

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: DANCING IN AND OUT OF PLACE:
BLACK CONCERT DANCE HISTORIES
AND NEW YORK CITY'S CLARK
CENTER, 1959-1989

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This dissertation is the first scholarly study of Clark Center for the Performing Arts, an important New York City dance studio and school. Founded in 1959 as a place for black gay choreographer Alvin Ailey to formalize his modern dance company, Clark Center began in a YWCA in midtown Manhattan. Over the next thirty years, it grew to offer a robust slate of intentionally low-priced dance classes to dancers of many walks of life. Specifically, Clark Center aimed to resource African American dancers and emerging choreographers who sought to establish themselves professionally and start companies. Affiliated teachers and choreographers of note included Thelma Hill, Dianne McIntyre, Pepsi Bethel, Charles Moore, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar.

Using primary-source archival records and oral-history interviews, this project chronicles the history of Clark Center and analyzes its social, political, and cultural significance. Theorizing that Clark Center's history has been obscured in the discourse of "uptown dance" and "downtown dance," I coin "midtown dance." This new paradigm highlights a network of dance studios in midtown Manhattan that offered a pluralistic array of dance forms to a diverse group of people. Clark Center also birthed Playwrights Horizons in the early 1970s, a theater organization that split off soon after its founding. As the Times Square area was subjected to "clean up" efforts, the arts became a tool of redevelopment. Playwrights Horizons inaugurated one such redevelopment project when it moved to Theatre Row, a new block of off-/off-Broadway theaters. After a years-long attempt to establish a dance venue there, Clark Center shuttered in 1989, its mixedness rendered incommensurate with the increasingly homogenized region.

This project is especially attuned to the politics of black concert dance extended through Clark Center and that live on today. It argues that Clark Center modeled an alternative, "black-centric" version of racial integration, one that did not undercut black identities. Moreover, it posits that engagement with African-diasporic dance forms at Clark Center engendered in black students expanded conceptions of themselves as diasporically African and historically American. Deploying and contributing to Black Performance Theory, dancing at Clark Center is shown to be *black self-making and black world-making*.

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by

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Dedication

This dissertation project committed to black lives past, present, and future is dedicated to my maternal grandparents. They are Dr. Ruth Brett Quarles and Dr. Benjamin Quarles. Both spent the bulk of their academic careers working at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland, supporting black students and reminding us we have a history. To complete my doctoral studies at another public institution of higher learning in Maryland should be understood as a reflection and extension of their fierce commitments. I am because of them.

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Thank you to my friends, near and far, who teach me how to play, how to tend, and how to fight for what's right.

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Prelude

I arrived at Clark Center as a dissertation topic circuitously. I wrote a paper early in my doctoral coursework likening the rhetorical strategies of Martin Luther King, Jr. to the choreographic strategies of Alvin Ailey. In a writing workshop organized by Melissa Blanco Borelli, I sent that paper to black performance scholar Anita Gonzalez, who read it for feedback. While the intent of the workshop was to focus on writing methods, one of Gonzalez's notes regarding content rang louder than all else. "I don't understand," Gonzalez remarked, "how you wrote a whole paper on Ailey without mentioning Clark Center." I shrunk a little. "Clark *what?*" The dissertation project was born then and there.

Kind of. The small group of fellow graduate students in the room and I ran a quick internet search for this place we were just hearing of. Within seconds, we were scrolling the pages of Clark Center NYC, marveling at the photos and lists of dance figures associated with the Center. To me, it read like a "who's who" of black concert dance—Dianne McIntyre, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Eleo Pomare... There were many more whom I just barely knew, perhaps having heard their names a handful of times—Rod Rodgers, Charles Moore... And then there were those completely foreign to me—Pepsi Bethel, Fred Benjamin, Thelma Hill. Notably, some figures amongst those I knew were not black—Kei Takei, Meredith Monk. There was a palpable sense of collective wonder in the room. What was this place so full of dance history (in general) and black brilliance (in particular) upon which Gonzalez had landed us?

It would take me a few more months to realize that I also had Jill Williams to thank for the sparks of that day. While Clark Center had formally closed in 1989, Williams—who was a teacher at the Center—reconvened a group of alumni in 2013. Out of the collective feeling that Clark Center's history needed to be preserved and its legacies animated, Clark Center NYC was

forged, helmed by Williams. This organization, which will be highlighted in more detail in the Conclusion, offers various social and educational programming and maintains the informative website my peers and I were ogling.¹

What Gonzalez neglected to tell me during the workshop was that *she herself* had trained and taught at the Center in the 1980s. I would come to learn this by stumbling upon her photo in the archives many months later. Gonzalez was a part of two important programs at the Center: the scholarship program and the New Choreographers series. Both of these will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 1, so suffice it to say that these programs provided Gonzalez and many other young dancers and choreographers with the resources to train with exceptional teachers as well as develop their choreographic voices. The New Choreographers series, which provided rehearsal space, mentorship, and a performance opportunity, was an early prototype of the kind of short-term choreographic residencies that have now become more standard in New York City.

I have been the beneficiary of such residency programs. I lived in New York City working as a dancer and choreographer from 2014 through 2020. Moving there after earning an MFA in Dance, I was twenty-five years old and raring to get my performing career going. During my MFA years, I had developed a practice of solo-making that combined the elements of my background in music, theater, and dance towards interdisciplinary performances. These works explored themes of otherness and estrangement, feelings foundational to my experience growing up mixed-race, light-skinned, and queer. I am both African American and Iranian American, and yet to many I inadvertently pass for white. My queerness is more evident to people, symptomized by my gay voice, my expressive hands, and my gentle manner. The queerness oozes out, it seems, beyond my fair skin and my ethnically ambiguous characteristics.

¹ Clark Center NYC, <https://www.clarkcenternyc.org/>. Note that the website has been re-designed since my first encounter in 2021.

If you know Persian features, you'll recognize my unmistakably hooked nose. If you know black hair, you'll recognize my curls. If you know American black-white mixedness, you'll recognize my never-quiet-enough-of-one-or-the-other-ness. But if you don't, well...

Early in my time in New York City, I received two fantastically helpful opportunities to start my dance life. One was a two-year artist-in-residence program with Movement Research, and the other was a three-month residency and performance opportunity at Brooklyn Arts Exchange. Both of these organizations persist, continuing to do the difficult but crucial work of supporting emerging and established dance artists in New York City. I, of course, after engaging in this project on the history of Clark Center, have a newfound appreciation for cultural institutions that sustain ecosystems of artists through various forms of support, including brick-and-mortar spaces.

The performances I was making were perhaps best categorized as “experimental dance.” To me, that designation signaled the way my work pledged no allegiance to individual dance vocabularies. And the concert dance conventions I *was* interested in reproducing—e.g., performing in a theater for an audience—were ones I also wanted to interrogate, play with, transgress. The proprieties of the theater, the stage, and its formal traditions were materials for social experimentation, for testing the limits of social behavior, interaction, and meaning making. This punk spirit felt tied to postmodernists about whom I had learned—namely, the Judson Dance Theater. These were those wild ones in 1960s Greenwich Village who wore street shoes, messed with objects, used their voices, and were interested in the “pedestrian” body—one either untrained or that sought to shed its dance training. Another name for this was “downtown dance,” standing in contrast to “uptown dance,” the latter of which designated figures like Ailey and Graham, companies which maintained traditional investments in formality, virtuosity, and

beauty. I certainly wasn't that; I had started training "late," so my legs and feet and hips didn't do the right things for that world. But I had only this thinnest of historical understandings of the New York City dance scene I was walking into. It seemed either/or. It wouldn't be long before I'd be noticing another either/or—a racial politics that, until that point, I had largely sidestepped.

As I saw shows in New York and was in dialogue with other artists about my work, I began to see how people of color had to account for this part of themselves, while white people got to talk about other things. This was less about how individual artists framed their work and more about how others publicly asked them to frame it. Why was a black artist asked about how their identity shaped their work while a white artist wasn't? As I write this now in 2025, it is hard to own up to the level of naivete preceding this emergent awareness. The nation has changed considerably in the last ten years, as have I. But has this condition actually changed? It is still entirely conceivable that a black artist would be expected to account for their blackness while a white artist wouldn't be asked to consider (their) race.

Up until my move to New York, I was generally not asked about my racial identity or ethnicity in relation to my dance work. I was perceived as white, or proximal enough to whiteness that (my) raciality was assumed to be insignificant. Something changed when, in the city, I began to be around more artists of color. I began to be asked about my of-color-ness...and *where it was* in my work. *It took peers and mentors who recognized me to be a person of color to activate this register of my work—at least, dialogically.* The truth was, my racial and ethnic identity was something I thought about. To make a solo is to think intently about how your body is read, is marked. What was it to be an enigma? A contestation? An Iranian dance artist who would go on to become a dear friend attended one of my shows in 2018. In the lobby, she was chatting with a black dance artist whom I already knew well at that point. When the Iranian

dance artist asked if I was Iranian, the black dance artist replied, “No, he’s black.” What a delightful argument. To be recognized—claimed by your own—can feel like belonging.

This brief memoiristic sojourn is meant to contextualize my interest in the racial politics of dance in America, and what it means to be a person of color dancing in New York City. While in one way I arrived at this project incidentally, in another, it makes complete retrospective sense that it “found” me. The history of Clark Center is comprised of the un(der)told stories of dancers, many of-color, making lives in New York City in the 1960s-80s. While some of those affiliated with Clark Center were also part of the Judson milieu, most were not. I needed to know more, needed to find other genealogies of dance artists. In essence, this project was a move towards deciphering the dance histories and racial politics animating the scene I was navigating in the 2010s, so much of which was obscured to me. To historicize a brick-and-mortar institution is also to unveil the municipal, federal, and geographical politics constituting places to gather around culture—their exploitation, their valuation, their disappearance, and their reappearances. These domains, too, contain human stories shot through with motion and grit.

It is, of course, much larger than me. This project stewards fragments of many stories towards a larger historical recovery meant to be shared—one that contributes to the academic discipline of dance/history, yes, but that is bigger than that too. Dance is an excellent place to look for how life exceeds that which may otherwise constrain it.

Introduction

This dissertation project expands the discourse of dance history by historicizing Clark Center for the Performing Arts, an important New York City dance studio and school which has until now received little scholarly attention. Originally founded as a place for black gay

choreographer Alvin Ailey to formalize his modern dance company, Clark Center began in Manhattan's Westside YWCA in 1959. Over the next thirty years, it would grow to offer a robust slate of intentionally low-priced dance classes to dancers of many walks of life. A civic-oriented ethos marked Clark Center as an institution from its inception. People taking dance recreationally and aspirationally often shared space with professional dancers. Additionally, Clark Center was guided by an express mission to resource African American dancers and emerging choreographers who sought to establish themselves professionally and start companies. The list of figures who came through Clark Center and went on to careers of renown is long and especially notable for its concentration of African American concert dance icons. In addition to Ailey, this list includes Dianne McIntyre, Eleo Pomare, Bill T. Jones, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, to name only a few.

Some of these artists were participants in the Center's New Choreographers series, a platform that nurtured the work of emerging dance makers. Taken up by director Edele Holtz at the suggestion of Ailey, the series fostered and diversified the field of concert dance in New York City at a time when such programs had little precedent. Before it became a dance-focused space, Clark Center for the Performing Arts offered classes in many different disciplines, as this full name suggested. Notably, it was under the aegis of Clark Center that Playwrights Horizons was founded in 1971 by Robert Moss. A well-known incubator of new theater works in New York City to this day, Playwrights Horizons splintered from Clark Center shortly after its founding and established itself on Theatre Row, a block of theaters west of Times Square. One of many redevelopment initiatives that sought to "clean up" the 42nd Street area into the tourist mecca it has since become, Clark Center also attempted to acquire a venue on Theatre Row to revivify its dance performance programming. Despite Roberts' assiduous work over several

years to secure such a space, the attempt proved financially unviable by 1985. The Center was in dire economic straits, exacerbated by a drop-in dance-class clientele lost to the aerobic exercise trend. Amidst such strain, Roberts resigned in 1986, and the Center was shuttered in 1989.

Accordingly, the story of Clark Center not only has much to reveal culturally but also institutionally and infrastructurally about dance in the urban history of New York City.

Given its significance as a dance historical site, Clark Center deserves sustained scholarly study and analysis. While it is mentioned in a few published biographies and academic texts, it has yet to receive focused attention. My dissertation project addresses this lacuna by recovering the Center's institutional and cultural activities. The overarching questions framing this research concern the racial dynamics that marked the emergence and propagation of various black concert dance practices in mid-20th-century New York City. More specifically, how did Clark Center forge space for dance artists of color—and African Americans in particular—to convene, create, and professionalize? Given its centrality in the Center's activities, what role did dance teaching play in the forging of culture engaged by African Americans there? In turn, historiographically, how does centering Clark Center intervene upon prevailing dance historical discourse, both by giving voice to artists rendered marginal and by foregrounding dance *teaching and training*, practices often overshadowed by the more highly prized domains of performance and choreography? Additional secondary research questions include: What does Clark Center's ultimately failed bid for a new space on Theatre Row reveal about the place of dance in New York City's urban (re)development in the 1970s-80s and the sanitization of Times Square more specifically? Given its proximity to the Broadway theater district, what does Clark Center's choreographic and performance activity elucidate about concert dance in relation to commercial performing arts industries in New York City?

As these secondary research questions indicate, the geographic scope of the project moves beyond Clark Center's walls to analyze how the studio's history is illustrative of larger spatial politics of New York City, particularly with respect to performing arts infrastructure. In terms of temporal scope, the project takes its cue from the thirty-year period of the Center's brick-and-mortar existence, 1959-1989. Each of the decades comprising this period is dense with historical significance vis-à-vis American politics and social movements and their articulations with civic and cultural life. Thus, this time period begs its own repository of analyses concerning how Clark Center and its activities shaped and were shaped by such phenomena as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the inauguration of "ethnic studies" programs, the gay liberation and LGBT rights movements, black and second-wave feminisms, neoliberalism and austerity politics, Reaganomics, and multiculturalism. While none of these framings takes primacy as the methodological locus of the project, such historical analyses will imbue the larger maneuvers per the principal research questions.

Special Terms

Those who attended Clark Center in its day referred to it as "Clark Center," with no "the." In keeping with those in the know, I will refer to Clark Center accordingly. When abbreviating its name, I will call it "the Center."

Note that the term "concert dance" is used in this research project to denote Euro-American dance traditions that are native to the theatrical stage, where the division between performer and audience is clearly spatialized and maintained. Such dance forms are traditionally ascribed a high aesthetic value, considered to be "art," choreographed by a single choreographer, and tend to be repeatable. Paradigmatic "concert" dance forms include ballet and modern dance.

As a designation, concert dance stands in contrast to “social dances,” which generally connote forms like lindy hop, salsa, and various hip-hop idioms. In such forms, there is less distinction in roles as those involved are both variously participating and witnessing. Generally, social dances are not intended to be framed as performance for the theater or proscenium stage.

At work in these designations are discursive productions of power that position concert dance forms as putatively highbrow and social dances as lowbrow. These markings are both shaped by and reify white supremacist ideologies. That is, forms that emerge from African Americans and other racial/ethnic Others vis-à-vis whiteness are generally designated as “social,” which intends to mark them as less aesthetic, respectable, and sophisticated than concert dance forms. (This is joined by a host of other identifiers, such as “ethnic dance,” “world dance,” and “street dance.”) As prior scholarship (discussed below) has demonstrated—and to which this project will add—dancers of color have thereby been positioned ambivalently by the concert dance establishment, questioned for their capacity to “overcome” the putatively essential barrier of a racial/ethnic inferiority. I maintain the usage of “concert dance” and “social dance” not in allegiance to some essential truth these designations hold but rather to be able to make clear how dance artists and institutions have had to position themselves in relation to these discursive categories. Histories like Clark Center interrupt the hegemonic hold of these terms, demonstrating how they are not in fact fixed but rather always open to performative revision. Artists at Clark Center evinced strategies for working through and intervening upon the highbrow arena of concert dance *as* a critical social and political maneuver, as well as (re)claiming marginality resistively and generatively.

From dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild, I use the terms “Africanist” and “Europeanist” throughout this document. These terms denote two broad categories of aesthetic

sensibilities, each of distinctly different origins but which nevertheless coalesce in much American cultural production. Gottschild uses Africanist “to signify African and African American resonances and presences, trends, and phenomena. It indicates the African influence, past and present, and those forms and forces that arose as products of the African diaspora.”² Europeanist, then, refers to “concepts and practices in Europe and the Americas that have their tap roots in concepts and practices from Europe.”³ In the context of this project, these two terms become a useful shorthand for denoting the general basis of particular dance forms or aesthetic values. Much of this project, in fact, exists at the intersection between these two terms, as well as the tension therein.⁴

The term “African-diasporic dance” is used interchangeably with “Africanist dance.” This is in keeping with Gottschild’s conception of these terms, as indicated in her definition above. “African diaspora” is used generally throughout the project to refer to African and African-descended peoples who have been scattered about the globe. While such movement has been both voluntary and by force, the latter is especially salient in the scope of African American history (the locus of this project) due to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The imperative of “historical recovery” also takes on deep resonance in the context of African American history, as the slave trade and slavery systematically expunged and reduced the personhood of displaced Africans and their descendants, rendering genealogical traceability by conventional historical

² Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), xiv.

³ Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence...*, xiv.

⁴ Ailey, for example, in his use of Europeanist concert dance forms, helped to integrate the field by dispelling the myth that people of color were inherently inept at achieving the ideals of such forms. At the same time that he intervened upon the racial exclusions produced and upheld through Europeanist concert dance traditions through this use of the black dancing body, he did so too through the incorporation of Africanist materials within Europeanist ones. *Revelations*, for example, a dance that conveys African American cultural narratives, themes, and sensibilities, does so via Europeanist dance aesthetics (such as the long, stretched limbs of ballet) and Africanist ones (such as isolated, swiveling hip movements). Many of the dance teachers and choreographers based at Clark Center were part of such interventions within concert dance that asserted and (re)claimed Africanist dance forms within its frame.

means impossible. As Chapter 5 will elaborate, the concept of the African diaspora has also occasioned (and been occasioned by) political convictions that locate in the interconnectedness of black peoples globally a ground of coalitional possibility toward liberation.

“Black-centric” will be used in this dissertation, particularly in Chapter 1, to denote an entity that is predominantly structured by black peoples and culture. Clark Center was a black-centric place in so far as it contained a core curriculum of Africanist dance forms as well as black teachers, choreographers, and students. “Black-centric” is favored over calling the Center a “black” space, as it did also host Europeanist dance forms and non-black people. (The nuances and political possibilities of being a black-centric *and* racially-mixed place are the focus of Chapter 1.)

I opt for the lowercase “black” and “blackness” when denoting the racial and cultural designation. With respect for those who capitalize these terms as performative correctives to systemic anti-blackness, I follow black studies scholar Jurelle LaMarr Bruce, who instead chooses the lowercase for “a blackness that is collectivist rather than individualistic.”⁵ Ultimately, the collectivist ethos is in keeping with a Clark Center spirit and model.

“Ailey’s company” and “Ailey’s studio” are used throughout this project as shorthand. While the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) is the formal designation by which Ailey’s company has been known for many years now, it had different names in its early iterations. Similarly, Ailey’s various institutional homes after Clark Center were known by various names. For ease of reading, I generally opt for the shorthand, which conveys what is most salient about these entities—that they bear the Ailey affiliation.

⁵ La Marr Jurelle Bruce, *How to Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 6.

“Dance artist” will be used as a general term to denote those with a professional relationship to dance. As is (and has been) quite common in the dance field, a dance artist may hold many more than one dance-oriented job. One may be a dancer, a choreographer, a dramaturg, a teacher, a company director, a dance administrator, and/or work in additional dance-adjacent roles, all at the same time. While a relatively new term, I use it both for convenience and to keep pace with terminology in the field. “Dance artist” will often be used to refer to groups of people, such as “dance artists who trained at Clark Center.” That said, the combination of *choreographer and teacher* is one that was especially relevant to Clark Center, given the Center’s dual function as a school and a venue/presenter. Thus, I will specify the role “choreographer-teacher” as something distinct, elaborated in Chapter 5.

Extant Literature and Gaps

While 1960s-1980s New York City has already been the subject of much dance historical discourse, Clark Center has not. Thus, this project is one of historical recovery, adding to and expanding the scope of current literature. While it inevitably reproduces the New York-centrism of dance-historical discourse, it also troubles these bounds by making connections between Clark Center and places elsewhere, such as Lester Horton’s Los Angeles-based dance school and the prismatic sites constituting the African diaspora. Dance critic Jennifer Dunning’s biographical book, *Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance*, offers the most substantial extant account of Clark Center. Dunning narrativizes the key players in Ailey’s orbit who conspired to establish the Center inside the Westside YWCA as an institutional home for his emergent company. In short, Charles Blackwell, Ailey’s stage manager and friend, convinced the YWCA’s manager of community programs, Edele Holtz, to take Ailey on as a resident artist of sorts. While the arrangement was

not intended to be permanent, the choreographer settled in, beginning to teach classes and implement programs for the wider dance community. Dubbed Clark Center for the Performing Arts after the YWCA's preexisting Clark Auditorium, Ailey's company inaugurated its public presentations with a performance in late 1960. As Dunning notes, "[b]y 1964, Clark Center had become known as an enormously imaginative and productive grassroots arts organization."⁶

While its scope was narrowed to dance in later years, the Center initially offered programming in an array of performing arts and attracted a broad range of students across age, dance experience, and race. "Many of the students were black, drawn in part by the YWCA's reputation as a friendly place and a home for black theater, dance and music."⁷ In addition to its programming, Dunning also comments on the space's affective environment, noting: "Most of all, Clark Center was a lively, comfortable hangout."⁸ It is this way in which the Center fostered a welcoming space for African Americans to gather in and through dance together that lies at the investigative heart of the dissertation project, asking both *how* that space was fashioned and *what* it engendered aesthetically, culturally, socially, and politically amongst African Americans.

The few other existing books that mention Clark Center do so as a passing moment in a longer historical trajectory, whether that of Ailey or Playwrights Horizons. The case of the former includes Thomas DeFrantz's book *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture*. In it, DeFrantz historicizes Ailey's ascension to the canonical status that his work still enjoys to this day, analyzing how Ailey's work came to stand as the exemplar of black cultural life figured through modern dance. DeFrantz references Ailey's early activities that established Clark Center and which, in turn, established him. Books that mention Clark

⁶ Jennifer Dunning, *Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), 133.

⁷ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey...*, 133.

⁸ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey...*, 133.

Center vis-à-vis Playwrights Horizons, on the other hand, include Anthony Bianco's *Ghosts of 42nd Street: A History of America's Most Infamous Block*. Bianco charts and accounts for the radical shifts in the look, feel, and shape of Manhattan's 42nd Street since the early 20th century. Though Clark Center's original space in the Westside YWCA was several blocks north of this storied Times Square block, the reach of the 42nd street redevelopment projects chronicled by Bianco accounted for the YWCA's shuttering and the Center's forced relocation. By this point in the mid-1970s, Clark Center included Playwrights Horizons—a platform dedicated to new theater works, as the name suggests—which had been established within the Center by Robert Moss in 1971.⁹ Bianco writes about Playwrights Horizons' securing of a new performance venue on Theatre Row, another redevelopment project which installed a string of new theaters on 42nd Street west of Times Square. What Bianco does not mention, however, is that Louise Roberts, director of Clark Center, also worked doggedly to secure a new dance-specific performance venue on Theatre Row. Though these efforts got so far as to have architectural blueprints drawn up to Roberts' specifications,¹⁰ the city ultimately reneged on its promised Parks and Recreation funds necessary for the completion of the new space, resulting in Roberts' resignation and the closure of the Center shortly thereafter.

That Clark Center never acquired space on Theatre Row—much less had a substantial brick-and-mortar space wholly its own—perhaps makes it unsurprising that the Center has garnered scant consideration in the historical discourses of New York City and American theater. The paucity of attention given Clark Center within the discourse of dance history, however, is a more glaring omission. One reason that Clark Center has been overlooked until now has to do

⁹ Anthony Bianco, *Ghosts of 42nd Street: A History of America's Most Infamous Block* (New York: William Morrow, 2004), 183.

¹⁰ See Architectural blueprints, Box 37, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

with the racial politics that excluded many of its dance artists of color from inclusion and/or participation in the narrowly circumscribed domains of “modern” and “postmodern” dance. These categories, as they have been drawn and re-drawn both by practitioners and historians, have determined and been determined by racial logics, arbitrated by an unmarked whiteness that has relegated artists of color and their activities to an uneasy discursive position, as many dance scholars have previously demonstrated.¹¹ Either discounted as improperly post/modernist on account of their race/ethnicity or discouraged from vying for such legibility, dance artists of color have seldom been centered in dance historical discourse that takes for granted and/or reifies the categories of modern and postmodern. In other words, the exclusionary dynamic that made spaces with the explicit aim of serving artists of color (like Clark Center) necessary is mirrored in scholarly discourse that has also neglected those same spaces from robust historical consideration.

Lines and Splits: Uptown vs. Downtown, Black vs. White

As early as the 1970s, the concert dance scene in New York City was figured in terms of a bifurcation along an “uptown-downtown” divide.¹² Less an official designation and more a colloquial conception and shorthand within the field, this binaristic framework has nonetheless endured to this day in New York City and beyond. While the city defines so much of American culture in general, this is especially true of concert dance, given the city’s iconicity for premiere stages, venues, and dance companies. Thus, its paradigms come to define the field across the

¹¹ See Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence...*; Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Carl Paris, “Defining the African American Presence in Postmodern Dance from the Judson Church Era to the 1990s,” in *34th Annual Congress on Research in Dance Conference Proceedings: Transmigratory Moves, Dance in Global Circulation* (Denton, TX: Terrill Wheeler Printing Inc., 2001).

