did, for a long time. Which freaked the dancer-choreographer David Thomson out, me too. I think David was even crying.

2012. A letter to a young artist.

. . . My humble advice, because I am older and you are younger, don't be so self-conscious, vain. What's up with this generation and its narcissism? It's what's inside, but you already know this. It's also about getting so deep in the work that your body disappears. It's about the work, brother, not the fucking beauty. Making work where you are too confident in how good, smart, contemporary, transgressive the work looks—seems—is a mistake.

When you start to become too self-conscious, just think of Ishmael, he was inside a fucking garbage bag (unseen) for an hour and it was the best moment of the ten-hour marathon at St. Mark's Danspace (the Parallels redux) in 2010, let's not forget.

I asked Ishmael what he was going to do a few weeks before the marathon—silence. And then some days before he said he had no idea. The day before, that evening, a kind of dress rehearsal, he was preparing in the church, punching small holes in a black plastic garbage bag. And then maybe a half hour later he asked me to help tape him into a separate top and bottom, prepared bags covering his whole body. Before I completely taped him in he asked me to insert, hand him some necessary paraphernalia: a notebook, a paperback novel (*Invisible Man*), a flashlight, a cordless microphone. And then he asked me to help roll him into the sanctuary space. I did. He rehearsed, not letting anyone know what he was doing inside the circumrotating plastic bag with its odd start-and-stop rhythm. After about fifteen minutes his now-amplified voice asked me to let him know when an hour had passed.

He did it again the next day, in front of an audience. This time it was not a rehearsal; still he made the audience completely disappear. And it was perfect. Occasionally reading aloud from *Invisible Man* (the audience having no idea what the source of the reading was), also singing-screaming a wild gospel that went on and on, referencing something from a Miguel Gutierrez rehearsal he was currently involved in. His imagined, necessary, private, sacred stuff kept him company in his suffocating and liberating cocoon.

After forty minutes it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. He stayed in a garbage bag for an hour. That's all that really happened, what one witnessed. A beauty stripped down to some kind of black, dull, reflective plastic, deathly loud boisterous nothing, rolling aimlessly around on the floor . . . provoking and entertaining the whole room. A true act?

And when it was over he was helped out of the bag by a young female stagehand. He was prone, soaking wet, he didn't move, wasn't smiling, his eyes were far away . . . Maybe he has died, I thought.

Ishmael almost died. 2013. The heart thing. I remember sitting in the waiting room at Beth Israel Hospital thinking about how remarkable it is that we are still at this work, our shrinking generation.

But Ishmael didn't die. Was seemingly dancing again in no time. He soared in Miguel's *Age & Beauty Part 3* (2015), literally. Harnessed, floating above New York Live Art's stage space, wearing a unitard. A white unitard. Yeah, slim, beautiful, and dancing better than ever. I thought to myself, maybe I need to have a heart thing.

His most recent 2016 epic, *Lost and Found*, a cocurated platform (his third curatorial platform over thirty-four years at St. Mark's Danspace), was a brilliant, dense, complex, generous, and loving memorial to a friend (our friend, John Bernd) lost too young to AIDS. A galvanized and fragile dance moment in the city, in our careers, a beginning moment that held all of our dances at the time.

In discussing the "paradox of the authentic act," Slavoj Žižek wrote that "what is so difficult to accept is not the fact that the true act"—an emphatic moment of pure certainty, a thing *as it is*—"is forever out of our reach. The true trauma resides in the opposite awareness that there are acts, that they do occur and that we have to come to terms with them."¹ Sometimes artists, good artists, make shit happen! Period.

We have to come to terms with Ishmael. He is not going away. The master-provocateur, artist, performer, author, teacher, curator, his generous, fearless, and dangerous humanity. My shaman friend. I am so grateful that I have grown up with him.

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), 135.

