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REFUSALS AND RECREATIONS: IMAGINING UTOPIA THROUGH BLACK LESBIAN  
AFFECT IN MODERN DANCE

by

SHAYLA ROBINSON

Under the Direction of Tiffany King, PhD

ABSTRACT

This project explores how Black lesbian affectivity performed through dance, which includes gestures, comportment, expressions, etc., can provide a utopian framework of political and social organizing against white supremacist heteronormative hegemony. These affective performances create spaces of resistance within modern dance choreographies. These affective moments and performances demonstrate alternative forms of individual and collective existence in both the dance space and daily life. By examining the works of modern dancer Nora Chipaumire and the social justice dance theater ensemble, the Urban Bush Women, this project argues that Chipaumire and Urban Bush women use disidentification, affective performances, queer utopia and shapeshifting, in order to create different social and political realities. Finally, I argue that moments within these performances open themselves to a reading for “Black lesbian affective” performances that reject normative standards of identity.

INDEX WORDS: affective performance, modern dance, Black lesbians

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AFFECT IN MODERN DANCE

by

SHAYLA ROBINSON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2018

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Shayla Keyona Robinson

2018

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AFFECT IN MODERN DANCE

by

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August 2018

## **DEDICATION**

This project is dedicated to my wonderful support system of friends, family, and colleagues who helped me in every way possible. This is also for those who have been searching for a familiar voice or face in the world and have yet to find it. And lastly, this is dedicated to myself, for my resilience and determination to see this project to completion.

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## 1 RESEARCH STATEMENT

In the field of performance and dance studies, many discussions of the body foreground its ability to shape and be shaped by identities, mainly those identity categories of race and gender. Although several authors in the field of dance and performance studies have elucidated the connection between race, gender, and dance, relatively few, if any, authors devoted serious scholastic inquiry into the relation between race, gender, and sexuality that Black lesbians and same-gender loving Black women, such as myself, embody. As with most academic disciplines, scholarship and research surrounding the arts have largely ignored the investigation of the relation between Black lesbians and dance and other performance art modes. As a result, dance and performance studies scholars have neglected dance as a potential site of identity formation, navigation, and actualization for Black lesbians, despite the numerous authors that have addressed the utility of dance as a site for racial redress for Black people. This lack of representation and visibility of Black lesbians in the realm of dance and dance scholarship mirrors a larger invisibility that has obscured the existence and realities of Black lesbians in all social realms. An investigation into the relation between modern dance and Black lesbian identity may provide a method of exploring issues related to self-definition, self-valuation, and self-actualization for Black lesbians, revealing how dance, and by extension, the body, may be understood as a site of the pleasure, agency, and self-actualization that has been historically denied to Black lesbians.

With this thesis project, I have intervened in the field of performance and dance studies by going beyond race and gender as analytic frameworks for dance production and interpretation. By attempting to decenter heterosexuality as the normative sexual orientation for Black women, I delineate the ways in which dance and performance studies represents a fertile ground for the

recuperation and redress of Black lesbian representation and community formation. Drawing on dance studies scholarship that explores the generative developments of self-identification and self-actualization for Black people and Black diasporic cultures, I move beyond race and gender as analytic frameworks, and investigate the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality for Black lesbians and same-gender loving women who participate in dance and or performance-based arts.

Throughout my project, I use the term lesbian for two main reasons. The first is based in lesbian feminist theorists' definitions of the term lesbian itself. Lesbian feminists define and deploy the term in an expansive way that highlights the importance of social and political bonding of women. Theorists such as Cheryl Clarke, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich provide definitions of lesbian existence and lesbian feminism that expand our understanding of what constitutes a "lesbian existence." In her foundational text, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich defines lesbian existence as including "many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support" (648-649). For Rich, "lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life....a form of nay-saying to patriarchy, an act of resistance," against oppressive norms (649). Rich elucidates a definition of lesbian existence that expands our understanding of lesbian to include a multitude women's same-gender congregations that have provided and continue to provide women with mutual emotional, social, political, and material support in a white supremacist, patriarchal world. Similarly, Audre Lorde loosely defines lesbians as "strongly woman-identified women where love between women is open and possible, beyond physical in every way," while still maintaining "an absolute recognition of the erotic within [their] lives...[and] dealing with the erotic not only in sexual terms" (Hammond, 21).

Lorde argues that the deep emotional bonds between women, and the “remnants of a...matriarchal society” that emerge amongst women, especially Black women, denote both lesbian and feminist consciousness, regardless of the personal identifications of women belonging to these women-centric social groups. Further, Black lesbian feminist Cheryl Clarke in her essay, “Lesbianism: an Act of Resistance,” notes that lesbian feminists aim to perpetuate “anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-woman-hating vision of bonding as mutual, reciprocal, as infinitely negotiable, as freedom from antiquated gender prescriptions and proscriptions” (134). Based on these definitions, I use the term lesbian when elucidating a Black lesbian affect as demonstrated by Nora Chipaumire and the Urban Bush Women. Their work demonstrates both the women-centeredness and desire to transgress and eradicate the systems of oppression based on white male domination and subjugation of minoritarian subjects.

Secondly, I use the term Black lesbian affect, as opposed to Black queer affect or any other derivative, as an intentional desire to center Black lesbians against the erasure they face as a result of both white supremacy and compulsory heterosexuality. Adrienne Rich defines compulsory heterosexuality as the bias “through which lesbian existence is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent, or simply rendered invisible,” as most women are assumed to be heterosexual, whether implicitly or explicitly (Rich, 632-33). I argue that “Black queer affect” would contribute to this erasure of Black women’s sexuality under an umbrella sexuality that ceases to be specific to Black lesbian and same-gender-loving women, as it then potentially erases the particularities of women’s social, political, and economic realities throughout history. This project challenges the assumed heterosexuality and subsuming of Black lesbians’ sexualities into larger categories of “queer,” “gay,” or even “homosexuality.” Black lesbians hold a uniquely transgressive position, as our existence highlights and offers a critique of

compulsory modes of existence in a white supremacist, heterosexist, patriarchal society.

Considering the above definitions of lesbian, discussions of affect by José Esteban Muñoz and Jennifer Nash, I define Black lesbian affect as the appearances, gestures, comportment of Black women engaged in the various forms of women-centric gathering that “are organized around [their] intensities, longings, desires, temporalities, repulsions, curiosities, fatigues, optimism, and how these affects produce political movements (or sometimes inertias)” (Nash, 3). Black lesbian affect encompasses the ways Black lesbians choreograph their existences and futures on a daily basis, and the utopian critique of the world that produces and surrounds their affect performs.

This project contributes to the current gap in feminist theory, dance theory and performance studies regarding the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality Black lesbians exhibit and perform, on and off the stage. Further, it generates new insights into the relation between corporeality, affective performance and queer futurities within dance, with special attention paid to modern dance. I focus on modern dance as a site of inquiry based on its ability to provide early Black modern dancers with the creatively theoretical space to explore, reject, and reaffirm conceptions of Blackness and Black identity in America. I hope this project continues in the same creative tradition of inquiry of early Black modern dancers, as I research the intersections of Black lesbian affect, dance and performance. More specifically, I am interested in how these findings can be mobilized in service of political activism when considering the ways people gather and coalesce for social and political liberation movements.

Taking my cues from early Black modern dancers such as Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, I demonstrate how modern dance represents a space for resistance and transformation of stereotypes of our experiences as marginalized people. This is particularly useful for Black women, but my focus on Black lesbians expands to include gender performance, sexuality and

corporeality in order to assess the affective and the resistive nature of modern dance. Modern dance as a style emerged from a commitment to “the principle that emotional experience can express itself through movement directly,” less reliant on strict, formal techniques and structures (Manning, 487). Modern dance served as a dissident space in relation to ballet traditions and inherent social norms, challenging stereotypical depictions of both white and Black, upper and middle-class, genders and sexualities (Manning, 491). Although modern dance provided a resistive space in relation to ballet, modern dance “closeted [its] dissident stagings of gender and sexuality, as the gay world created [in modern dance communities] ... gave way to discreet and discrete spaces for gay sociality” (Manning, 493). Instead of shying away from this dance form, I have homed in on this contention for this project in order to explore how the presence of a Black lesbian body creates small interventions and interruptions into normalized ideas of what bodies are allowed to occupy space in these studios, choreographies, and stages. Hegemonic depictions of dancers as thin, able-bodied, feminine cisgender heterosexual women, and only occasionally men, reify the social, economic, and political conditions that implicitly and explicitly exclude bodies outside of the normative standards. As a Black lesbian who is a dancer, my body has disrupted modern dance spaces.

In attempting to situate myself in the larger project, it is important to note that I am a Black lesbian with a dance background in modern and burlesque traditions who is interested in the synthesis of performance and textual scholarship as a means of addressing the affective and theoretical underpinnings of Black lesbian affective performances. Beyond merely addressing the formal theoretical underpinnings of identity in the space of modern dance, I am also interested in modern dance as a site of self-actualization and pleasure for Black lesbians. I hope that my work will function as a useful resource for the re/formation of Black lesbian spaces and

communities as well as identify possible sites for coalition building between minoritarian subjects who may have never considered their struggles as aligned.

## **1.1 Literature Review**

In the following literature review, I parse three main categories: race and gender in dance literature, the analytics of power, and the body according to feminist, affect, and dance theorists. These literary categories highlight the primary areas of analysis that I pursue in the project, as well as the foundational theoretical knowledge that informs my understanding of identity, power, and subjectivity. Exploring race and gender as addressed in dance literature has illuminated the gap present in considerations of sexuality alongside race and gender.

I investigate how dance operates as a space for exploring, expressing, and interpreting identity through a textual analysis of performance and dance studies sources, as well as through a visual analysis of modern dance choreographies. Modern dance choreographies that center race and gender, such as the choreographies of Katherine Dunham, posed the greatest interest to me because they have proven to be a fertile ground for the exploration and self-actualization of Black diasporic identities. I specifically chose modern dance because of its stylistic and ideological malleability. It is also a resistive space that was created for Black dancers at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The creation of modern dance itself stemmed from the desire of the artists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially American artists, to break away from the rigid and highly restrictive nature of traditional European art forms, which included classical ballet. Therefore, the freedom of exploration and self-expression at the foundation of modern dance arose simultaneously as a site for constructing self-generated and self-actualized representations of Blackness, and undoubtedly remains a source of joy and self-valuation for a segment of Black

people. I have focused on modern dance given its role during the 1940s as a space for self-actualization and African diasporic connectivity amongst Black people. In this project, modern dance functions as a particularly malleable and pliable site of Black creative intervention, and therefore, an ideal place to locate performative and affective transgressions that Black lesbians can create according to their own needs. In investigating modern dance as a site of reclamation for Black people, I have focused on the presence of Black lesbians, and Black female homoerotic and homosocial energy in modern dance, focusing on both femme and masculine lesbians. Through a textual analysis of modern dance theory and visual analysis of modern choreography, I have investigated Black lesbian identity and Black female homoerotic energy through movement and space.

### ***1.1.1 Race and Gender in Dance Literature***

Before 1990, very few authors addressed gender and race in the history of modern dance, with attention to the ways in which these identity categories influence social and spatial movements within dance. In 1988, Judith Lynne Hanna, an anthropologist produced the first analyses that directly addressed dance, sex, and gender, and how sex and gender influence the creation and performance of dance cross-culturally in her book *Dance, Sex, and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance, and Desire*. Hanna notes that her book is a “study of sexuality and gender patterns in the production of dance and its images” (Hanna, 26). She utilizes both Western and non-Western cultural dances to demonstrate how sex, described as the “biological distinctions of anatomy, hormones, and erotic behavior,” (6) and gender, or sex roles, which “denotes their cultural, psychological, and social correlates: the rules, expectations, and behavior appropriate to being male or female within a particular society” (7) combine to produce culturally normative gendered choreographies. Although Hanna’s work represented an important



intervention in both dance and feminist theory and exposed the ways in which gender and dance choreographies are mutually constitutive, she completely dismisses race as an important cultural ideology that influences dance. She argues along with Historian Carl N. Degler that “sexuality is to women as color or race is to blacks” (qtd. in Hanna, 27). Hanna’s erasure of Black women’s comparable struggles with misogyny in dance studies, their innumerable contributions to the field of dance in general, and their general existence as oppressed women leaves Black women and more specifically Black lesbians in the world of dance unexplored. Following in her footsteps in her book *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*, famed dance teacher and scholar Ann Cooper Albright uses both textual analysis of feminist theories on corporeality, identity, social and political ideologies, and analysis of contemporary choreography. Her research focuses on how “the act of choreographing [gender, racial, sexuality, and ability] differences...[can] mobilize cultural identities, unleashing them from their overly deterministic moorings while at the same time revealing their somatic ground” (Albright, xiii). In other words, Albright argues that cultural dances that inscribe racial, gender, and sexual differences have the ability to both destabilize hegemonic notions of identity while simultaneously highlighting their corporeal basis. For Albright, the basis of her project is the “conviction that contemporary dance could shed light on...debates about how cultural identities are negotiate and embodied” (ibid). Both authors use a combination of dance analysis and textual analysis of feminist theories as methods of examining the cultural and social meanings that constitute and are constituted by the body, especially in the realm of dance.

However, more recent dance history scholars, such as Susan Manning, Anthea Kraut, and Stephanie Baptiste, argue that dance and performance provides Black dancers with a space to navigate their spectacularized Blackness in the face of white supremacy throughout the

20<sup>th</sup> century. In the articles “Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham” by Anthea Kraut, and “Modern Dance, Negro dance and Katherine Dunham” by Susan Manning, Kraut and Manning elucidate upon how modern dance and “Negro dance” provided a space for white and Black performers to stage their dissent against the elite upper-class values embodied in ballet traditions.