¹² Buck Wanner, “Between Precarity and Vitality: Downtown Dance in the 1990s” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2021), 6.

nation, and it would be commonplace today to hear a dancer outside of New York City talk about the “downtown” look or feel of their work.

This split and its geographic nomenclature are a product of postmodern dance, which was inaugurated in the early 1960s in spaces in downtown Manhattan. Practitioners of postmodern dance intended to challenge the conventions of modern dance, which tended to be practiced in upper (or “uptown”) Manhattan. Modern dance had been organized around several “greats”—that is, individual choreographers whose purported giftedness manifested in a unique movement vocabulary. Dancers trained in these distinct codified vocabularies usually named for their progenitor, such as Graham Technique founded by Martha Graham. While modern dance is oft-historicized as an early-20th-century rebellion against ballet, it would go on to reproduce the kind of hierarchies structuring ballet wherein participation in the form required rigorous training and proficiency, if not virtuosity, in the technique. Accordingly, “uptown” is used to describe the formal, technically virtuosic, elite domain of ballet and modern dance companies.

While the term clearly designates the geographic location of upper Manhattan, this specificity quickly breaks down in terms of the actual locations of its constituent dance companies, highlighting the term’s condition as a generality. More salient than geography, then, is this term’s designation of the aforementioned set of aesthetic principles and values that define modern dance and ballet as concert dance traditions. Included in the category of “uptown dance” are New York City’s major ballet companies, such as New York City Ballet (NYCB) and American Ballet Theatre (ABT). It also includes the predominantly African American companies of Dance Theatre of Harlem, founded by Arthur Mitchell in 1969, and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT), founded by Ailey in 1958. Also included are the predominantly white modern dance companies such as the Martha Graham Company, the Merce Cunningham

Company, and the Paul Taylor Dance Company. This final example, while firmly considered “uptown” on account of its formalist aesthetics, has been for many years located in downtown Manhattan.¹³ That said, the venues at which Paul Taylor and other uptown choreographers’ works tend to be performed, such as Lincoln Center and City Center, are indeed uptown.

“Downtown dance,” on the other hand, describes the decidedly unspectacular and non-presentational aesthetics of the experimental artists working in lower Manhattan in the early 1960s. These postmodernists, as they would come to be known, were working in Greenwich Village’s Judson Memorial Church, aptly calling themselves Judson Dance Theater. Known for their radical interventions in choreographic form and process, this group and its milieu included figures such as Yvonne Rainer, David Gordon, Deborah Hay, and Rudy Perez. As dance scholar Marcia Siegel describes it, “all the downtown dancers were determined not to look like dancers—neither formal dance technique, stagey attitudes, nor accepted artistic structures were to be used. Clothing, behavior, and the parameters of performance would be outwardly as close to civilian life as possible.”¹⁴ In so doing, these artists were challenging the narrative and representational schema central to modern dance, which had tended to deploy mythic and Orientalist themes and figures. Against the highly emotional and dramatic sensibilities of modern dance vocabularies and works, postmodern dance artists embraced coolness and ordinariness.

In his work on New York City’s downtown dance scene, dance historian Buck Wanner argues that the “downtown” designation was less about an aesthetic and more about a distinctive way of working. The downtown approach to dance emphasized community, collective

¹³ Interestingly, the Paul Taylor Dance Company recently opened a new (additional) center on West 38th Street, in midtown. See Brian Seibert, “An Unlikely Winner in the Office Real Estate Slump? A Dance Troupe,” *New York Times*, October 28, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/28/arts/dance/paul-taylor-dance-company-midtown-real-estate.html>. See Chapter 4 Postscript.

¹⁴ Marcia B. Siegel, “Dancing on the Outside,” *The Hudson Review* 60, No.1 (Spring 2007): 112.

authorship, and process over product, challenging uptown's privileging of the staged product and hierarchy of choreographer over dancer. For Wanner, the specific geography of downtown Manhattan was incidental: "it would be downtown dance whether it was happening on the Upper West Side, or in Houston, Texas, for that matter."¹⁵ While I think the geographic specificities of 1960s Manhattan were central to the dance practices that took shape there in a way Wanner misses, I take his point that "downtown dance is an attitude" and therefore it permeated (and continues to permeate) well beyond geographic circumscription.¹⁶

Interestingly, Wanner cites the work of Samuel Gilmore, a sociologist who in 1987 penned an essay about the professional music scene in New York City. Gilmore argues that this music scene was divided into three "subworlds": downtown, midtown, and uptown. While each subworld could be characterized by aesthetic tendencies, Gilmore ultimately contextualizes these characteristics within their infrastructural conditions, demonstrating how aesthetic production is determined by its material circumstances. Gilmore's data, for example, illustrates how the uptown music scene—which tended to present music for standard orchestral instruments but with some experimental techniques—featured specialists affiliated with academic institutions who may be willing to work beyond compensated time due to a personal investment in contemporary music.¹⁷ In drawing such links between aesthetics and access to material resources, Gilmore illuminates the importance of considering these connections.

In terms of material resources, uptown and downtown dance vary starkly to this day. Perhaps not surprisingly given its elitist associations, uptown dance tends to be well-funded, enabling dance works with high production value and full-time dance companies that can offer

¹⁵ Wanner, 5.

¹⁶ Wanner, 6.

¹⁷ Samuel Gilmore, "Coordination and Convention: The Organization of the Concert World," *Symbolic Interaction* 10, no. 2 (1987): 223.

salaries and benefits packages to dancers. Downtown dance, on the other hand, tends to happen on shoe-string budgets, may be presented in everyday, non-theatrical spaces, and features performers who may have little training or professional pedigree. As the spatial logics of the uptown-downtown divide also suggest, encoded therein is a hierarchizing that situates uptown dance aesthetics as high-brow, serious, and sophisticated, marking the downtown aesthetics as low-brow, unrefined, and ordinary. The ordinary, however, was the very ethos downtown dance artists were intending to claim, eschewing the self-serious and bourgeois preoccupations of the uptown artists.

Importantly, both groups included artists of color, a point I have underscored in my inclusion of artists and companies of color in the preceding lists. That said, the few companies of color within the uptown fold tend to be firmly recognized as such while artists of color in the downtown cadre have tended to be either underrepresented or only ambivalently included in historical discourse. Perhaps this is because black-centric companies like AAADT and DTH have been legible enough in their allegiance to the classic conventions of modern dance and ballet, respectively, as to be readily included in the uptown category. This is not to say that their blackness disappears through such inclusion, nor that their inclusion is unconditional. It is, however, to say that the rubrics of liberal American democracy that have measured progress via civic inclusion have made AAADT and DTH squarely available for integration while keeping the color line more or less intact. Not incidentally, both of these companies arose within the long 1960s of Civil Rights politics and should be counted as definitive gains both produced by and helping to produce the wave of changes that brought African Americans into the fold of American citizenry.

Several of the artists of color who *were* present in the downtown milieu have been only ambivalently ascribed this designation, if at all. In her book about Japanese American dance artists Eiko and Koma, dance scholar Rosemary Candelario illustrates how this artistic duo's Asian-ness accounts for such ambivalence.¹⁸ The inability or unwillingness of critics and historians to categorize Eiko and Koma within existing paradigms reveals the hegemonically white criteria that has structured American concert dance discourse. Artists of color involved in New York's postmodern dance activities since at least the 1970s who have received scant scholarly attention include Sheryl Sutton, Harry Shepard, Blondell Cummings, Kei Takei, and Rudy Perez. The latter three figures had known ties with Clark Center. While a lack of representation of such figures in dance-historical discourse is one problem, it is also important to consider the structural barriers precluding access to or discouraging participation in this milieu for people of color at that time. A look at the discursive construction of postmodern dance history is helpful towards illuminating these barriers.

Dance historian Sally Banes wrote prolifically on Judson Dance Theater and postmodern dance co-temporally with the aesthetic movement's emergence. As scholar, critic, and dancer, she immersed herself in the postmodern dance milieu; her multiple books on the subject convey a sense of her presence in its midst. Her well-recognized book *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Postmodern Dance*, for example, was originally published in 1980, only two decades after postmodern dance's beginnings. A 1987 re-publishing of the book contains a sizable prefatory note in which she reflects upon her original text as well as updates it with the latest shifts and trends of the 1980s. In the book, Banes contends that the first three decades of postmodern dance contain at least three distinct phases, all of which have been lumped under the singular term.

¹⁸ Rosemary Candelario, *Flowers Cracking Concrete: Eiko & Koma's Asian/American Choreographies* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016).

Banes neatly periodizes these shifts according to their consecutive decades—the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s. While some of her other books, such as *Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964*, are limited to historicizing the Judson Dance Theater specifically, *Terpsichore* contextualizes Judson Dance Theater in a longer history, explicating the conditions out of which the group’s aesthetic interventions emerged as well as the challenges made to their propositions and values by practitioners in subsequent decades.

Particularly in its early decades, the artists in the postmodern milieu were predominantly white. In the 1980s, however, Banes notes a marked expansion in the number of African American artists in the postmodern dance fold, attributing this shift to a renewed interest in the use of music by choreographers. She writes, “Perhaps the new musicality in post-modern dance is partly responsible for another great shift, the recent emergence of a group of black post-modern choreographers.”¹⁹ Thus, rather than examining the reasons artists of color may have been previously precluded from postmodern consideration, Banes naturalizes their emergent inclusion as a product of an aesthetic expansion precipitated by (white) postmodernists. Or, as dance scholar Carl Paris puts it, Banes’ “statement seems to imply that it was the contrivance of the white postmodern world that allowed for the new black presence.”²⁰

Paris, in his 2001 article entitled, “Defining the African American Presence in Postmodern Dance from the Judson Era to the 1990s,” argues that African American aesthetics were central in postmodern dance from its inception, despite its dearth of black practitioners. Given what Paris describes as “the omnipresence of black cultural expressions in American

¹⁹ Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), xxxiv-xxxv.

²⁰ Carl Paris, “Defining the African American Presence in Postmodern Dance from the Judson Church Era to the 1990s,” in *34th Annual Congress on Research in Dance Conference Proceedings: Transmigratory Moves, Dance in Global Circulation* (Denton, TX: Terrill Wheeler Printing Inc., 2001), 241.

society,” the historical shortsightedness of Banes’ analysis comes to the fore.²¹ The entrance of black choreographers in the 1980s into a form already imbued with black aesthetic values should flag the exclusionary logics that marked the form’s emergence, a dynamic Banes misses. It is precisely these logics that Paris takes up in his essay, as he also examines the racial politics that animated why many black dance artists may not have wanted to join the postmodern dance movement in the first place. The shedding of technique and discipline at the heart of the postmodern break registered differently for white dancers—who did not need to prove their (racial) capacity for concert dance—versus black dancers—who were not afforded such a privilege. In order to undermine the racist notions that black people were inherently unfit for the sophistication and refinement of such forms as ballet and modern dance, “proficiency in European American dance techniques was especially important to black concert dancers.”²² This point not only provides crucial context for understanding the de facto racial segregation at the emergence of postmodern dance but also reveals yet another way in which aesthetics are never neutral but in fact a racialized (and racializing) frame.

Paris’s work follows in the intellectual lineage of dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild, whose 1996 book *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* also took direct aim at Banes for failing to identify the Africanist aesthetics of postmodern dance. Dixon Gottschild argues that all American forms are marked by a syncretistic blend of multiple cultural influences. Dubbing this a kind of “intertextuality,” it is not the hybridization that is the historical problem but rather the way Africanisms within intertexts have remained unidentified, or—in Dixon Gottschild’s terms—“invisibilized.” As a case in point, she notes how Banes identifies postmodernism’s aesthetic influences “from the European historical

²¹ Paris, “Defining the African American Presence...”, 236.

²² Paris, “Defining the African American Presence...”, 235.

avant-garde” and “Asian sources in Zen and other Buddhist philosophies, yoga and other Hindu practices, and in the martial arts”²³ with no mention of Africanist presence. In her book, Dixon Gottschild correctively names and claims the postmodern aesthetics beholden to Africanist values, such as coolness, clearly evidenced in the loose and casual movement qualities and attitudes so prized by the Judson Dance Theater and its inheritors.²⁴

Both Paris and Dixon Gottschild’s historiographic interventions expose the conditions whereby postmodern dance was imbued with Africanist aesthetics and yet structurally unavailable to black dance artists. In a similar vein, in her book *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, dance historian Susan Manning examines the structures through which black dance artists were largely excluded at the emergence of modern dance in the early twentieth century. Through dance reviews and criticism from the 1930s through 1950s, Manning shows how black dancers were rendered incommensurate with the ascription of “modern.” Various figures as too primitive, too natural, and too black, even African American dancers training and performing squarely within the modern dance milieu were written about ambivalently with regards to their aesthetic designation. Manning shows how the ascription of “Negro dance” was created as a way of reconciling this purported ineligibility of black people for modernism. What ensues is a segregated history of dance—modern dance vs. Negro dance—and therefore a “segregated historiography”²⁵ as well, a term she borrows from dance scholar Cynthia Novak.

An examination of improvisation offers insights into the segregated history and historiography of postmodern dance. Improvisation—as a strategy of both performance and choreography—was central to the postmodernists’ interventions. Against the determined

²³ Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence...*, 51.

²⁴ Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence...*, 51.

²⁵ Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xi.

choreographic steps in forms like ballet and modern dance, postmodern dance artists embraced a spirit of spontaneity, a conviction expressed in the visual art tradition of “happenings” as well, where simultaneous events would occur in non-pre-determined ways in the real time of performance.²⁶ In place of strictly determined choreographic sequences, choreographers instead utilized “scores,” sets of parameters through which a composition could play out differently each time. While improvisation is central to African-diasporic forms and sensibilities too, the improvisation at the heart of postmodernism concerned a disinvestment from the codified choreographic and movement structures of modern dance and ballet. Improvisation in black cultural production, on the other hand, concerns inventive and expressive play within the strictures of a form.²⁷ These divergent investments in improvisation further underscore the color line that delineated postmodernism as a predominantly and culturally white space, even if mixed.

Dance scholar Danielle Goldman highlights this racial divide within improvisational aesthetics through a particularly telling moment in a public conversation between white postmodern choreographer Steven Paxton and black postmodern choreographer Bill T. Jones from 1983. Paxton, who was also one of the founding members of the Judson Dance Theater, is known for exploring decidedly non-presentational modes of dancing that featured little external movement, experimentations which Jones found to be “ungenerous,” as he states in the exchange. Goldman observes, “At the time of their conversation, Jones wanted to do big moves in big houses, while Paxton wanted to create a research branch of dance.”²⁸ Not unlike Ailey’s intentional instrumentalization of modern dance as both a declaration of black people’s rightful

²⁶ For more on happenings, see Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

²⁷ See Jonathan David Jackson, “Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing,” *Dance Research Journal* Vol. 33, No. 2 (Winter, 2001): 40-53.

²⁸ Danielle Goldman, *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 108.

place within the theater and a mode of representation that would be accessible to audiences across class, Jones had similar commitments within the idiom of postmodern dance. He did not want to make navel-gazing work like Paxton's that could only be engaged by a small group of the dance intelligentsia. That Paxton could deploy improvisation towards non-presentational ends and garner status as the pioneer of a new form must be understood within the context of his white privilege. Jones, on the other hand, was not afforded such liberties as a black artist. To be taken seriously, he had to hew closer to the respectable conventions of the theater and its logics, utilizing improvisation that was legibly rigorous. Jones' improvisatory elements appeared so calculated, in fact, that Paxton mistook an improvised speech within one of Jones's dances as scripted, as revealed during the conversation Goldman analyzes.²⁹

Thus, two distinct yet interrelated discursive dynamics explain the dearth of people of color included in postmodern dance and its historicization: 1) people of color had more to lose in postmodern dance's disinvestment in modern dance and ballet aesthetics; and 2) those who did participate in postmodern dance were treated ambivalently vis-à-vis their status as properly postmodern. Put another way, these two problems—the first historical and the second historiographic—account for the whiteness of downtown dance. While uptown dance has more readily and firmly included some companies and choreographers of color, such exceptionalism has obscured the preponderance of black-centric dance sites and companies elsewhere.

I return to Banes to make one final point on the historical/historiographical segregation of dance discourse. Banes wrote as both a critic and a historian, and some of her critical writing has come to stand as historical discourse. Many of the essays in Banes' 1994 book *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*, for example, are reviews written by Banes for newspaper outlets

²⁹ Goldman, 109.

such as the *Village Voice* and *SoHo Weekly*. What started as public-facing cultural criticism went on to be framed as dance historical scholarship. Remarking on this dynamic in the Introduction of the book, Banes states, “it seems to me I entered the field of dance scholarship by the back door.”³⁰ While I do not mean to suggest that the work of scholarship and criticism are irreconcilable or intrinsically at odds, there is a myopia at play when criticism from a single perspective becomes the basis of historical account. Within such a correlative trajectory, the seemingly innocuous situation whereby Banes may not have been assigned to review anything at Clark Center produces the Center’s erasure from historical discourse. Recovering Clark Center, then, requires turning to other discursive sites than the ones for which Banes wrote.

Given the concentration of African American artists at Clark Center, discursive evidence of the Center was to be found in African American-specific writing outlets of the day. Black dance artists in the 1960s-80s were exceedingly active, constituting what Edward K. Taylor, President of the Harlem Cultural Council, called a “second black dance renaissance.”³¹ Both in response to and support of these formative activities, New York City-based black dance periodicals were inaugurated in these years. These included *The Feet*, founded by editor Carole Johnson in the 1960s, and *Dance Herald: A Black Dance Journal*, founded by editor William Moore in the 1970s. *Attitude: The Dancer’s Magazine*, founded by editor Bernadine Jennings in the 1980s, covered a wider scope of the dance field. That said, a healthy portion of *Attitude’s* coverage was devoted to black dance, and the outlet also did the important work of implementing a new cadre of dance writers who were African American.³² Mentions of Clark Center across

³⁰ Sally Banes, *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), xi.

³¹ Edward K. Taylor in “The Fred Benjamin Dance Company's Twentieth Year Celebration and Alumni Reunion,” September 8, 1989, Symphony Space, produced by Joint Efforts, Inc., videocassette, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

³² Thomas F. DeFrantz, “Theorizing Connectivities: African American Women in Concert Dance,” *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 6 (September 2011): 59.

these periodicals were common, ranging from reviews on its shows, advertisements about its classes, and profiles on dance artists affiliated with the Center. One issue of *The Feet* even featured a two-page spread profiling the Center, illustrating the breadth of its activities and dance forms through many photographs.³³ The presence of Clark Center in these alternative sites of cultural discourse demonstrates how institutional hegemony accounts for the Center's absence in much historical discourse. That is, the turn to alternative evidence both invests in an African American intellectual and cultural genealogy and reveals how the heretofore institutionalization of only certain discursive sites (i.e., the *Village Voice*) as proper scholarly evidence has been racially determined.

Methodology: Antecedents and Models

While the dissertation critically considers the reasons for the lacuna of historical work on Clark Center, this project is *not* primarily focused on the exclusionary dynamics that impacted the lives and work of those who found an artistic home at Clark Center. Rather, the project is more interested in the social, cultural, and political impacts of the activities made possible by the space, particularly for African Americans. Ultimately, I will posit that such activities expressed and enacted strategies of *black self-making and world-making* whereby black people forged cultural self-determination via dancing together. I am working with a notion of black self- and world-making here that refers to the strategies through which African Americans cultivate time and space in which to *be*—and to be together—in ways that express and affirm the living and futurity of black people. While it is a capacious concept that is enacted in myriad ways, it is the

³³ Carole Johnson, ed., *The Feet 2*, no. 1 (July 1971).

specifically dance-based activities of Clark Center to which I am applying this concept in my project.

Looking at dance as self- and world-making by and for black people arises from an interdisciplinary nexus that bridges *critical dance studies*, *queer studies*, and *black studies*. The “critical” maneuver marking *critical dance studies* denotes several discursive interventions which expand dance and its lexicon (e.g., “choreography”) as objects, methodologies, and analytics. Chief among these interventions is a move away from the idea of dances as texts to be semiotically “read” and towards dance as performative, active, and transformative in the world. That is, dances *do* things, and dancing is a *doing*. In the case of this research, I am looking at the “doing” of the dance(s) at Clark Center as world-making, analyzing how they generated particular subjectivities and relations. The notion of “world-making” derives from the discourse of queer studies and more specifically *queer of color performance theory*, most notably inaugurated by José Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz analyzes the performance work of queer of color artists, foregrounding strategies they deploy to reconfigure hegemonic structures toward a more live-able present. As Muñoz posited, “The concept of world-making delineates the ways in which performances—both theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternative views of the world. These alternative vistas are more than simply views or perspectives; they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of ‘truth’ that subjugate minoritarian people.”³⁴ While not focused distinctly on dance or blackness, Muñoz’s conceptualization of performance certainly includes both, as evidenced by his generative analyses of figures such as Kevin Aviance, a legendary black gay drag queen.³⁵

³⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 195.

³⁵ See José Esteban Muñoz, “Gesture, Ephemerality, and Queer Feeling: Approaching Kevin Aviance,” in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

More attuned to the vicissitudes of *black* performance in general and black *dance* in particular is the work of Thomas F. DeFrantz. In these arenas, DeFrantz has published widely, authoring books and articles on topics ranging from modern and postmodern dance to various forms of hip hop to other black and queer social dances. He has developed theories that particularize what black dances do, make possible, and reconfigure vis-à-vis discursive constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. “Corporeal orature,” for example, is DeFrantz’s term for the ways in which black social dances are active and communicative; that is, they activate a culturally-specific dialogic sociality.³⁶ DeFrantz has also helped to establish the discourse of *black performance theory* through his anthology of that same name co-edited with dance scholar Anita Gonzalez.³⁷ This interdisciplinary domain enables the analysis of various modes of black performance across the African diaspora, examining what such performance does, through what routes it is generated and circulated, and to what ends. It is a scholarly province just as grounded in black studies as it is in critical dance and performance studies. Black performance theory makes possible such a multi-sited analytic as black world-making. Thus, deploying black world-making as a prism for understanding the dance-based activities at Clark Center is predicated on an intellectual lineage propagated by DeFrantz as well as a cadre of other black performance theorists, further elaborated in Chapter 5.

By investing in expressive practices as socially and politically generative, this project also inherits and extends black- and women-of-color feminist methodologies. Early in his 1999 book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Muñoz articulates his

³⁶ See Thomas F. DeFrantz, “The Black Beat Made Visible: Body Power in Hip Hop Dance,” in *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*, ed. André Lepecki (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 67.

³⁷ See Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, eds., *Black Performance Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

intellectual indebtedness to Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and the group of women whose works were featured in their groundbreaking 1981 anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. These scholars and artists' works (re)claimed marginality, corporeality, and the domain of culture as sites and articulations of radical politics. Black- and women-of-color feminist intellectual genealogies have worked to reveal the structurally (re)produced centers of whiteness and masculinity in dominant discourses, making clear that the recovery and rendering of subjugated knowledges requires the speaking (and dancing) of subaltern subjects in and on their own terms. What makes critical dance studies a particularly apposite site for black- and women-of-color feminist theorizing is the discipline's fundamental attention to the register of embodiment, which feminist thought particularizes vis-à-vis relations of power enshrined in the bodily politics of mobility, aesthetics, and representation.

While critical dance studies and performance studies are disciplinarily imbricated with black- and women-of-color feminist and queer-of-color theories in constitutive ways, certainly not all scholarship in this arena springs from such identitarian convictions. Thus, it is important to identify recent scholarship that is representative of this generative nexus, as it inspires the methodological commitments of this dissertation project. The following is a short list of books published in the last two decades that position dance and/or performance as their object of study and mobilize black/women-of-color feminist and/or queer-of-color theories: Kareem Khubchandani's *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife*; Marlon Bailey's *Butch Queen Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*; Danielle Goldman's *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*; Joshua Chambers Letson's *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*; E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón Rivera-Servera's *Blacktino Queer Performance*; Ananya Chatterjea's *Butting Out: Reading Resistive*

Choreographies through Works by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Chandralekha; Jayna Brown’s *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*; Nadine George Grave’s *Urban Bush Women: Twenty Years of African American Dance Theater, Community Engagement, and Working It Out*; and Melissa Blanco Borelli’s *She is Cuba: A Genealogy of the Mulata Body*. Blanco Borelli, for example, theorizes how “the *mulata* choreographs her racialized identity through her hips.”³⁸ Goldman argues how dance improvisation has been used to navigate the “tight places” of social and political constraint.³⁹ As these examples indicate, each of these texts in its own way looks at how people rendered marginal (vis-à-vis race, ethnicity, class, nationality, gender and/or sexuality) danced or performed to make themselves against and beyond the oppressive structures limiting their mobility.

For its multitude of shared research valences, the paradigmatic model for this dissertation project exists in dance scholar Naomi Jackson’s book *Converging Movements: Modern Dance & Jewish Culture at the 92nd Street Y*. As the title suggests, Jackson traces how the 92nd Street Young Men’s and Young Women’s Hebrew Association (YM-YWHA, or simply the 92nd Street Y) was a formative site at which modern dance and Jewish-American identity were co-constitutively forged. The 92nd Street Y’s Dance Center served a mixed community of dancers—both Jewish and non-Jewish, professional and amateur—through a prodigious offering of classes and performance-based programming. The 1930s through the 1950s was a particularly fecund period during which several choreographers now celebrated as modern dance trailblazers made and presented dances there, including the likes of Alvin Ailey, Doris Humphrey, and Anna Sokolow.

³⁸ Melissa Blanco Borelli, *She is Cuba: A Genealogy of the Mulata Body* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6, emphasis in original.

³⁹ Goldman, 6.