We are Black¹

Manifesto from
Untitled Duet
or *Oo-Ga-La* (1983)*

Fred Holland
and Ishmael
Houston-Jones

We will wear street clothes²

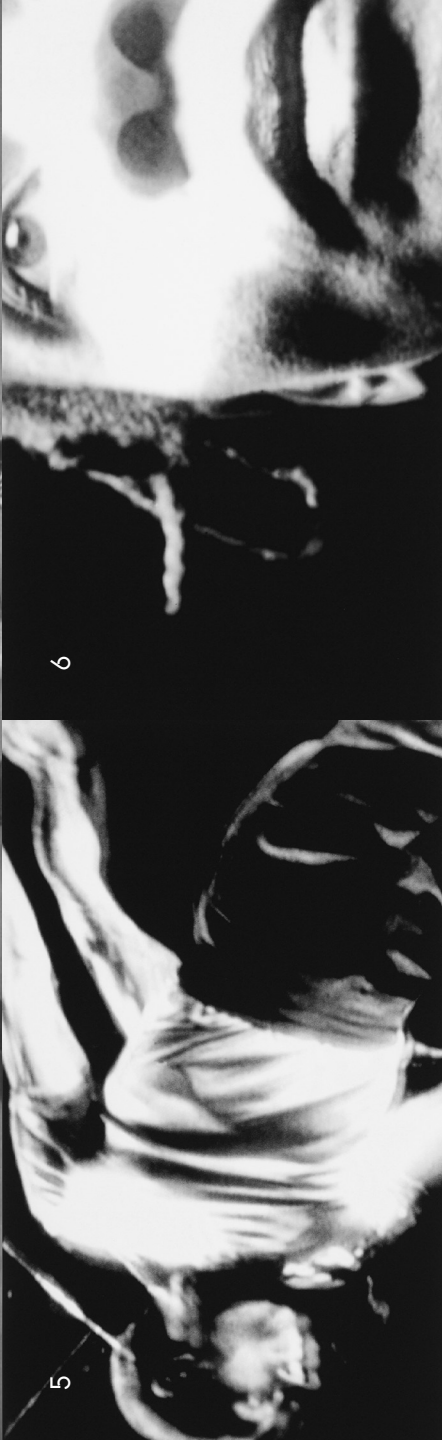
We will wear heavy boots³

**We will play a loud,
abrasive sound score⁴**

**We will have non-performative
conversations⁵**











10



11



12











We will fuck with flow⁶ We will stay out of physical contact as much as possible⁷

ANNOTATIONS (2016) †

- 1 The earliest iteration of Contact Improvisation was *Magnesium*, a dance performance created by Steve Paxton, first done at Oberlin College in 1973. Contact Improvisation remained in 1983 and remains still a dance form done largely by people who are liberal arts educated and are not Black.
- 2 Contactors most often wore baggy, soft sweats with little attention paid to style.
- 3 Contact was always performed in bare feet and Fred and I were very punk rock; I wore combat boots and Fred wore construction worker boots. We used to be chastised for wearing boots at contact jams.
- 4 Early contact was rarely done to any music and if so it was of the gentle ambient variety. We used a tape given us by a noise composer, Mark Allen Larson, which he made with samples from Kung Fu movies.
- 5 We talked about anything we wanted, sometimes referring to the dance we were performing and at other times just everyday chit-chat, but neither were projected to the audience.
- 6 In ten years, a classicism had attached itself to C.I. that dictated that movements “should” always be soft, flowing and sequential.
- 7 As the name of the form implies, this was an important rule to break.

* Manifesto (1983) was never disclosed to the public but it was Fred Holland’s and my score for the dance.

† These annotations were added by Ishmael Houston-Jones in 2016.

CAN YOU SEE HOW I SEE?
REGARDING THE PERSISTENT
ESSENTIAL FRICTION OF GESTURE,
ATTENTION, AND MEMORY¹

Bebe Miller

I am a choreographer because I watch. I watch the space between events and the timing between people. I watch the degree and angle of energy in reconsidering a thought. I watch the laying of hands on foreheads, furniture, puppies, space, the missing person described from memory. I watch carefully, carelessly, glancingly, stupidly. I watch based on how I've watched before and what I've seen before. It's harder than it should be to take in something new.

Humans are built on memory. We build our place in the world through how and what

we remember. We move through the events we encounter according to our habits and perceptions, ricocheting and navigating through the familiar and unfamiliar by way of constant sensory information. We organize faces, postures, our relation to the weather and the political climate, aligning ourselves to the interior catalogue of events that we collate and regenerate through the course of our lives.