For Black dancers in particular, as Kraut notes, the dissident nature of modern dance provided the necessary space to incorporate African diasporic folk dance into more professional spaces and choreographies, which allowed for the dissemination of these dance forms to a wider audience. The treatment of the African diasporan cultural forms as staged by Zora Neale Hurston, Josephine Baker, and modern dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham mark the “historical transition from representations of black primitivity to representations of Black diaspora” (Kraut). Manning also directly addresses the issue of race and modern dance, as well as dance as a site of transformation and political action for Black people under intense white supremacy. Through archival research and analysis, Susan Manning’s *Modern Dance, Negro Dance* traces the history of dance from the 1930s-1960s along racial lines. Manning chronicles the Black modern dance tradition that developed from Josephine Baker, to Pearl Primus, concluding with Katherine Dunham and her Caribbean-inspired modern dance technique. She also highlights the emergence of the concept of the African Diaspora, loosely understood as the transnational cultural ties that exist between Black cultures in the Americas, the Caribbean, and continental Africa, through the work of Katherine Dunham and the ways in which the concept of the Diaspora served as a political and social tool for Black people at large. She argues that although the racist perceptions white people held about Black people did not change because of the proliferation and increased visibility of Black modern dancers and performers, such a

proliferation of Black dance and culture aided Black peoples' ability to conceptualize their culture and social traditions outside of white supremacist frameworks.

Using a similar method of archival research and analysis in her book *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom*, Daphne Brooks centers what she calls the “bodily insurgency” of Black performers and performances in their efforts to deconstruct and defamiliarize depictions of Blackness in transatlantic imagery. Much like Manning’s book, Brooks demonstrates how Black performers, through carefully crafted performances and appearances, challenged white supremacist notions of Blackness as well as a presumed familiarity with Blackness. Brooks uses a variety of historical sources to demonstrate the ways Ramsay Burt’s *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, “Race,” and Nation in Early Modern Dance* diverges from the themes of both Brooks and Manning’s texts in that he mainly investigates how modern dancers, white and Black alike, across Germany, France, and the United States grappled with themes such as national and racial identity, modernity, ritual and primitivism in dance, among others.

Much like many other modern dance scholars, Burt argues that theater and staged dance performances during the period between both World Wars blurred the distinctions between high/low, European/American, and white/Black dance. Even with such insight into the complex and hierarchical relations between race, nationality, and classification of dance, Burt ultimately restates past arguments about the value of Katherine Dunham’s choreographies resting in her presentation of “an ideal vision of modern African Americans who have both discipline implicit in ballet and a pride” in the emergence of the African diasporic connections (Burt, 158). Burt seemingly ignores or misconstrues the intentionally transgressive nature of Dunham’s use of

modern dance as a site of contesting white supremacist perspectives of Blackness, Black subjectivity and existence.

### ***1.1.2 Power***

Considering race and gender in the context of dance as a reflection of general society, it is important to contextualize the significance of racial and gender identities in the context of power and oppression as it operates in our society. Given my project's consideration of identity, I will provide a brief literature review of identity construction by way of Allison Weir's *Identities and Freedom: Feminist Theory between Power and Connection*. In her book, Weir argues "that identities can be recognized as sources of important values," such as the connections identities provide to ourselves, each other, and ideas, but notes that constructing such an argument "requires taking seriously the critiques of identity" to work through them and to "develop clarifications and, differentiations, and reconceptions" of identity that reveal its potential as a liberatory framework (3). Turning to Michel Foucault and Charles Taylor, Weir parses out the ways in which they theorize identity and its relation to power. I will quote her at length here:

For Taylor, our identities are constituted, and defensible, through relations to and identifications with specific goods and defining communities. For Foucault, identities (including the deep selves of our subjective experience) are constituted through normalizing regimes of power. Taylor and Foucault are thematizing two very different aspects of identity – Taylor is focusing on first person, subjective, affirmed identity, and Foucault is focusing on third person, or ascribed, category identity (Weir, 15).

Weir follows by noting the combination of these two aspects of identity illuminate and provide understanding that struggles for identity can be understood as practices of freedom for

marginalized people, moving beyond typical constructions of identity that involve exclusion and boundary policing. To create this conception of identity politics calls not only for the quest towards “what Taylor calls authenticity: a pursuit of knowledge, through reflection on and affirmation of [one’s] commitments and... identifications with defining communities,” but must also involve Foucault’s call for “a continual critique of one’s own positions in relations of power” (15). Both Taylor’s and Foucault’s constructions of identity provide a more comprehensive framework for investigating how Black lesbians perform affective ruptures in the field of modern dance. Taylor’s view of identity as located in the subjective experience accounts for Black lesbians’ subjective affirmations of gender and sexual nonconformity, regardless of social and/or political circumstances; Foucault’s theory of ascribed identity accounts for socio-cultural change that exists as a possibility of these subjective affective ruptures. In comparing and contrasting subjective and ascribed identities, Black lesbians’ ruptures can be more fully accounted for on both an individual and communal level, and a larger social and political level.

### ***1.1.3 The Body According to Feminist, Affect, and Dance Theorists***

Next, I consider feminist literature on the corporeal element of existence – the body. Approaching Black lesbian affective performances in dance as a topic requires a consideration of body in conjunction with power and identity, as the corporeal provides the basis and vehicle for these experiences. To be clear, the body is central not in an essentialist fashion that deems certain bodily traits as isolated or confined to certain identities, but simply as a consideration for the material realm in which our experiences occur. In feminist theory, the hazardous association of the body, ideologically linked to women, and the resulting societal and institutional oppression has caused much contestation within feminist circles, as noted in Susan Bordo’s “Feminism, Foucault, and the Politics of the Body.” In this chapter, Bordo outlines the different feminist

theoretical conceptions of the body, drawing a distinction between the feminist discourse in the 1960s and 70s, which imagined the female body as “socially shaped and historically ‘colonised’ territory” (188), with all women posited as “utterly power-*less*” against the oppression of men (190), and contemporary feminism which understands the body as a site of individual self-determination” (188). For Bordo, as well as for Foucault, the oppressor/oppressed binary subsumes other forms of oppression under patriarchy and ignores the complex ways in which power operates as a “network of non-centralized forces” that permeate every facet of society (191). Although feminists during this time reconstructed their theory to center a Foucauldian analysis of power, thus providing a complex understanding of the ways in which power “grips” and creates identity based on the social position of the body, postmodern feminists resisted both interpretations, critiquing both theoretical perspectives for “failing to acknowledge adequately the creative and resistant responses that continually challenge and disrupt it” (193). Ultimately, Bordo emphasizes that both perspectives on the importance of the body must be considered to understand how power functions on and through bodies in society. Muñoz’s theories represent a continuation of Bordo’s work, as they navigate the corporeality of minoritarian subjects’ experiences, without reifying binaries and essentialist notions of identity. My research questions emerge from and are inflected by this complex constellation of approaches to exploring identity.

As discussed in the methodology section, José Esteban Muñoz’s scholarship serves as theoretical frame for my inquiries into the affective registers and performances of Black lesbians as a strategy of resistance and queer worldmaking, which “delineates the ways in which performances – both theatrical and everyday rituals – have the ability to establish alternate views” (*Disidentifications*, 195). In his germinal text, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Muñoz reframes queer of color cultural producers and world-

makers, such as Carmelita Tropicana and other cultural workers as theorists, and their performances of disidentification with hegemonic constructions of race, gender, sexuality, class, as theoretical and practical interventions into dominant modes of sociality to imagine new social models and queer utopias. His work offers several concepts that I have used to demonstrate the importance of dance and performance as generative pathways for Black lesbian subjects to imagine new futurities.

The most useful concept for my project is his concept of disidentification. Muñoz defines disidentification as a survival strategy for queers of color that calls for neither identification with, nor counter identification against the dominant ideology; it instead calls for the “working on and against dominant ideology...[to] transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of everyday struggles of resistance” (11-12). The theory of disidentification acknowledges that the pervasiveness of these ideologies and epistemological frameworks, while not precluding the possibility of escaping the social and cultural sphere by working with, against, and through dominant ideologies. The process Muñoz describes mirrors the process of contestation and reconfiguration of Black identity that Black modern dancer performed with their works in the 1940s. Disidentification opens a space of complexity for Black and other minoritarian subjectivities. Thus, his queer subjects and my Black lesbian dancers must work within and on these structures to reconfigure them for their own use and futurity.

Muñoz further explores this concept in his article, “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho’s *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)*,” as he traces the concept of Latina/o theatricality and performance as disidentificatory affective differences that serve as interventions into what he calls the “standard national affect” of whiteness (69). These affective

differences, or “the ways in which various historically coherent groups ‘feel’ differently and navigate the material world on a different emotional register,” (70) allow radicalized and ethnic groups to stage political interventions into naturalized discourses of U.S. national affects, such as the proper U.S. citizen, the trope of Latina/o affective excess, and other naturalized national affects (72).

Because I have focused on the body through my attention to dance choreography, I turn to Black dance scholars such as Aimee Meredith Cox, Jasmine Elizabeth Johnson, and Deborah Thomas for the various frameworks of examining and analyzing the body through the dance choreographies of Black women dancers. In Deborah Thomas’ article, “Democratizing Dance: Institutional Transformation and Hegemonic Re-Ordering in Postcolonial Jamaica,” Thomas examines how dance in post-colonial Jamaica became instrumental in the creation of post-colonial Jamaican nationalist identities. Thomas reads the “physicality of the body as the viscerally tactical extensions of the unpredictable movements of institutions through time and space (including transnational space), and reads the body in motion (dancing on stage, dancing through space) as analogous to institutions in motion, and the movement of the body as reflecting social movements” (Thomas, 512). Thomas foregrounds the body’s choreography as both an artistic and a social dance Jamaican subjects must perform to navigate national institutions. Thomas demonstrates dance’s utility as a methodology for considering subjects interactions with the state, and how they shape their own identities at the same time their identities are shaped by the state. Similarly, Jasmine Elizabeth Johnson reads “dance [as] an important register” on which diasporic identities are created, indexed, and reconstituted (Johnson, 47). In her article, “Queen’s diaspora,” she examines dance as a tool of enacting diaspora, as it indexes the gender, sexual, and cultural norms of the culture in which it arises.



## 1.2 Research Questions

How can modern dance serve as a site of self-definition and disidentificatory liberation for Black lesbians and Black lesbian sexual expression? How do the affective performances of Black female homoerotic energy in modern dance choreography and production create space for Black lesbian bodies in dance and performance spaces? How are dance and performance spaces impacted by the presence of Black lesbians?

## 1.3 Methodology

For this project, disidentification serves as the foundational theory for framing the ways Black lesbians perform affective interventions into modern dance spaces. Although a degree of standardization occurs in dance spaces through the constant flow of discourses about race, gender, and sexuality, I intend to demonstrate how Black lesbians are discordant with normative affective registers and interrupt this process of standardization. Using a Black lesbian interpretive frame, specifically my own application of disidentification, I attend to the ways that particular bodily movements, comportment, styling including hair styles, choreography and other performances interrupt normative notions of gender, sexuality, bodies and alter the modern dance space. Here, L.H. Stallings' article, "Coming out natural: Dreaded desire sex roles and cornrows," provides an analytic of Black hair as a political signifier of sexual desire, gender expression, and a subversion of hegemonic norms. Stallings' article illuminates the connection between queerness, Blackness, and the natural kinkiness of Black hair, and from this, I frame my readings of black lesbian affective disruption. Like the aesthetic ruptures of natural hair, certain performances and gestures provide the ground for a reading of black lesbian affective openings

or ruptures create fissures that make queer—and black lesbian—utopias possible. Through embodied and affective performances of gender, sexuality, and race – hair styles, particular bodily comportment in response to certain gendered choreography, style of dress – we interrupt the processes of normalization, and transform modern dance into a space of social, political, economic, and material re-imagining. L.H. Stallings’ work on the politics of Black hair influence represent a significant site of analysis for this project, given the intentional focus on hair by the Urban Bush Women and the way I interpret the politics of Nora Chipaumire’s shaved head in conjunction with her desire to unmoor racial and gender norms.

For the primary dance methodology, I turn to Aimee Meredith Cox’s book, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*, which engages with the ways young Black women and girls’ realities highlight the “contradictions and failures of twenty-first-century U.S. citizenship” through an ethnographic study of young Black women in a Detroit homeless shelter (7). Cox’s main analytic framework and title of her book, *shapeshifting*, “describe[s] how young Black women living in the United States engage with, confront, challenge, invert, unsettle and expose the material impact of systemic oppression” (7). For Cox, “shapeshifting is an act, a theory, and... form of praxis that reveals our collective vulnerabilities” (7). Simply, the concept of shapeshifting refers to the individual modes of existing in the world for these young Black women, and how these modes define themselves through and against a history of “inevitable and perpetual displacement” (27). Shapeshifting is a process that gives rise to new possibilities and narratives for existence to emerge from perpetual displacement offering the possibility of queer utopias that affirm our collective humanities.