Simultaneously, the institution provided opportunities for the Jewish American community who gathered there to socialize and find solidarity through activities like the arts, collectively determining the terms of their emergent Jewish American identity. Methodologically, Jackson toggles between these braided strands “by considering what happened at the Y with its dance programming (the *historical* question) and what this can tell us about the way we might reconceptualize dance and Jewish and American history (the *historiographic* question).”⁴⁰ Similarly, my research aims to understand what occurred at Clark Center in order to see what this offers (and reconfigures about) extant histories of dance, African American identity, and the racial politics determining American cultural expression and institutions. Specifically in the domain of dance history, Jackson states her intention to intervene upon the well-trodden version of modern dance’s development as a series of “great individual American innovators.”⁴¹ In a shared vein, the story of Clark Center dislodges such historical narratives by illustrating the centrality of teachers in the dance ecosystem, particularly for African Americans. This primacy of communitarian dance training at Clark Center highlights the work of dance as social and cultural transmission as opposed to a pursuit principally concerned with individual authorial genius.

In the specific arena of African American concert dance history, this project follows in a scholarly tradition forged by several dance scholars who have specialized in African American concert dance and its antecedents, such as Lynn Fauley (*Black Dance: From 1619 to Today*), Richard A. Long (*The Black Tradition in American Dance*), John O. Perpener III (*African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*), Brenda Dixon Gottschild (*The*

⁴⁰ Naomi Jackson, *Converging Movements: Modern Dance and Jewish Culture at the 92nd Street Y* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), 4. Emphasis mine.

⁴¹ Jackson, 4.

Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool and *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era*), Susan Manning (*Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*), Carl Paris (“Defining the African American Presence in Postmodern Dance from the Judson Church Era to the 1990s”), and Thomas F. DeFrantz (editor, *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*). Each of these scholars’ works traces genealogies of African American dance artists across sites, dance forms, as well as the historical conditions that shaped and were shaped by their activity. The list is far from exhaustive. While there are many important texts that give historical and biographical accounts of single choreographers and/or companies, the aforementioned list instead enumerates books that highlight a multitude of different dance artists. Such polycentric texts are most methodologically germane to this dissertation, which also spotlights an array of dance artists and companies rather than any singular entity.

Regarding the secondary research questions which look to Clark Center in relation to the urban history of New York City, the work of cultural and urban historian Julia Foulkes is especially consequential. Across her corpus of scholarly work, Foulkes has examined how the performing arts have shaped New York City in the twentieth century spatially, economically, politically, socially, and culturally. In “Streets and Stages: Urban Renewal and the Arts after World War II,” for example, Foulkes analyzes major performance-presenting institutions in mid-century America and how they interfaced with the changing look and demographic make-up of New York City neighborhoods. Her analysis is multi-directional in that she looks both at how these institutions inflected the cultural imaginary of the city’s residents and image as well as how the shifts in the city became figured through cultural production presented by the institutions. Foulkes’ analytical movement across registers proves instructive for my project, as I trace Clark

Center's impacts inside and outside of its walls. Additionally, Foulkes wrote a book on the history of modern dance, *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey*, which ends at the precise place where Clark Center begins—with Ailey in the early 1960s. Thus, in both object of study and methodology, Foulkes' scholarly output is a crucial antecedent to this Clark Center project as a model for mapping the co-constitutions of concert dance, institutionality, and the urban history of New York City.

“Midtown Dance” as Methodology

To focus on Clark Center is to focus on an under-historicized area of dance history, both geographically and culturally. Geographically, Clark Center was located in midtown Manhattan, a region of the island south of Central Park that includes Times Square and surrounding streets and avenues. This portion of Manhattan was home to several black-centric dance studios, clustered close enough together that dancers would travel amongst them for various classes in a single day. Culturally, Clark Center was unique in the expansiveness of black identities and forms that converged there. That is, there were black people hailing from many different places as well as a variety of Africanist dance forms to be found.

Clark Center and its neighboring midtown studios confound the "uptown dance"- "downtown dance" split that has come to operate as a kind of given in the New York concert dance scene and thus obscured the other dance legacies in its midst. As previously explained, this binary marks an “uptown” scene of tradition (i.e., ballet and modern dance) versus a “downtown” scene of experimentation (i.e., postmodern dance). In dance historical discourse, it has been accompanied by an emphasis on performance and choreography over training and teaching as the primary loci of concert dance activity. Such a privileging of choreographers and

dancers has obfuscated the centrality of teachers and students to the concert dance ecosystem. Methodologically, beginning a dance history by focusing on a dance studio and school already re-shuffles this tendency by spotlighting dance classes and the people involved in them. More specifically, focusing on Clark Center foregrounds the unique salience of teaching and training for black dance artists in 1960s-80s America.

It is also important to note that the uptown and downtown dance worlds were not actually wholly segregated in practice. Many dancers flowed between the two, performing gigs in both places/sensibilities.⁴² “By the 1980s,” Paris notes, what were “once sharp ideological and aesthetic distinctions between uptown and downtown dance were beginning to blur.”⁴³ Evidencing this blurring, Paris cites Ailey’s commissioning of Bill T. Jones in 1983 to create a work for his company, “a spell-binding male sextet” entitled *Fever Swamp*.⁴⁴ “This commission helped to give Jones tremendous exposure to a larger national and international audience.”⁴⁵ It is notable that both of these black gay choreographers of different generations intersect at their affiliation with Clark Center (a point elaborated in Chapter 4). It could be said, then, that midtown dance was a meeting ground between uptown and downtown, where black dance artists convened to professionalize and help each other in that endeavor. Clark Center was a vital site for such encounters, serving as a home to many black teachers and dance companies and providing much needed resources for black dancers to train.

To recover and account for the pluralisms that defined Clark Center and its milieu, this project inaugurates a new paradigm: “midtown dance.” This term recovers New York City concert dance activity in the mid- to late twentieth century that has fallen outside of the

⁴² Ellen Graff, in discussion with the author, November 2023.

⁴³ Carl Paris, “Will the Real Bill T. Jones Please Stand Up?” *The Drama Review* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 71.

⁴⁴ Paris, “Will the Real Bill...”, 71.

⁴⁵ Paris, “Will the Real Bill...”, 71.

discursive frames of downtown and uptown dance. While Chapter 4 will lay out the details, midtown dance refers specifically to the network of dance spaces in the western part of midtown Manhattan that were host to a mix of dance forms and people. In addition to being geographically proximal, these studios shared overlapping groups of students and teachers, some of whom frequented multiple sites in a single day. To historicize Clark Center as “midtown dance,” serves not only to situate the Center geographically and historically but also becomes a kind of methodology for doing dance history that expands the scope of dance activities understood to be at the heart of concert dance. That is, sites of dance in midtown evidence the salience of training and teaching to the concert dance ecosystem in addition to choreography and performance.

Evidence and Research Method

This dissertation project employed two primary sources of evidence: archival and oral-historical. The New York Public Library (NYPL)’s Jerome Robbins Dance Division possesses an archival holding titled Clark Center Records, which is publicly available. This collection of thirty-eight boxes contains a breadth of material types, such as concert posters and programs, financial records, board meeting notes, donor letters, student rosters, class schedules, and newspaper clippings. Before they were given to the NYPL, the documents were compiled and organized by long-time Center director Louise Roberts and administrative director Joan Chanin.⁴⁶ Clark Center was closed by this point. In addition to preserving the Center’s history,

⁴⁶ The creation of the Clark Center Records was funded in part by Stanley Stairs (Clark Center’s attorney, who worked for the Center pro bono, according to Chanin). The endeavor was also supported by the New York Foundation for the Arts, which provided Roberts and Chanin with space in its SoHo office for a time. In addition to files and photographs from the personal collections of Roberts and Chanin, information and materials from other directors were also procured, including Jerry Cole, Marianna Gates (director from 1963-1966), and possibly Edele Holtz too. Joan Chanin, in email correspondence with the author, February 28, 2025.

for Roberts, the creation of the archives was an opportunity to gather information for a book on the topic.⁴⁷ While she passed away before she was able to write it, a brief narrative outline for the planned book can be found in the Clark Center Records. For this dissertation, I carefully combed through the boxes most pertinent to the institution's activities as a school and dance presenter, such as administrative files, programs, and brochures. Some boxes were less useful for the study at hand; the first ten boxes in the series, for example, contain the Center's roster system comprised of thousands of index cards, one per student.

When approaching the boxes, I paid particular attention to the ways that the institution "talked about" itself, both in public-facing statements, such as narratives statements intended for donors and audiences, and internal statements, such as Board Meeting notes. Taken in tandem, such statements were particularly insightful for understanding how the Center positioned itself in relation to the politics and paradigms that structured New York City and the concert dance world. Additionally, in the archives, I found Clark Center mentioned throughout many of the aforementioned black dance periodicals, such as *The Feet* and *Dance Herald*. Insights culled from these robust sources are woven throughout the project.

The Clark Center Records primarily tell an institutional story of Clark Center. While they elucidate much about its operations from a financial, infrastructural, and organizational standpoint, they have less to say much about the *liveliness* of Clark Center. To account for this register, I conducted oral history interviews for this research, speaking to a number of what I will call Clark Center alumni. The embodied experiences, memories, and testimonials of these interviewees serve as living archives. I connected with the majority of them through Clark Center NYC, the legacy organization run by Williams. Some contacted me through email, in

⁴⁷ Chanin, email, February 28, 2025.

response to a “call” from Williams; many more I met at one of the group’s Gatherings (a specific event hosted by Clark Center NYC, described in detail in the Conclusion). Given that most of my interviews were long distance, I had initially conceived of doing them by Zoom, i.e., internet video-conferencing. After a consequential conversation with theater scholar Cindy Rosenthal, however, in which she described to me the enhanced intimacy of the phone, I opted to do the majority that way.⁴⁸ A small handful of the interviews happened in alternative formats, including Zoom and in person.

In total, I conducted formal interviews with twenty-three people. Most of them had attended Clark Center as students and dancers, attending classes and rehearsals there in the years between 1959-1989. The list also included teachers, administrators, as well as a couple of people who never stepped foot in Clark Center but overlapped with its milieu. The accounts of the interviewees provided insights into the affective environmental valence of the Center—how it felt to be there, in classes, in the neighborhood, at shows, and how the Center’s physical space and location in the city shaped these activities and who showed up for them. They also shed light on how the Center figured into people’s lives in the greater scope of their dancing and working, as well as their social, cultural, and political formations and identifications. Such insights were central to the theory of *dancing at Clark Center as black self-making and world-making*, laid out in Chapter 5. That said, anecdotes from the interviews are interpolated throughout the dissertation, forging a fundamental strand of its methodological and evidentiary braid.

The dissertation is comprised of five main chapters. The first four are structured by historical period, each looking at up to a decade of Clark Center’s thirty-year history. Rather than

⁴⁸ Rosenthal completed numerous interviews for her book *Ellen Stewart Presents: Fifty Years of La MaMa Experimental Theatre*. She described how the phone allows interviewees to wander into a more comfortable, dream-like state, since it permits one to sit however they like, unconcerned with having to appear in the web-cam frame. Such a state is conducive for drifting down memory lane. (She was right.)

strict adherence to periodization, chapters look backward and forward at times, disrupting the seductions of neat historicity. While Chapter 2, for example, focuses on the 1970s, it begins by highlighting the person who held directorship of Clark Center in the late 1960s. Chapter 3 begins in the late 1970s, homing in on a narrower period than the previous two chapters, to give sustained attention to a particularly consequential span in Clark Center's trajectory (explained below). Chapter 5 is least structured by period, as it takes a wider temporal scope to consider the impact of dancing at Clark Center across its institutional life. This is achieved by looking to the work of the Center's two longest-term teachers and resident choreographers, Pepsi Bethel and Charles Moore, whose time there spanned all three decades.

In addition to historicizing a specific period or aspect of Clark Center, each chapter engages in a distinct analysis of its historical material. These analyses are prismatic. Not bound or informed by one discipline, responsive assemblies of methodologies are forged within each chapter. Analyses in Chapters 1 and 2, for example, draw on the work of political scientists (Sharon Stanley and Alexander Riechl, respectively) for the ways they help elucidate the racial and urban politics animating Clark Center in the 1960s-70s. Chapter 3, on the other hand, turns to a cultural and urban historian (Julia Foulkes), whose insights help surface how Clark Center was impacted by arts policy (whereby the arts were simultaneously supported and exploited) in New York City in the mid-twentieth century. That said, the work of dance studies and black studies scholars figures throughout, grounding these two primary loci—dance and blackness—of Clark Center's history.

As this dissertation will show, Clark Center was *many places*—it relocated three times, occupying a total of four different spaces (five, if you count an offsite garage rented for storage) throughout its institutional life. All of them were in midtown. It is no accident, then, that this

project's most forthright epistemological intervention concerns *that* place I will call "midtown dance." Moreover, the concept of place functions in a myriad of additional ways in the history of Clark Center. Many places outside of Clark Center came alive within its walls. African diasporic dances enlivened other times and places, animating them on a corporeal register for those engaged in the act of dancing. Additionally, the place of Clark Center was (and continues to be) extended into other places, by virtue of those who carry its impacts and legacies.

"In and out of place," of course, holds another important meaning. To be "out of place" is to be improper, or *rendered* improper. Cultural geographer Tim Creswell, in his book *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*, examines how "place" is marshaled to do the work of such rendering, producing a discourse that designates certain activities as unwelcome in certain places. It is often those already marginalized by institutionalized difference (e.g., class, gender, race) who are marked as out of place. That marginality itself is a spatial concept makes clear how place reinforces ideologies of supremacy as it also (re)produces them. One of the case studies in Creswell's book concerns graffiti in 1970s New York City. While I deploy his example in more detail in Chapter 3, suffice it to say here that graffiti was an activity which occasioned the production of discourses of disorder and madness by the municipal government, who affixed this depravity to its assumed black and brown perpetrators. Thus, the activity is wielded as proof of its perpetrators' unfitness for participation in the moral order of civil(ized) places. Put another way, graffiti's out-of-placeness tautologically confirms the out-of-placeness of people of color, all towards the justification of their continued disenfranchisement by the state.

The history of Clark Center has everything to do with the putative out-of-placeness of people of color in American society, and specifically the field of concert dance. Clark Center

(and the YWCA, in which it was first located) had an explicit mission to enfranchise African Americans, who in 1959, had limited opportunities to pursue lives as dance artists. By *providing a place* for African Americans to train as dancers and choreographers, Clark Center was *making a place in concert dance* for us. Meanwhile, racialized discourses of place continually encroached upon the Center's viability to stay in operation in midtown. Real estate redevelopment aimed at "cleaning up" Times Square sought to oust the many African Americans and Latinx peoples who lived in, congregated around, and passed through the area. These same forces that commercialized and socially homogenized the area ultimately priced out Clark Center (and other dance institutions) too. While those for whom Clark Center was home were rendered (yet again) out of place, the Center had already done much to racially integrate the larger field. Place, then, as an expanded notion is useful in accounting for these continued impacts beyond Clark Center's brick-and-mortar existence. Thus, while it will not be explicitly engaged in each chapter, *dancing in and out of place* frames the larger project to establish the salience of place as both a physical and discursive concept historiographically.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1, "Alvin Ailey, Thelma Hill, and a Black-Centric Model of Racial Integration: Clark Center and the 1960s," begins with an institutional history of Clark Center's first decade, starting in 1959 at the West Side Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). Its origins as a home base for Alvin Ailey's emergent dance company are explored. The Center's early offerings as a performing arts school, rehearsal space, and theatrical venue are highlighted, as are its central missions to resource both young artists and African Americans. Clark Center and Ailey's company are then analyzed in tandem, wherein I argue that both illustrate two

interconnected aims of the Civil Rights Movement: African American enfranchisement and racial integration. The facile aggregation of these aims has upheld the dominant Civil Rights model of racial integration, which has entailed the insertion of black people into white spaces, predicated on assimilationist terms that undercut black identity. However, the histories of Clark Center and Ailey's company evidence an alternative model of racial integration that begins with African American enfranchisement as an in-road to racial integration, enabling black-centricity to be maintained within racial integration. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the central work of black dance teachers to the enfranchisement of black dancers, highlighting Thelma Hill, the Center's most prominent teacher.

Chapter 2, "The 'Vitality' of Dance, Experimentation in Broadway's Shadow, and the Public Good: Clark Center and the 1970s," looks to the 1970s by first glancing back to the important life of Kathleen Stanford Grant, a black woman who helmed Clark Center in the late 1960s. The new decade began with a new director—Louise Roberts, a white Jewish woman. The organization grew under Roberts' leadership—including the inauguration of a playwright-centered theater organization, Playwrights Horizons—but the closure of the West Side YWCA in 1974 threw Clark Center into crisis. Institutional maneuvers taken in the ensuing years are shown to be indicative of contradictions in governmental support for the arts. The arts had gained publicly funded support beginning in the preceding decade, celebrated by politicians as a "vitalizing" good. This support, however, was sometimes a cover for a pro-business agenda. Playwrights Horizons became part of one such scheme called Theatre Row. When Clark Center could not find a new theater, Roberts innovatively turned to outdoor space; her Summer Festival on The Mall transformed a public walkway space into a stage. As the city government celebrated

the cultural vitality of Clark Center's contributions, its own complicity in squeezing the Center out of its formerly robust operations was obscured.

Chapter 3, "Dancing in Mixed Company: Clark Center's Bid for Theatre Row in the Late 1970s to Early 1980s," homes in on a period in Clark Center's history characterized by its attempt to move to Theatre Row (a few years after Playwrights Horizons). A historical look at this area of midtown shows it to be a site of profound mixedness across difference—e.g., high-brow and low-brow economies, which brought people of different classes, races, and genders into contact. Clark Center, too, was a site of mixing, hosting a great diversity of peoples and dance forms. As real estate redevelopment in Times Square brought homogenization and commercialization in the 1970s and on, Clark Center's ethos of social pluralism and economic accessibility was rendered increasingly incommensurate with the area. Roberts' ultimately failed bid for a space on Theatre Row was for no lack of trying, shown instead to be a casualty of systematic redevelopment.

Chapter 4, "'Midtown Dance': Clark Center and the Late 1980s," takes a look at the other dance studios in the blocks around Clark Center. Identifying a distinct network of spaces with overlapping groups of dancers and teachers, I argue for a new paradigm that recovers this significant region of dance activity in the mid- to late twentieth century: "midtown dance." Key to this network was the geographic proximity of its studios, each located in convenient walking distance of the others. While a few studios are profiled in detail, one—the New Dance Group—is given extended attention for its multitude of convergences with Clark Center's history. Prior to this, the chapter chronicles the late 1980s at Clark Center, which were the last few years of its institutional life. Major events included the resignation of Roberts and the Center's third and

fourth relocations. Ultimately, Clark Center's enfranchisement of black dancers is shown to be part of a longer institutional lineage in midtown.

Chapter 5, "Black Self-Making and World-Making: Choreographer-Teachers and Students of Clark Center," synthesizes the previous four by generating a theory of what dancing at Clark Center *did*. Through oral-historical accounts of students, two central teaching figures at the Center are historicized, Charles Moore and Pepsi Bethel. In addition to teaching, both of these black choreographers based their dance companies there (at least in part), making them what I call "choreographer-teachers." Their work at Clark Center evidences these two activities to be co-constituting. Additionally, their teaching of Africanist dance forms impacted their students profoundly, engendering expanded conceptions of black subjectivity. Through the study of "authentic jazz dance" and African-diasporic dance forms with Bethel and Moore respectively, students gleaned a deeper sense of themselves as (historically) American and (diasporically) African. Dance, engaged communally in class and performance at Clark Center, was a vehicle of such *black self-making and black world-making*.

The Conclusion, "Clark Center's Legacies," looks to the living legacies of Clark Center. It highlights the current lives of some Clark Center figures, underscoring how the formative impacts of the Center continue to inform and shape their work. Additionally, the chapter celebrates the work of Clark Center NYC, an organization formed in 2013 by Jill Williams, which hosts social and educational programming that preserves Clark Center's history and animates its legacies.

The pages that follow are replete with Clark Center and its surrounds. It begins where it ends: in the streets of midtown Manhattan. Let's venture there, in 1959... past the hotdog stands, porn

movie theaters, Broadway theaters... the buses, subway stations, taxicabs... the businesswomen and men, the sex workers, restaurant workers, actors, drugs dealers, musicians, dancers, nannies, people raising families, people forging chosen families... There Ailey was, working on Broadway, but dreaming of something more self-determined. As his choreographic energies buzzed, people rallied to move potential towards form.

Chapter 1: Alvin Ailey, Thelma Hill, and a Black-Centric Model of Racial Integration: Clark Center and the 1960s

Alvin Ailey and the West Side YWCA

Before Alvin Ailey became a titan of American modern dance, he was slipping in rehearsals for his own dance works whenever and wherever he could.⁴⁹ While dancing in the chorus of the Broadway show *Jamaica* in 1957, star performer Lena Horne “lobbied producers to allow [Ailey] to use the stage between performances to develop movement ideas.”⁵⁰ Horne was not the only one who saw that Ailey held immense artistic promise, if given the space. In fact, by the end of 1958, Ailey had shown his choreographic work twice at the 92nd Street Young Men’s and Women’s Hebrew Association (92nd Street Y) in Manhattan’s Upper West Side, a home for modern dance training and presentation since the 1930s. “There was an Ailey buzz in the air,”⁵¹ and a third concert of Ailey’s works at the 92nd Street Y was slated for January 31, 1960.⁵² It was typical in this era for choreographers in New York City to have such one-night-only engagements.⁵³ This structure made it difficult to establish a professional foothold and an enduring repertory, and racial barriers to participation in civic life for African Americans at that time further limited Ailey’s chances of establishing a choreographic career.

Through the efforts of a few advocates, however, and the fortuitous emergence of a different “Y” location, Ailey would not only find a place to rehearse regularly for his upcoming

⁴⁹ “[Alvin and his thirteen performers in 1957] wandered from studio to studio throughout the theater district and beyond for rehearsals, many of which were held in snatched moments on the stage of the Imperial [Theatre, site of Broadway show *Jamaica*].” Jennifer Dunning, *Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), 101.

⁵⁰ Thomas F. DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 55.

⁵¹ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 110.

⁵² Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 113.

⁵³ “One New York season or performance a year tended to be the rule for modern dance in the 1950s.” Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 109.

engagement; he would also be afforded his first institutional home, Clark Center for the Performing Arts. The opening gambit was made by Charles Blackwell, a former dancer who had toured internationally with the likes of Pearl Primus. Blackwell and Ailey knew each other through *Jamaica*, where Blackwell was working as stage manager, making him the first African American to work in this capacity on Broadway. After seeing Ailey's initial show at the 92nd Street Y, Blackwell was thoroughly impressed and enlisted himself as stage manager for the second show.⁵⁴ Recognizing the need for reliable rehearsal space if Ailey's choreographic efforts were to really bloom, Blackwell decided to help his new friend. He scoured the city for a home base where the company could take root.⁵⁵ Looking near Broadway where they worked together, "Blackwell walked down block after block of the theater district, investigating churches, empty storefronts and even the local offices of the national union for hospital workers, which he knew to be receptive to the needs of dance and theater folk."⁵⁶ He happened upon a Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) located on Eighth Avenue between 50th and 51st Streets.⁵⁷ It, too, was in transition, having recently opened in this space formerly occupied by the Capitol Hotel. There he met with Edele Holtz, a Danish-American social worker who headed the activities and programs at this YWCA, known as the West Side branch. As Blackwell described to Holtz the needs of a group of black dancers working at a neighboring theater who wanted to do a

⁵⁴ Alvin Ailey and A. Peter Bailey, *Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1995), 92.

⁵⁵ As Ella Thompson Moore remembers, Blackwell similarly prowled the area in search of jobs for black dancers. In addition to advising his friends about which auditions to take, he would encourage them to advocate for themselves if they were turned away due to race. It is clear he did important but largely undocumented work to help integrate the field and get black artists employed. Ella Thompson Moore, "Tea with Ella: An Intimate Conversation with Ella Thompson Moore," Clark Center NYC, November 8, 2015, YouTube video, 1:00:31, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-Ub6L45mw8&t=783s>.

⁵⁶ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 114.

⁵⁷ Long-time Clark Center director Louise Roberts credits Charles Blackwell's memory of his mother as "a big Y lady." Perhaps Blackwell, then, was familiar with the Y as an organization hospitable to African American arts traditions and programming and thought it would be a promising prospect for Ailey. Louise Roberts, "Dance On: With Billie Mahoney," Television program, June 28, 1989, Videocassette, 28 minutes, New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division.

“community project,”⁵⁸ she heard in this an opportunity to fulfill the YWCA’s mission to serve the disenfranchised communities in its immediate vicinity. Intended as a temporary arrangement, she agreed to let Ailey rent rehearsal space for a nominal monthly fee.

The January 31, 1960 concert at the 92nd Street Y was tremendously well received. The show, which ended with the premiere of Ailey’s now-canonical *Revelations*, was met with such ovation that William Kolodney, the director of dance programming, took to the stage and quieted the audience for a spontaneous announcement: the concert would have a repeat performance on February 28.⁵⁹ In the landscape of single-night dance productions, this was extraordinary. Holtz was also in attendance that night and realized Ailey might be more than a community project.⁶⁰ The recognition of his emerging greatness led her to pardon his inability to pay the agreed-upon rental fee. Indeed, Ailey’s artistic residency at the YWCA not only continued but rapidly expanded.

In the YWCA’s studios—“huge, clean and freshly painted white”⁶¹—Ailey held rehearsals and started to teach dance workshops open to the public. Alongside these, courses in several arts disciplines taught by other teachers would go on to be offered as well, generating a total-theatrical kind of educational space akin to Lester Horton, Ailey’s influential dance teacher. While Ailey’s meteoric rise pulled him away from Clark Center by the end of the decade, the bustling dance hub that Ailey and his advocates had founded lived on for another two decades. Providing vital resources and support to emerging choreographers and dance artists of color, Clark Center fostered interventions and legacies in the concert dance ecosystem of New York City that live on to this day.