Dances—and dancers—are built by humans. The layers of remembered events we pass through daily become the fascial matrix of the form of

the body, the form of an idea, form itself. We remember remembering, and find ourselves yet again at a point of becoming. Memory is the container; remembering is the action. For me, choreographing seems to be a way of revisiting small events in some weird, made-up way. I'm less interested in coming up with a different ending or turn of circumstance than in the chance to recrystallize a fleeting encounter. I stop time long enough to read it from the inside, from the flesh, from a distance. I fact-check my attention, choreographically: what's the rhythm, where's the focus, what's the next move, what can I interrupt.

Watching dancing goes along with making dances. The first time I saw Ralph Lemon dance (in the early 1980s?) he was maneuvering a flat cardboard car in the Cunningham studio in Westbeth, New York. I think he was wearing glasses. I also wore glasses, but it hadn't occurred to me to dance with them on in front of people. He put one kind of motion next to another (also) in ways that hadn't occurred to me. I felt a certain relief that he (also) did not seem to be translating a perspective assumed to be for

black people. I enjoyed not knowing why he was doing what he was doing. I received it, didn't try to explain it, and kept an eye out for what else he might do. When I first saw Ishmael dance (also in the early 1980s) he was wearing an animal; perhaps he was also wearing his combat boots—I can't quite recall. He had worked up an intensely personal and pungent state that was mesmerizing. He moved wildly and carefully, and there was a hint of Twyla Tharp alongside the bushwhack—pretty terrific. I hadn't seen anyone become that transported since dancing during Yoruba *bembé* ceremonies in Queens in the 1960s.

My reason for dancing is because of what it feels like. I place one arm in time and space, check it against an awareness forming in another part of my body, note what I attend to, and proceed to bend, redirect, interrupt the references that rise up. I rearrange sensation, image, according to the form that emerges. I follow the timing between gestures, the *tell*, the rise of attention between people, the toss of their weight, the offhand smirk of a shoulder held in place a bit too long. Dancing holds many moments I've walked

through before, but it's their rearrangement rather than the retelling that most interests me. What I remember, what I carry with me, is what I measure the present moment against. Earlier in my career, when I began to realize that people were paying attention to these dances we were making and coming back more than once to see what I was up to (even though I wasn't sure what I was up to), I was regularly asked about what perspective on the African diaspora I was sharing. Clearly my telling needed some translating. How to answer that?

There was a symposium on Black Aesthetics at Hampshire College not long ago. There was much discussion of Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket*, at the 2017 Whitney Biennial. I bring it up because it brought Emmett Till back in mind. Now, I can call up Emmett Till's image from *Jet* magazine, lying in his casket, almost anytime I would wish to. It's embedded, unforgettable. I can place it in relation to a host of other images that resound in my memory for completely different reasons. And I get to organize them, I get to notice the power of one against another. I get to go all dreamy and remember the details of my aunt's living room where I

first saw the Emmett Till photo, feeling the pull of that reverie. I get to wander in an adjacent image of nursery school vintage, the Red Hook projects in Brooklyn where I grew up, then the walk to the subway on the way to dance class, and then remember that I was good at dancing as a little kid, at improvising about clouds, I was really good! And then there was summer camp in Maine where I learned the names of trees, where my mother was the nurse, my mother who left Mississippi at age twenty before her leaving was called the Great Migration, who left for New York to be a domestic, who so impressed her employer that he paid for her nursing school, becoming the nurse who became friends with my dance teacher who was also the director of the summer camp in Maine, and I learned the names of trees and how to swamp a canoe and how to ride a horse, and I can still call up Emmett Till's face anytime I would wish to.

My reason for dancing does not need to be anyone's reason for watching. What people expect of my memory has more to do with their own, a limited reading of consequences that has not

much, or not enough, to do with me.