For example, I have drawn on an example from Cox’s book that demonstrates how Black women’s expression of unapologetic sexuality changes the affective currents in a space. Cox

notes how the explicitly erotic poetry performance one of the pregnant homeless shelter residents, a 22-year-old Black woman named LaT, arouses discomfort and scandal amongst the middle-class audience, and even her friends from the shelter. The space of the performance, a racially and economically mixed coffee shop fails to adequately surveil and police LaT's explicit sexuality, and thus creates a rupture, a space for the self-affirmation of sexual and bodily agency. Read through the lens of shapeshifting, Cox notes that LaT's performance resists respectability politics, in addition to reactionary, figurative reworkings of the Jezebel narrative, highlighting how the young Black woman simply chooses the sexual and artistic expression she desires (155-161). In this way, shapeshifting provides a useful framework for tracking Black lesbian bodies in modern dance. It uses both modalities of choreography to read how the movements of Black lesbians cause ruptures through resisting and navigating stereotypes in the dance space and embody forms of performance that express their interactions with the state and society.

Because I have analyzed choreographies of Black women, it is important to lay out the definition of choreography that will inform my analysis. Aimee Meredith Cox uses shapeshifting to define choreography, noting that "choreography is shapeshifting made visible" (28). She further defines choreography as "embodied meaning making, physical story telling[*sic*], affective physicality" that sums up the interactions between Black women and the state (28).

Choreography links "the continual performance of self in the sense of moving through daily life" to what is usually meant when we refer to choreography, which is "[dance] performance as a means of intentional artistic expression aimed at a specific audience" (199). Considering these two main modalities of choreography, it becomes clear that "dance is an important register...[that] indexes" politics and narratives of the body and represents a space ripe with potential for regeneration and affirmation (Johnson, 47). Both modalities emphasize the

spatiality of the body, as “choreography suggests...a map of movement or plan for how the body interacts with its environment...[and] suggests that by the body’s placement in a space, the nature of that space changes” (47). In a societal paradigm that characterizes young Black women’s bodies as “undesirable, dangerous, captive, [and/or] out of place,” Cox’s conception of choreography brings into sharp relief the relationship between these performances, both quotidian and staged, and what Muñoz asserts is the affective excess that characterizes the existence of marginalized people, especially young Black girls and women (Cox, 29).

In Muñoz’s larger body of scholarship, disidentificatory affective performances of ethnicity and race allow minoritarian subjects to navigate white normativity, and help us imagine and “enact other realities, other ways of being and doing within the world” (74). In his own terms, the affective performances of race and ethnicity in conjunction with gender and sexuality not only hold the potential to intervene in the affective dominance of white normativity, but to imagine these other realities, or “utopias” as he defines it in his 2009 article, “Stages: Queers, Punks, and the Utopian Performative.” In contrast to common notions of utopia, typically posited as a definitive spatial and temporal location devoid of harmful dominant ideologies, Muñoz argues that “utopia is an idealist mode of critique that reminds us that there is something missing, that the present and presence (and its opposite number, absence) is not enough” (11). Although his concept of utopia retains its spatiality and temporality, he complicates the nature of that temporality by suggesting that utopian performance as a mode of potentiality, “temporality that is not in the present but, more nearly, in the horizon, which we can understand as futurity” (11). Although modern dance provided a space for Black diasporic issues to be examined and navigated through performance, it failed to fully address the multiplicity of Black experiences, such Black lesbians and other queer Black people, in explicit or substantial ways.

Another major analytic framework that my project utilizes is José Esteban Muñoz's concept of affective performances of ethnicity, along with his concept of disidentification. Although affect theory and politics as a field of inquiry remains relatively new and expectedly unwieldy, it will serve as a core analytic tool for a portion of my project, given its potential for addressing the ways in which the body and affect are mutually constitutive. Affect theory is also useful when examining the ways in which Black lesbian bodies are interpellated spatially and produce space. By this, I refer to the ways Black lesbian bodies are shaped by the normalizing discourses of race, gender, and sexuality that operate in the physical dance space and shape their behavior; in return, Black lesbians interrupt the physical space of the dance studio simply through their presence and existence as non-normative dance bodies. This includes the ways we navigate our existence in dominant society, ranging from staged performances to our everyday activities. In the following chapters, using my own perspective as a Black lesbian familiar with Black lesbian affective registers, I demonstrate the presence of Black lesbian affective performances even in the absence of Black lesbian bodies, and the potential for subversion and creation of new affective spaces within modern dance.

### ***1.3.1 Methods***

The method of my project is based on the analytical method used by dance and performance studies scholar, Thomas DeFrantz in "Stoned Soul Picnic: Alvin Ailey and the Struggle to Define Official Black Culture," in the book *Soul: Black Power, Politics and Pleasure*. DeFrantz constructs a genealogy of Alvin Ailey's desires and attempts to bring Black social dance to the mainstream concert stage through a combination of a brief biography which relays the struggles and aspirations of a young Alvin Ailey, and a subsequent analysis and contextualization of selected choreographies that reflect and engage with Ailey's struggles as a

Black performer in a white supremacist society. Similarly, I have used interviews with the choreographers of the selected dance choreographies and analyses of the choreographies to contextualize their content and performance, using feminist and dance studies analytical frameworks.

To demonstrate the utility of these analytic frameworks, I have applied them to my reading of three video clips from three separate performances of *dark swan*. Developed in 2005 by Nora Chipaumire as a personal solo performance, *dark swan* was then commissioned for revival by the Urban Bush Women in 2014. All of the performances were choreographed by Zimbabwean-born contemporary dancer, Nora Chipaumire. The third video clip of *dark swan* shows the choreography as performed by the University of Minnesota Dance Program for their 2010 Continuously Rich Symposium, “Continuously Rich: Black Women and Cultural Production.” Originally choreographed as a solo piece, *dark swan* pays homage to the contributions of Russian dance techniques and dancers to contemporary dance. Chipaumire notes she intentionally fashioned the solo performance as “black and African” to challenge the white/black swan dichotomy, and to “celebrate [her] mother/African/black women who refuse to wither away and die or die beautifully” (Chipaumire website). The Urban Bush Women version, performed by the entirety of the ensemble, and the other, performed with eight male dancers, four Black and four white, utilize the same foundational choreography and score; the gendered and racialized meaning of the choreography morphs – ultimately demonstrating the generative potential of dance in creating new worlds and meanings.

All three video clips demonstrate different segments of the choreography. The choreography starring the Black female dancers begins with them slowly reaching into their skirts, perhaps protectively, as they melt and bend forward at the waist. They fluidly move

themselves upright as they reach up and grab their breasts and continue towards their head. They suddenly spin and plant themselves in a semi-lunging position, then spin and land on the floor on their hands and feet. They slowly rise as the excerpt closes out.

On the other hand, the performance with the mixed-race ensemble of male dancers begins with the dancers situated in the front corner of the stage, performing an abstraction of the *bourrée*, as the ensemble of dancers begin to shiver violently, before bursting forth individually in movement and coming to a still pose, with their raised leg creating a diagonal (Mead, 55). They move as an ensemble into a lunge pose, then bring themselves to an upright position and raise their chests to the ceiling. They then hop forward and transition to the floor and move wide on their hands and feet, where they come to stand on the opposite corner of the stage from where they began.

At first glance, the choreography in both its description and original construction as a Black female ensemble calls attention to the histories and attendant narratives that have affected the creation and embodiment of the Black female body and the modes of resistance that we enact through our existence in the world. The literal *shapeshifting* the dancers demonstrate corresponds to the social choreographies that undergird our gendered and racial affective performances, as the explicit focus on the pelvis and breasts undoubtedly evokes historical narratives of hypersexuality and hypervisibility that continues to plague Black women. Similarly, the “re/gendering” of the performance, as well as what I term *re/racialization*, of the choreography evokes the multiplicity of relations that other subjects have with the histories of Black women. The presence of the men calls into question their complicity with and resistance to these narratives (Chipaumire website).

These two excerpts of *dark swan* demonstrate the “resilient and malleable” nature of this choreography (Chipaumire). Although Chipaumire choreographed the piece as a solo featuring a Black/African woman, the choreography’s malleable and mutable nature facilitates the multiplication of bodies. The contested nature of the dance provides the space for questioning, navigating, disrupting, and reimagining normative narratives; the particular pathways of inquiry and exploration shifts with the shifts in the gender and racial makeup of the ensemble, and addresses different relationalities between the dancers, the choreography, and the audience. The malleability of *dark swan* provides a space for Black lesbian affective performance, as the meanings of the choreography shift with the presence or absence of particular bodies. The Black lesbian body shifts the historical references made by the choreography and highlights the erasure of that particular history. In referencing the history of the Black female body, the Black lesbian complicates what sexual agency means for Black women in the face of white supremacist conceptions of gender, race, and sexuality.

In order to trace and tease out the historical references and larger symbolic meanings of bodily movements and choreography, I have augmented my visual analysis of the choreographies with textual analysis. For example, I have turned to feminist theorists, performance and dance scholars who address the relationship between corporeality, dance and performance, and power structures in the analysis of Urban Bush Women’s dance productions of *Hair & Other Stories*. I referred to interviews with various choreographers to add further context to these performances. While dancers and dance studies theorists began tackling the issue of race, gender, and sexuality and how they inform and are informed by dance, performance studies scholars and cultural critics also begin to delineate the political utility of dance and performance as modes of exploring, opening, and paving new theoretical frameworks for political organizing



and action. Moving beyond simply examining the ideological and epistemological underpinnings of dance studies and performance, scholars such as José Esteban Muñoz elucidate the ways in which corporeality and performance studies, and social and political ideologies converge to create temporal affective performances, and how identities and spatiality are constructed by and construct these affective performances. Here, the use of the term “affective” refers to Muñoz’s elucidation of affective differences, or “the ways in which various historically coherent groups ‘feel’ differently and navigate the material world on a different emotional register” (70).

Following from Muñoz’s definition, the affective performances of subjects refer to all the aspects that comprise the ways they move the world spatially and emotionally; modes of dress, comportment, emotional expression, and communication of all forms.

## 2 MY PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Initially, when I began this project, it was difficult to locate Black women dancers that openly identify as lesbian, queer, bi/pansexual, or any other term used to indicate same-gender attraction and relationships. Most of the initial searches returned pages of “lesbian ebony” pornography, which complicated the initial study. What does it mean that these terms have been so jumbled and tethered to one another that these are the first and only results? The search for “Black lesbian modern dancers” returns slightly better results, although none of the results actually highlighted any famous or noted Black lesbian modern dancers or queer Black women. This absence of notable or widely renowned, even one, Black lesbian dancer highlights how the structure of these fine and performing arts institutions both originates from and reifies the anti-Black, misogynist, and homophobic attitudes that inform our daily lives. This invisibility of Black lesbian dancers, or at least publicly out dancers, influenced my own desire to become invisible in the spaces I inhabited, as I would have rather be hidden under invisibility, rather than constantly under the spotlight of hypervisibility.

Choosing a self-identifying Black lesbian modern dancer or choreographer would have removed much of the guesswork, maybe not guesswork, but rather the need to search for the queer ruptures. I define these ruptures as breaks from heteronormativity and hegemonic gendering and transmogrify these disruptions in the sense of turning them into something else. Muñoz defines disidentification as a survival strategy for queers of color that calls for neither identification with, nor counter-identification against the dominant ideology; it instead calls for the “working on and against dominant ideology...[to] transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of everyday struggles of resistance” (11-12). In this way, performance is a process

of materializing these disidentifications or ruptures into concrete gestures in our real lives; essentially, we perform our constant negotiations and rejections of dominant narratives and make them visible in our actions, comportment, affects, etc. This frame of understanding performance and disidentification is helpful in locating Black lesbian affective performance in and through artistic and creative expressions. The importance of these expressions lies in the possibilities they present for social and political coalition building in our lives.

As such, I turned to Black women modern dance choreographers and ensembles who openly address and work to resolve racial, gender, economic, and other oppressions through dance. They demonstrate their desire to address oppression via awareness raised through their choreographic and narrative content, which often demonstrates the problem and offers a vision of resolution in the ways the ensemble is composed, maintained, and in the choreographed performances. Knowing that those choreographies implicitly and/or explicitly call attention to the many racialized and gendered stereotypes that surround Black women and seek to transgress gender norms, their work aligns with the definitions of lesbian invoked by Lorde, Clarke and Rich. These choreographies also sync up with my own notion of Black lesbian affect that illumines a transgressing of gender norms and dismantling of binaries.

My first experience with modern dance came at the hands of a very accomplished, brilliant, beautiful Black woman named Ferneasa Cutno. A moderately-tall, brown skinned woman with wide hips and thick, voluminous hair, Miss Cutno founded and served as the artistic director of Cutno Studios in Augusta, GA. She instructed most of the classes, occasionally inviting colleagues to substitute during her very rare absence. Miss Cutno recognized my talent as a budding modern dancer, encouraged my growth, and eventually asked me to assist her during her young ballet classes. Her care and instruction planted the seed of pursuing dance long-

term, a more fitting afterschool activity than track or band. Unfortunately, my time with Cutno Studios ended as my course load increased, and the dance haven I had found faded into the past like as an uncomplete memory.

My next official foray into dancing at a studio occurred during my undergraduate studies, and the results were considerably different from the first one. Living in Athens, GA, I was totally surrounded by petite, typical feminine, white women; the sense of comfort and belonging I cherished during my high school years did not translate to my new setting. My presence in the burlesque class can be summarized in the same manner as my entire undergraduate experience until that point: one of culture shock, a complete immersion in a sea of whiteness in all aspects of college life, and this was no different. I routinely faced the almost-constant paranoia and self-policing that comes with existing as a newly-natural Black woman with sturdy thighs and muscular arms in an all-white space, regardless of gender composition, that my presence inhabited a space of excess in many forms – in size, in expression, even my hair. “OMG, do you know how to twerk?” “Tuck your butt in more!” Paranoia confirmed. Constantly faced with costuming that did not fit the realities of my body, or performance guidelines requiring bone-straight, slicked-back ponytails, or long tousled waves, I perpetually felt a sense of abnormality or unusualness, tinged Black. An affective excess by merely existing in a space that was wholly unprepared to include a Black woman or anyone not petite, traditionally feminine cisgender, heterosexual white woman.