⁵⁸ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 114.

⁵⁹ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 121.

⁶⁰ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 129.

⁶¹ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 129.

This initial chapter of the dissertation focuses on the 1960s, the first decade of Clark Center's thirty-year life (1959-1989). It begins by outlining the Center's emergent offerings as a school, rehearsal space, and performance venue. Throughout, Clark Center's two primary mission-based commitments are underscored: to foster the development of young artists and to provide performing arts experiences to socially and economically disenfranchised communities, particularly African Americans. The chapter contextualizes the Center in relation to Ailey's formative years at Horton's Los Angeles-based Dance Theater, a studio that trained dancers in many aspects of the theater and that was racially integrated long before the federal dismantling of segregation. The values that Ailey forged there are examined in both his emergent dance company and Clark Center's missions as organizations. Ultimately, I argue that both Ailey's company and Clark Center are examples of distinct yet interconnected Civil Rights Movement goals that linked African American enfranchisement with racial integration. This dynamic, which is indicative of 20th-century American racial politics and the legacy of the color line,⁶² creates a simultaneous ascription of these entities as "black" *and* "multi-racial/ethnic." While integration discourse has tended to focus on the assimilation of black people into white spaces, both Ailey's company and Clark Center offer an alternative model of racial integration that begins from and maintains an allegiance to African American identity. The chapter concludes with a look at black women dance teachers who helmed racially integrated dance studios in New York City, drawing connections with Clark Center and Thelma Hill, the Center's most distinguished teacher.

⁶² Here I invoke the Du Boisian term for the discursive line of American racial politics, white versus black. See W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1904).

Holistic Performing Arts Offerings for a Diversity of People: The Y and the Lester Horton Legacy

The Young Women's and Men's Christian Association (YW/YMCA, or simply "the Y") dates back to the nineteenth century, "when a host of local YWCAs and YMCAs opened their doors to young Protestant women and men alone in the cities."⁶³ While these homosocial spaces would go on to become sites of homosexual cruising and dancing, they were initially motivated by a "missionary zeal...to protect [their residents] from the perceived temptations of dance halls, cheap theaters, brothels, and saloons."⁶⁴ The mission of the Y would shift into the twentieth century, congealing in "an emphasis on social service and health."⁶⁵ Such enfranchisement would take a number of forms, including providing help to immigrants and the socially and economically dispossessed, engendering early sites of racial integration. But the organization's initial religious and moral objective was especially striking for its misalignment with public life. Indeed, as it broadened the public it served, there was a sweaty, sensual, social *liveliness* for which the Y's facilities would become central, particularly in the history of American concert dance. The West Side YWCA was one such facility, opening Clark Center under its aegis in 1959, which grew into a critical hub of dance activity—and its attendant gay sociality—in the late 1950s, particularly for African Americans.

Before Clark Center was instituted, the West Side YWCA was comprised of three departments: the Laura Spelman Residence Club, which provided accommodations for women and girls; the Social and Recreation Department, which boasted an Olympic size pool;⁶⁶ and the

⁶³ Joanne Meyerowitz, "Preface," in *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City*, eds. Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt (New York: New York University Press, 1997), xi.

⁶⁴ Meyerowitz, xi.

⁶⁵ Meyerowitz, xi.

⁶⁶ Mary Wolf, interviewed with Kathy Grant by Marian Horosko, "Dance, New York," WBAI Radio, January 21, 1970, Cassette, 28 minutes, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Craft Students League, which offered widely accessible training in a broad array of craft traditions such as woodworking and ceramics. Perhaps its most renowned program up to that point, the Craft Students League had been founded in 1932 at another YWCA location in New York City, relocating to the West Side branch in 1958. In announcing their new performing arts department, the YWCA invoked this already well-established sister program:

Starting in October of 1960, the West Side Branch of the New York City YWCA will be introducing its new Clark Center. We hope to begin a program of service to young artists and other young people which will do for the performing arts what our well known Craft Students League has done for the applied arts. In addition to classes and informal programs, our plans include showcases, seminars, films and concerts.⁶⁷

Thus, from its outset, the YWCA established Clark Center as a civically oriented entity. It was intended to provide a diversity of performing arts-based training and programming to a wide public of young adults, an intention in step with the broadening mission of the Y.

Clark Center, then, was not the first offering of robust arts programming at the West Side YWCA. Nor was it the first—or last—time that formative resources for New York City’s concert dance ecosystem were provided by the larger Y organization. As aforementioned, the 92nd Street Y was monumental to the emergence and growth of modern dance as a field, and it continues to offer dance programming to this day. In his autobiography, Ailey refers to the 92nd Street Y as “the hub of modern dance because every night a concert was presented.”⁶⁸ He goes on to praise the ease with which young choreographers were able to show work there, presentations which clearly inspired Ailey to want to do the same. Dance scholar Naomi Jackson has illustrated the historical emergence and co-constitution of modern dance and Jewish Americanness evidenced in the activities of the 92nd Street Y since the 1930s. In so doing, Jackson also foregrounds the

⁶⁷ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, 1960, Box 27, Folder 19, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁶⁸ Ailey and Bailey, 90.

formative opportunities afforded to African American choreographers.⁶⁹ In the early decades of the 1930s and 1940s, this included such figures as Edna Guy, Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, and Janet Collins. Continuing this legacy “as a place where young African American dancers could get their start,” Jackson notes that “between 1954 and 1960, [director of dance programming William] Kolodney presented a large number of [black] choreographers in either their first or near first New York Concerts.”⁷⁰ This list included Donald McKayle, Louis Johnson, Talley Beatty, Geoffrey Holder, and of course Alvin Ailey.⁷¹ That Ailey’s choreographic career in New York City began in one branch of the Y and was then incubated in another makes him a remarkable link in the chain of concert dance histories nourished by community centers.⁷²

Preceded by the 92nd Street Y, Clark Center at the West Side YWCA would go on to inspire other Y locations to extend their dance programming.⁷³ Before it became dance specific, however, Clark Center started by offering a broad palette of performing arts training. As outlined in its inaugural brochure in 1960, initial workshop offerings entailed: “Folk Music,” which included instruction in guitar and singing, taught by Dick Weissman; “Understanding the Theatre,” a lecture-based course on many aspects of theatrical productions including business

⁶⁹ The racial integration of the 92nd Street Y’s dance programming was part of a broader commitment of the institution. Describing African American choreographer Pearl Primus, Jackson notes, “Primus’s success was closely tied to the particular openness of the Y community to African Americans. Around the time of her first concerts there [in 1944], internal documentation shows that blacks were welcomed at the institution.” Jackson, 166.

⁷⁰ Jackson, 146-147.

⁷¹ Jackson, 146-147. Other Clark Center figures who gave their choreographic debut at the 92nd Street Y include Pepsi Bethel. Pepsi Bethel, *Authentic Jazz Dance: A Retrospective* (New York: The American Authentic Jazz Dance Theatre, Inc., 1990), 23.

⁷² Other community centers in New York City that have been key sites of concert dance activity include the 14th Street Y (formerly known as the Emanu-El Midtown YM-YWHA) and settlement houses, such as Henry Street Settlement.

⁷³ For example, the director of the YM-YWHA of Essex County (New Jersey), Ray Kempner, expressed that he wished to showcase some of the same choreographers and companies that Clark Center had been hosting. Ray Kempner, Ray Kempner to Louise Roberts, Letter, December 23, 1970, Box 26, Folder 11, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

and stagecraft, taught by Marshall Spiller; “Drama Workshop,” an acting class, taught by Freddie Royal; “Creative Writing,” taught by Howard Richardson; and “Modern Dance,” taught by Ailey.⁷⁴ Most of these workshops met one night a week for one to two hours, totaling ten sessions between October and December. Modern dance, however, was offered in two levels—“Beginners” and “Intermediates.” Both levels met twice a week for six-week sessions, and consecutive sessions were offered in the October through December timeframe. In terms of volume of workshops, then, Clark Center’s broad offerings across performing arts disciplines carried an emphasis in dance from its inception. In keeping with the YWCA’s mission of accessibility, workshops were intentionally low-priced, ranging from \$10 to \$15 for the bundle of ten sessions, or \$18 for the twelve dance-class sessions.

While the West Side YWCA had not been originally designated to host such robust performing arts offerings, existing facilities were outfitted to optimize their hospitability for such activities. Key in these efforts was Robert Buccolo, the white technical director for *Jamaica*, whom Blackwell brought on early in Clark Center’s formation. But Buccolo’s contributions extended beyond paintjobs and furniture rearrangement. In what had once been a “big, old-fashioned auditorium” on the hotel’s first floor, Buccolo “saw a working theater.”⁷⁵ To materialize this vision, Buccolo renovated the small stage space, building it out it such that several dancers would fit on it at once. Seating was comprised of a small balcony and rows of folding chairs totaling 450. Though far from glamorous, it was an integral part of Clark Center’s operations. Through this performance venue, Clark Center not only showcased performance works, but could also present works as a way of further incubating them. Ailey, for example, was able to try out emergent choreographic ideas on this humble stage and glean the kind of feedback

⁷⁴ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, 1960.

⁷⁵ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 129.

that only comes from the live exchange with an audience.⁷⁶ While differing accounts exist regarding when the auditorium was dubbed with the “Clark” name,⁷⁷ there seems to be consensus that Clark Center was named after its resident performance space, Clark Auditorium.

Printed informational materials announcing the Center’s inaugural workshops in 1960 referred to the organization simply as “Clark Center.” By 1962, brochures and posters bore the longer name, Clark Center for the Performing Arts, which reflected the Center’s broad offerings. In the early 1970s, an internal organizational division was drawn between theater and dance, resulting in sub-organizations known as Playwrights Horizons and Dance Horizons. When the YWCA closed in 1974, Playwrights Horizons split off from the larger organization and moved into its own space. The resultant Clark Center for the Performing Arts was left with its dance-based activities, an identity which it embraced. Dropping the moniker Dance Horizons, it retained the lengthier title, although now a sort of misnomer for its dance-specific focus. Colloquially, the shortened “Clark Center” continued to be used to refer to the organization formally known as Clark Center for the Performing Arts through its end in 1989.⁷⁸

In its early years, Clark Center offered programming that supplemented its classes and workshops. In fall of 1962, for example, a weekly “Sunday [sic] at Five” series included: a

⁷⁶ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 130.

⁷⁷ Dunning notes that Clark Center was “named after the family that had contributed funds for the theater renovation.” *Alvin Ailey*, 131. Louise Roberts, however, suggests that the auditorium already bore the “Clark” name when Ailey and his team moved in: “Typically, the now time-honored name of Clark Center was not chosen; it was there...a sign reading Clark Auditorium. The notable founders agreed that ‘Auditorium’ was scarcely an appropriate appellation, but Clark sounded fine; hence Clark Center.” Louise Roberts, Clark Center 20-year Retrospective Statement, Box 11, Folder 4, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. In a 1989 interview, Roberts also said: “...and then there was this huge auditorium down below, the one that had been, as you mentioned, the show-biz part, and Alvin moved in. And that was—and why is it called Clark Center? Because when they were wandering around, they found a sign that said ‘Clark Auditorium.’” Roberts, *Dance On: With Billie Mahoney*. Joan Chanin, long-time administrative director of Clark Center, shared that it was a running joke within the organization that no one really knew the true origins of the Center’s name. Joan Chanin, in discussion with the author, October 2023.

⁷⁸ In administrative correspondence from the 1980s on letterhead emblazoned “Clark Center for the Performing Arts,” it was not uncommon for the body text to contain the shortened “Clark Center.”

lecture-demonstration on “History of the Dance, 12th to 19th Century” by Jacques and William Burdick; guest talks by *New York Times* dance critic Allen Hughes, actress Mildred Dunnock, and producer and director José Quintero; an “informal lecture” and “open discussion” accompanying a jazz concert with Billy Taylor; and various performances of music, dance, and theater.⁷⁹ This diversity of programming across the performing arts mirrored the broad range of courses offered. It was also similarly low-priced; in the 1962 season, one could attend ten events for \$10. Such programming emphasized accessibility in another way, too, by inviting the public into arts discourse and dialogue. As June L. Aulick noted in *The Chelsea Clinton News*, “Sundays at 5 programs are followed by very charming receptions, where the audience, over coffee and cakes, has a chance to chat with the performers.”⁸⁰

Such eclectic and holistic performing arts-based programming had been modeled for Ailey a decade prior, during his formative years at Lester Horton’s Los Angeles-based studio and school. Dance Theater, as it was known, had opened in the mid-1940s, making it the first theater in the United States dedicated exclusively to the presentation of dance.⁸¹ Horton also used the space to disseminate his emerging philosophy; in his lecture titled “The Function of the Dance in Acting,” for example, he articulated his convictions that actors had much to glean from the embodied expressivity afforded by dance training.⁸² These events featured his students, such as Carmen de Lavallade, who would go on to teach at Clark Center and achieve renown as a dancer, but who in 1949 “was experiencing her first performances in workshops and lecture-demonstrations” given by Horton.⁸³ Ailey, new to Horton’s studio that same year, worked stage

⁷⁹ “Sunday at Five” poster, 1962, Box 27, Folder 19, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Interestingly, a “Fridays at Noon” series at the 92nd Street Y, featuring free public presentations of dance, persists to this day.

⁸⁰ June L. Aulick, “Chit-Chat,” *The Chelsea Clinton News* (New York, NY), December 20, 1962, Page 4.

⁸¹ Don McDonagh, *Don McDonagh’s Complete Guide to Modern Dance* (New York: Popular Library, 1977), 108.

⁸² Larry Warren, *Lester Horton: Modern Dance Pioneer* (Pennington, NJ: Princeton Book Company, 1991), 73-74.

⁸³ Warren, 128.

crew. Indeed, training with Horton entailed a robust education in the many interwoven disciplines that converged in concert dance. They learned how to dye clothes and build sets. They even learned how to play percussion instruments from Horton's global collection, "and were often called upon to perform, both on the stage while dancing and in offstage percussion orchestras."⁸⁴ Speaking to the holism of theatrical training under Horton's tutelage, dancer Don Martin observed, "The theater on Melrose was a lifestyle... We were consumed by it. We lived by it."⁸⁵

Horton's hunger for heterogeneity in the theater and in his pedagogy was of a piece with his appetite for other cultures. He was white but grew up accustomed to the demographic diversity afforded by his California upbringing. From his youth, Horton had cultivated relationships with ethnic enclaves around him, including Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans, making him a warmly welcomed outsider, as dancer Bella Lewitzky recounted.⁸⁶ This fraternizing included participation in the cultural traditions of others, practices which he appropriated towards the forging of a dance ideology and vocabulary which would later bear his name alone. While such individualistic paradigms of innovation are endemic to Western ideals of artistry (i.e., "the genius artist"), the codification of a movement vocabulary was also a particular hallmark of American modern dance. Techniques were named for their inventor and formed the basis of both their teaching and dance-making. This was the case with Horton, too, and the import of the Horton Technique has been likened to other choreographers of his time whose codified techniques live on: "Cunningham, Humphrey-Weidman, Graham, and Limon."⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Warren, 73.

⁸⁵ Don Martin quoted in Jana Frances-Fischer, "The Life and Work of Lester Horton," in *The Dance Technique of Lester Horton*, written by Marjorie B. Perces, Ana Marie Forsythe, and Cheryl Bell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Book Company), 8.

⁸⁶ Warren, 70-72.

⁸⁷ Perces, 6.

And yet, Horton has not generally been afforded the same iconicity within the modern dance canon as these figures, a subordinate status which has been chalked up to geography. That is, while these contemporaries were based in the nation's dance capital, New York City, Horton was insulated by his Los Angeles locale, another big city but not for concert dance. Lelia Goldoni, a former Horton company member, invoked this idea in the title of a 1993 documentary film she made to uplift Horton: *Genius on the Wrong Coast*.

Like his contemporaries, Horton's dance vocabulary was not wholly an invention of his own but rather a process of amalgamation and adaptation that included the contributions of his company members⁸⁸ as well as appropriations from other cultural traditions. His early involvement in performing and dance-making took from Native American traditions. In *The Song of Hiawatha*, for example, a 1926 pageant directed by Clara Nixon Bates, Horton incorporated movements that he studied while on Native American reservations in Indiana and New Mexico expressly for the purpose of bringing them to the stage.⁸⁹ Horton, however, saw his appropriations as fundamentally different from those of his modern dance forebears, such as Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. Interestingly, it was this married duo's dance company, Denishawn, that first turned Horton on to dance in 1922.⁹⁰ But by 1936, Horton projected a distinct break with such inheritances, particularly evident in a solo dance entitled "Escape into

⁸⁸ Bella Lewitzky, a star dancer and muse for Horton, notes: "The Horton technique began to take shape concurrently with the development of his choreography. The method he used was typical of the day. Lester would start a movement pattern going. The dancers would pick it up and he would bounce back with an elaboration of the theme. Very often the whole class would be based on a single movement and its development. Our entire vocabulary in those days was fashioned out of this kind of exploration on the part of the company. Lester would draw from what we had done, guiding us toward the things he felt were significant and welding them into technical studies." Bella Lewitzky, "Reminiscences of Early Horton Technique," in *The Dance Technique of Lester Horton*, written by Marjorie B. Percus, Ana Marie Forsythe, and Cheryl Bell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Book Company), 3.

⁸⁹ Warren, 14-15.

⁹⁰ He first saw Denishawn in 1922, in a program with a cast that "included Charles Weidman, Doris Humphrey, and Martha Graham, who were, with Horton, to become the cornerstones of American modern dance." Warren, 7-8.

the Exotic,” which he made to parody the Orientalism of Denishawn’s work.⁹¹ Even Horton’s title critiqued the way St. Denis and Shawn’s aesthetic pivoted on fetishistic fantasies of faraway lands such India, Japan, and Egypt, all while excluding racial minorities from their milieu.⁹²

The degree to which Horton’s approach actually differed from his predecessors with regards to his incorporation of cultural materials or renderings of Others, while a worthwhile study, lies beyond the scope of this document.⁹³ That said, we might understand Horton’s cultural appropriation as a product of the seeming naturalness of the ethnic diversity around him. As biographer Larry Warren puts it, “Integration, for him, had never been something to work toward; it simply was a fact of life.”⁹⁴ Horton brought this progressive ethos to his studio and company in the 1940s, which was racially integrated years before federal legislation began to mandate such integration of the nation’s civic institutions. While the Lester Horton Dance Group was “the first racially integrated company in the country,”⁹⁵ Warren underscores that this was not so much a progressive declaration but something Horton did “unceremoniously and without fanfare.”⁹⁶ Of course, Horton must have been aware of the social intervention he was making, as his interracial company was denied motel accommodations while on tour in 1953, for example.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Warren, 61.

⁹² Edna Guy, for example, was an African American woman who sought out training and employment with Denishawn but was ultimately denied from joining the company on account of her race. Julia Foulkes, *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 24 and 57-58.

⁹³ Warren, Horton’s biographer, also leaves the veracity of Horton’s knowledge of these dances as a dangling question, the implications of which could be critical for determining the ethics of Horton’s appropriations (i.e., the degree to which he was “playing Indian”). Warren ultimately finds value in what he deems Horton’s earnest desire to preserve and share these dances. “We will probably never know just how much of an expert in American Indian Dance Horton was. It is certain that no other non-Indian on the West Coast during the late 1920s and 1930s matched his accomplishment in interesting people in this aspect of our heritage” (Warren, 30).

⁹⁴ Warren, 70.

⁹⁵ McDonagh, 108.

⁹⁶ Warren, 53.

⁹⁷ Warren, 176.

Amidst such adversity, Horton maintained the integrity of his interracial company, even when it meant risking the loss of work.⁹⁸ While gigs were in fact revoked, Horton's insistence also successfully dismantled certain venues' policies for mono-racial performing groups, opening the door for other interracial companies down the line.⁹⁹ Interestingly, the presence of African American dancers in Horton's company who would go on to careers of renown—e.g., Alvin Ailey, James Truitte, Carmen de Lavallade—produced a fundamental association between Horton technique and blackness. Retrospectively, some have mistakenly assumed Horton to have been African American himself.¹⁰⁰ No doubt, the way in which Ailey's choreographic work mobilized African American culture has contributed to this slippage. Ailey's company has long acted as a de facto conveyer of Horton's legacy, given the primacy of the Horton technique within Ailey's training program and choreography. Thus, for some, Horton's technique has come to signify blackness through its usage as a vehicle of African American references and themes on stage.

The multi-raciality of Horton's space in tandem with the teeming energy that characterized his total-theatrical approach to dance and education stand as critical antecedents to Ailey's values, which infused both his company and its home at Clark Center. Like Horton's Dance Theater, Clark Center initially provided a broad curriculum and buzzed with sweaty, cross-racial camaraderie. As Ailey's biographer Jennifer Dunning puts it, "Clark Center for the Performing Arts at the YWCA would become the closest thing to the hectic, yeasty, welcoming

⁹⁸ Warren, 188.

⁹⁹ Warren, 188.

¹⁰⁰ Warren notes that Walter Terry, a prominent dance writer and critic, included Horton under the section of "The Black Dance" in his 1956 book *The Dance in America*, alongside black dance artists such as Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Pearl Primus (53). Jill Williams, a Clark Center teacher whom I interviewed for this project, also mentioned this tendency. Jill Williams, in discussion with the author, January 2024.

Horton studio that Alvin would ever know.”¹⁰¹ A similar sentiment was voiced by Goldoni, who described Clark Center as the closest thing to Horton’s studio.¹⁰²

To recognize the New York City-based Clark Center as a kind of east coast version of the west coast phenomenon that was Horton’s Dance Theater, then, is an interesting inversion of the “New York-centrism” that has tended to structure the dance field and discourse. While Ailey’s legacy far outsizes that of Horton—indeed, of just about any other choreographer, living or not¹⁰³—Horton’s movement vocabulary and philosophy were fundamental for Ailey. Ailey’s legacy contains and carries Horton’s. While Horton Technique is not a standard offering in dance studios or university curricula today, it *is* part of the Ailey school’s training and offerings to this day.¹⁰⁴ Thus, the long historiographic arm that traces the germ of Ailey’s becoming to Horton’s Los Angeles-based hub dislodges the fixity of New York City as the only notable center of concert dance activity.

Clark Center’s Offerings for Youth, Emerging Choreographers, and Established Companies

Within its first year of operation, Clark Center began to offer classes for children and teenagers in addition to their workshops for adults. A 1960 brochure titled “Theatre Workshop for Children” describes a 3-hour weekly workshop session featuring training in ballet, acting, and singing, with one section for ages seven to twelve and another for ages thirteen to sixteen.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Dunning, 129.

¹⁰² Williams.

¹⁰³ “It has been estimated, and doubtless correctly, that the Ailey Dance Theater has been seen by more people than any other in the world. One television showing in the Soviet Union alone had a reported viewing audience of 22 million.” Warren, 167.

¹⁰⁴ The Ailey School even offers teacher certification in what it calls Ailey Horton Technique. See “Ailey Teacher Certification Program: Ailey Horton Technique,” AILEY, <https://ailey.org/training/ailey-teacher-certification-program-ailey-horton-technique>.

¹⁰⁵ “Theatre Workshop for Children at West Side YWCA,” Brochure mailer, 1960, Box 27, Folder 19, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

A “Letter to Parents” portion of the brochure signed by Edele Holtz (Program Director) and Duncan R. Linsley (Department Chairman) stated,

In an era where youngsters too often are glued to television sets, the importance of providing an opportunity for a child to participate in and see live theatre and dance cannot be underestimated. However, while emphasis will be placed on the acquiring of skills, we feel keenly that it is just as important that the child be able to *enjoy* the sheer fun and excitement of recreative effort.¹⁰⁶

Thus, Clark Center advertised participation in the arts as a boon to one’s social and cultural development and as a counterweight to the alienating impacts of technology. The dual emphasis on skills and fun acknowledges and reconciles two seemingly incongruous realities of Clark Center: it was located in the theater district of New York City, where professional performers of the highest caliber and those aspiring came to train and work, and yet it was based in a YWCA, a community center meant to be broadly available to the public. Making this latter commitment abundantly clear, the brochure clarified that this workshop was for all children, “whether talented or not.”¹⁰⁷

Moreover, it was not the cultural capital or professional promise of Clark Center’s location that Holtz and Linsley underscored, but rather its geographic accessibility. Their statement ended, “A final word, and we believe a welcome one for parents—the West Side YWCA is easily reached by all subway lines, convenient to nearby shopping and theatre districts, and has on the premises, a modern, low price cafeteria.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, several former Clark Center students whom I interviewed for this research spoke to the ease with which they could access the Center by subway. That they mentioned this aspect of the Center unprompted made clear the salience of its location to its overall appeal. While the theater district may have been less a draw

¹⁰⁶ “Theatre Workshop for Children...,” Emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁷ “Theatre Workshop for Children...”

¹⁰⁸ “Theatre Workshop for Children...”

for children, for adult students at Clark Center who were professional performing artists or aspiring, the Center's proximity to the theater district was useful. This midtown location allowed students to train and take warm-up classes within blocks of their dance gigs and auditions as well as walk to the network of dance studios clustered within these blocks for additional training. (I call this network "midtown dance," which will be elaborated in Chapter 4.)