When I stepped out of my work as a performer in the 1990s I became my own proscenium. My language changed. I described what was happening (or could happen) in front of me rather than what I *felt* was happening around me. I found myself describing the weather of the material: the pull of attention, the sweep of action, the arrested moment, the pressure—both political and personal—between people. The details shifted from articulating the body to articulating the tones of the situation, which were abundant, heated, sensual, quizzical, human. The specifics of the body's rhythm of attention brings up references recalled from another part of living. There is no escape from seeing the color of the folks in front of me. I am most interested, though, in the wealth of collateral information that shifts the heat away from the obvious, the rest of the picture that gives color its shape and heft. Where does the impulse travel, how can that be interrupted and redirected, what's the tensile involvement as it travels, what might it remind you of (which is where context begins), who is

doing it to or with whom, what kind of action can be sustained in the presence of another? It is the thrust of intention rather than its placement that sends an arm into space *just* so. It is the felt sense of the arrangement of parts and sequences of action, in the body and in the circumstance between bodies, that is choreographic.

We find the impulse to move from an interior, ancient place. We throw up our hands in horror or, when swiveled slightly, in question. Actions are visceral, cultural, personal. Who determines what meaning they carry? I'm after *story*-ness, the sense that all of us, audience, choreographer and performer, are responding through our own histories, living through the shared privacy of the moment. As humans we understand physical effort, so I can choreographically subvert-or-interrupt-or-further the meanings that surface, in the same way we subvert-or-interrupt-or-further our own stories, in the same way we subvert-or-interrupt-or-further what lies before us. There's so much meaning-making involved in how bodies work all on their own. Ultimately, I'm aiming for meeting what's there right before me, remembering

where I've been, recalibrating the present moment and letting it speak for itself.

¹ Adapted in August 2018 from a talk Bebe Miller gave at Smith College in April 2017.

BEBEISHRALPH

Claudia La Rocco

The body was somersaulting turning over and over itself. The world rushed in through the open windows (not yet). Neutrality is for suckers. You walked slowly over to him you put your hands on his shoulders on his back. Because he could not see you. Neutrality is. High leg. Feet, feet, feet. Too young to know your own material. You went walking. Closed the door on the expected thing.

You watch enough dance, you learn how to write. That is, how to pay attention.

Begin. Off-kilter knee up arm out we save the impenetrable ones for last.

Oblique (implied) our bodies shuddered side to side. Artifacts and fictions, you know, uh, let's call them mavericks. Is that your mother on your shoulder or are you just glad to see me. She is

all geometries he is all circumventions. In the end the kind tyrants cannot find anyone(s) to equal themselves.

But what am I trying to say? The computer screen is glowing. All these open tabs, all these small dancing bodies.

The marley floor is white. The dark wood surrounds. You unfurl those long thin fingers. Your body an s curving caught. again&again&again youyouyou. Again and—hitch up your pants. Refine the score. Spiral for us.

Slow walk back to the edge. Too many ghosts: she breathes you into her. To remind us what we've survived. No. You cut it out with this elegy crap we haven't gotten anywhere yet.

But. But, you say. At some point she has to exhale. There's a story. There's a plot. Only the wrong bodies, falling like it's nothing at all.

A certain kind of skittery intelligence, maybe. The body buckles under these constraints, ratchets up and out of its holster. The hip opens, the weight shifts, *the*—does this feel necessary? Nothing changes. Does this? And still we return to the church. And still we. The little red chair in the sandbox. The bunny slumped against the wall.

Oblique. Implied. The hip opens. The weight shifts. Listen. She used to be so tense. You put cinderblocks on your chest. He sent his body through an elegant spiral.

I send my body through. What did I think they were going to tell me? Growing up watching the grown-ups stay young.

Beauty becomes kitsch pain becomes a mural their feet are still bare. These are some notes

from a trip I haven't digested yet, she says. Heavy footfalls, slippery shoulders. Too many ghosts. I'm gonna walk this line, I'm gonna send us into darkness, her dancing says. Don't close the windows just yet. Big topic. Direction shift. You open your body wide. Begin. Begin again. Remember this time to fake the ecstasy; it's safer that way.

The arm is a plane. The arm rises. Some of the necessary things have been kept.

Written while watching and listening to and reading and remembering and stealing from Bebe Miller, Ishmael Houston-Jones, and Ralph Lemon.