Current searches have yielded little better results. There’s no shortage of Black owned dance studios, but those spaces for adult beginners’, especially those spaces with an accommodation for adults with any variation in physical ability are quite rare. In the classes I have found, many of the beginners’ classes assume a previous knowledge, mastery, and athletic

ability seemingly unexpected for a class marketed as an adult beginner's dance course. As my race ceased to be the source of discomfort and separation, my physical disabilities in the form of chronic knee pain and weakness became the next source of contention within the dance space, as the narratives and realities associated with limited mobility and range are not often highlighted in typical modern dance classes. The sense of not belonging re-emerged full-force, considering I was in a class where my knees made certain moves physically impossible, while my classmates had the full range of motion and the technical precision of a decade or more in continuous dance training. With advanced choreography, taught at an intense pace with seemingly very little room for accommodation, it was hard to keep up or feel quite as if I had truly stepped foot in a beginner's class.

But T. Lang has been the saving grace. In the Summer Sweatshop for modern dance, the instructors Teena-Marie Jones, a short, seemingly white woman specializing in disco and poplocking, and T. Lang, the illustrious founder and modern dancer, created a week-long intensive dance workshop where beginners and those returning to dance were encouraged to (re)establish their modern dance skills. A statuesque Black woman with beautifully wild hair, T. Lang fostered a space that emphasized the emotional connection to the creation and execution of movement. T. Lang directed the choreography and focused on making expansive space for all of our bodies. Or maybe more accurately, I was able to connect more deeply with their affective registers and choreography, as T. Lang tackles topics explicitly related Blackness and Black identity within America through modern dance choreographies and concert performances. More importantly, during the span of this dance sweatshop intensive, the instructors consistently monitored the dancers progress during each day and throughout the entire week. At the end of the sweatshop series, T. Lang herself noted that I had improved in both technical execution and

creative expression in the span of a week. Ample time was allotted for workshopping, i.e., reworking and re-executing a particular sequence or move until it flows more seamlessly from the dancers' body, with extra time and attention allotted to accommodating my chronic knee pain. Given that it was an adult beginners' class, time was spent carefully tweaking and retrying each move and rerunning the choreography as a group until everyone felt confident in their personal abilities to perform the dance.

This experience with Miss Cutno and T. Lang's dance companies serve as inspiration for a potentially ideal dance space. First, allow me to start by considering what an ideal dance space would look like, in my worldview of course. For me, an ideologically ideal dance space does not teach dance forms that require the punishing or "taming" of bodies through rigid techniques that often contorts the body's natural physiognomy for the sake of obtaining an aesthetic of pure grace and effortlessness. Why should there be an effort to erase the very real power and effort exerted by bodies during physical activity? Foundationally, I would like if the dance space sought to enhance natural abilities, challenge our limits with care, and strengthen our bodies and minds through physical activity with an attention to the communal needs of the dance collective. Essentially, an understanding and celebration of the uniqueness of bodies and the beautifully complex movements and choreographies we create when we work collaboratively with these differences, regardless of skill level, because presence of skills does not mean lack of limits in our abilities.

The variation of bodies, narratives, and aesthetics entailed in this ideal inevitably entails a variation in the types of instructors and collaborators that participate and guide the students through the exploration of their bodies and the sharpening of their skills. The current structure and ethos of most dance studios do not necessarily offer dance classes as part of a

larger and more comprehensive attention to total bodily health. But ideally, I imagine dance studios and companies would be able to and inherently engaged the body more holistically, especially in regard to bodily care outside of the dance space, but also related to the dance space.

Why such an emphasis on the desire for dance spaces to incorporate and take seriously the corporeal care element of the dance space? My own struggles with limited physical ability and range inform my experiences and needs with regard to modern dance spaces, but other dance spaces as well. I was born with a congenital condition known as Blount's disease in which the bones of the leg are bowed, more widely known as being bowlegged. Although being bowlegged is not typically acknowledged by general society or even those who possess the characteristic themselves as a disability or physical impairment, my experience of the syndrome has resulted in chronic knee pain, abnormal bone formation, extensive surgery and physical therapy, and continuous monitoring of daily activities and their effects on my mobility. Thus, my ability to pursue my desire to dance recreationally became seriously affected by the onset of the knee pain, causing me to reconsider my needs in relation to the dance space. Learning and practicing dance came to require more attention paid to the style of dance I practiced, noting that the intense athleticism of hip hop would not be suitable for weak knees, nor would the technically rigid ballet or contemporary dance be gentle enough for my body to handle. Or at least not in those spaces. During those initial forays back into dance, the combination of the past isolation and the current feelings of failure and incompetence, initiated a desire to find dance spaces that acknowledged the body holistically, one that does well and requires constant maintenance and care beyond the confines of the weekly choreography practice and concert performances.

For me, this includes a course of physical therapy and training instruction to strengthen my body and control the effects of my knee pain and increase my mobility. Typically, physical therapy entails physical therapists instructing me on a course of physical activity tailored to my needs and monitoring my progress, offering tips for correction for maximum impact and minimum pain. The goal is the appropriate and thoughtful movement of your body in relation to style of dance, level of skill, and bodily ability. I believe a dance class should be similar, where attention is paid to the needs of each body, not just during the session, but beyond the class as well. The physical therapist charges all of us as patients to take control of the continuation of our progress, without their supervision and their correction. In this way, regardless of our individual physical needs and disabilities, we are all autonomous – intentional in the care and maintenance of our bodies. Of course, even in the present physical therapy is not always ideal, as some patients will stop going, stop doing their at-home exercises, or the issue either heals or gets worse. Even still, that does not reduce the re-generative properties of the practice, given its longevity as a method of physical recovery. In imagining a dance space as a space for the autonomous co-creation of choreography and honing of skill, the dancers can autonomously tailor their dance experience to their needs, while still engaging in the expansion of their talents. Ultimately, this process requires a level of democratization and collaboration between and amongst the instructors and students. Dancers retain and remain free and able to be true to the messages and realities of their bodies within their skill range, while being able and expected to take control of the continuation of progress. Additionally, instructors become relieved from a centralized role as the sole generator of content and guidance, but also have the opportunity to imbue their practice with democratic methods and pedagogical practices. Their intentionality in creating a space of honest bodily exploration allows dancers to become more personally invested



in the choreography, the company and community itself, as well as in the physical healing of their own bodies and the autonomy of bodily expression, including the expression of gender and sexuality.

Ideally, dance instructors would be at least moderately versed in a broad variety of topics, especially as related to bodily care and physical health. This is not merely to shift the onus of education from doctors or parents or sexual educators to dance teachers or to suggest there is an onus to place, but to ensure that communities are structured in such a way that recognizes and highlights the interdisciplinarity of all disciplines and accepted structures of knowledge, and that its subsequently dispersed and circulated freely amongst communities.

Summarily, I want dance to be an exercise in communal trust, care, commitment to healing and justice within the context of performing and choreographing. The democratizing of the dance space and process does not necessarily entail the destruction of dance groups or performances, but merely opens who it includes, the purpose and content of those performances, and the process of creation for those performances. In these dance space, there is explicit room for failure, improvement, improvisation, and continuous workshopping. I want to be encouraged to take more risks, but have the physical knowledge, strength, and support to ensure continuous, nurtured growth as dancers and embodied humans.

Similar to Black modern dancers in the 1940s, dancers who occupy marginal positions continuously perform disidentificatory acts to create space for their authentic subjectivities wherever they may find themselves practicing dance. Although I have yet to locate a studio or dance space comprised of these ideals, my queer reading practice allows for an analysis of these moments of rupture as performed by contemporary modern dancers as spaces of theorizing and practicing disidentification through dance. Further, I argue that ideal spaces do

and will not exist, as this remains the ultimate principle of Muñoz's conception of performance as queer utopia. The moments of disidentification wherein there lies a space for recuperation and insertion of marginalized subjects perform utopian interventions into dominant discourses.

For Muñoz, utopia is not a prescriptive "time [and place] that is not here yet, a certain futurity, a could be, a should be," totally absent of all social ills and evils; rather, it functions as a "an idealist mode of critique that reminds us that there is something missing, that the present and presence (and its opposite number, absence) is not enough" (Muñoz, 11). For instance, Black lesbian dancers, such as myself possess the ability to perform utopian critiques of the social and cultural discourses of heteronormativity and antiblackness through modern dance. The moments of rupture allow me as a marginalized subject to intentionally signify my disidentification with the dominant narratives associated with my subject positions, while carving out a space of autonomy and freedom of expression that informs my daily lived gestures and affective registers. They figure as spaces of not just visibility, the desire to be seen and recognized by the co-called majoritarian sphere, but as locales of active living and subjective creation. Or more simply put, these moments represent an opportunity for the freedom of existence pre-denied to marginalized groups, especially Black lesbians, whose experiences lie at the intersection of antiblackness, misogyny, and homo- and transphobia, and whose actions are constantly read and policed according to those oppressive discourses and institutions. This is not to say that their identities cease to matter or exist, it is to say that the differences and similarities between individuals cease to cause undue friction or prejudice at best, and genocide and oppression at worst. Individuals feel comfortable and are encouraged to celebrate their uniqueness, while also celebrating the communal unity and collaboration of a dance ensemble, racial group, or political group.

In the following chapters, I explore moments of rupture that I have identified in modern dance performances enacted by Nora Chipaumire and the Urban Bush Women. As dancers who explicitly challenge societal norms and injustices through their commitment to innovation, I interpret them as performers that create moments of black lesbian affective attachment or disidentification. Further, I also delineate the ways in which these moments of rupture can inform our social and political organizations.

### 3 NORA CHIPAUMIRE: *DARK SWAN* AND GENDER PERVERSION

The search for Black women choreographers who specialized in modern dance works that center race and gender issues led me to Zimbabwean modern dance choreographer, Nora Chipaumire. Born in Mutare, Zimbabwe in 1956, Nora Chipaumire is a gender-nonconforming modern dance choreographer whose “work grapples with issues of struggle, determination, oppression, and loss, work that examines how values about democracy and religion are palpable in precise deployments of time, space, and force” (Chipaumire biography). Here, gender non-conforming refers to my interpretation of her shaved head, her slim muscular nature, and her androgynous presentation and habitual embodiment of masculinity as woman, not necessarily that she identifies as a gender non-conforming woman. Her shaved head and focus on the subversion of many binaries, from Western/the African “Other,” past/future, and the gender binary itself highlight her desire to challenge the unstable binaries that animate dominant society. Chipaumire’s desire undergirds much of her work, but she moves beyond narratives of injustice, producing creative works that serve as modes of imagining the future. She resists and accepts her personal history, which is a disidentificatory action. “My dances have become less about grief and displacement, as I have become more aware of accepting responsibility for creating work that inspires a world without poverty of the spirit and mind,” says Chipaumire. Her latest work, *Portrait of Myself as My Father*, deftly demonstrates this struggle, as she places herself in the role of her father in an attempt to visually and figuratively communicate the “spectres of [her] estranged father’s spirit and struggle against prejudices, social pressures, the weight of traditions and history,” and the impact of those forces on the African family (Chipaumire bio). She dons boxing gloves and stands in a ring with the “Senegalese dancer Pape Ibrahima Ndiaye [as he] crouches down on the floor, flicks his tongue wildly, growls, and pounds his chest with his fists.

His body is practically naked, and his movements suggest someone who is only beginning to discover the extent of his powers, tentative yet forceful and commanding” (Charlton).

The use of personal experience as the foundation for creative narratives is evident in Chipaumire’s practice, as she “chose dance as a language to address [her] demons, [her] past, and [her] dreams within this context of self-exile. This state is intrinsic to [her] aesthetic, the subject matter, and the dissemination of the work” (Chipaumire biography). For Chipaumire, “each dance is an attempt towards self-determination within that loaded landscape as [she] physically resists and accepts my complex personal and collective history.” In his article “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's "The Sweetest Hangover (And Other STDs),” Muñoz loosely characterizes a disidentification as “neither an identification nor a counter-identification—it is a working on, with, and against a form at a simultaneous moment” (70). Nora’s desire to both contest and embrace her personal and collective history connects her dance practice and life as literal disidentificatory acts that feed each other in a process of utopian critique. Here, as discussed in the chapter 3, Muñoz argues “that [utopia performativity] is primarily a critique of the here and now,” and “suggests another modality of doing and being that is in process, unfinished” (Muñoz, 11). Nora uses her personal history and experiences as inspiration for her performances but uses them to critique the circumstances of those experiences, while offering a visual representation of alternative ways of existence and performance. She explicitly links the utopian potential of performance and the embodied subjectivity that serves as a narrative inspiration. Nora states, “How I, (the choreographer) see the world is re-presented in the space I create on stage, what I value about democracy, religion, etc. is manifest in the way I use time, space and force” (Chipaumire website). For Chipaumire, “effort shape is one way to understand the gendered space: Clearly for [her], you can be

muscular about time, space, force: or you can be feminine/gentle/round/ circular/measured. All the qualities one attributes to masculinity and femininity are present in use of space/time/force” (Chipaumire website).