A 1964 brochure listed a series of classes specifically for teenagers in dance, theater, and music. Accompanying this list was fine print stating, "Teenagers may also enroll in any of the other classes at Clark Center."¹⁰⁹ For teenagers who were professionalizing in the performing arts, taking classes with adults could be a boon. A tilt towards professionalization was indicated in other of the 1964 brochure too. Unlike the 1960 brochure, this one featured an assortment of large photographs of professional performing artists at work, both on stage and in rehearsal. Furthermore, one whole spread was dedicated to "Showcase Productions," highlighting ensembles and performance series at Clark Center in which students could engage. These included: the Clark Center Opera Workshop, the Clark Center Resident Drama Company, the New Choreographers Concerts, and the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater. The brochure read, "Clark Center sponsors showcase productions for its participants in dance, drama and music. The department has two fully equipped theatres. All Clark Center students are encouraged to participate on or off-stage in every production."¹¹⁰ To be oriented around the stage, of course, was to acknowledge that a career in these fields was generally structured around live performance.

¹⁰⁹ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, Fall term 1964-1965, Box 27, Folder 19, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

¹¹⁰ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, Fall term 1964-1965.

Additionally, the brief description of Clark Center given in the 1964 brochure diverged from the 1960 brochure in some notable ways. It began: “Clark Center for the Performing Arts...is dedicated to helping young performing artists in New York City by providing them with a special place in the heart of the theatre district where they can study with highly qualified instructors, rehearse in well-equipped studios and perform in showcase productions.”¹¹¹ While the emphasis on young artists was contiguous with the earlier statement, the superlative terms used to describe the course offerings and the highlighting of the showcase productions spoke of Clark Center as a place where one could train towards excellence and thus professionalism. The statement continued, “Clark Center encourages experimentation in the fields of dance, drama and music. All its participants have an opportunity to share ideas with performers in the other arts.”¹¹² While experimentation was not necessarily a hallmark of professionalizing, it was also not an angle that would be used to appeal to those engaging in the performing arts for recreation. Thus, the statement invested more in the arts as social erudition than the arts as a feel-good pastime.

That said, the statement ended by leveling any hierarchical order it hazarded to draw: “Young men and women of all levels of ability are welcome to participate in the Clark Center program. Clark Center is one of the many YWCA programs which aims to further understanding among all people and to promote a fuller life through creative activities.”¹¹³ While both aforementioned brochures from 1960 (for adults and children) had a similar all-are-welcome ethos, this 1964 brochure stated it in starker terms, underscoring the potential for the arts to bridge divisions. The Civil Rights Movement was in full force by 1964, a year bookended by

¹¹¹ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, Fall term 1964-1965.

¹¹² Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, Fall Term 1964-1965.

¹¹³ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, Fall Term 1964-1965.

monumental legislations in 1963 and 1965 that expanded the civil liberties and citizenship of African Americans. Given this political context and the Y as an organization dedicated to social welfare for the disenfranchised, these final sentences of the 1964 sentence appear intentionally consonant with the progressive rhetoric of the Civil Rights cause. Further suggesting such alignment was a Civil Rights Benefit Concert given in 1965 by “singer-folk guitarist” Jim Bartow, who also taught classes in folk guitar.¹¹⁴ The poster specified that the proceeds of this concert—a “\$2.00 donation” per person—would be going to “the YWCA’s National College and University Division’s Summer Civil Rights Projects (voter registration and education, desegregation in public schools, race relations workshop).”¹¹⁵

In its description of Ailey’s company, the 1964 brochure declared, “Clark Center has been the home of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, one of America’s most exciting dance companies, for four years.”¹¹⁶ Such language indicated how Clark Center began to position itself as a base for resident artistic companies. While this may seem inconsequential given the formalization of Ailey’s company as the driving force behind Clark Center’s founding, a 1967 poster listed several more resident companies: “Home of: Actor’s Opera...Anna Sokolow Dance Company, Augie & Margo, Marvin Gordon’s Ballet Concepts, Montego Joe, Ray & Roman, Rod Rodgers.”¹¹⁷ Through such statements, Clark Center was branding itself as an institutional home that could host multiple companies simultaneously. It was a place for artists to gather, to make and perform their work, to derive energy and inspiration from each other, and to teach and take classes. These activities were not separate, of course, but fundamentally inter-animating. In

¹¹⁴ “Jim Bartow Civil Rights Benefit Concert,” Poster, Sunday, June 27, 1965, Box 27, Folder 29, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

¹¹⁵ “Jim Bartow Civil Rights Benefit Concert.”

¹¹⁶ Clark Center for the Performing Arts Fall Term.

¹¹⁷ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, 1967, Box 27, Folder 19, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

contrast to theaters, which provided performance opportunities, and dance studios and schools, which provided rehearsal space, classes, and teaching opportunities, Clark Center's potency arose from its merging of all these activities (and their requisite facilities) under one roof.

The development of young choreographers was given special focus from Clark Center's inception. Especially invested in addressing the dearth of opportunities for emerging dance-makers, Ailey had persuaded Holtz to implement the New Choreographers series.¹¹⁸ Through an application process, a cohort of young choreographers was selected each year by a panel of well-established dance artists. Each young choreographer was provided with resources and mentorship towards the presentation of their dance work in a shared-bill concert. A 1965 advertisement for the opportunity in the *Show Business* newspaper read,

The Clark Center is active in the area of assistance to young artists by sponsoring New Choreographers Concerts. Solos, duets, groups, Modern, Ballet, Ethnic, Jazz, are auditioned by an impartial committee. Works must be in the completed stage before they are auditioned. For those chosen the Center then supplies rehearsal space, publicity, lighting designer, auditorium, stage facilities and professional advice in staging, at no cost to the performers. Choreographers must supply costumes, dancers, and music.¹¹⁹

In essence, the New Choreographer series was an early prototype of a choreographic residency, a nascent concept in those days which has since become more common. Many who would go on to noted careers as dance artists received formative support from this program, including Brenda Dixon Gottschild (participant in 1963 and 1964), Meredith Monk (1965), Rudy Perez (1966 and 1967), Kei Takei (1967), George Faison (1971), Dianne McIntyre (1971), Michael Peters (1971), Otis Sallid (1972), Bill T. Jones (1976), Kariamuwelsh Asante (1976), and Doug Varone

¹¹⁸ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 135.

¹¹⁹ "Groups Assisting Choreographers in Performances, Clark Center," *Show Business* (New York, NY), December 18, 1965, Page 16.

(1978).¹²⁰ Indeed, the New Choreographers series was one of the Center’s most enduring and impactful contributions to the New York City concert dance ecosystem.

Racial Integration and its Discontents

Ailey’s intentions with the New Choreographers series—to support and service the field beyond his own choreographic output—were also manifest in how he structured his emergent dance company. Citing Ailey’s writing for a 1965 grant application, dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz notes: “[Ailey] suggested an alternative model to the ‘star dominated company’ in his ‘group of top performers who as individuals are permitted equal opportunity to display their best.’”¹²¹ In other words, Ailey challenged the conventional hierarchy stratifying dance companies that privileged only a select few. He extended this democratizing ethos not only towards his dancers but towards other choreographers too. From the outset, Ailey established his group as a repertory company—that is, a company that performs works by many different choreographers. This was a departure from the more common company model up until this point, wherein a dance company exclusively performed the works of its founding choreographer. The repertory structure not only provided professional opportunities to a larger group of choreographers, but it also enshrined their works in the canon of a company that enjoys international renown and well-sold show runs to this day. This commitment to showcasing the works of other choreographers was evident from Ailey’s very first Clark Center concert on November 27, 1960. In addition to restaging his own *Revelations*, which had garnered

¹²⁰ Clark Center New Choreographers 1962-1978, Typewritten list, Box 26, Folder 5, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

¹²¹ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 51.

considerable attention at its premiere earlier that year, the company performed *The Beloved*, a 1947 work by Lester Horton, and *Portrait of Billie*, a 1960 work by John Butler.¹²²

That Ailey's company and Clark Center were structured by similar values is unsurprising. These two entities emerged in and through one another. Clark Center made possible the establishment of Ailey's company. At the same time, Ailey's quickly rising star (on the coat tails of *Revelations*' smash success and his company's State Department-sponsored tours) made Ailey an impressive poster child for Clark Center. (Indeed, director Louise Roberts would go on to describe him as a "son" of Clark Center in a 1976 correspondence.¹²³) Both Ailey's company (as a repertory company) and Clark Center (as host of the New Choreographers series) expressed a primary commitment to foster multiple choreographic voices. There were two additional commitments shared by these entities, both of which have to do with race. While they may seem initially incongruous, they actually evince dual and co-constituting commitments. Ailey intended: 1) for his company to redress the dearth of professional opportunities for African American dancers; and 2) for his company to be multi-racial, not solely African American. Clark Center, too, publicly stated its mission in terms of identitarian pluralism, seeking to support an inclusive "ethnic mix" of dance artists as well as to expand the field to more proportionately reflect the diversity of New York City.¹²⁴ Despite being helmed by white administrators for much (but not all) of its life, Clark Center was made up of a notable concentration of people of

¹²² DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 57. Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 131.

¹²³ "Thank you for being a dear and loving friend and agreeing to be a Clark Center sponsor. Truth is you have never failed by word or deed to be anything else but Clark Center's first son and leading advocate." Louise Roberts, Louise Roberts to Alvin Ailey, Letter, April 8, 1976, Box 12, Folder 2, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

¹²⁴ "Celebrate Clark Center's Past Present and Future at Symphony Space," Poster, 1980, Box 27, Folder 27, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. See also, Roberts, Clark Center 20-year Retrospective Statement.

color when it came to teachers and clientele,¹²⁵ and had a particular mission to serve African Americans.

Insofar as both Ailey’s company and Clark Center had a large enough concentration of black people that this stood as a defining feature of their existence, they might be understood as “black” entities. They were, however, also multi-racial entities, as aforementioned. This simultaneous designation as black *and* multi-racial is reflective of two distinct and interrelated goals of the Civil Rights Movement burgeoning in the late 1950s: African American enfranchisement and racial integration. While these two goals are often twinned or might be assumed to be synonymous, the histories of Clark Center demonstrate the need to disaggregate them. Such disentanglement is not to suggest that African American enfranchisement and racial integration are unrelated. It is rather to show that while each goal could be said to beget the other, a re-ordering that begins from a commitment to African American enfranchisement offers an alternative model of integration that does not begin with a white space or require the dissolution of black racial identity.

Contra common conceptions of integration that entailed the insertion of black people into previously “whites-only” spaces, Ailey’s company and Clark Center both began as *black-centric* spaces (i.e., centered around black peoples and cultures), which enabled a racial mixing that did not dissolve this primary African American identity or allegiance. Such a trajectory—black first, then multi-racial—belies anxieties that have often been used to critique integrationist agendas for a presumptive dissolution of racial identity that they might require or produce. That is, whites and blacks have feared how forging interracial spaces would mean a giving up of their distinct

¹²⁵ Dianne McIntyre estimated that about two-thirds of Clark Center’s clientele was people of color. Dianne McIntyre, in discussion with the author, May 2024.

racial identities. These anxieties are evident both in articles written during the Civil Rights Movement as well as in more contemporary historiographic accounts of Civil Rights politics.

In a 1966 article entitled “The Goals of Integration,” for example, white historian Oscar Handlin bemoaned a general lack of visioning and protocol for integration as an imperative of the Civil Rights Movement. Chief amongst his concerns was a view of integration “defined as the elimination of differences” which would “demand of both Negroes and whites an impossible surrender of identity.”¹²⁶ While he conceded that “desegregation is a genuine issue,”¹²⁷ he vehemently rebuked integration as the way forward, arguing that economic, social, and political infrastructure foreclosed the possibilities for robust African American enfranchisement within white institutions. Moreover, he averred that most African Americans “show neither a desire to merge with the whites nor any expectation that that will soon happen.”¹²⁸ While Handlin stopped short of considering the psychic cost of integration for African Americans, some of his African American contemporaries pointed to this disproportionate impact on African Americans for whom integration actually meant a kind of assimilation into white culture. That is, under forms of integration that entailed the insertion of black people into white spaces, the primary dynamic for African Americans was one of having to relinquish African American codes and customs and assimilate into those preceding their arrival in white civil society. Critiques of this imbalance from such figures as Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Baldwin spoke of the need for another version of integration that entailed mutual transformation instead, requiring all parties to compromise towards the goal of coexisting equally in an interracial civil society.

¹²⁶ Oscar Handlin, “The Goals of Integration,” *Daedalus* 95, no. 1 (1966): 276.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20026974>.

¹²⁷ Handlin, 277.

¹²⁸ Handlin, 277.

A wave of contemporary scholars has taken up such critiques of integration.¹²⁹

Reexamining the limits and incompleteness of this Civil Rights project, they articulate more equitable visions of integration and issue renewed calls for its promise. In her 2017 book *An Impossible Dream? Racial Integration in the United States*, white political scientist Sharon Stanley surveys the two sides of the integration debate—those for and against—and attempts to reconcile seeming incommensurabilities. Key to Stanley’s vision of an integration that entails mutual transformation are both structural and personal shifts: “a substantive redistribution of power in the polity” and “an internal process of psychic conversion,” the latter of which requires a “more radical leap into a new form of self-consciousness” for white people.¹³⁰ Even with these processes in place, however, Stanley concedes that fears of identity dissolution may persist, and rightfully so:

Yet even if we can reconceptualize integration as mutual transformation, one might still worry that its achievement would require the dilution of a valuable form of black solidarity, expressed through shared community spaces, institutions, practices, and political aims, deeply felt social bonds, and a distinctive cultural legacy. In many of its formulations, integration threatens the endurance of cherished black spaces and institutions.¹³¹

Stanley takes these concerns seriously but ultimately argues that the presumed encroachment of integration on the viability of black identities, solidarities, and spaces is not inevitable. Drawing on the work of other scholars who have envisioned alternative (and alternatives to) integration, Stanley maintains that racially distinct identities and institutions can endure in a more fully integrated nation.

¹²⁹ See Derrick Bell, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Roy L. Brooks, *Integration or Separation?: A Strategy for Racial Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹³⁰ Sharon A. Stanley, *An Impossible Dream?: Racial Integration in the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9.

¹³¹ Stanley, 10.

Stanley's vision remains speculative, as she identifies little historical evidence for the kinds of black institutional persistence she propounds. There is, however, historical precedent for an alternative version of integration that has tended to be overlooked due to a focus on white spaces. Given that integration arose as a corrective to segregation's barring of African Americans to white spaces, it is logical that integration efforts have fixated on the opening up of white spaces. But what has this fixation obscured? What kinds of integration occurred in spaces initially structured by African Americans? This is not, of course, to advocate for government-sanctioned intervention that would place white people into spaces forged and maintained by black people. That would undoubtedly be disastrous as well as counter-productive to Civil Rights motivations, namely the ending of discriminatory practices that barred African Americans from participation as fully enfranchised citizens. Rather, Ailey's company and Clark Center demonstrate an alternative kind of integration wherein an initial predominance of African Americans (and African American culture) ushered a racial integration that did not require the dissolution of African American identity. What this made possible was also the inclusion of non-black people of color on terms less dictated by an imperative of assimilation to whiteness. In other words, a commitment to minoritarian interests expressed via African American identity served other people of color as well.

Ailey's company and Clark Center as different case studies, so to speak, each emphasize a different aspect of this alternative integration. In the case of Ailey's company, which started as all black and then became racially mixed, most salient is an integration that does not dissolve the African American identity of its profile as a company. In the case of Clark Center, which entailed the participatory efforts of both black and non-black people from its inception, most salient is the integration of non-black people of color on less assimilationist terms. What

proceeds here is an examination of Clark Center and Ailey's company as indicative of an alternative integration wherein an initial orientation towards African Americans paved the way for black-centric, multi-racial possibility. An ancillary yet important discursive aspect of this dynamic is also examined wherein these entities could simultaneously be said to be "black" *and* "multi-racial." The section concludes with a more general contextualization of these dynamics within American racial politics.

Black-Centric Integration: Alvin Ailey's Company

To understand how Ailey's company offered an alternative model of racial integration, it is useful to consider the emergence of his company chronologically. The notion of an integrated dance company was something Ailey had initially experienced with Lester Horton. As previously mentioned, the Lester Horton Dance Group had been the nation's first interracial dance company.¹³² Linking this racial inclusivity with a sexual progressivism that was also activated in Horton's space, DeFrantz notes,

Horton, a gay white man from Indianapolis...enticed Ailey with his utopian vision of a multicultural dance melting pot. Horton's dancers included African Americans James Truitte and Carmen de Lavallade, white dancers Bella Lewitzky and Joyce Trisler, and Japanese dancer Misaye Kawasumi; in later years, the Chinese American critic Frank Eng was Horton's lover. Horton encouraged his company to see beyond common constructions of race and sexuality.¹³³

As a gay man himself, Ailey likely felt an affinity with Horton along lines of sexuality. Unlike Horton, of course, Ailey was black. He lived at the limits of the so-called American melting pot. In 1953, upon Horton's sudden and unexpected death, Ailey was in an exceedingly unusual position to step in as director of a major dance company, despite both his blackness and his

¹³² McDonagh, 108.

¹³³ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 28.

greenness, so to speak. Only twenty-two years old, he was still at the beginning of developing his choreographic voice and sensibility. With no one else taking the lead, Ailey became artistic director and choreographed several works for the company in a short time. Helming Horton's company would prove to be a short stint, however. At the end of 1954, Ailey moved to New York City with fellow Horton dancer Carmen de Lavallade, as the pair had been recruited to perform on Broadway in *House of Flowers*.

House of Flowers helped give rise to a moment when "black performers were becoming more visible on the Broadway and concert dance stage."¹³⁴ It was also, however, one of several other musicals at the time that pivoted on primitivist tropes of blackness for the titillation of largely white audiences. Such "playing black" was the cost of admission to professional performing work on New York City's celebrated stages.¹³⁵ There was little other choice in a more general landscape where black performers were still structurally hindered from accessing many resources and opportunities to professionalize, much less define themselves.¹³⁶ It was the early 1950s, a few years before the Civil Rights Movement started to congeal into nationally organized actions.¹³⁷ The lives of African Americans and other non-whites were cordoned off

¹³⁴ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 88.

¹³⁵ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 32.

¹³⁶ Negotiating this tight cultural and professional space produced its own set of strategies and aesthetics, of course. Analyzing African American men specifically, DeFrantz posits the "simmering passivity" of hyper-masculine tropes danced and choreographed by Ailey and others. "Forced to entertain audiences receptive only to broadly stereotyped personae, African American men danced savage, hyper-masculine, aggressively heterosexual, and naive-primitive roles which catered to traditional assumptions about the black male body. Denied the opportunity to perform powerful dance that reflected the realities of their lives outside the theater, African American men simmered passively for decades, awaiting the chance to define themselves in terms of movement." Thomas F. DeFrantz, "Simmering Passivity: The Black Male Body in Concert Dance," in *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, eds. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 348.

¹³⁷ This is not to exceptionalize the Civil Rights Movement as the beginning of black freedom struggles but rather to mark the civil disobedience tactics that distinguish it. "In one sense, the steady efforts of the NAACP since its founding in 1909 provide ample evidence of an unbroken line of challenges to racial discrimination in the twentieth century. But the distinguishing feature of the freedom struggle emerging in the 1950s was the use of 'direct action' techniques in villages, towns, and cities throughout the South. New organizations or rejuvenated chapters of old ones guided these assaults on the racial status quo in their local areas, apparently signaling a distinct break with the past." Steven F. Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 2 (1991): 464. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2163219>.

from the liberties and privileges of whiteness through both de jure and de facto policies.

Employment was one major arena of such disenfranchisement.

1960, the year that Ailey's all-black company performed its inaugural Clark Center concert, was the same year that four black men staged a sit-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Earlier sit-ins since at least 1958 had preceded the Greensboro Four, and sustained television coverage of the North Carolina action continued to galvanize momentum towards local civil disobedience throughout the South and into the North. While such actions intended to be peaceful acts of protest, reactionary white mobs formed, and in some cases, violence ensued. This foreshadowed later tactical violence deployed by law enforcement against African American protesters. The era, however, was also marked by the inaction of law enforcement to protect or prosecute white segregationists who terrorized African Americans.

As the campaign for African American enfranchisement took shape through widespread, organized actions, integration—that is, full inclusion in the nation's civic, social, and political institutions—was the goal. In a society in which groups had long been segregated through a system of racially determined exclusions to civic participation, integration represented a removal of those barriers. Access to resources, opportunities, and spaces which had previously been restricted to whites only would bring African Americans into the fold of the American citizenry. Doing so would move the nation closer to the romanticized ideal of the melting pot wherein people of different origins could coexist peacefully and in shared commitment to “liberty and justice for all.”

But the integrationist maneuver could be strategically harnessed to move in the other direction as well. That is, an entity that first centered African Americans and African American culture could then be racially integrated while maintaining its original allegiance. In a 1978

interview with *Dance Magazine* marking the twentieth anniversary of Ailey's company, Ailey shared, "When I first started, of course, I just wanted to *dance* and the idea was to make dances about the black experience for an all-black company. I was into a kind of message-poetic thing."¹³⁸ While these may have been his early convictions, by the time he started assembling what would become his company in 1958, his feelings had changed. He had by this point trained with Horton, of course, where he experienced a racially integrated dance space. As Ailey put it, "[Horton] was doing what I'm still doing now: He was trying to erase the idea of color."¹³⁹ Ailey then invoked the company of Katherine Dunham as another exemplar of racial integration in dance dating all the way back to the 1940s.¹⁴⁰ It is a well-known anecdote of Ailey's origin story that seeing Dunham's company as an adolescent was not only one of his first brushes with concert dance but, more importantly, with seeing black people dancing on stage¹⁴¹. Thus, Dunham's work and legacy were formative for Ailey as both a black *and* a multi-racial entity. Her black-centric, integrated dance school as an important antecedent of Clark Center will be elaborated later in this chapter.

Addressing the dearth of opportunities for black dance artists was chief amongst Ailey's intentions for formalizing his choreographic and teaching activities in the mid- to late 1950s. "[H]e wanted to employ the scores of excellent black dancers in New York who had no performing homes."¹⁴² The earliest iteration of Ailey's company, which functioned as a pick-up company (meaning it came together temporarily for gigs), was fully comprised of African Americans. Some of these dancers Ailey knew from the Horton company, and many he met in

¹³⁸ Richard Philp, "Twenty Years Later: The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater," *Dance Magazine*, October 1978, 66.

¹³⁹ Philp, 68.

¹⁴⁰ Philp, 68.

¹⁴¹ See DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 28. Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 33-34.

¹⁴² DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 26.

New York through his dance work on Broadway.¹⁴³ Accordingly, despite his interest in establishing an integrated company, it took a few years for this to pan out. As Ailey told it,

When I first came to New York, well, I didn't know any white dancers. I sort of stayed with the black dancers because they were the ones who provided me with support. I mean, the other black dancers were the ones who told me what was right and wrong about what I was trying to do. And I learned, and they were the ones who taught me. The black dancers are actually rather close anyway, like a family. It's been that way for years. We know each other, what we're doing; we know who's in Cincinnati, for example, and they know about us in New York; we cross each other's paths. We've learned to lean on one another for support.¹⁴⁴

Ailey initially worked with friends who he knew and trusted. That this group was all black was not a strategic exclusivity or a deliberate political statement.¹⁴⁵ Rather it was a de facto condition wrought by the color line. This is who was available to Ailey. Their shared positioning as dancers who were black generated the possibility of solidarity; Ailey's formalization of them as a group mobilized and confirmed this solidarity.

While the personnel of the group continually shifted in those first few years as a pick-up company, an all-black ensemble was a fixture until 1962, when an invitation from the U.S. State Department came to tour Southeast Asia. As dance scholar Clare Croft has examined at length, for the United States government, sending out a black company as an ambassadorial representation of the nation was geopolitically strategic. Government-funded polls had confirmed that people all over the globe were both aware of and “disapprov[ed] of the United

¹⁴³ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 16-17.

¹⁴⁴ Ailey and Bailey, 68.

¹⁴⁵ In contrast, Arthur Mitchell strategically kept his company Dance Theatre of Harlem exclusively black in its beginnings: “White dancers have asked to join us and I tell them we must first prove that there *are* black ballet dancers; when we are accepted, then we will integrate the company, as we have integrated the school. We have to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that it is talent and training, not color, that makes a ballet dancer.” Arthur Mitchell quoted in Olga Maynard, “Arthur Mitchell & The Dance Theater [sic] of Harlem,” *Dance Magazine*, March 1970, 60.

States for its racial politics in the late 1950s and throughout much of the 1960s.”¹⁴⁶ Within this landscape, the State Department was invested in touring Ailey’s group as a kind of pro-African American cultural diplomacy that could obscure the horrors of the nation’s ongoing racial oppression, one foreign city at a time. In so doing, the government “took a covert hand in molding what became the signature style of Afro-American concert dance.”¹⁴⁷

However, in accepting this and future State Department invitations for ambassadorial tours, Ailey was far from a mere pawn of the U.S. government. In more ways than one, he would go on to tactically exploit such government sponsorship: towards the bolstering of his company’s financial viability;¹⁴⁸ towards highlighting the history and political agency of African Americans in their struggles for enfranchisement (correctively, against the narrative spun by U.S. government-authored pamphlets circulated abroad);¹⁴⁹ and towards globally broadcasting a vision of self-determined, African American life and culture.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, it was at the precise moment that the State Department was interested in Ailey’s company as a *black* entity that Ailey complicated this designation by racially integrating the company’s makeup. For the 1962 tour, Ailey—“sensitive to his new and suddenly acquired role as cultural ambassador”¹⁵¹—brought on white dancer Connie Greco to perform with the group. We might, on the one hand, understand Ailey’s incorporation of Greco as beneficial to the State Department’s intended illusion of a racially integrated—and therefore egalitarian—America. On the other, DeFrantz asserts the inclusion of a white dancer as Ailey’s way of “escap[ing] essentializing criticism as an all-Negro

¹⁴⁶ Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 67.

¹⁴⁷ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 59.