Ralph Lemon, *Untitled*, 2018. Ink and watercolor on paper.
Courtesy of Ralph Lemon.

CONTRIBUTORS

ISHMAEL HOUSTON-JONES is an improvisational and often collaborative choreographer, curator, and teacher. In 1982 he curated *Parallels* at Danspace Project, asking, "What is post-Alvin Ailey Black Dance?" Thirty years later, with PLATFORM 2012: *Parallels*, he offered an updated reflection on the relation between dance makers of the African diaspora and postmodern choreography. After a decade-long hiatus from choreographing, during which he performed in the works of Miguel Gutierrez, Yvonne Meier, Lionel Popkin, and others, in 2010 Houston-Jones restaged *THEM*, a 1985 collaboration with writer Dennis Cooper and composer Chris Cochrane, which explored aggression and sexuality and premiered during the rise of the AIDS epidemic in the United States. Houston-Jones was honored with the Doris Duke Impact Award in 2015 and received the CalArts Herb Alpert Award in the Arts in 2016.

RALPH LEMON is a choreographer, writer, visual artist, curator, and the artistic director of Cross Performance, a company dedicated to the creation of cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary performance

and presentation. His most recent works include *Scaffold Room* (2015), *4Walls* (2012), and *How Can You Stay in The House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?* (2008–10), a work with live performance, film, and visual art that toured throughout the United States. His solo visual art exhibitions have been shown at the Studio Museum in Harlem; the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; The Kitchen, New York; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. He is the recipient of three Bessie Awards, two Foundation for Contemporary Art Awards, two New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowships, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a CalArts Herb Alpert Award. Lemon has held teaching positions or residencies at Harvard University, Krannert Center, Princeton University, Stanford University, Temple University, and Yale University. He is currently Professor of Practice of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies at Brown University and a Visual Arts Mentor at Columbia University School of the Arts. He was the 2014 Annenberg Fellow at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), where he curated a series of "performance essays" titled *Value Talks*. He received a 2015 National Medal of Arts

from President Barack Obama. The first monograph of his work was published by MoMA as part of their new Modern Dance series in 2016.

BEBE MILLER, a native New Yorker, first performed her choreography at New York's Dance Theater Workshop in 1978 after receiving her MA in dance from The Ohio State University in 1975. She formed Bebe Miller Company in 1985. Known for its mix of virtuosic dancing and fundamental humanity, her choreography has been produced at major dance centers across the country and in Europe and Africa. Her work has been commissioned by the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, Ohio; Oregon Ballet Theatre; Boston Ballet, Massachusetts; PHILADANCO!, Pennsylvania; Ailey II, New York; and the Phoenix Dance Theatre in the United Kingdom, among others. She has been honored with four Bessie Awards as well as fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, Ohio Arts Council, and Guggenheim Foundation, and she was named a United States Artists Ford Fellow in 2010. A professor in the Department of Dance at The Ohio State University since 2000, Miller is a Distinguished Professor in their College

of Arts and Humanities and received an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Ursinus College in 2009. In 2012 she was designated as one of the inaugural class of Doris Duke Artists, a program of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's Artist Awards. Most recently, she was honored by Movement Research as an honoree at their 2015 gala along with Tere O'Connor and Moira Brennan. Miller currently lives in Columbus, Ohio.

CLAUDIA LA ROCCO is the author of the selected writings *The Best Most Useless Dress* (Badlands Unlimited) and the novel *petit cadeau* (The Chocolate Factory Theater). Her duo with musician-composer Phillip Greenleaf, animals & giraffes, has released *July* (with various musicians; Edgetone Records) and *Landlocked Beach* (with Wobbly; Creative Sources). Her poetry and prose appear in *6X6 #34: I Like Softness* (Ugly Duckling Presse), *Imagined Theatres: Writing for a Theoretical Stage* (ed. Daniel Sack; Routledge), *On Value* (ed. Ralph Lemon; Triple Canopy), and others. She has bylines in numerous publications, including *Artforum*, *BOMB*, and *The New York Times*, where she was a critic from 2005 to 2015.