She emphasizes her belief that the African male has been affected by the processes of colonialism and has been “sacrificed” as social, political, and economic collateral damage over women in the name of capitalistic progress and the spread of Christianity throughout the world (Chipaumire website). Given that this Chipaumire frequently tackles the impacts of colonialism, Catholicism, and capitalism on the African male and his masculine expression in the world. This open and willful defiance and interrogation of racialized gender norms through her performance and her appearance lead me to interpret this choreography as lesbian.

Although her sexuality is not explicitly elaborated upon, her appropriation and attempt at navigating issues plaguing African masculinity repeatedly does denote a queering of the self, or even just a moment of Black lesbian affect. This androgynous, gender non-conforming woman appropriates or embodies masculinity in an effort to provide an avenue of redress and resolution in the face of these dehumanizing paradigms. Her presentation and central theme of exploring and attempting to untangle African masculinities’ relationship with Catholicism and colonialism imbues her with a queerness and lesbian identity that ultimately translates into her oeuvre separately of her personal identification. She noted that her bared breast in the original solo configuration of *dark swan* discussed in this chapter represented a choice that casts her as a deviant, as an African woman is not expected or generally allowed to bare their chest in public performances. Combined with her shaved head, and the candidness with which she approaches the fluidity of gender and gendered presentations signaled her as a modern dancer who, if not self-identifying, can be read as lesbian. Further, I argue that queer black women and lesbians

could read her as lesbian as a result of their shared Black lesbian affective performances. My positionality as a Black lesbian informs my reading of Chipaumire's appearance and comportment as lesbian, and it is this positionality that is the base of the Black lesbian affective reading practice used in the following chapters. Therefore, African modern dancer and choreographer Nora Chipaumire is the first choreographer I turn to for my investigation. Chipaumire's solo work, as well as her collaboration with the Urban Bush Women, a dance theatre company composed of Black women dedicated to challenging and dismantling social and political oppressions through performance, solidified the possibility of her work serving as a potent source of inspiration for tackling gender and race through a lesbian, or nonnormative gender lens. Although, as discussed in the fourth chapter, the Urban Bush Women do not explicitly market themselves as a lesbian or queer dance theatre ensemble, their work draws from explicitly lesbian narratives, and their commitment to the creation of a utopian performance ensemble through a politic of affective organizing amongst Diasporic Black women and other women of color speaks to their desire to defy and dismantle identity boundaries, which represents foundational tenets of radical lesbian-feminist aims, as elucidated by Black lesbian feminist Cheryl Clarke in her article, "Lesbianism: an Act of Resistance." She notes that lesbian feminists aim to perpetuate "anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-woman-hating vision of bonding as mutual, reciprocal, as infinitely negotiable, as freedom from antiquated gender prescriptions and proscriptions" (134). Further, as Adrienne Rich states, the definition of lesbian is not limited to women who "has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman," but includes "more forms of primary intensity between and among women," such as women-centric dance ensembles.

Nora Chipaumire's work provides a potential space for the disruption of heteronormativity within the modern dance space or rather a space to locate possibilities of disruptions of heteronormative choreography within modern dance. Her work has historically sought to challenge strict notions of what constitutes African culture in relation to modernity and innovation. She complicates the notion that Africa and its cultural contents represent guardians of antiquity by emphasizing the Avant-Garde nature of contemporary African cultural production. Her work asserts the presence and reality of technological and artistic evolution in Africa against troublesome depictions of Africa as a place of perpetual pastness and antiquity. For Chipaumire, "ancient, tribal, ethnic, colonial, modern, and post-modern cultures live in [her] body," and that complexity became a driving force behind her creative pursuits (Borger). She acknowledges the ever-present and irreversible effects of colonialism and increased globalization of the economy and political realms, and how that has precluded any ability to define any culture, belief, or person, as either African or Western. She strives to "[radicalize] the way the African body and art making is viewed at home and abroad" by refusing to embrace binary notions of the antiquated, ancient Africa versus the technologically hyper-advanced West to offer her perspective on the reality of life in Africa, Zimbabwe. She also sheds light on the seeming ideological mutual exclusivity between Africa and innovation. Nora states that "[her] work as a dance maker has been largely about radicalizing the way the African body and art making is viewed at home and abroad. [She is] devoted to shifting the central point of view of Africa as being solely the holder of past traditions and forms, and not a place of the avant-garde or innovators" (Borger). She contests the narratives of African as a primitive, or archaic monolithic continent, while still embracing traditional cultural mores and identity, especially on a global scale.



Again, my personal motivations for focusing on her work become particularly salient around her initial desire to pursue dance. Nora Chipaumire's personal experiences represent a source of interest, given its similarity to the experiences of many young queer people of color who experience the same sense of "self-exile" that Chipaumire experiences when deciding to pursue her career as a dancer in the United States. She states that she "chose to depart from the expectations of her country, her culture, and her family," by choosing to dance as a profession and a creative "language to address [her] demons, [her] past, and [her] dreams within this context of self-exile" (Borger). The narrative of self-exile is one that many queer people of color feel in relation to both the white supremacist mainstream society, and to their own racial and ethnic groups. This is not to claim that communities of color are anymore homophobic than white communities; far from it, I understand the reality of homophobia and general homoantagonism in communities of color as partially resulting from the establishment of a binary gender schema that never quite encompasses Black and nonwhite bodies under white supremacy. Thus, Chipaumire's intentional decisions to address and attempt to undo the rigid structures of gender and race tackles both the issues related to her gender subversion in her native African context, wherein her decision to live nonnormatively ultimately drove her into a self-imposed exile, and the modern Western context where her reinterpretation of a European "classic" or traditional work and traditional style through a lens of gender subversion and survival.

### **3.1 DARK SWAN**

When analyzing *dark swan*, I first consider the source of inspiration for Nora Chipaumire's choreography, Michel Fokine's ballet piece *The Dying Swan*, choreographed for Anna Pavlov in 1905. Anna Pavlov stars as the titular swan and performs her proverbial and

literal swan song before her death at the conclusion of the dance. She is costumed in a white, elegant, full-bodied tutu, and feathered head decoration that mimics a tiara or crown. Pavlov appears alone on stage, lit by a single spotlight that follows her movements as she dances across the stage. She assumes traditional ballet poses that emphasize the elegant, highly structured nature of the dance, and the graceful, elongated shape of her body that heightens the association between the dancer and the diegetic swan. She moves around the stage, taking small, nibbling steps, otherwise known as *pas de bourrée suivi*. Her arms, imitating wings, flaps delicately behind her. As the performance continues and she continues her nibbling steps, she eventually falls to the ground, depicting her waning state of life, but resiliently rises, and begins the cycle once more. Eventually, however, the cycle comes to an end as the dancer gracefully collapses to the ground for the last and final time.

Nora Chipaumire notes how *Dying Swan*, even as it accords to hegemonic gender and racial codes, “was also trying to subvert... certain romantic conventions” of its time (Borger). It represented a blending of the old and new styles, by using the technique of the old dance and traditional costume,” but alongside the expressiveness of the body and dance’s ability to not only be aesthetically pleasing, but emotionally provocative as well (Balanchine & Mason, 138). It is this emotional and deeply affective dance that provided Chipaumaire “a way to physicalize what [she] felt looking at the Darfurians in their plight” through abstracted dance (Borger).

Filmed in 2008, the video clip of *dark swan* depicts Nora Chipaumire’s re-interpretation of the struggle of the dying swan and repurposes the dance, turning it into an abstraction of the genocide against the women and children in Darfur and their attempts to flee (Borger). Although Chipaumire explains that her reinterpretation of *The Dying Swan* does not attempt to “correct” the ending or outcome of the performance, she notes that she actively chose to “bring a womanist

point of view [in a] refutation of death as the only possible outcome for the swan” (Borger). So more accurately, Chipaumire reimagined *dark swan* as a correction to what she called the “imminent death” that the Darfurian woman and children faced, and continue to face at present, either as they remained in their homelands, or fled and ventured forth into unknown territory in search of safety. In *dark swan*, the swans refuse to die, using “everything from prayer, cunning and the will to live” to resist the assumption of imminent death (Borger).

The original version of *dark swan* highlights the deeply resistive nature of the swan, and the highly evocative and emotional nature of the swan’s efforts to continue living, despite the adversity the swan faces. Chipaumire demonstrates this not only through her dancing, but also through her costuming choice, as she performs bare-chested and barefooted, covered only by a humble flesh tone tutu. The flowiness of the tutu represented an intentional aesthetic choice that symbolically emphasized the abstracted narrative that inspired Chipaumire. She “thought these women in their elegant and colorful Muslim clothes looked like swans, beautiful; and like dying swans, they seemed to be trekking to a certain death” in their escape from their land (Borger). Although the tutu represents a traditionally female or feminine costuming article, her decision to dance bare-chested, clad only in the sheer, appropriately-toned nude tutu represents a disidentification with traditional gender aesthetics and presentation, especially considered in the context of Nora Chipaumire’s native Zimbabwe. “For an African woman to dance bare-chested is both a protest and a curse of the highest order,” states Chipaumire in reference to the work, noting how her decision to perform bare-chested magnifies the womanist perspective Nora values and centers in the choreography.

Her minimal costuming represents the most resistive aspect of *dark swan*, as her bare-chest represents an insurrection of gender that also increases the evocative power of her work, as

well as the disidentificatory nature of her body of work. Chipaumire notes that an African woman performing bare-chested in public, and even more so on stage, is extremely taboo, and falls outside of the acceptable gender norms for women. Her decision to perform bare-chested invokes the position of non-normative gender presentations, challenging the white heteronormativity of both the original dance, but our current society as well. The display of her chest coupled with the other moments of Black lesbian affectivity read on her person designate *dark swan* as a choreography that not only grapples with the direct violence women face in a world dominated by war and violence, but the indirect flows of violence that are societally produced and policed, and institutionally enforced through the oppressive norms that come to dominate our society.

It highlights her goal of resisting traditional modes of expression, presentation, and existing in the world. As a dark-skinned black woman with an athletic frame composed of lean muscle, with a shaved head and bared breasts, Chipaumire's mere existence—in western choreography—stages the disidentificatory interventions into modern dance traditions through the rejection and subversion of heteronormative standards of bodily comportment and costuming, as it is extremely unusual for the lead dancers in Western ballet traditions to perform topless, barefoot, and with shaved heads. The ideal woman for lead positions for performances are usually sought out for their lithe, feminine qualities, which includes a softness of form and lack of muscle definition, as well as long, straight hair. This is seen in the *Dying Swan*, the lead dancer performs in traditional ballet costuming, tights, tutu, and ballet shoes, even as her hair is pulled back and secured under a feather-like headdress. A visual comparison of the dancers immediately reveals an almost binary-like relationship between the visual identifiers of both dancers. Of course, no binary holds true, as Nora Chipaumire's choreographies aim to highlight,

but there is a clear difference between the aesthetics of each dancer, and thus, the dances themselves. Even as “the ‘dying swan’ is of its time...[as there are] certain romantic conventions which Fokine was also trying to subvert,” the dancer still accords to heteronormative standards of society through the selection of traditionally gendered costuming to re-present a gendered even known as the dying swan (Borger).

Chipaumire performs alone, standing on an empty stage that signifies the “shifted landscape [of] an African desert, a sandy hot desert instead of a glacial European lake” that is the setting of *The Dying Swan*. She stands bare-chested, barefooted, clad only in a flesh-toned tutu, boldly addressing the crowd with a fiercely emphatic disposition. She begins dancing, taking wide steps as she performs an abstraction of the movements from *The Dying Swan*, slowly but intentionally pacing around the stage in an extended *bourrée*. During the three-minute clip, we see Chipaumire slowly make her way around the stage, mirroring the desperation and exhaustion of those Darfurian women and children escaping from the genocide being executed against them in their homeland. Through Chipaumire’s slow, intentional and sturdy movements, we get a sense of the emotional weight of the movements and their meanings. The audience is emphatically drawn into the story of the dark swan who rebels against tradition and refuses to die, all conveyed through Nora’s passionate solo choreography.

By comparison, *dark swan* for Urban Bush Women features a dance ensemble consisting of eight women, most of whom appear to be Black women or Women of Color. They are clad in black sports bra-style tops, with teal and rust colored fringe skirts of varying patterns, and leg warmers made of the same material. They do not don a headdress or any other external indicators of the title of the dance. The choreography begins with the dancers slowly spinning halfway around with their hands outstretched as if they are gathering energy, with Yo Yo Ma’s “The

Swan” by Camille Saint-Saëns playing for the portion of the choreographies. They then make a 180 degree turn, as they lift their hands and hearts up to the sky, with knees bent. They punctuate their slow, gradual movements with moments of fast-paced spinning, ending in the dancers laying face-down on the ground. They then spring up, emphasizing each level of upward movement. Their arms slightly mimic the graceful flapping of the arms in the original dance’s movements but are noticeably less stylized and rigid than the original ballet piece. Here, the *bourrée* is abstracted and slowed down, and spaced out. The *bourrée* is slowed down and allows the variations in the dancers’ performances to be expressed and recognized by the audience.