¹⁴⁸ Croft, 100.

¹⁴⁹ Croft, 89-92.

¹⁵⁰ Croft, 84.

¹⁵¹ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 145.

company.”¹⁵² In other words, integrating the group was a bid for abstraction and universality (hallmarks of American modernism¹⁵³), a demand by Ailey that his work be considered according to the rubrics afforded white artists, not cordoned off as “just” black.

Thus, Ailey’s company was both black and multi-racial—or, put chronologically, black first and then integrated. Each designation could be tactically foregrounded, per Ailey’s negotiations of the tight discursive space to which he was culturally and politically circumscribed. While Ailey may have integrated his company sooner had the opportunity been available to him, integrating what was first an all-black company enabled the possibility of doing so without jeopardizing his primary commitments to African Americans: platforming African American dancers, featuring African American cultural materials, and conveying African American histories. This trajectory of the company’s racial integration demonstrates the distinction and yet interconnectedness of two primary goals of the Civil Rights Movement: African American enfranchisement and racial integration. While each undoubtedly begot the other, a discursive tendency to favor sites of integration that entailed African Americans entering “whites-only” spaces obscured an alternative chronology of integration on more African American terms. Ailey’s company stands as a powerful example of this particularized trajectory of Civil Rights history, and one which offers a useful model for the unfinished project of black freedom today.

As DeFrantz has shown, Ailey’s status as a bearer of African American culture was set early in his career, despite his attempts to eschew being hemmed in by this imperative of representing blackness.¹⁵⁴ In his early dances in the 1950s and 1960s, Ailey had drawn on a

¹⁵² DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 61.

¹⁵³ Croft, 66.

¹⁵⁴ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 50.

myriad of cultural forms, particularly Euro-American materials, such as the music of Debussy and Milhaud and ballet techniques such as *pointe* work. Within the racialized schema of American cultural production, however, work by a black artist using white materials was rendered anomalous. These early works did not resonate widely with critics or audiences. Rather, it was Ailey's "pieces that addressed obvious Afro-American themes"¹⁵⁵—that is, works that were legibly black and/or aligned with stereotypes of blackness—that started to garner him significant attention. These included *Revelations* (1960), with its use of the southern sites and rites of the black church, and *Blues Suite* (1958), which featured those of the barrel house, a space of black working-class leisure and pleasure.

Indeed, part of the success of these dances was their availability for different racial groups to invest in them in different ways. Black audiences appreciated partaking in their own culture brought to life within the high-brow realm of concert dance. Given the legacy of minstrelsy and other denigrating, white-authored representations of blackness so central to 20th-century American popular culture, it was significant to see African American cultural materials authored and performed by black people, with pride. Such dances instantiated a representational win. In Du Boisian terms, these works satisfied the "for us, by us, about us" criteria for the creation of a black dramatic canon articulated decades earlier.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, space for Ailey to fly singularly high had been made by those who preceded him, as dance scholar John Perpener III reminds us: "by the 1960s, because of the struggles of earlier black dancers, the fineness of his own work, and the changing social and political environment in America, Ailey could assume the reins of racial self-representation to a degree that had not been achieved before."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 50.

¹⁵⁶ See W.E.B. Du Bois, "A Little Negro Theatre," Krigwa Players, Playbill, 1926.

¹⁵⁷ John O. Perpener III, *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 202.

The enduring resonance of these early masterpieces (and *Revelations* in particular) has often been used to substantiate a tautological claim—that is, that their mass appeal is both a product *and* evidence of their universality. Even Ailey himself used such universalist terms, claiming, for example, that “the spirituals [which form the basis of *Revelations*] speak to everybody.”¹⁵⁸ While the profound popularity of Ailey’s work is undeniable, the Euro-American racial regime and its attendant schema since at least the Enlightenment have entrenched discourses of bodily difference so thoroughly that the possibility of universality is foreclosed. Seeing the black dancing bodies of Ailey’s company might for some register as highly trained individuals who have worked collaboratively to generate something beautiful. For some others, the dancing in *Revelations* and *Blues Suite* would have been fetishistically registered as expressions of the dancers’ essential blackness. While these are certainly not the only possibilities, the latter is a fundamental construction within Euro-American racist discourse, which has figured black people as primitive, sensual, and base. Whereas whiteness was imbued with elevation of mind and thus a transcendence of the body, blackness reduced one to one’s body,¹⁵⁹ with all of its debased and sinful Judeo-Christian associations. This construction of blackness imbued the black *dancing* body with special significance,¹⁶⁰ taken as both as a sign and a symptom of black people’s intrinsic bodiliness, making them “naturally good” dancers.¹⁶¹ (It should be noted that this is categorically different from black-vernacular formulations of that “something else” that African Americans possess—e.g., soul—which has been forged

¹⁵⁸ Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 213.

¹⁵⁹ See Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 44.

¹⁶⁰ Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, xiii.

¹⁶¹ This stereotype was figured through minstrelsy. See Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today, Second, Revised Edition* (Hightstown, NJ: Dance Horizons, 1988), 198.

experientially, in and through the adversities of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and its subsequent and ongoing legacies of anti-blackness.)

Such essentialist views were often figured in bestial terms, as evidenced in multiple reviews of Ailey's works by white dance critics.¹⁶² Reviewing *Blues Suite* in 1958 for the *New York Times*, for example, John Martin wrote of Ailey's "rich, animal quality of movement and innate sense of theatrical projection."¹⁶³ Lauded for the animality of his dancing, Ailey is also ascribed a kind of racial canniness for performing. Within the predominantly white institution of modern dance discourse, this authentic "black knack" for the theater, then, authorized Ailey's place and contributed to his elevation to canonical stature. Understood this way, facile notions of integration as an overcoming of the color line are complicated, for Ailey gained access to the mantle of genius choreographer not in spite of his blackness but because of it. His integration (into the American modern dance mainstream) was an act of racialization, wherein his blackness was re-articulated and re-inscribed. That said, Ailey understood this conditionally racial nature of his inclusion, strategically harnessing it towards legitimating African American cultural materials and enfranchising African American dancers in concert dance.¹⁶⁴

Such strategy speaks to Ailey's negotiation of the color line. While maintaining a cultural integrity that would meaningfully speak to the African American public, being "integration-minded"¹⁶⁵ also meant that Ailey had to ensure that his work was relatable enough to the white

¹⁶² See Caroline Joan S. Picart, *Critical Race Theory and Copyright in American Dance: Whiteness as Status Property* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 149-150. See Thomas F. DeFrantz, "Simmering Passivity," 345-346.

¹⁶³ John Martin, "The Dance: Review III," *New York Times*, July 6, 1958, 11.

¹⁶⁴ "Racial segregation dictated the degree to which white audiences thought *Revelations* and *Blues Suite* to be autobiographical documents of Ailey and the 'black race'; the choreographer shrewdly amplified that impression to enlarge the vistas available to himself and his dancers." DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 50.

¹⁶⁵ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 27.

public and institutions that he would continue to be widely embraced.¹⁶⁶ Looking at *Revelations*, dance scholar Susan Manning considers how Ailey's decision for a multi-racial company may have been tactical towards this end: "That Ailey regularly cast nonblack dancers suggests his intentionality in presenting a work designed to address black and white spectators in distinct ways."¹⁶⁷ She goes on to examine how this multi-racial mirroring engenders interracial unity. That is, the interracial alliances brought to life on stage—in and through African American cultural references—activate the same possibility in the house. Key to her analysis is the possibility for a kind of cross-racial identification, or "cross-viewing," whereby "some spectators may catch glimpses of subjectivities from social locations that differ from their own."¹⁶⁸ Speaking from her own viewing experience of *Revelations*, Manning—who is white—explains this phenomenon thusly:

In the context of modern dance, the audience response to Ailey's work breaks the norm of quiet and attentive spectatorship. In my viewing experience, spectators are up on their feet well before *Revelations* comes to a close. Indeed, it seems that the greater the proportion of African-American spectators in the audience, the sooner and more intensely the audience becomes involved. *Revelations* brings the spectatorial dynamic characteristic of the black church into the theater and thus engages the multiracial audience in a kinesthetic experience of cross-viewing. Black folks celebrate black culture in the company of white folks. White folks celebrate black culture along with black folks. And the difference between black and white folks seems to break down for the duration, given the multiracial composition of Ailey's company and its audiences.¹⁶⁹

Gleaned from having experienced *Revelations* multiple times, Manning speaks to the audience's standing as a common response to the dance. The standing is illustrative of both the generally rousing impact of the dance and the distinctly identificatory experience of African Americans

¹⁶⁶ Affirmations of the wide palatability of Ailey's work came in the highest order in 1962 when Ailey was selected for the aforementioned ambassadorial tour sponsored by the State Department.

¹⁶⁷ Manning, 219.

¹⁶⁸ Re-purposing this term as used by Tirza True Latimer who derived it from Patricia Simons, Manning uses it specifically to analyze the cross-racial spectatorial dynamics of Ailey's work and other twentieth-century dances that straddled the color line. See Manning, xvi.

¹⁶⁹ Manning, 217.

moved by the work's invocations of the black church. Black audience members "catch the spirit" of the dance like they might in church, responding to this call in kind. But, as Manning posits, white audience members, too, can catch the spirit, both through their experience of the dance *and* of their fellow (black) audience members' response to it. This is the cross-viewing possibility for white viewers—to traverse the color line and partake in (or at least witness) black joy and black excellence. Manning also points to the presence of white dancers in Ailey's interracial company as potentially significant to white viewers' sense of access to the work and belonging in the theater. This is demonstrated through the writings of white critic Clive Barnes, who "often remarked on the number of white dancers in the troupe," contrasting this with black theater of a more separatist ethos. Manning notes, "one senses his relief at feeling included rather than excluded by the stage proceedings."¹⁷⁰

The interracial makeup of the company and audience and its generative cross-viewing possibilities for black viewers is, however, less clear in Manning's analysis. Is it perhaps that *Revelations'* emphatic celebration of blackness in the theater is a momentary respite from the anti-black world outside the theater? That for black people to participate in the centering of their own culture in supportive white company underscores the rarity and significance of this experience? Or is it perhaps to that to see white dancers involved in interracial activation of African American cultural forms in all of their specificity (rather than appropriative obscurity) functions as a utopian performative, offering a glimpse of a more just world?¹⁷¹ Interestingly, what is clearer in Manning's analyses are the ways that black audience members partaking in *Revelations* felt steeped in *blackness*, not multi-racial-ness. This is evidenced in the sentiments

¹⁷⁰ Manning, 219.

¹⁷¹ See Jill Dolan, "Performance, Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performative,'" *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 3 (2001): 455–79.

of African American critics Zita Allen and Robert Maurice Riley, both of whom express how the profundity of the experience for them has to do with its black materials and black community.

For the black newspaper *New York Amsterdam News* in 1974, Riley invited his readers into the Ailey experience: “On these special evenings, and you are Black, and you are sitting proudly in the City Center Theatre...”¹⁷² He continued by recounting the verbal responses that confirm black audience members’ recognition of the onstage action. Stoked by this collective identification, he declared: “...you don’t give a damn whether the OTHER people in the audience understand it or not.”¹⁷³ Such a view, which positions white viewers as irrelevant or even antagonistic to the experience, reveals the limits of cross-viewing as a dynamic that does not “cross” in both directions evenly. That is, viewing *Revelations* alongside white people did not necessarily offer black people a positive identification with whiteness, nor a *more* positive identification with blackness, nor still a transversal of the color line.

All of this is to say nothing of non-black people-of-color audience and company members, who, undoubtedly had individual and collectively-specific experiences per their distinct social locations and identifications. As previously mentioned, Ailey had begun to realize his intentions of a multi-racial company in by 1962 with white dancer Connie Greco. But—importantly—many of the company’s non-black company members who would go on to be hired were non-white. By 1970, the company had included Miguel Godreau of Puerto Rico, Takako Asakawa of Japan, and Japanese American Mari Kajiwara, among others. And yet, despite his inclusion of Latinx and Asian/American dancers and a wide-ranging set of cultural materials, Ailey’s work was also already popularly and critically conceptualized as a vehicle of African American cultural expression by this point. This established perception, coupled with an

¹⁷² Manning, 219.

¹⁷³ Manning, 220, Emphasis in original.

enduring predominance of black company members (a constitution which has remained to this day¹⁷⁴), helps explain how a multi-racial entity—even a truly *multi*-racial one, exceeding black and white—continues to be marked as “black.” That is, while Ailey intended for his company to be multifarious, both in terms of his dances and his dancers, the “narrow cultural space available to African American choreographers” demarcated the discursive bounds of his own career and the critical attention paid to his oeuvre.¹⁷⁵ The blackness, then, of Ailey’s work must be understood as culturally determined *and* self-determined. That Ailey helmed a company understood to be embodying African American culture and that this multi-racial company was a vehicle of his ascension to the status of American modern dance icon evinces a reordering of Civil Rights goals that positioned African American enfranchisement as a context for integration. In accordance with the limits and possibilities of the color line, this was a black-centric model of racial integration.

Black-centric Integration: Clark Center

Like Ailey’s company, Clark Center was a bastion of black concert dance that was multi-racial and multi-ethnic in its organization. Given that the Center undergirded the emergence of Ailey’s company, he was its first teacher. On the aforementioned 1960 brochure announcing Clark Center’s inaugural course offerings, Ailey is listed as the sole dance instructor. By 1964, however, a number of other teachers had joined the roster, including early company members and collaborators of Ailey’s, such as Thelma Hill, James Truitte, and Carmen de Lavallade.¹⁷⁶ This set a trend that endured throughout Clark Center’s thirty-year life, which is that a large

¹⁷⁴ Manning, 213.

¹⁷⁵ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 50.

¹⁷⁶ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, Spring term 1964, Box 27, Folder 19, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

proportion of the Center's dance teachers were African American. This included teachers of Europeanist forms, such as Lucinda Ransom and Kathy Grant, African American women who taught ballet and Pilates respectively. Clark Center also offered a variety of Africanist forms, including jazz, tap, capoeira, West African, Afro-Brazilian, and Katherine Dunham's signature blend of modern and ballet with Afro-Caribbean forms. This array productively challenged notions of blackness as monolithic, evincing the multitude of distinct practices constituting black forms and people. Some who taught these forms foregrounded blackness in their teaching through invocations of the African-diasporic roots of their forms. This dynamic was especially salient in the jazz and tap classes of teachers like Pepsi Bethel (aptly named "authentic jazz") and Cookie Cook, respectively.¹⁷⁷ In this way, black teachers were continuing lineages and legacies of that which preceded them, transmitting African-diasporic cultural practices to the next generation, a point further elaborated in Chapter 5.

A concentration of black teachers and forms at Clark Center was a clear statement that black students were not only welcome but a priority.¹⁷⁸ Notably, Clark Center's amenability to black arts and artists was contiguous with a general characteristic of the Y. As Dunning puts it, "[m]any of [Clark Center's] students were black, drawn in part by the YWCA's reputation as a friendly place and a home for black theater, dance and music."¹⁷⁹ Underscoring the affective environment of home at Clark Center, Dunning concludes, "Most of all, Clark Center was a lively, comfortable hangout."¹⁸⁰ This social function of Clark Center cannot be overstated. As a case in point, one interviewee's relationship to the Center was *primarily* one of socializing.

¹⁷⁷ Anita Gonzalez in discussion with the author, October 2023.

¹⁷⁸ This dynamic of the space as black-centered is clearly evidenced in statements by white interviewees in particular and their navigation of feeling out of place or in the minority.

¹⁷⁹ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 133.

¹⁸⁰ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 133.

While he occasionally took classes, he explained that he mostly went there to hang out and talk with other dancers.¹⁸¹ Another interviewee described how it was not uncommon for people attending a 7:00 p.m. class to arrive at 5:00 p.m., simply to commune and chat.¹⁸² Bathrooms and changing rooms at Clark Center were a major locus of social activity, as nearly all interviewees recounted. While these spaces were segregated by sex, people also gathered in the hallways of the studio before and after class. They shared news of upcoming auditions and opportunities, shared dance-world gossip, and found friends, lovers, and artistic collaborators. There were a couple of print outlets for dance news and opportunities (e.g., *Backstage* and *Show Business*), but otherwise, people heard about gigs and made connections informally through word of mouth.

Clark Center was a racially integrated space from the beginning, so I do not mean to suggest that its social homeyness was exclusively experienced by African American students and teachers. Nor do I mean to suggest it was a utopia, free of tension and conflict, race-based or otherwise. But given Clark Center's emergence in and through the Civil Rights era—a time marked by interracial strife and anti-black violence across the nation—it is significant how the Center functioned as an integrated gathering place for many people of different races and ethnicities. Specifically, the affective comfort of the space as a place to hang out—both in and in proximity to dance—was key to making African Americans and others historically marginalized from concert dance feel *at home* in this arena. In this way, the site of the dance studio underscores the register of affect (and its import) to integration.

Moreover, Clark Center had been born of a cross-racial collaboration. Initially overseen by a white woman (Edele Holtz) in a white-led organization (YWCA), it had been instigated and implemented by African Americans (Charles Blackwell and Alvin Ailey). Teachers and students

¹⁸¹ Alde Lewis, in discussion with the author, October 2023.

¹⁸² Gonzalez, discussion.

were racially mixed within its first few years of operation. Given the predominance of African American teachers and African-diasporic forms, black people—and blackness—were constitutive of the place. Thus, the Center’s racially integrated status occurred in and through an enfranchisement of black people. This dynamic is distinctly different from the sort of federally mandated integration that entailed the insertion of black people into formerly “whites only” spaces. Such integration had at times necessitated law enforcement, as in the case of the Little Rock Nine.¹⁸³ Clark Center, on the other hand, was not integrated by state force. Rather, through its intentional centering of black dance artists, it remained open to the public; anyone able to pay for its low-priced classes and performances could attend, and there was the possibility of scholarships. As it provided vital space and resources for African Americans to gather through dancing and also to professionalize in concert dance, it did so in a context that welcomed people of other races and ethnicities as well.

In effect, racial integration was extended to and benefitted non-black people of color through the Civil Rights goal of African American enfranchisement. The Center’s black-centricity acted as an anchor. Amidst their black peers, Latinx, indigenous, and Asian students could train. But such enfranchisement extended beyond simple participation; new social and aesthetic possibilities were gleaned. That is, black dance artists who asserted their blackness as meaningful if not fundamental to their artistic expression modeled this approach for other people of color. Tina Ramirez, for example, who founded the renowned Ballet Hispánico in 1970, derived the idea for her company and school from what she saw happening at Clark Center. As

¹⁸³ The “Little Rock Nine,” as they would become dubbed, were a group of nine African American students who were the first to be integrated into Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. In an attempt to prohibit this federally mandated integration, Arkansas governor Orval Faubus marshalled the state’s national guard and local white mobs gathered. Through the efforts of NAACP lawyers, the integration was enforced and implemented via police escorts to enable the nine students safe passage into the building.

founding company member Sandra Rivera recounted to me, Ramirez was inspired by the Center's multiplicity of dance forms as well as its many black choreographers whose dance works (re)claimed and articulated Africanist aesthetics and materials. As she witnessed black artists articulating African-diasporic consciousness in and through the Europeanist conventions of concert dance, she felt confidence to do the same with her own Latinx heritage.¹⁸⁴

Inaugurating Ballet Hispánico, she employed Latinx dancers and brought Latinx cultural materials to the concert dance stage, including "Caribbean, Creole, Mexican, and Spanish dance traditions."¹⁸⁵ Opening her own school in midtown Manhattan,¹⁸⁶ Ramirez carved out a place for herself and in turn made space in concert dance for other dance artists of color.

Notably, Ramirez's company was a repertory company. Ailey had initiated this model, using his company as a repository for the works of other choreographers. But Ramirez's repertory company was like Ailey's in another key way: many of the works in its repertory were by African American choreographers. This affiliation with African Americans was prominent enough to grant Ramirez's organization an ascription as "black" in some cases. In *Dance Herald: A Journal of Black Dance* from the 1970s, Ballet Hispánico was included in a "Black Dance Directory," a list intended for those looking to train.¹⁸⁷ Alongside Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theatre of Harlem, Dianne McIntyre's Sounds in Motion, and George Faison's Universal Dance Experience, Tina Ramirez's Ballet Hispánico was counted as one of the "centers of Black Dance."¹⁸⁸ While Ramirez had initially inherited the studio from her teacher, Lola Bravo (who helmed the Lola Bravo School of Spanish Dance), Ramirez broadened the offering of dance

¹⁸⁴ Sandra Rivera, in discussion with the author, January 2024.

¹⁸⁵ Jennifer Dunning, "Ballet Hispánico of New York," *Hispanic Arts*, no. 3 (January-February 1977): 1.

¹⁸⁶ Ballet Hispánico's first school was located at 425 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY.

¹⁸⁷ William Moore, "Black Dance Directory," *Dance Herald: A Journal of Black Dance* 1, no. 2 (1975): 5.

¹⁸⁸ William Moore, "Black Dance Directory," *Dance Herald: A Journal of Black Dance* 1, no. 1 (1975): 4.

forms once it became hers in 1963.¹⁸⁹ While this shift mirrored Clark Center's pedagogical model, the Center also provided Ramirez's company with formative support.

Clark Center was used as a rehearsal site, for example, when African American choreographer Talley Beatty made one of the company's inaugural works in the early 1970s.¹⁹⁰ Lolita San Miguel, a Puerto Rican woman who taught Pilates at the Center, was another point of connection; San Miguel served as ballet mistress of Ballet Hispánico.¹⁹¹ Moreover, in 1972, the company was presented by Clark Center on the stage of its YWCA location. As Rivera recalled, it felt "epic" to perform on this proper stage after many earlier performances in community settings, such as hospitals.¹⁹² Appearing in the Center's auditorium made her feel like a real professional. Additionally, Rivera, who is Puerto Rican and grew up in the brown and black neighborhood of East Harlem, felt at home in the black-centricity of Clark Center. "Going outside my East Harlem community was a big deal," she explained, "there was just something comforting about being around a place that there were a lot of black people for me."¹⁹³ The impacts of Clark Center for both Ramirez and Rivera evidence how this space of African American enfranchisement engendered an affirmation of their Latinx heritage at the same time that it extended an invitation into the world of concert dance. Rather than having to dissolve their Latinidad to enter dance, they were able to mobilize this identity in and through Europeanist and Africanist dances, in addition to Latinx dances.

¹⁸⁹ Sandra Rivera, in email correspondence with the author, March 4, 2025. Jennifer Dunning, "Hispanic Dance Gains Foothold in New York," *New York Times*, October 14, 1979, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/10/14/archives/hispanic-dance-gains-foothold-in-new-york-hispanic-dance-gains.html>.

¹⁹⁰ Rivera, discussion. See also "60 Years of Clark Center," Clark Center NYC, YouTube video, 1:35:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BUJ7LYPPT3o>.

¹⁹¹ Rivera, discussion.

¹⁹² Rivera, discussion. Ramirez jokingly referred to these beginnings as the "hospital circuit." Tina Ramirez quoted in Dunning, "Hispanic Dance Gains Foothold in New York."

¹⁹³ Rivera, discussion.

Given its simultaneous centering of African Americans and its integration across racial and ethnic difference, Clark Center was both “black” and “multi-racial.” Indeed, this dual dynamic is evident in narratives of the Center written from the institution’s perspective in branding and historicizing itself. On the occasion of the Center’s twentieth anniversary, director Louise Roberts authored a retrospective statement. The opening section entitled “Origins” stated: “This was the historic time of the emergence of many gifted Black dancers and choreographers who were seeking to show their work and be seen on the concert stage. They had, unfortunately, little or no access to space in which to create and rehearse their work.”¹⁹⁴ Roberts went on to describe Ailey as one such choreographer and the felicitous circumstances that converged to generate Clark Center as his first institutional home. After a second section titled “New Choreographers” that underscored the import of this series as an incubator of new choreographic voices for New York concert dance, a third section entitled “Other Principles” elaborated the Center’s foundational ethos. It began,

The racial, ethnic, socio-economic mix, essential to Clark Center's way of life, is reflected in the faculty, staff, student body and participating artists. We are, in fact, a microcosm of New York City. Rooted in the determination to assist and encourage Black dancers and choreographers, we remain a vibrant example of an arts organization that lives in racial harmony.¹⁹⁵

Here was perhaps the clearest expression of the Center’s explicit mission to serve African American dance artists *and* a mixed population. Perhaps in reference to Ailey as its progenitor, Roberts expressed the Center’s intention to serve black dance artists as its root, the foundational commitment out of which it sprang. Out of this grew space for a diverse mix of people, which was conceived broadly, inclusive of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Roberts declared this diversity as reflective and representative of New York City. The trajectory of this historical

¹⁹⁴ Roberts, Clark Center 20-year Retrospective Statement.

¹⁹⁵ Roberts, Clark Center 20-year Retrospective Statement.

narrative was of a piece with the kind of Civil Rights integration model enacted in Ailey's company—black first, and multi-racial to follow. Beginning by addressing anti-black illiberalism, both maneuvers were political correctives to national white supremacy. Ultimately, Roberts' celebratory tone pointed to the urbanity of New York City as an ideal of the American melting pot.

This triumphalist rhetoric was indicative of the 1980s embrace of multiculturalism. Along with Roberts' narrative, other public-facing statements written in this third decade of the Center's life celebrated its "ethnic mix." A 1980 mailer advertising a show series at Symphony Space entitled "Celebrate Clark Center's Past, Present, and Future," contained the following text about the organization: "Clark Center for the Performing Arts was organized twenty years ago. From the beginning, an harmonious ethnic mix of dancers and the joy of birthing new talent were Clark Center's hallmarks."¹⁹⁶ Another blurb from a 1986 playbill for a concert at the Douglas Fairbanks Theater puts it in even more mission-based terms: "Clark Center was organized 27 years ago and has remained steadfast in fulfilling its commitment to teaching a harmonious ethnic mix of dance students and professionals at affordable prices."¹⁹⁷ These statements suggested that the Center's administrators (whether authored by Roberts or another staff member) saw the mixedness of its clientele as uniquely important about what it had offered, both in the context of 1960s and 1970s progressivist movements, but also into the 1980s context of multiculturalism.