TARA AISHA WILLIS is Associate Curator of Performance at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, after working on programming and diversity initiatives at Movement Research in New York. She is a PhD candidate in Performance Studies at New York University and has held editorial positions at *Women & Performance* and *TDR/The Drama Review*, and coedited a special issue of *The Black Scholar* with Thomas F. DeFrantz. Other writings appear in *Movement Research Performance Journal*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Magazin im August*, *Voices from the Bush*, *Dancing Platform Praying Grounds: Blackness, Churches, and Downtown Dance*, and *Performance Research*. Willis currently performs in a collaboration between Will Rawls and Claudia Rankine, and recently in works by Kim Brandt, Megan Byrne, and Yanira Castro. She danced in the original Bessie Award-winning performance by The Skeleton Architecture.

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This booklet was published on the occasion of *Relations*, performances by Ishmael Houston-Jones, Ralph Lemon, and Bebe Miller held during the 2018–19 MCA Stage season in the Edlis Neeson Theater at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Nov 2–3, 2018. Lighting was designed by Stan Pressner, who also lit the *Parallels* series when it toured Europe in 1987. The project was managed by Lila Hurwitz.

IMAGE CREDITS

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1 From left: Harry Sheppard, Rrata Christine Jones, Fred Holland, Ralph Lemon, and Ishmael Houston-Jones on the fire escape outside Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church, New York, during the original 1982 *Parallels* series, curated by Houston-Jones.

2 and 13 Ishmael Houston-Jones performs his work *Relatives*, an improvised duet with his mother Pauline H. Jones, during the 1982 *Parallels* series at Danspace Project, New York. Photo: Pamela Moore.

3 Ishmael Houston-Jones (in a black garbage bag) performs in *The End*, PLATFORM 2012: *Parallels*, Danspace Project, New York. Evening curated by Ralph Lemon. Photo: Ian Douglas.

4 Ishmael Houston-Jones performs *Screws Loose: they won't shut up* with an improv group at Performance Space 122 (now known as Performance Space New York) in the 1980s. Photo: Dona Ann McAdams.

5–7 and 14 Isaac Julien, *Untitled (Three)*, 1999. Micro Piezo Prints on Aquarelle Arches paper; ten parts, each: 15 x 26 in. (38.1 x 66 cm). Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift from The Howard and Donna Stone Collection, 2002.38. 1–10. These artworks are stills from Isaac Julien's 1999 film *Three*, adapted from Ralph Lemon and Bebe Miller's duet for the stage entitled *Two*. The prints are on view from November 3, 2018 through May 12, 2019, in the MCA's

exhibition *Groundings*, which presents works from the museum's collection alongside a series of performance residencies.

8 From left: Isaac Julien, Ralph Lemon, Bebe Miller, and Cleo Sylvestre on set for Isaac Julien's 1999 film *Three*. Photo: Chelsea Lemon Fetzter.

9 Ralph Lemon and Bebe Miller on set for Isaac Julien's 1999 film *Three*. Photo: Chelsea Lemon Fetzter.

10 Bebe Miller and Ralph Lemon perform their Bessie Award-winning duet, *Two*, at Dance Theater Workshop's Bessie Schönberg Dance Theatre, New York, in 1986. This work was adapted for Isaac Julien's 1999 film *Three*. Photo: Johan Elbers.

11 Bebe Miller in a photo shoot. Photo: Anja Hitzengerger, NY.

12 Ralph Lemon and Bebe Miller perform material from *Three* at Judson Church, 1995. Photo: Harvey Goldwasser.

15 and 17 Ishmael Houston-Jones and Fred Holland in a 1987 work-in-progress showing of *How to Pray for 21* at Inside/Out at Jacob's Pillow Dance, Becket, Massachusetts. Photos: Lorie Novak.

16 Fred Holland and Ishmael Houston-Jones pose for a publicity photograph along the West Side Highway for their work *Babble First Impressions of the White Man* at Dance Theater Workshop, New York, in 1983. Photo: Pamela Moore.

BACK COVER Bebe Miller and David Thomson in *Trapped in Queens*, 1985. Photo: Virginia Liberatore, NY.



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