Immediately, the differences between the two choreographies become apparent. The most notable change is not only the multiplication of the amount of bodies on the stage, as the Urban Bush Women version of *dark swan* featured the entirety of the ensemble versus the solo performance of the original version choreographed by Chipaumire. The other noticeable difference comes in the change in costuming, moving from a flesh-colored tutu to bandage-like, fringe skirts and chest adornments in teal and rust. The emphasis the costume draws our attention to the state of emergency, deep desperation, and direness of the plight of the Darfurian women and children, as the flesh-colored tutu signifies the bare necessity of the moment of escape, being the only piece of clothing that Chipaumire wears on stage. As an abstraction of the flight from danger these figurative swans are forced to undertake, Chipaumire’s choreography distills the essence of the emotional weight of fleeing from your ancestral home in an attempt to evade genocidal violence. The emphasis on her face, her breath, and the intentionality of her movements focuses our attention on the emotive component of dance, as opposed to the technical or formal aspects of her dance. Chipaumire’s desire to re-present the emotionally evocative nature of the original *Dying Swan* choreography can be seen in her own subversions

and artistic directions. The emotional strength of her solo performance conveys Chipaumire's belief in the evocative strength of the connection between a solo dancer and the audience. OF the relationship between the solo performer and the audience, Chipaumire says:

The lone body has nowhere to hide, the solo performer has to live and die on the strength of their presence, commitment: you are absolutely revealed," says Nora. She continues, "It is this vulnerability I find most fascinating, and beautiful. The communication between the solo performer and the audience is singular (like being at a museum with a Mona Lisa in front of you.) The solo voice allows for the most private and intimate of conversations. AND finally, yes, the solo affects more than my art making. The individual's potential is of great interest to me (Chipaumire).

Similar to the aesthetic and narrative effects of the costuming in *Dying Swan*, which utilizes the elements of the costume to representationally simulate the appearance of a swan's feathers and grace, the minimalism of the costuming abstractly conveys Chipaumire's envisioning of the women as "beautiful swans escaping" from their almost certain death. The flowiness of the brown nude material replicates the same flowiness of the clothing the escaping women wear yet emphasizes the abstracted circumstances of their situation – leaving their homelands with little of their personal possessions except for the clothes on their back and the items they are able to carry with them.

The gender roles that Nora Chipaumire attempts to eschew rely on appearance, bodily comportment, gestures, etc., but they indicate much deeper issues, such as the assumed heteronormativity of dancers and choreographic narratives that ultimately suppresses Black lesbian expressivity and affective displays. Although Nora Chipaumire has not publicly, to my knowledge, definitively stated her sexual identity, her frequent inhabitation of masculinity as a

woman and the generally androgynous appearance stage a gender disidentification. Her presence presents a queered version of womanhood, a subversion and rejection of expected behaviors for women that mirrors much of Black lesbian identity.

Nora Chipaumire's approach to choreography and costuming stage a disidentification that provides a space for the projection and reception and interpretation of Black lesbian affectivity. These moments of rupture provide the space for the presence of Black lesbian affects, i.e., comportment, movements, and presentations that circulate in Black lesbian communities as signifiers, and thus, spaces of queer African utopia as defined by José Esteban Muñoz. Chipaumire's presentation in the original run of choreography signifies a monumental disruption that is missing from the Urban Bush Women choreography. Although Chipaumire choreographed the re-staging of *dark swan* and demonstrated how the choreography could be expanded and adapted for ensembles, I argue that the emotional impact does indeed change between the re-stagings and performances. Chipaumire's choreography simultaneously critiques two different, but ontologically similar moments of violence, both direct violence via warfare and genocide, and the violence in the form of white cisheteronormative societal norms. She captures the desperation, yet the fierce determination of those fleeing violence to resist their circumstances, to stage an escape against certain death overrunning their homes of the women and children in Darfur as she also critiques the pervasive norms for women in the world, but in Africa specifically through highlighting and resisting these assumed ends. The Urban Bush Women staging of *dark swan* emphasizes less of the plight of the Darfurian women even as the conflict continues until the present and highlights its relation to the original *Dying Swan* by Michel Folkiné. The change in costuming and its expansion of focus from the affective performances of the solo dancer to those of the ensemble lessens the focus on the emotionally



evocative nature of the dance. Although the women move in harmony while still making their individual affective contributions, I argue their faces and their emotive capacities become harder to parse and connect to the original source of inspiration for Nora Chipaumire's solo performance.

Although Chipaumire envisioned *dark swan* as a representation of the Darfurian plight, she highlights the malleability of the choreography and its ability to affectively resonate with different dancers, across nationality, gender, race, etc. "As this work moves more and more into other and non-Zimbabwean bodies," Nora writes " [she] welcome[s] the challenge of looking at how work lives [and] how archives become living archives the prevention | accumulation | reinvention of knowledge.[sic] *dark swan* serves as a reminder of how living work lives from one body to another from one time to another from one purpose to another" (Chipaumire website).

The comparison between both performances highlights the stylistic rifts between ballet and modern dance, as the *dark swan* dancers perform their movements slightly out-of-sync with each other, falling and rising at slightly different, but always noticeable rates of speed. Being a former modern dancer, I am aware that modern dance often focuses on the heterogeneity of the ensemble, as each dancer is encouraged to embrace their natural bodily and expressive rhythms, regardless of the flow of the rest of the ensemble. This quality can be seen here, as some dancers spend longer amounts of time in certain poses than others, yet this seeming disharmony does not disrupt or detract from the power of the performance. The individuality of their movements within the context of the larger performance ensemble highlights the original intention of *dark swan*, which she stated as "noting how the swan are the women who refuse to die" (Chipaumire, 2013). Each of the swans collectively refuse to simply stay down, instead demonstrating their

vitality and resilience through the quick-paced and constant level-changes, directional changes, and abrupt stops.

Further, I offer another comparison, an all-male performance of *dark swan* re-worked by Nora Chipaumire. Performed in 2010 by The University of Minnesota Dance Program students at their annual Dance Program Symposium, this version of *dark swan* is performed by an eight, all-male dance team, composed of four Black and/or men of color, and four white male dancers. Everything about the performance in its expanded form remains the same, with the choreography being set to “Casta Diva” and “The Swan,” as in both the Chipaumire and the Urban Bush Women version of *dark swan*; the major changes lies in their costuming, their length of the performance, and their relationship to the original narrative. Nora Chipaumire notes that she “lengthened the dance [from 20 to 30 minutes] to allow the dancers to reflect much of their own personality,” and that the men struggled with their bodily perceptions and self-esteem. Chipaumire notes, “the men were all American thus the story they could tell best was their own insecurities around the body and beauty, and less related to women, displacement etc. I learned that men are equally vulnerable about the body” (Borger). As with the previous two versions, the dance takes place on a stage absent of any set design, the only indicator of weather, location, and temperature being costuming. The male dancers are clad only in spandex dancing shorts, in a variety of colors ranging from red to yellow to green. They are barefoot and bare chested, like Chipaumire, and perform the expanded choreography much like the Urban Bush Women. The dancers perform the choreography, starting with the abstracted bourrée movements, transformed from light, delicate and pattering, to heavy, rhythmic and audible, although with less articulation through the lower back and the spine. Their movements appear to be stiffer, with less curvature being present during the move when they bend their knees and arch their spine as they look

towards the ceiling with their arms cast down with wrists straight. The movement in both Nora Chipaumire and the Urban Bush Women's choreography mimic the curvature of the back of a swan and their wings, as if they were gliding through water. Much of the evocative power is lost during this movement, as their comparative stiffness breaks the reference to the swan and conveys less of the graceful curvature.

The costuming of the all-male performance marks the first perversion of the original because of the bare chest issue. The largest source of the evocative and disidentificatory power of Chipaumire's version lies in her refusal to cover her chest according to heteronormative gender scripts, and in her desire to theatrically represent the struggle of the Darfurian refugees via the flowiness of her skirt fabric and the lack of other accessories or costuming. Although the men similarly wear miniscule amounts of clothing, with the shorts being the only article of clothing, the emotional and narrative thrust of the dance is thus removed, changing the intent and reception of the dance. Instead of highlighting the struggle of refugee women, or the general violence that women face in the form of heteronormative gender definition and expression, the dance shifts focus onto the issue of race and gender in the dance space. The defiant statement of Chipaumire's work is of course still central to the dance, but it shifts the scale of focus from the struggle of women, to perhaps the individual struggles of the performers. Given that Chipaumire frequently addresses the development of African masculinity in the context of colonialism and capitalism, her reworking of *dark swan* for an all-male ensemble opens new avenues for considering how Black masculinity is formed in white patriarchal supremacy.

However, the mixed racial composition of the dance troupe presents its own interesting or troubling questions, as the dance then approaches questions of Black men's proximity to whiteness and white masculinity, and how Black men must navigate the world. For the Black

men to refuse to die performs a different labor than a white male dancer inhabiting the narrative of dispossessed people and their refusal to grant white supremacy its mandate of death. One represents a moment of rupture and racial redress against the mandate of death for Black subjects central to white supremacist society, while the white body obscures this narrative by re-centering itself as an undying force in a world in which they are always already present. Given the inherent queering the male body undergoes in the dance and concert space, and the visual distinction between the white and the Black dancers, their iteration of the performance re-presents itself as a site for exploring the relationship between gender, gender expression, and race in the context of dance. The dance then becomes focused on the struggle of Black men who refuse to die much like the swan and the space for the recuperation of their masculinity and/or femininity.

The struggles with their body can and should be considered in the context of the feminization they appear to inhabit in the dance space. The dance still remains as a queer staging of utopia, a method of critiquing the present, but its aims change even as its target remains the dismantling of heteronormative gender norms that generate the context in which the feminization of a male body happens. Even when removing the consideration of gender and gender expression, the issue of race still remains, as the visual dichotomy between the white and Black dancers highlights the attendant racial issues in current society. The white male dancers similarly undergo the feminization that occurs, but devoid of any other signifier of oppression, their presence initially disallows an easy explanation or definition of the dance and its goals and is in-line with Chipaumire's desire to create a dialogue surrounding the history and impacts of colonialism witnessed in the cultural *mélange* that results from the spreading of colonialism and the resulting adaptations native cultures make as a result. The racially mixed ensemble of

dancers can signify the cultural blending that happens as a result of colonialism and the ways that different forms of masculinity collide and inform one another.

Performances of *dark swan* by Black performers more viscerally depict and convey the struggle that comes along with a refusal to die under the order of death that is mandated not just by guerrilla soldiers or tyrants, but by the larger systems of social oppression and control that comprise the white heteropatriarchy. They outright defy the expectation and belief in the inhumanity and the subsequent valence of worthlessness that Black life accrues by resisting the implicit belief that Black bodies are undeserving of life and freedom. The Black women who perform this specifically resist the misogynoir/anti Blackness and misogyny that deems them as inferior to even men of their own race, and positions them as dependent yet hyper-aggressive, animalistic and emasculating. Even as the dance and the song behind the inspiration of the original dance relate the dancers to swans, the links between the Black dancers and animalism cease to break the surface as most of the performative emotion relies on the inhabitation of a swan, an animal rarely associated with Black people. Black women are rarely associated with the inherent elegance, whiteness and femininity of conventional depictions of swans. In this way, Nora's re-interpretation and disidentification with the swan's death dance serves as a moment of utopia because it also demonstrates a rejection of dominant anti-Black narratives that renders Black life invisible or not worthy and offers a mode of existence and resistance for the continuing rejection of these narratives.

From this angle, the parallels between *Dying Swan* and *dark swan* can be seen further highlighting the choreographer's artistic vision. Nora Chipaumire notes that her work endeavors to synthesize more modernist, African dance traditions and classical European ballet as an analogy for the synthesis of African and European traditions by way of historical

colonialism. Although Nora Chipaumire's sexual identity may not be publicly disclosed or known, both her work and the synthesis of her experiences into modern dance choreographies provides a transgressive space for marginalized subjects, especially Black queer and lesbian women. Through her disidentification with hegemonic, white supremacist notions of Blackness, gender, and identity in both dance and in life, Chipaumire cultivates a space of utopian critique. She addresses, contests, and questions static definitions and social relations in an attempt to suggest alternative modes of conceptualizing our existences and actions as subjects. Ultimately, these disidentifications draw on Black lesbian affective performances of gender and racial subversion and expands the conceptions of modern dance aesthetics and affects. Chipaumire's *Dark Swan*, and both the Urban Bush Women revival and the University of Minnesota's performance of *dark swan* demonstrate these disidentifications, and the malleability of Black lesbian affect as resistance. In the next chapter, I expand on how the works and principles of the Urban Bush Women dance company also embody these concepts of utopian performativity and provide alternative ways of communal care and survival.

#### 4 URBAN BUSH WOMEN AND UTOPIAN PERFORMATIVITY

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar founded the Urban Bush Women in 1984 along with dancers Terri Cousar, Anita Gonzalez, Christine Jones, Viola Sheely, Robin Wilson, and Marlies Yearby, the Urban Bush Women challenge “contemporaneous notions of dance and social politics, particularly in terms of African American identity. [Zollar] wanted to create dances that showed how African Americans perform themselves ‘when not in the presence of whites’” (George-Graves, 11). The healing from social injustices and traumas through a utopian dance community also served as a major goal of the founding members, as they sought ways to heal from their traumas and saw the potential of dance theater as a vehicle for these processes. The paradoxical combination of the terms “urban” and “bush” highlights the complexity and diversity of the heritages of the women in the dance ensemble, a representation of the Diaspora itself with women from Africa, American urban centers, and Southern rural areas. Their name plays on the tropes associated with both phrases and repurposes them to emphasize the diversity and range of Diasporic experiences, especially those of Black women, as the “bush” also euphemistically refers to pubic hair, usually an abundance of untamed and unmanicured pubic hair on women (11). Zollar’s Black feminist and womanist influences can be seen in her choice to highlight typical stereotypes and assertively confront them, not through a negation, but through the intentional and continuous embrace of the complex humanity of Black women, their bodies and their creative expression. Through the narrative-based dance choreography comprised of a variety of styles, acting and dialogue, and singing that can be described as dance theater, Zollar adeptly and thoughtfully depicts these struggles, but also uses the concert stage as a space to counter popular narratives, to “create performers armed to use performance to build up

individuals and communities” (Graves, 16). She emphasizes building a “company on participation [not] victimization. Choreographic solutions are achieved through processes similar to those advocated in the group’s community work. By respecting individual contributions, the company endeavors to create a working atmosphere similar to a larger vision of community engagement” (Graves, 17).