Such historicizations also served an advertorial function contemporarily. To express a historical and ongoing "commitment to teaching a harmonious ethnic mix" of people was to

¹⁹⁶ "Celebrate Clark Center's Past..."

¹⁹⁷ Celebrate Clark Center, Douglas Fairbanks Theater, Playbill, August 7-9, 1986, Box 27, Folder 28, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

construct a profile of the organization that would hail its readers who were potential clientele, donors, and funders. That is, Clark Center administrators were speaking to many audiences at once in the 1980s, foregrounding progressive values that were taking on new currency in the discourse of the era. Clark Center is an expression of this continuum of Civil Rights progressivism which would become reconfigured into celebratory discourses of multicultural difference in America two decades later. It is clear from these institutional statements that Clark Center's racial integration was both initiated by and predicated on the enfranchisement of African Americans. Like Ailey's company, it is indicative of an alternative model of integration that did not dissolve a predominance of and allegiance to African Americans but rather maintained this affinity in and through its racial and ethnic mixing.

Emerging as and through Civil Rights gains, both Ailey's company and Clark Center illustrate a black-centric model of integration. More generally, both entities and their historical context evince the black-white contours of American racial politics. Since the fight for the abolition of slavery, black freedom struggles have tended to define liberation struggles within the context of the modern United States. Laws that have enfranchised African Americans have simultaneously enfranchised other peoples denied the privileges of the white racial designation. This is not to say that other non-white groups have not resisted, organized against, and effectively ameliorated the specific conditions of their own subjugation by systemic white supremacy—they, of course, have. Nor is the point here to gloss the specific histories of racialization and attendant forms of marginalization wreaked upon non-black people of color in America that have occasioned such organization. Rather, the point is to highlight the salience of

the black-white terms of the American racial schema—i.e., the color line—due in large part to the history of slavery and its afterlife.¹⁹⁸

This is perhaps most plainly evidenced in the Jim Crow segregationist policies of the early 20th century mandating separate facilities for “whites” versus “coloreds.” Given that the “colored” category most directly referred to African Americans, non-black people of color would seem to go unaccounted for. In some cases, as non-white, they were lumped into the “colored” category; in other cases, they were marked “not white,” its own designation.¹⁹⁹ These groups sometimes allied themselves with African Americans in struggle against racial oppression; at other times, they distanced themselves from blackness (the “colored” designation) towards a bid for inclusion in the privileges of whiteness; and at others yet, they advocated for themselves on the complex terms unique to their position.²⁰⁰ Such bifurcations speak to the way the struggles of non-black people of color in America have been figured in and through black freedom movements, even if relationally or implicitly.²⁰¹ In other words, better opportunities for African

¹⁹⁸ Saidiya Hartman coined “afterlife” to speak of the ongoing deleterious impacts of slavery’s legacy (beyond formal emancipation in 1863) upon black lives. “If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery.” Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 2007.

¹⁹⁹ Stephanie Hinnertshitz, *A Different Shade of Justice: Asian American Civil Rights in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 6.

²⁰⁰ Hinnertshitz, 5-7.

²⁰¹ As some theorists have argued, this dynamic (of non-black freedom struggles needing to account for/position themselves in relation to blackness) is undergirded by anti-blackness as a structuring principle of modernity—that is, the structural position of blackness has been uniquely positioned in the global order since at least the 19th century as *the* other against which white, Euro-American imperial hegemony has been figured. (See Jared Sexton, “People-of-Color Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Social Text* 103, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Summer 2010): 31-56.) From such a view, all freedom struggles in the modern world exist in relation to black struggle; or, a freer world for the most structurally oppressed would mean a freer world for all. The eminent black feminist group of the 1970s known as the Combahee River collective put it thusly: “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.” (Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 22-23.) For these reasons, whether oppressively or resistively, America has generally been figured in black-white terms.

Americans would generally result in improvements for all non-white peoples (or, to use the unmodified version of a term that has been used throughout this document, “people of color”—another telling catchall phrase). Put in terms of Ailey’s company and Clark Center, enfranchising African Americans in the arena of dance was both an end in itself *and* a means to broadening access for other people of color as well.

Framed thusly, Clark Center emerges as an important political node in the cultural arena; it both shaped and was shaped by the Civil Rights Movement. As an activity that entails the intimate sharing of space and modes of embodiment, dance carried special potential as a means of challenging the color line. Horton had modeled this for Ailey in the 1950s. By the end of that same decade, Ailey himself was manifesting intentions for concert dance as a racially integrated endeavor through his company and Clark Center, both of which maintained primary affiliations with African Americans, African American culture, and Africanist forms. Key in the mobilizing of such black-centric integration was Clark Center’s black teachers.

Black-centric Integrated Dance Studios: Katherine Dunham and Syvilla Fort

Black dance teachers in the mid-twentieth century cultivated a politics of hope, preparing black dancers for more professional opportunities than they had had. Their work mobilized the gains of the Civil Rights Movement in and through concert dance, enfranchising black students to become professional dance artists. While some scholarship has been done on black dance teachers and black-run dance centers specifically intended to serve black students,²⁰² peculiar to Clark Center is the fact that it was white-led for much of its life. Louise Roberts, the Center’s longest-running director—and the person whose presence looms so large that for some she

²⁰² See, for example, Melanye P. White-Dixon, “Marion Cuyjet: Visionary of Dance Education in Black Philadelphia” (Ed.D. Dissertation, Temple University, 1987).

functions metonymically—was white and Jewish. (Her life and work will be elaborated in Chapter 2.)

While Clark Center was notable for its interracial operations and concentration of black dance teachers and students, this is not to say that these were wholly new phenomena. In cities and towns all around the country, black dance teachers had taught and nurtured young black dancers since the early 20th century. In Philadelphia, Marion Cuyjet taught ballet to black students in the 1940s-1970s at her Judimar School of Dance. In Washington, D.C. Bernice Hammond started the Northeast Academy of Dance in 1934, training many black students in ballet. In New York, Katherine Dunham and Syvilla Fort both trained multiple generations of black dancers and did so in the context of their racially integrated dance schools.

Katherine Dunham (1909-2006) holds an especially large presence in the history of concert dance, invoked as the “matriarch of black dance” to this day.²⁰³ She is remembered as a choreographer-performer-anthropologist who helmed a dance company, worked on the stage and screen, conducted field work in the Caribbean, and forged a dance vocabulary that combined Afro-Caribbean dance forms and sensibilities with modern dance and ballet—Dunham Technique. While her anthropological and performance work spanned many sites, for a time she was rooted in midtown Manhattan. Founded in September 1945, the Dunham School of Dance and Theatre (initially called the Katherine Dunham School of Dance) was located at 220 West 43rd Street (between Seventh and Eighth Avenues),²⁰⁴ not far from where Clark Center would be. Operating as part of her larger School of Arts and Research,²⁰⁵ dance technique was just one amongst many offerings there, which included courses in dance history and notation, as well as

²⁰³ Joanna Dee Das, *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

²⁰⁴ Dee Das, 105.

²⁰⁵ Perpener, 154.

drama and humanities courses, such as playwriting, anthropology, foreign languages, philosophy, and psychology.²⁰⁶ Indeed, Dunham's program was "one of the most ambitious educational projects ever established by a dance artist in terms of the breadth of its curriculum."²⁰⁷

Dunham's school was one of the earliest racially integrated sites of dance training. Moreover, the establishment of her school in midtown was an intervention in and of itself. As dance scholar Joanna Dee Das underscores, "In 1944, she defied the segregation of the New York dance world by opening the Katherine Dunham School of Dance, not in Harlem, but in the heart of Manhattan's Broadway theater district."²⁰⁸ African American artists up to that point had tended to work in Harlem, not just because it was a historically black neighborhood and had become a bastion of black culture, but because it was one of the few areas black artists could make their work in a hospitable environment. To establish herself elsewhere was already to defy geographical instantiations of the color line. Nevertheless, she had to make herself known. Dunham drew a racially mixed clientele through a variety of strategies, including advertising her school across newspapers with different readerships.²⁰⁹ Other racially integrated sites of dance training in New York City existed concurrently with Dunham's school, such as the New Dance Group, an organization which will be detailed in Chapter 4. Dee Das, however, draws a key point of contrast between these two entities. While the New Dance Group offered scholarships to people of color, in effect managing its racial ratio and maintaining a predominance of whites,

²⁰⁶ Dee Das, 107.

²⁰⁷ Perpener, 154.

²⁰⁸ Dee Das, 7.

²⁰⁹ Dee Das, 116.

“the Dunham School did not turn away any paying student who wished to take classes, and thus did not have a quota system per se.”²¹⁰

Syvilla Fort (1917-1975) was a leading dancer in Dunham’s company for a time, eventually becoming ballet mistress. As fellow company member Eloise Anderson recounted, Fort’s talent rivaled Dunham’s. Dunham often starred in her own work and she did not want to be upstaged,²¹¹ resulting in a strained relationship with Fort. And yet, she relied heavily on Fort in other ways. Dunham spent long stretches of time out of town due to her company’s dense touring schedule. In her stead, beginning in 1948, Fort directed, maintained, and taught in the school. Underscoring her significance as a keeper and conveyer, dance writer William Moore called Fort “the link, the information center, the inspiration and culture bearer for the anthropological work done by Ms. Dunham in dance.”²¹² Eventually, Fort decided to go her own way. “In January 1954, Fort opened a studio with her husband Buddy Phillips, one block away on 44th Street, and most students followed her.”²¹³ Dunham’s school had already been buckling under financial strain and a lack of administrative leadership due to her frequent absence. It closed just one month after Fort’s studio opened.²¹⁴

Even as Dunham’s work continued and took her elsewhere (i.e., East St. Louis, where she opened another educational center in 1967²¹⁵), her legacy continued to unfurl in midtown. Dunham Technique and the diasporic politics of her work were foundational for many of the African-diasporic forms practiced at Clark Center. Dunham had done much to expand understanding of the African diaspora—that is, of African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans as

²¹⁰ Dee Das, 116-117.

²¹¹ Eloise Anderson, in discussion with the author, January 2024.

²¹² William Moore, “BTA Honors Syvilla Fort,” *Dance Herald: A Journal of Black Dance* 1, no. 2 (1975): 1.

²¹³ Dee Das, 121.

²¹⁴ Dee Das, 119-121.

²¹⁵ DeFrantz, “Theorizing Connectivities,” 65.

part of a global community of African-descended peoples scattered all over the globe. With this diasporic conception came an internationalist consciousness too, which framed black freedom struggles as a global phenomenon.²¹⁶ African Americans struggling against Jim Crow oppression, for example, could understand themselves in coalition with Haitians fighting legacies of colonization. Such a capacious diasporic blackness, which was further mobilized and solidified through Black Power politics starting in the 1960s, laid the necessary groundwork for the work of *capoeiristas* Loremil Machado and Jelon Vieira to be understood and embraced at Clark Center as *Afro-Brazilian*, not just Brazilian (elaborated in Chapter 5).

Dunham's legacy was animated within Clark Center in more direct ways, too. Charles Moore, who had trained with and danced in Dunham's company for several years, taught classes in Dunham Technique at the Center. A 1968-69 brochure explained that the technique "is based on Miss Dunham's research into the rhythms and dances of the West Indies and Africa, where Dance was a functional part of the people's daily life. The Dunham Technique enables the student to learn the language the body creates through ethnic movement and patterns."²¹⁷ Notably, Fort was also teaching at Clark Center that same year. The blurb for her class in "Syvilla Fort Technique" described it as follows: "Gives an awareness of the body and prepares it for future techniques. It has an added richness in that it is an amalgamation of Negro folklore taken from Africa, the West Indies, Haiti and early American Negro jazz."²¹⁸ The overlaps in these course descriptions make clear that Fort's approach was informed by her years of training and performing with Dunham. Fort's course description summarized the ideological basis of the African diaspora, figured in terms of American dance.

²¹⁶ Dee Das refers to these impacts and motivations of Dunham's work as her "politics of diaspora." Key to Dee Das' argument is that Dunham also *lived* diaspora. For more, see Dee Das, 1-10 (and whole book).

²¹⁷ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, 1968-69 Term.

²¹⁸ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, 1968-69 Term.

Fort's new studio, the Phillips-Fort Studio of Theatre Dance, was located at 153 West 44th Street (between Broadway and Sixth Avenue). Tap dancer Buddy Phillips, Fort's husband, taught at the studio, in addition to other tap legends Cholly Atkins and Honi Coles.²¹⁹ Phillips died an untimely death in 1963, leaving Fort to maintain the studio. Experiencing financial strain, she supplemented with other ventures, including a trip to Guinea to help institute a national dance company. She also began to teach at Teachers College of Columbia University.²²⁰ Her students went on to markedly diverse careers across dance forms, from modern dancer Ailey to postmodern dancer Yvonne Rainer to tap dancer Brenda Bufalino. She was revered not just by dancers but actors, too. As dance artist Katiti King expressed, "If you were an actor, she was the movement teacher to go to."²²¹ Such students included James Earl Jones, Jane Fonda, Eartha Kitt, James Dean, and Marlon Brando.

In November of 1975, Fort lost her life to breast cancer. Thankfully, she was given her flowers while still living. Just days prior to her death,²²² she was honored in a three-day program titled "Dance Genesis: Three Generations Salute Syvilla Fort." Produced by the Black Theatre Alliance²²³—specifically its "newly founded dance unit"²²⁴—and directed by Ellis Haizlip, the first two days entailed workshops and lectures held at Ailey's studio. As *Dance Herald: A*

²¹⁹ Wendy Perron, "Syvilla Fort (1917-1975)," Wendy Perron, October 3, 2020, <https://wendyperron.com/syvilla-fort-1917-1975/>.

²²⁰ Perron, "Syvilla Fort."

²²¹ Perron, "Syvilla Fort."

²²² The same issue of *Dance Herald* that reported on the event honoring her life also told of her death. Nested in the corner of the front page was the following statement: "One week after the historic BTA tribute, Saturday, November 8, Syvilla Fort passed away, a victim of cancer. We have all suffered a great loss in Black Dance." William Moore, "BTA Honors Syvilla Fort," *Dance Herald: A Journal of Black Dance* 1, no. 2 (1975): 1.

²²³ The Black Theatre Alliance was founded in 1970 as a merger of several black theater organizations in New York City. It eventually grew to include over sixty theater and dance companies across the country but dissolved by the mid-1980s. In 1978, the organization opened a space on Theatre Row (410 West 42nd Street), where it hosted dance classes in its 5th-floor dance studio. See Robert Jerome Wilson, "The Black Theatre Alliance: A History of Its Founding Members" (PhD Dissertation, New York University, 1974). See A. Peter Bailey, "A Look at the Contemporary Black Theatre Movement," *Black American Literature Forum* 17, no. 1 (1983): 19–21. See *Dance Herald: Black Dance Newsletter* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1978): 2.

²²⁴ Moore, "BTA Honors Syvilla Fort," 1.

Journal of Black Dance reported, “dancers came from far and wide to attend master classes by such notables as Mary Hinkson, Carmen de Lavallade, Larl Beacham, Liz Williamson, Pearl Reynolds and others.”²²⁵ The third day culminated in a dance concert dedicated to Fort, where she was “present in a wheelchair” along with a “star-studded” group of attendees.²²⁶ The concert was held at the Majestic Theater, host to *The Wiz* on Broadway at that time, for which George Faison (a Clark Center New Choreographers participant) had won the Tony Award in 1975. In addition to a performance by the cast of *The Wiz*,²²⁷ several more of the evening’s featured performances bore important ties to Clark Center. These included works and/or appearances by Dianne McIntyre, Eleo Pomare, and Charles Moore.²²⁸ As dance writer Wendy Perron notes, “Dunham, who was in the hospital at the time, sent a message [which was read onstage], calling Fort ‘one of the greatest people who ever honored the Dunham company with her presence.’”²²⁹ Fort’s *New York Times*’ obituary echoed the title of her tribute concert, capturing the enormity of her contribution: “Miss Fort provided a spiritual home, together with training and inspiration, for three generations of black artists.”²³⁰

Despite the interracial makeup of her school, this statement emphasized the significance of her impact for *black* dance artists. Indeed, her decades of teaching, spanning from the 1940s into the 1970s, was a period of marked progress for black people in the United States. Fort was not ancillary to this progress but a driving force of it in the realm of concert dance, shaping a burgeoning, ascendent cadre of young black choreographers. William Moore dubbed her “a

²²⁵ Moore, “BTA Honors Syvilla Fort,” 1.

²²⁶ Moore, “BTA Honors Syvilla Fort,” 1.

²²⁷ Sabur Abdul-Salaam, “Life of Syvilla Fort,” *Syvilla: Syvilla Fort, My Sister, My Mom*, July 10, 2011, <https://syvilla-blog.tumblr.com/>.

²²⁸ Perron, “Syvilla Fort.”

²²⁹ Perron, “Syvilla Fort.”

²³⁰ “Syvilla Fort, a Dance Teacher who Inspired Blacks, is Dead,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/11/09/archives/syvilla-fort-a-dance-teacher-who-inspired-blacks-is-dead.html>.

connecting link between the Katherine Dunham Dance Company and the Alvin Ailey Company.”²³¹ Connectivity, DeFrantz would agree, is a salient concept for bringing into view the work of black concert dance artists, and black women in particular, whose “contributions...have remained shadowed and poorly documented.”²³² In his article, “Theorizing Connectivities: African American Women in Concert Dance,” DeFrantz offers an understanding of cultural work that is predicated on acts of sharing, underscoring culture as active, a means of making meaningful lives together. He highlights a constellation of black women concert dance artists of the 20th and 21st centuries, animating them relationally, bringing forward those lesser known.

Black Dance Teacher Connectivities: Thelma Hill

“She rarely performed leading roles in any of the works she danced, but choreographers, audiences, and other dancers always noted her authoritative presence, even when positioned on the periphery of the stage space.”²³³ This was the stage presence of Thelma Hill (1924-1977). Hill was Clark Center’s most important teacher, a fixture until her untimely death in 1977. Fittingly, then, I primarily heard about her from my interviewees as a teacher. Growing up in New York City, Hill’s artistic pursuits as a child involved music and painting. Her formal dance experience began as a teenager, learning to tap dance from well-regarded teacher Mary Bruce in Harlem. Around 1949, she began study at the Metropolitan Opera School of Ballet and continued to hone her balletic facility with former Bolshoi Ballet dancer Maria Nevelska. Her devoted training resulted in professional work by 1955, when she became a founding company member of Les Ballets Nègres, “the most considerable attempt at the formation of all-Black ballet” up to

²³¹ William Moore, “The Screening Room,” *Dance Herald: Black Dance Newsletter*, Make-up issue for 1980: 4

²³² DeFrantz, “Theorizing Connectivities,” 57.

²³³ DeFrantz, “Theorizing Connectivities,” 64.

that point.²³⁴ Founded by Ward Flemmyng, the company would later be known as the New York Negro Ballet and ultimately Ballet Americana.²³⁵ In addition to performing for the company, Hill worked as its administrator and rehearsal director, efforts which were instrumental to the success of a European tour in 1957. While an injury brought Hill's time dancing *en pointe* to an end, her performing career in New York continued. She danced in "pick-up companies of several artists who combined ballet technique with modern and social dance idioms,"²³⁶ such as Jean-León Destiné and Louis Johnson.²³⁷ Around that same time, in 1959, she began dancing for Alvin Ailey's emergent company too. She toured with the company in its 1962 trip to Southeast Asia, worked as its ballet mistress, and became a close friend and advisor to Ailey.

Given her position in the company and her closeness to Ailey, she was part of Clark Center's inception. She taught classes in jazz and Horton Technique, the latter of which she mastered after learning it from Ailey and James Truitte.²³⁸ Amongst my interviewees, unanimous and fervent was their praise for her skilled teaching and warm devotion to her students. Multiple people described her presence in their lives as mother-like. Some first encountered her in one of the other places she taught, eventually following her to Clark Center. One such interviewee, Dr. Jacqueline Sawyer, initially studied with Hill at Connecticut College. Not knowing who she was, she described feeling an immediate draw to Hill upon seeing her dance "light on her feet" despite being "a little butterball."²³⁹ Hill would go on to help Sawyer overcome her own insecurities about not possessing the idealized Europeanist dancing body. As she recounted to me, the word "THINK" was emblazoned above the mirrors in one of Clark Center's studios. Gesturing to the

²³⁴ Richard A. Long, *The Black Tradition in American Dance* (London: Prion, 1995), 123.

²³⁵ Long, 124.

²³⁶ DeFrantz, "Theorizing Connectivities," 64.

²³⁷ Long, 137.

²³⁸ DeFrantz, "Theorizing Connectivities," 64.

²³⁹ Jacqueline Sawyer, in discussion with the author, November 2023.

sign, Hill would point out the existence of another word inside that word: “Think *thin*.”²⁴⁰ For Sawyer, this was revelatory: “Even if I looked like a hippopotamus, I could think I was a gazelle.”²⁴¹

This story is indicative of the breadth of Hill’s pedagogy. In addition to teaching students to dance, she taught them the skills critical to navigating and sustaining a professional life in dance, such as self-esteem, perseverance, and time management.²⁴² As Sawyer recounted, when Hill would learn of a student in class who was attending an audition later that day, she would tailor class material to evoke the style of the prospective gig, helping to prime the student for a successful audition. Such extemporaneous customization of her class is clear evidence of Hill’s intention not just to train her students but to get them employed. Underscoring this point, DeFrantz explains, “Hill devoted herself to her students’ individual growth, as well as a larger social project to encourage more African Americans toward the mainstream of American concert dance practice.”²⁴³ In this way, Hill was an exemplar of a cohort of black dance teachers whose commitment to training black dancers was an expression of their hope that future generations would have more opportunities than Jim Crow America had allowed them.²⁴⁴ To orient black students towards such professionalization was not just to hope for a better future but was to *enact* it.

In this pursuit, Hill’s work was connected with other teachers with whom she shared students. One such student was Shawneequa Baker, whose illustrious career included dancing for Donald McKayle, Eleo Pomare, Dianne McIntyre, and the New Dance Group, amongst others.

²⁴⁰ Sawyer.

²⁴¹ Sawyer.

²⁴² DeFrantz, “Theorizing Connectivities,” 64.

²⁴³ DeFrantz, “Theorizing Connectivities,” 65.

²⁴⁴ Rashidah Ismaili AbuBakr, in discussion with the author, March 2022.

Baker was interviewed in a 1981 episode of *Eye on Dance and the Arts* (an educational series on public television) dedicated to the legacies of both Hill and Syvilla Fort. In conversation with Kathe Sandler (filmmaker of *Remembering Thelma*) and Ayoka Chenzira (filmmaker of *Syvilla: They Dance to Her Drum*), Baker emphasizes how Hill and Fort inspired students and fortified them for professional dance work, especially those for whom “there were obvious limitations”²⁴⁵—seemingly a reference to being black. Interviewer Julinda Ferguson-Lewis asks what Baker personally gained from the two teachers, and she responds, “A sense of freedom—not only dance wise, but culturally. They gave me a foundation and a background with which to build an entire life in dance.” When Ferguson-Lewis emphasizes, “It was more than just dance training,” Baker affirms that truth, explaining: “Dance training just happened to be part of the experience. That was one of the things that they made their communication through, but there was a lot more power behind each of the ladies that they were able to deliver to anyone that came within range and interest.” Baker’s comments elucidated the multidimensionality of Fort and Hill’s impacts, pointing to the personal development and cultural education they imparted to students.

Hill’s care and attention extended to non-black students too. Jill Williams, a white woman who today acts as a keeper of Clark Center history, studied with Hill at the Center. As with Sawyer, Hill helped Williams forge a life around dance. The paths of Williams, Sawyer, and Hill are all connected by another significant black dance figure: Kathleen Stanford Grant. A dancer, master Pilates teacher, and administrator for Clark Center and Dance Theatre of Harlem, Grant wore many hats, and a more detailed account of her important life will follow in Chapter 2. A closer look at Sawyer and Williams and their ongoing work will follow in Chapter 5. Thus,

²⁴⁵ Shawneequa Baker in *Eye on Dance and the Arts*, Episode 30, “Third World Dance, Tracing Roots,” produced by Celia Ipiotis and Jeffrey Bush (1981, New York: ARC Videodance), videodisc.

this document is bookended by Hill and her connections to those preceding and succeeding her, a gesture intended to position her centrally in the history of not only Clark Center but black concert dance history of the twentieth century. As “one of the best-known dance teachers in New York,”²⁴⁶ many were impacted by her premature death, the result of smoke inhalation from a fire in her Washington Heights apartment building. Her *New York Times* obituary penned by Don McDonagh was titled “Thelma ‘Mother’ Hill dies at 53; Noted Teacher of Black Dancers.”²⁴⁷ In her honor, dancer and teacher Larry Phillips organized a commemorative event and renamed his Brooklyn-based dance organization to the Thelma Hill Performing Arts Center (THPAC).

Originally founded in 1976, THPAC would support the work of many of the black dance artists also affiliated with Clark Center, such as Baba Chuck Davis, Fred Benjamin, and Eleo Pomare. Beyond Phillips’ death in 1987, THPAC has continued to offer dance programming to this day, including support for contemporary black dance artists such as Jawole Willa Jo Zollar (also supported by Clark Center, elaborated in Chapter 4), Camille A. Brown, and Kyle Abraham. Notably, since the mid-1990s, THPAC has developed programming that spotlights black queer and feminist expression, such as: *Toenails of Steel and Ruby Red Text*, a program that forges collaborative pairings between gay black choreographers and writers; “*Audre Lorde In Motion*—a collaboration between spoken word artists and choreographers using the works of Audre Lorde;” and “*A Ramp to Paradise*—a dance narrative about the famed underground Black gay dance club the Paradise Garage.”²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶ Long, 159.