Although Zollar’s work is not explicitly queer or lesbian-centric, her work often takes themes from lesbian fiction and lesbian existence, which emphasize love and communal unity between women. The “images of empowered, whole, healed black women” that Zollar and the Urban Bush Women evokes through these women-centric narratives and performances draws from lesbian-centric themes of communal support and care amongst women, and offers an alternative mode to white supremacist patriarchal standards of societal organization. One such instance is her borrowing of the themes and elements from *The Gilda Series* by Jewell Gomez, a Black lesbian fiction writer. *The Gilda Stories* centers on a young woman named Girl, an escaped enslaved Black woman who meets Gilda, a Black bisexual vampire who eventually transforms her into a vampire as a means of commencing “Girl’s project...to assemble a life by dealing with past” (86). *Gilda: Blood and Bone* exemplifies the core of the Urban Bush Women’s repertoire, as “lies in the interstices of literature, dance, theater, storytelling, and ritual” (82). Formally the dancing blends abstract gesturing: impassioned, dramatic lyrical dance; and grounded strong African dance” (83).

The validation of the individual through the ensemble also highlights the importance of self-fashioning and “self-determinacy” that characterized the Jazz tradition from which Zollar drew her inspiration for the ensemble. For the Urban Bush Women, “the individual is affirmed by the group and becomes a part of a community” (Graves, 16). By emphasizing “the validation



of individuals,” the Urban Bush Women emphasize on the importance of individual experiences, histories, and more importantly, their bodies. Although the association of Black women and the body and its attendant stereotypes has rightfully remained a source of tension and discomfort for feminists, Zollar’s company and ensemble choreography utilizes “dance movement to communicate the experiences and embodied histories of these diverse African women” subjects in a deeply interconnected web of power structures. She notes that “significantly, there is a corporeal foundation for this individualism. It is rooted in the body. This is crucial for the dancers as well as the audience” (14).

For Zollar, “the individual experience, background, history, who you are, working from an authentic place of your individuality is very important. The technique work, it’s going to mean that you’re inside your body having your experience and it has nothing to do with the person’s body next to you. You can learn from it, but you each have something to offer in terms of dance” (Graves, 14). Each dancer experiences their own reality in their body, independently of the person near or next to them, yet they work in tandem to create a community of individuals who relate and connect to each other as individuals. This community then affirms the individual through communal support and empowerment, both in the dance ensemble and in the company’s community work (Graves, 15-17). One of the original founders, Anita Gonzalez, further emphasizes the importance of the community for the survival of the individual, especially during times of duress (Gonzalez, 11). A global issue that Urban Bush Women explore through dance is Black homelessness and displacement. The choreographic piece, *Shelter*, depicts the struggle to find safety, comfort – shelter, indeed – for the Black dancers who depict the traumatic effects of homelessness and isolation on Black women. Gonzalez uses *Shelter* as an example of how the

Urban Bush Women emphasizes the importance of the community for the survival of the individual, especially during times of duress” (11).

Zollar purposefully intended the performative repertoire of the Urban Bush Women to perform and reflect not only on the struggles of what Muñoz calls “minoritarian” subjects, but also ideal modes of action for the redress and healing of social oppression. “Since the inception of the Urban Bush Women, choreographer Zollar has searched for a way to represent an ideal of a woman's community - or what [Gonzalez calls] the Utopian ensemble — expressed through dance theater,” which is an attempt to create a utopian ensemble as a method of advocating for social change and the elimination of oppression based on gender, race, class, orientation, or ability (Gonzalez, 251). Here the relation between Muñoz concept of utopia, the concept of choreography as a means of shifting our identities and futures, and the Urban Bush Woman’s mission of creating a utopian ensemble collide and can be seen in their works. Their choreography and foundational ideologies demonstrate Muñoz’s assertion that “utopia is an ideal that should mobilize us, push us forward” politically and socially to directly impact and critique the present (Muñoz, 9). Gonzalez characterizes the dance ensemble similarly “it intends to create a Utopian space within the confines of performance. This idealized space becomes a ‘no-place’ (utopia in Greek) that is also a ‘good place’ (from the Greek utopia) for emotional expression. It contains the hopeful promise of collective unity” (Gonzalez, 257). The Urban Bush Women’s commitment to utopian ideals is the foundational structure of the company and does not evoke traditional conceptions of utopia as a perfectly good and moral society at an undetermined point in the future, but rather embodies Muñoz’s concept of utopia as a performative critique of the present. Important to this concept of utopia as a method of critique is the “sense of potentiality” imbued in the performance; this also serves as a foundation of the Urban Bush Women’s mission

as a dance company that uses performance as a method and language of social justice critique of the present (Muñoz, 70).

Most importantly, Zollar envisioned her dance company as a space “when not in the presence of white people” and “challenged contemporaneous notions of dance and social politics, particularly in terms of African American identity” (Graves, 11). She taps into the affective difference of Black subjectivity to destabilize the assumptions or prescriptions of Blackness. Here I use “affective difference,” a term originating from Muñoz, which describes “the ways in which various historically coherent groups “feel” differently and navigate the material world on a different emotional register” (Muñoz, 70). The importance of the affective register of these modalities is further emphasized by Gonzalez, noting that “the pleasure of this unique Utopia is unspoken, expressed only through sounds, sighs, and physical exchanges. The clump [of dancers] can create collective soundings that spread throughout the group and allow individuals to communicate with one another, to take their cues from one another” (Gonzalez, 257). Even as the embodied identity of the subject generates these affective registers, they highlight the fleeting and tenuous boundaries of identity as a stable category and the relationships between those included in these categories. These gestures and affective cues not only allow each individual to create and express their desires, pains, needs, and truths to the dance group and to receive the cues from other group members, but also to collectively adjust to the groups’ needs. It is through this lens of the affective performances of ethnicity that the goal of the Urban Bush Women ensemble becomes clear, as “the project is more about alliances than essentialism. Because the company is so varied, blackness as an essentialist concept is deconstructed. Performances feature a cross section of African womanhood bonded through dance” (Gonzalez, 251). Zollar’s work around challenging typical notions and conceptions of

Black subjectivities demonstrates Muñoz's concept of the affective performances of ethnicity. For Muñoz, utopian performances help "move beyond notions of ethnicity as fixed (something that people are) and instead understand it as performative (what people do), providing a reinvigorated and nuanced understanding of ethnicity. Performance functions as socially symbolic acts that serve as powerful theoretical lenses through which to view the social sphere" (Muñoz, 70). These performances by the Urban Bush Women help contest traditional notions of Black womanhood by openly addressing and critiquing the variety of issues facing Black women of all backgrounds, while offering alternative ways of existing in the world.

Their commitment to showcasing alternative modalities of political, social, and cultural bonding that revolve around affective politics stem from the desire to critique the variety of oppressions and obstacles that Black Diasporic women must contend with daily on a global scale. These commitments are represented through the diasporic heterogeneity of the dancers' experiences that critique stereotypical or prescriptive notions of what Black women are and how they should exist in the world, even as they fall under the certain ideological idea of global misogyny enforced by white cisheteropatriarchal supremacy. The purposeful assemblage of a diverse dance ensemble by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and their continued emphasis on the attendant multiplicity of experience actively combats the white supremacist desire and ability to invisibilize, misalign, or flatten the experiences and identities of Black women.

As seen in "Hair and Other Stories," the Urban Bush Women boldly tackle white supremacy, misogynoir and intracommunity issues such as colorism and the "good/bad hair" hair(hier)archy. There are deeper implications of their highlighting the kinky and natural "untamed" nature of Black hair, as it rejects normative, white notions of womanhood. The focus on the kinkiness of Black hair recalls L. H. Stallings's argument in "Coming Out Natural" which

points to the connection between sexual desire and racial consciousness that Black queer people use as a way of signifying their attendance to both their queerness and their Blackness simultaneously. As Stallings observes when regarding the etymological and linguistic history of the term “kinky” as a “negative or deviant trait in Western rhetoric of sexuality and standards of beauty,” the intersection of medical and linguistic discourses produces a Black subjectivity that is phenotypically aligned with affective excess, and consequently dehumanized. This discursive connection becomes solidified in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with “literary and medical texts begin to engage the term [kinky] that associate racial difference with sexual terminology,” as kinky also obtains a valence of sexual deviance and queerness (364). Although Stallings’ argues in favor of queer Black people specifically using hair as a signifier, she notes that regardless of the individuals actual sexuality, “untamed” retains a relationship to queer and racial-coding and their implied deviance.

By making the natural texture and state of Black hair a central focus in their mission, and their name and identity as a dance company intentionally evokes the resistive potential and significance in Black hair, especially Black women’s hair. In a world in which the first Black millionaire in America earned her riches due to the appeal of hair straightening for Black hair, the natural state of Black women’s hair has remained a hotly contested issue, with a resurgence of natural hair, now named the “natural hair movement.” The over policing of Black women’s bodies has long been an issue, and Zollar’s choice to boldly adopt and proclaim the centrality of the naturalness of Black hair to her project represents an intentional choice to resist, reject, and dismiss the denial of humanity that accompany white supremacist projections of so-called “deviance” onto Black bodies, especially those not in accordance with assimilationist notions of comportment. This policing and assimilationism affects the entire Black corpus, including Black

hair, imbuing it with a stereotype of deviance and essentialist difference. As a result, “hair [also became] an indicator of norms and sexual perversion,” and thus another avenue of affective disidentification (Stallings, 363).

The name “Urban Bush Women” suggests not only the heterogenous backgrounds of the dancers, it also references the “untamed growth [of] the female anatomy” in the form of curly, pubic hair through the use of the euphemistic “bush” (Graves, 11). Given the alignment of Black hair with kinky, and that “‘kinky’ [is] used to depict sexual behavior and as an adjective that has continuously been used to describe the coarse nature of certain black populations’ hair,” “the natural woolly state of African hair subconsciously suggests sexual perversion or nonheteronormativity for” Black people” (Stallings, 365). Zollar and the Urban Bush Women mine this space of abjection to shatter static notions of Blackness as deviant or abnormal. By assembling diverse women to boldly address hegemonic beliefs, they intentionally work with and against the European prescriptions of behavior and embodiment. They evoke the image of kinkiness in all of its attendant racialized, sexualized, and gendered connotations to highlight the complex relationship to those terms and ideas, and ultimately use them to convey a multiplicity of perspectives, all falling within the category of Black womanhood. Thus, the Urban Bush Women seize upon the misalignment of natural Black hair with sexual and racial deviance, as they use hair as a signifier of Black lesbian utopian performativity.

The syncretization of these different backgrounds and experiences further influences the choreography that characterizes the Urban Bush Women. This can be seen in their Urban Bush Women’s “Hair Hell & Other Moments” from their *Hair and Other Stories*, which demonstrates a different approach to choreography. This choreography incorporates not just directed physical movements, but also consists of skits that contain a sizeable amount of dialogue, as well as the

amount of acting skill that accompanies performing a skit. The Urban Bush Women's approach to choreography mirrors not only their name, but the concept behind the syncretization of differing experiences and methods. Although the formal aspect of speech is not generally taken as integral to dance choreography, its incorporation into the traditional choreographic process transforms the storytelling and narrative possibilities, and radically expands them. By adding speech in the form of dialogue, as well as songs and hymns, the choreography obtains the ability to connect physical movement to words, mirroring the necessary marriage between social and political action, and theory.

The current Urban Bush Women ensemble consists of eight members, six ensemble dancers along with the creative directors, as well as head choreographers. The first dancer in the ensemble and the Associate Artistic Director can be recognized as the protagonist and narrator for the Hair Hell moment, Chanon Judson. She served as the lead director of the ensemble, along with Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Samantha Speis to develop the choreography and the creative direction of the company. She is also the darkest-skinned member of the company, further highlighted in the hair hell segment. Next is the aforementioned Samantha Speis, another Associate Artistic Director, who describes herself as a "movement artist" and serves as a member of an explicitly non-heteronormative dance troupe called the *Skeleton Architecture* which seeks to explore issues related to women and gender non-conforming women. It is also interesting to note that she is one of the dancers that I initially read as a signifier of Black lesbian affectivity. The rest of the ensemble comprises Courtney Cook, a light-skinned African American woman who is of medium build, and Tendayi Kuumba, a similarly light-skinned Black woman, with a half-shaved head that is loc'ed.

The two anomalies in the Urban Bush Women ensemble are the two members, Du'Bois A'keen and Stephanie Mas. Stephanie Mas represents the only white woman and non-Black person in the entire ensemble. Her presence provides a racial disruption that remains unaccounted for, especially when considering the title and specific meaning of the company – although no one is rejected based on their identification lying outside of the realm of Black Diasporic womanhood.

Du'Bois A'keen, the marketing director, who coincidentally is the only man in the ensemble. Immediately this disruption in the gender demographics achieves its own queering affect, as A'keen's presence not only affirms the queerness of the Urban Bush Women space, it also queers his being as well, regardless of his actual sexuality. Although his biography on the Urban Bush Women site notes that he is married to his wife, it directly contradicted my initial reading of his presence and personhood in the context of the ensemble. A'keen's presence becomes more important when switching to assessing the impact and meaning of his presence in Urban Bush Women not just as a man, but as a man who if not straight, inhabits a position of social privilege as a cisgender heterosexual man. Although he is straight, I note that the supposed masculine energy that Zollar values from her male dancers gets transmogrified through his surroundings, mainly the cadre of Black women who serve as his colleagues. It becomes less about the masculinity of his presence, but more about the difference in gender foundationally. There are no specific points in which his masculinity serves as the focus or is even tangential to the choreography. Just the opposite, his movements fall in-sync with the rest of the ensemble, thus erasing the specific and notable presence of his masculinity. Mas' and A'keen's presence gestures towards the affective unity that unites the Urban Bush Women and fuels their desire for a utopian ensemble based around a desire to collectively and peacefully exist. Although they do



not fit a traditional or assumed identity as a member of the Urban Bush Women, that does not negate their assumed desire and effort in working towards achieving the goal of a utopian ensemble, and more largely, society.

Zollar states that she did not intend to create an exclusively Black women ensemble, and “[she] says that she loves male energy (especially competitiveness, bravado, and machismo) and likes to work with men, but she takes pride in the fact that a female energy is at the center of the company’s work” (Graves, 12). Even so, the ensemble has remained traditionally very women-centric. The lens of assessing his role in the company’s repertoire highlights his role as the sole Black man, symbolically standing not as a total representative but as a part of a larger community, and their relation to the struggles of Black women that Zollar and the company address in their choreographies. As a lone male voice, his presence during the “Hair Hell” moment as one of the antagonistic characters represents the intracommunity issues between Black women and Black men when considering the intersection of oppressions that Black women face. One of the trailers for the performance serves as a cinematic rendering of a portion of the actual choreography. It is set in a white, standardized elevator, where 6 people and a child surround a dark-skinned woman with kinky hair, antagonizing and mocking her appearance, mockingly harmonizing the opening chant of Lion King, making references to Africa as the “Motherland,” and chanting “You think she need a comb? I know she need a comb!” The aptly titled “Hair Hell moment” ends, and transitions into a performance stage, where the dancers stand silhouetted against a blue backdrop and become illuminated by the stage light.

When considering this moment from Stallings’ framework, several things become more apparent. It is worth noting that all of the women in the scene have what would be called natural hair: one of the dancers, a light-skinned medium build woman loc’d hair; the narrator, Chanon,

the tall dark-skinned woman with “kinky” hair that is styled as afro; the racialized and queer-coding power of hair is brought into steeper relief the only male dancer in the ensemble also has natural hair, a large curly Afro. The centrality of natural hair to the foundation and the mission of the Urban Bush Women utopian dance collective combined with its desire to “challenge notions of fixed racial identity...that indicate[s] alternate modalities” (Graves, 6). Although the company only explicitly mentions race as one of the identity groups they seek to destabilize, their desire to challenge Blackness inherently ties with the destabilization of gender, as the construction of the white cisgender, heterosexual male as the ideal and all other variations of identities as deviant or inferior in some way relies on the construction of both a standard race and gender. One of the particular ways becomes inscribed on bodies is through the assignation of deviant status on the attendant superficial characteristics, such as facial characteristics, bodily composition, and hair; these “parts of [the] Black body, strand or limb, [come to stand] for a body and sexuality comprehended to be distinctly different from Eurocentric bodies and sexual normativity” (Stallings, 364).

It is this association between queerness and Blackness in the realm of Black hair that supports a queer reading of not only the *Hair and Other Stories*, but of the Urban Bush Women as an ensemble of women, and as a dance theatre company attempting to create social change through the creation of a utopian ensemble. From the “Hair Hell Moment,” we notice that all of the dancers have what is considered natural hair, save the lone white woman dancer who may indeed be wearing her natural hair, but natural hair here is understood in terms of the coily, kinky, curly hair of African Diasporic people whether loc’d, twisted, braided, plaited, un-styled, protective styles, etc., as natural hair as a cultural movement specifically relates to the reclamation of natural African Diasporic hair textures, dedication to “nonstraightening” non-

processing, etc (Stallings, 362). The white woman's hair can never be understood as "natural" in the same way, as their natural hair has aligned with beauty ideal and thus is marked as "default" leading to its disappearance from our discursive centers. Even that point denotes the ingrained cultural logic of hair that informs the creation and performance of *Hair and Other Stories*, as the scenario enacted in the segment denotes the deviance that is inscribed on the Black body and hair simultaneously in cultural discourse. As Chanon steps onto the elevator during the first portion of the segment, the Black people outright assert the nappiness or unkemptness of her hair, reinforcing cultural ideology that assumes "nappy or kinky" hair denotes "deep ties to African peoples" (363). When the scene transitions and the dancers symbolically and diegetically represent white people, the crowd still responds with racism via the fetishization of Chanon's hair. Their marvel and disbelief at the texture and desire to touch her hair without her permission exhibits another equally extreme and opposite response to revulsion, which is the revealing of her hair as deviant or "Other" and thus, a mystery, novelty, and objectification of her hair as an object on display or for consumption.

Returning briefly to the one male dancer in the ensemble, I have already argued that A'keen makes a special revelation on the relation between sexuality, gender, and dance through his presence in the Urban Bush Women ensemble and his identity as an assumed cisgender heterosexual man in a women-centric, dance company. Stallings' assertion of the link between Black queer aesthetics and Black natural hair highlights the queering potential of hair even further, as natural Black hair's connection with both racial and sexual deviance imbues the subject with this deviance, or rather, a space for disidentification. First, notably is the length and size of A'keen's Afro, especially when considered in relation to the other dance members. His hair reaches a sizeable distance from his scalp, definitely being longer than the narrator's hair, as

well as the other women in the dance ensemble. His is not the only longest hair, but his is the longest naturally styled or un-styled Afros. Although the author notes that long hair is not excluded from expressions of hypermasculinity in Black culture, via the various “Bad Nigga” types Stallings’ articulates, A’keen’s presence in the dance space in conjunction with the length and texture of his hair evacuates any potential for reading hypermasculinity onto his presence in the project or in the ensemble.

This is even more fitting when considering the queering that male bodies undergo in the dance and recital space. A certain femininity becomes inscribed on the male body in those spaces, one that codes them as inherently queer, and the male dancer’s hair underscores the inscriptive power of hair as a racial and queer signifier. Although the male dancer, A’keen has stated that he is married to his wife, I initially read his inclusion in the company as an indication of his assumed queer sexuality. Of course, that does not mean he does not have a queer sexuality, but that it is not a stated, self-identification for him. Given that the name and mission of the ensemble centers women and homo-social bonding and experiences, it is not surprising that his inclusion lead to a particular queer reading of his body. While his inclusion in the ensemble may appear to some to create a rupture in the women-centric orientation of the company, the gendering of his subject position or imagined subject position thematically resolves his inclusion as he can be read as “feminine” amongst the rest of the group. Through his presence in the ensemble, his hair, and the subject of many of Urban Bush Women’s choreographic performances, his presence is queered by its proximity to the disidentificatory lens and actions of the Urban Bush Women. Their desire to question, disrupt, and reject traditional identity boundaries signifies and creates queer utopian futurities through the dancers’ affective

performances, and this space of queer futurity imbues A'keen with a queerness that destabilizes hegemonic masculinity.

A staged performance of the same scene composes the larger *Hair and Other Stories Series* which features a mix of skits, dialogue, solo and ensemble performances, and changing set design. For the title of the portion titled "Hair Hell Moments" that features three separate scripted scenarios, each portraying a different reaction to the narrator's naturally kinky hair. Each of the scenarios represent a moment of misogynoir that a dark-skinned woman with kinky natural hair might and have already experienced. The segment contains three diegetically distinct groups: the first scenario mirrors the trailer skit, as it depicts the experience the dark-skinned woman has in an elevator full of light- to medium-skinned Black people, but not necessarily any less natural or kinky per se, who react negatively to her hairstyle and texture; the second scenario imagines the elevator with white people, as they fetishistically admire and attempt to touch her hair and fawn over the Otherness of the texture of her as they generally exclaim about the otherness of hair ; the third scenario features a racially-mixed group just labeled "PEOPLE," with no racial or gender descriptors, but it seemingly takes place on the same elevator as the first two scenarios. The third is distinctly different not just in its refusal to name a specific racial group, but also because it seemingly takes place and concludes outside of the normal space of an elevator. But it also features a moment where the light-skinned dancer attempts to touch the hair of/the Baby, and all of the members of the scene visibly recoil, as they begin to move in slow-motion, exaggerating the sounds of their exclamations to project a realistic picture of slowed-down motion. This scene is different in that it does not pointedly name the racial group of the origin of the offense, yet one interpretation is that it represents white microaggressive acts against Black people, usually those with noticeably natural hair, whether in braids, afros, or locs,

wherein white people often fetishistically express their admiration of the texture via unwarranted and unwelcomed physical contact such as petting or running their hands through our tresses.

Ultimately, the third scenario evokes this interpretation, as it most often associated with the “hair hell moments” that Black women, most likely members of the ensemble as well, experience on a daily and systematic basis, and fits the nature of the segment.

This transposition of the scene from an elevator set to a stage highlights the choreographic nature of our interactions with each other. Here, I use choreographic in the manner scholar Aimee Meredith Cox uses it, as the “embodied meaning making, physical story telling[sic], affective physicality” that sums up the interactions between Black women and the state (28). In addition to the social choreography, choreography links “the continual performance of self in the sense of moving through daily life” to what is usually meant when we refer to choreography, which is “[dance] performance as a means of intentional artistic expression aimed at a specific audience” (199). In fact, the whole of the “Hair and Other Stories” series highlights the choreographic nature of our interactions with ourselves, each other, and the world at large which includes the institutions that govern our lives. By moving these quotidian but very real and very racist interactions onto a concert stage and staging them as a choreographed performance, they highlight this aspect of our lives, as our reactions to these situations may follow certain scripts and scripted movements, but the mutable nature of choreography also highlights the space of possibility for transformation and transfiguration. Just as choreography changes subtly every time it is performed, regardless of whether performed by the same person, there is an ability to change the choreography of our interactions with these institutions and oppressions.

All of the elements of the “Hair Hell” segment demonstrate the tightrope between outright anti-Black disgust and vitriol, even internalized, and the fetishistic othering admiration

that has already played out too fatalistically for Black people since the advent of the motion picture itself. In the first scenario, which depicts the reactions of other Black people to the segment protagonist and narrator and her kinky hair demonstrates that it is undoubtedly filtered through the lens of colorism and internalized antiblackness, as the dancers are diegetically Black, and the dancers themselves have natural hair. Not that their “realistic” or identities as Black people with actual natural hair matters, except it somewhat does because if the ensemble members were white, the skit would not only be unbelievable, but it would be racist and against the totality of the issue at hand in the performance. The comments regarding her needing a comb to fix her hair in accordance with white heteronormative standards of outward gender expression, which includes the straightening and “doing” of hair and doubling down on the antiblackness via xenophobic linking her hair to African hair through the singing of the Lion King theme song, which indeed feature words in Swahili. This effectively calls her hair kinky, nonnormative, and deviant in some way. Further, I propose that that androgyny of her body and presence and face of the narrator also lends to a queer reading of the scene, which further highlights the use of Black hair as a signifier for other racialized queerness of Black queer people.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The Urban Bush Women dance company embodies Muñoz's concept of utopia through its identification as a utopian ensemble. Its emphasis on the mutual constitution and validation of both the individual and the group demonstrates an alternative mode of subjectivity and existence – one that simultaneously allows the constant negotiation and adjustment of the needs both the part and whole. Their commitment to embracing dancers of varying backgrounds within both the group and the performance demonstrates the utility of affective performances when considering new ways of social and political organizing. Utopian performativity serves as a critique of the present political and social systems that result in the systemic marginalization of historically oppressed people, such as Black people, undocumented people, queer and trans people, and disabled people. The centrality of uplift and support to the Urban Bush Women ethos demonstrates the importance of healing and care to sustaining both the individual and the group, whether in the dance space or in our various communities. Like Chipaumire, they too enact nontraditional ways of creating dance ensembles and choreographies that focus on collective healing and active collaboration and work in ways that enable black lesbians—like myself—to attach affective and black lesbian meaning to their creative works. This emphasis on collaboration across difference highlights Muñoz's re-conception of racial identity as an affective performance of ethnicity, and how the affective performance of identity allows for a dynamic understanding of organizing that prioritizes coalition building, rather than the seeming solidification of discrete identity categories as mutually exclusive of one another. This understanding of identity allows for the Urban Bush Women to create collaboratively produced dance theater works that project these disidentifications with hegemonic identities through narrativized content. The Urban Bush Women's performance, *Hair and Other Stories*, represents



one such work, as it tackles the stereotypes of deviance and undesirability that enshroud Black hair as an extension of the Black corpus. It opens a space of rejection and resistance to these narratives and forces the destabilization of those definitions and associations of Black subjectivity as racial and sexually deviant, while maintaining an attention to the material element of our embodiment and experiences. They demonstrate one of many ways of contesting traditional structures and discourses around race, gender, sexuality, class, etc., for the constant imagining and creation of new worlds based on the ideals of utopian performativity. As a dancer, these Black lesbian affective performances create a space for the possibility of not just representation, but representation that allows for the constant negotiation and rejection of heteronormative affective registers on the stage, and in daily life. This space of possibility has the potential to critique the current realities of social and political organizing, creating a space of active imagination and worldbuilding of future societies free from social injustice and oppression.

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