²⁴⁷ Don McDonagh, “Thelma ‘Mother’ Hill Dies at 53; Noted Teacher of Black Dancers,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1977, <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/11/23/archives/thelma-mother-hill-dies-at-53-noted-teacher-of-black-dancers-by-don.html>.

²⁴⁸ “History,” Thelma Hill Performing Arts Center, <https://www.thelmahill.org/about>.

THPAC and Hill's important legacies both warrant more sustained scholarly consideration. This project, which has begun by historicizing Clark Center and Ailey's company's co-emergence through the 1960s, is broader in scope, recovering a major site of black concert dance activity. By considering the racial politics of Clark Center and its articulation with the larger concert dance world, the Center comes into relief as a driving force in the racial integration of the field. Ailey's choreographic work and Hill's teaching work precipitated the Center's establishment, serving as a site of training and professionalization for multitudes of dancers, and African Americans especially. Their efforts at Clark Center enacted a black-centric model of racial integration that enfranchised and visibilized people of color as central to American concert dance.

Chapter 2: The “Vitality” of Dance, Experimentation in Broadway’s Shadow, and the Public Good: Clark Center and the 1970s

If Ailey’s rise was meteoric, Clark Center was the launchpad. The support of the Center had given him the solid ground from which to fly. But having moved the base of his operations elsewhere by the end of the 1960s, it would soon be the Center that needed *his* help. In July of 1971, the Center’s new director Louise Roberts asked Ailey if his company would perform a benefit concert. Ailey responded affirmatively, adding:

Believe me, I cannot ever forget how important Clark Center has been to me personally and I am sure I speak for the entire Clark Center alumnae when I say that whatever small contribution I can make to help the Center continue its work in aiding anybody and everybody in their artistic endeavours [sic] can never repay the opportunity the Center gave to me during my own ‘growing pains.’²⁴⁹

When Roberts had started her new job as director at Clark Center a little over a year prior—on March 9, 1970²⁵⁰—she may have been inheriting an organization in financial need. But it was also an organization known for its robust slate of performing arts classes and training programs. Ailey’s good will confirmed this.

Interestingly, while Ailey’s professional trajectory was exemplary of what Clark Center could facilitate, such ascension was not illustrative of Roberts’ investment in the Center. She was not attempting to identify only the talents of those with star potential. Rather, she wanted to broaden access to dance, nourishing the lives and careers of many. Roberts stewarded emerging dancers and choreographers, giving generously of the Center’s resources. Continuing to employ the finest dance teachers, she kept class prices low and continued robust scholarship programs to fully fund dance classes for selected young adults. It was these thresholds—widening access to

²⁴⁹ Alvin Ailey, Alvin Ailey to Louise Roberts, Letter, July 8, 1971, Box 25, Folder 2, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

²⁵⁰ Louise Roberts résumé, Box 11, Folder 22, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

quality dance education and initiating choreographic careers—to which she was wholeheartedly committed.

As detailed in Chapter 1, Clark Center served a vital role in fostering camaraderie amongst dancers, providing them a place to gossip and relax before and after class. Roberts was a part of this landscape, as was her poodle Max, the Center’s “resident mascot.”²⁵¹ Nearly every interviewee who attended Clark Center during Roberts’ years as director described her seeming omnipresence. She proactively greeted students as they passed by her office or as she saw them in the halls. She asked about how they were doing. This isn’t to say she was *sweet*. As dance artist Dianne McIntyre put it, “she was motherly and at the same time she did not bite her tongue.”²⁵² Some were intimidated by this directness and intensity. But it is clear that Roberts’ demeanor was an expression of her fierce commitment to be of service to dancers.

She would remain director for over fifteen years, serving the longest tenure in this role at Clark Center. Her steadfast presence in the Center and her tireless efforts to grow its resources and foster the careers of choreographers imbue her with a metonymic quality in the accounts of some interviewees, who speak of Louise and Clark Center as indistinguishable entities. Roberts was a white, Jewish woman committed to furthering the Center’s founding intent to resource artists of color in particular. Importantly, she had been preceded by another ardent advocate for black dance artists, Kathleen Stanford Grant, a black woman who directed Clark Center from 1967-1970. Before turning to the 1970s, this chapter will begin by foregrounding Grant for her impactful legacy which Roberts would inherit and extend.

²⁵¹ Louise Pastore, “New Dance Spaces: Here, There and Everywhere: Oases for Modern Dance,” *Dance Magazine*, April 1974, 63.

²⁵² McIntyre, discussion.

The bulk of the chapter chronicles the institutional life of Clark Center through the 1970s, a trajectory which illustrates contradictions at the heart of the city government's purported support for the arts. The Center underwent major shifts in this decade, which included the birth of Playwrights Horizons, an off-off-Broadway theater producing entity under its aegis, as well as the closure of the YWCA, resulting in the displacement of the Center. Concurrently in this period, the arts had become a major political playing card. From President Johnson's creation of the National Endowment for the Arts some years prior (1965) to New York City Mayor Lindsay's economic decentralizing which purported to democratize the arts in the early 1970s, the arts were being touted as a *vitalizing* and edifying force. In New York City specifically, municipal and corporate efforts were underway to redevelop the Times Square/42nd Street area, replacing porn theaters with "legitimate" theaters. While Playwrights Horizons contributed to and benefitted from these efforts, Clark Center managed only to find a less-than-satisfactory temporary space in midtown, one that lacked a theater. Particularly in its moments of crisis and its pleas for support, rhetorics of "vitality" were adopted by Clark Center in describing its civic contributions. Determined to continue its dance presenting, Roberts brought to life a short-lived but important dance festival on City University of New York's (CUNY) Graduate Center Mall, a public walkway space. The city, which was complicit in Clark Center's displacement, celebrated the Festival as a triumph for all New Yorkers, illustrating the contradictions of its uneven support. Ultimately, in the face of shifting economic and political dynamics that exacerbated Clark Center's precarity, the Center managed to remain vital.

Kathleen Stanford Grant, Director, 1967-1970

Kathleen Stanford Grant, née Brown (born August 9, 1921) is most remembered today for her devoted teaching of Pilates. Known as “Kathy Grant” within the Pilates community,²⁵³ she spent the latter half of her life teaching this practice, up to her death in 2010. She was especially noted for her work with dancers and taught on faculty at New York University’s (NYU) Tisch School of the Arts, where she also had her own studio for private clients on the top floor of the dance building.²⁵⁴ Lesser known are Grant’s important impacts as both a dancer and an arts administrator. Intending to redress these lacuna, Maria Earle, a dancer and Pilates instructor who studied with Grant for several years, wrote a Master’s thesis entitled “Sing My Song: The Legacy of Kathleen Stanford Grant,” published in 2006. As her student, Earle encountered the details of Grant’s life in the in-between moments of Pilates sessions, when Grant would conversationally share anecdotes of her life experiences.²⁵⁵ Earle also engaged Grant in more formal oral history interviews, albeit sometimes with great reluctance from Grant, in addition to speaking with some of her other students. In sum, Earle elucidates both Grant’s significant contributions and the unique challenges she faced as a black woman in the predominantly white spaces of concert dance, arts administration, and Pilates. Drawing from Earle as well as other sources, below I give a brief overview of Grant’s life in these various roles before turning to her work at Clark Center specifically.

As the only black child in youth ballet classes at Boston Conservatory, Grant was made to study privately at first and later was prohibited from sharing a barre with the other students.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ Maria Earle, “Sing My Song: The Legacy of Kathleen Stanford Grant,” (Thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 2006), 4.

²⁵⁴ Earle, 4 and 66-67.

²⁵⁵ Earle, 5.

²⁵⁶ Earle, 13.

Undeterred by such racial discrimination, she moved to New York City in the early 1940s to pursue a life as a professional ballet dancer. Few such opportunities were available for a black woman. She instead found her first dance job working as a “Zanzibeaute,” the name given the chorus girls at the Zanzibar nightclub. She would go on to dance in one of the earliest integrated musicals on Broadway, *Finian’s Rainbow*, and then pursued various gigs in Europe through the early 1950s. Upon her return to New York, she was cast in the Broadway production of *House of Flowers*. While an injury prevented her from performing in the show, Grant made some important connections with fellow dancers.²⁵⁷ This was the Broadway show that Ailey and de Lavallade had left Los Angeles to dance in, and the ensemble also included Arthur Mitchell and Donald McKayle.²⁵⁸

In the following decade, Grant married Jim Lloyd Grant, an attorney who was “one of the first three African-American men to graduate from New York University Law School.”²⁵⁹ Grant also joined McKayle’s prominent modern dance company. There she would dance again with Mitchell, who was her duet partner in a 1960 remount of *They Called Her Moses*, a dance about Harriet Tubman, in which McKayle and de Lavallade also performed.²⁶⁰ (Ailey had performed with Grant in this work in 1956.²⁶¹) Her work with McKayle extended beyond performing. In 1973, Grant served as his choreographic assistant for *Raisin*,²⁶² the musical theater version of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, which McKayle directed and choreographed (with co-choreographer Walter Nicks), earning him Tony nominations in both categories.

²⁵⁷ In his autobiography, Donald McKayle says of this show, “The dancing ensemble was a Who’s Who of the future.” Donald McKayle, *Transcending Boundaries: My Dancing Life* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 71.

²⁵⁸ Earle, 30.

²⁵⁹ Earle, 88.

²⁶⁰ McKayle, 120.

²⁶¹ McKayle, 295.

²⁶² McKayle, 216.

In McKayle's autobiography, published in 2002, he identifies Grant as "a physical trainer skilled in the Joseph Pilates' *Return to Health* program," and goes on to describe her as "fanatic in the championing of the Pilates method."²⁶³ He narrates the "freak accident" resulting in injury that disrupted her dance career and made her turn to Pilates for healing. While extant accounts of this accident diverge in the details,²⁶⁴ Grant slipped on a wet stage, causing a grave knee injury. Today it is common to hear of dancers turning towards Pilates for two reasons: firstly, to heal and rehabilitate their own injuries, and secondarily, to teach the practice as a form of livelihood. Unsurprisingly, these groups often overlap, so that those who benefitted from the practice come to teach it. While this pipeline indeed describes Grant, she did so before any such trend was established. Grant studied with Joseph Pilates himself and is thus today referred to as a "first generation" Pilates teacher.²⁶⁵

At the time of its development, Mr. Pilates called his method "contrology." Grant sought out Mr. Pilates' contrology on the recommendation of Pearl Lang²⁶⁶—a leading Martha Graham dancer and choreographer with her own company, the Pearl Lang Dance Company—with whom

²⁶³ McKayle, 216.

²⁶⁴ As McKayle tells it, Grant was injured "while dancing with Claude Marchant in the variety circuit at the Palace theater on Broadway. They played in a vaudeville format between movie showings and were scheduled after an animal act. A wet spot on the stage floor gave Kathy a nasty spill, which wrenched her knee acutely and tore the cartilage" (216). Earle recounts the following scenario: "Late for rehearsal with Claude Marchant at the Palace Theatre, she ran into the studio, slipped on a spilt cup of coffee, and fell, ripping the cartilage in her right knee" (29). In a footnote, Earle explains, this "story was told to me during a conversation at [Grant's] studio at a time when she was not being interviewed but allowed me to take notes" (Footnote 51, 29). Earle includes an additional footnote about Grant not recalling the exact date of her injury. Earle estimates the year to have been 1953 (Footnote 52, 30). In yet a third account, an oral history interview with Grant conducted by Linda Tarnay, Grant gives less detail than these other two accounts but describes slipping on stage due to water that had not been thoroughly cleaned up. Kathy Grant, Oral history interview conducted by Linda Tarnay, November 21, 2009, DVD, 97 minutes, New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division.

²⁶⁵ Earle, 3.

²⁶⁶ It is also interesting to note that one of Ailey's next institutional homes after Clark Center was a shared venture with Lang. The AILEY website (as the organization's name is stylized today) states that in 1970, "Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center relocate to 229 East 59th Street in Manhattan to share a renovated church building with choreographer and former Graham dancer Pearl Lang. AILEY and the Pearl Lang Dance Company share rehearsal space and, at the same time, Alvin Ailey and Pearl Lang co-direct the School." "History," AILEY, <https://ailey.org/history#1970>.

she took ballet class.²⁶⁷ As Grant recounted, Mr. Pilates was a demanding teacher, and the method was challenging. She fell in love with it. While she rehabilitated her knee well enough to return to some dance work over the next couple of decades, she would not be able to dance at the intensity she once had. Needing other work, she would soon be teaching the method herself. Notably, Mr. Pilates certified only two people in his lifetime to teach the practice, both of whom were women of color:²⁶⁸ Grant and Lolita San Miguel, a dancer of Puerto Rican descent.²⁶⁹ San Miguel would go on to teach the practice at Clark Center, classes which were titled “Body Conditioning.”²⁷⁰ The history of Clark Center is shot through with several other significant links to the Pilates legacy, which will be elaborated later in this chapter.

No matter the kind of work, Grant’s primary commitments were unchanging, and they were rooted in what she knew: dance and blackness. As Earle underscores, Grant’s early life is significant not only for the sheer fact of her forging a dance career as a black woman at a time of pervasive racial discrimination; she also bucked the presupposition (which continues to this day²⁷¹) that all African American dancers in the early to mid-twentieth century followed (or wanted to follow) in the traditions of Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus.²⁷² Unlike these two titans who made scholarly and embodied interventions upon American modern dance through

²⁶⁷ Kathy Grant, Oral history interview conducted by Linda Tarnay, November 21, 2009, DVD, 97 minutes, New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division.

²⁶⁸ Sarita Allen, who danced in Ailey’s company and trained in Pilates with Grant, shares this fact in a 2022 promotional video for the Ailey Extension program honoring Black History Month. She emphasizes the significance of both of Mr. Pilates’ protégés having been people of color. Allen, who is black, teaches Pilates-based classes for Ailey Extension, a program at the Ailey studios which intends to offer dance and fitness classes for a wide public. Sarita Allen, “Black History Month: Pilates with Sarita Allen,” Ailey Extension, Facebook, February 24, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1UNaQKDVzt/>.

²⁶⁹ Lolita San Miguel, “About Lolita San Miguel,” Jules Pilates, Jules Pilates Studio, accessed September 5, 2024, <https://julespilates.com/yoga-and-pilates/about-lolita-san-miguel/>. See also BlackGirlPilates, Twitter post, June 6, 2022, 7:46pm, <https://x.com/blkgirlpilates/status/1533973535877742592>.

²⁷⁰ Chanin, discussion.

²⁷¹ In her 2009 oral history interview with Grant, Linda Tarnay, a white woman, asks Grant about Dunham technique in such a way that assumes a relationship to it. In the tone of her response, it is clear that Grant is all too familiar with this assumption yet no less annoyed by it. Grant, Oral history interview.

²⁷² Earle, 3.

reclamations of African-diasporic epistemes, Grant's interests were less anthropological and Africanist. Rather, she was drawn to and trained in ballet, a form which she enfranchised other black people to engage through her teaching at Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH).²⁷³ Arthur Mitchell, who in 1955 became the first African American dancer promoted to principal at New York City Ballet, had founded DTH in 1969. This was the year after the assassination of the Martin Luther King, Jr., the galvanizing moment that impelled him to inaugurate a black-centric space for ballet.²⁷⁴ In addition to teaching children's classes at DTH,²⁷⁵ Grant was brought on by her friend Mitchell as the new organization's lead administrator. She held this role from 1970-1972, working tirelessly to establish the institutional infrastructure which has allowed this renowned company to persist to this day.

Occasioning Grant's departure from DTH was an invitation to manage a Pilates studio attached to the ritzy Manhattan department store known as Bendel's. While this meant moving from a predominantly black space back into a predominantly white one, Grant's commitments remained. She accepted the position "only under the condition that her 'kids' from Dance Theater could come to the studio to train with her."²⁷⁶ Likewise, when she was subsequently hired to teach at NYU, she ensured permission to train former students in her NYU studio, "enabl[ing] her to continue working with her dedicated clients from Bendel's, some of which she

²⁷³ Comments made by Mitchell in 1970 illustrate that underneath the assumption that black dancers trained in the techniques of Dunham or Primus was an even more general assumption that black people were suited to modern dance over ballet. As he put it, "Like every black student, I had been shoved into modern dance class. I didn't know much about ballet, had never thought of becoming a *danseur*." Arthur Mitchell quoted in Olga Maynard, "Arthur Mitchell & The Dance Theater of Harlem," *Dance Magazine*, March 1970, 60. Note that I have opted for "Theatre" in DTH's name throughout this document, honoring the way it is styled on the company's current website. When it is spelled alternatively in an outside source, I have honored the source's spelling.

²⁷⁴ "After Martin Luther King was assassinated, and there were all the eulogies, I asked myself: Arthur Mitchell, what can *you* do? When you pay homage you do the thing you do best: if you make music, you beat your drum; if you are a singer, you sing; if you are a dancer, you dance." Mitchell quoted in Maynard, 62.

²⁷⁵ Grant, Oral history interview.

²⁷⁶ Earle, 65.

had known from Dance Theatre of Harlem.”²⁷⁷ At Bendel’s, Grant also took on some of her students as apprentices, training them as teachers. These apprentices included Wendy Amos (a black woman who was Grant’s first apprentice²⁷⁸), Jill Williams, Dr. Jacqueline Sawyer, and Sarita Allen.

The latter two were also affiliated with Clark Center, and I spoke with both of them for this project. Williams and Sawyer recounted memories of Grant in adoring terms, emphasizing her rigor when it came to the practice. Referring to Grant as a “taskmaster” and a “perfectionist,” Sawyer highlighted Grant’s gift for tailoring Pilates sessions to the needs of the individual at hand.²⁷⁹ This individualized approach, she explained, stayed true to Mr. Pilates’ intentions, something that has been lost in the group classes of many current Pilates settings.²⁸⁰ Moreover, Grant recognized that many people who came to Pilates were not immediately ready for mat work (a series of exercises done on the floor). Accordingly, she developed a “pre-work” regimen that allowed students to build up to mat work—another one of her major contributions, according to Sawyer. Further innovations of Grant’s are mentioned in online content produced by her former students, in testimonials, statements of gratitude, and teaching demonstrations videos.

Grant’s administrative skills to manage both DTH and Bendel’s had been developed in the preceding years at Clark Center. Grant became involved with the Center in 1967 through Charles Blackwell, who was her friend and neighbor.²⁸¹ For a benefit show, Grant “agreed to volunteer her time, and when the woman in charge of organizing the performance suddenly took

²⁷⁷ Earle, 66-67.

²⁷⁸ Williams.

²⁷⁹ Sawyer.

²⁸⁰ Earle and her interviewees also speak to the loss of the individualized approach that had been at the heart of Joseph Pilates’ work in many contemporary settings. Earle, 74-75.

²⁸¹ Grant, Oral history interview.

a medical leave, Grant took over as assistant director” of Clark Center.²⁸² Before long, she became full director. While Grant may have fallen into this leadership role, she steadfastly embraced the opportunity to make substantive change towards enfranchising African Americans in concert dance. In a 1970 radio interview, Grant spoke proudly of the primarily black group of artists whose work would be featured in an upcoming show: Alvin Ailey, Carmen de Lavallade, Geoffrey Holder, Jane Faulkner, Arthur Mitchell’s Dance Theatre of Harlem (freshly founded), and the Utterbach Gospel Group. Grant also described dance workshops for “youngsters” taught by black choreographers Eleo Pomare and Rod Rodgers. When the interviewer asked about Donald McKayle, Grant explained, “he’s always used our space whenever he needed it.”²⁸³ This ethos of working in service of choreographers was echoed in an interview with black choreographer and beloved Clark Center jazz teacher Fred Benjamin. He described Grant as providing both the encouragement and the resources—namely, free rehearsal space—to start a company.²⁸⁴

In addition to supporting artists of color, Grant’s adamant commitment to Clark Center’s other missions were also clearly evidenced in the 1970 radio interview. She spoke to the Center’s vital work as a testing ground for emerging choreographers. She described how the pressures for immediate success in the dance field was detrimental—“you should be able to make mistakes and try again.”²⁸⁵ Additionally, Grant touted Clark Center as a place that celebrated the benefits of dance for all people, not just those seeking to professionalize. In response to a comment about

²⁸² Earle, 42. The 1968-69 Clark Center brochure lists “Mrs. Joanna Beck-Nichols” as Director and “Mrs. Kathleen Stanford-Grant” as Assistant Director. Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, 1968-69.

²⁸³ Grant, Radio interview.

²⁸⁴ “Fred, Louise & Kathy G,” YouTube video, 4:16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dj4X4PpoWfQ>.

²⁸⁵ Grant, Radio interview.

children, Grant described the many socially salubrious aspects of learning to dance, including the ability to express oneself, to release tension, and a place to be with people one's own age.²⁸⁶

That said, I hear in Grant's comments her most fundamental conviction for the Center being its service to people of color. When asked about her work at the Center in a 2009 oral history interview, she began her comments by invoking the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., and Malcolm X. This *was*, of course, the historical context of her years directing Clark Center (1967-1970); but that she chose to contextualize her time there with reference to these Civil Rights and Black Power figures is meaningful. She went on to describe the need that Clark Center filled for spaces where black people could train in dance. Speaking to the de facto segregation experienced by black dancers even in the context of de jure integration, Grant remarked, "the dance studios didn't want you. They didn't refuse you, but they didn't correct you, you knew you weren't wanted."²⁸⁷ She went on to describe participating in lunch counter sit-ins.²⁸⁸

Ironically, Grant's decision to leave Clark Center also expressed the primacy of her commitment to African American enfranchisement. This came in 1970 when she decided to work instead for DTH, a still-nascent company with which Mitchell needed infrastructural help. While I have been referring to Clark Center as "black-centric" to express the predominance of black artists it served, DTH was even more explicit in its founding motivation to serve African Americans. Grant described how she brought "discipline" to DTH, helping it to "get situated."²⁸⁹

²⁸⁶ Grant, Radio interview.

²⁸⁷ Grant, Oral history interview. "Correct" in this context refers to the "corrections" dance teachers give to individual students, a standard practice in dance class cultures, ballet especially.

²⁸⁸ Grant, Oral history interview.

²⁸⁹ Grant, Oral history interview.

The same could be said of the many Pilates students whose lives she touched. And the same was true for Clark Center, where Grant sharpened and brought to fruition the institution's missions.

Louise Roberts Becomes Director, 1970

Clark Center's next director, Louise Roberts (1911-1997), was equally ardent in fulfilling Clark Center's civically oriented goals. And like Grant, she too was from Boston and grew up dancing.²⁹⁰ It was not, however, until a formative brush with the work of Martha Graham at age sixteen that Roberts' zeal for dance would be fully activated.²⁹¹ Thereafter she engaged in more serious dance study in modern dance, ballet, and Dalcroze,²⁹² and performed with choreographer Blanche Evan. She did so while concurrently majoring in political science at Hunter College in New York City, from which she graduated in 1931.²⁹³ Her early jobs reflected an interest and commitment to civic causes as well as the role of the arts to that end. While working for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, for example, she "helped to develop some new-choreographer concerts."²⁹⁴ Subsequent jobs included working for the New York City Welfare Department²⁹⁵ and as a case worker for the Rikers Island Penitentiary.²⁹⁶ She married a man named Paul Ziporkis and together they had a daughter, Karen de Francis, who would later work

²⁹⁰ Roberts, Clark Center 20-year Retrospective Statement.

²⁹¹ "A Special Dance Performance for the Benefit of Kei Takei's Moving Earth," Playbill, May 4, 1976, Box 27, Folder 25, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

²⁹² "A Special Dance Performance..."

²⁹³ Jennifer Dunning, "Louise Roberts, 85, Director of Modern Dance Center, Dies," *New York Times*, January 27, 1997.

²⁹⁴ Louise Roberts quoted in Jennifer Dunning, "Honoring a Lifelong Love Affair with Dance," *New York Times*, May 6, 1991.

²⁹⁵ Dunning, "Honoring a Lifelong..."

²⁹⁶ Louise Roberts résumé.

with Roberts at the Center. Ziporkis died suddenly in 1953, when de Francis was just nine years old.²⁹⁷

It was Roberts' next job that offered sustained training in the kind of arts administration that would be directly transferrable to Clark Center. Just blocks from the Center's eventual location, Roberts first worked as an administrator of the June Taylor Dance School, located on Broadway between 56th and 57th Streets. There for "thirteen happy years,"²⁹⁸ as she described them to interviewer Billie Mahoney in 1989, this school was a hub in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly for dance professionals working in the commercial arena—that is, Broadway, television, and film. At its center was June Taylor, a choreographer known for her work on the Jackie Gleason Show, a popular 1950s variety television program. Taylor choreographed for and performed in a group of tap-dancing chorus girls known as the June Taylor Dancers, a beloved fixture of the show. They were featured in song and dance interludes, often in unison choreography and geometric spacing that centered around Gleason. In addition to their impressive dancing, Roberts noted that Taylor's group was known for the "overhead shot," in which the camera captured the line of dancing women from above.

It was at Taylor's school that Roberts came to appreciate "commercial dance," meaning jazz and tap. Taught by "young frontrunners" such as Matt Maddox, Jaime Rogers, and Michael Bennett, she declared that there was "hardly a jazz person who didn't have a beginning there."²⁹⁹ As an industry hub, the school received calls when Broadway or television shows were seeking dancers. Roberts also underscored the strength of the ballet training offered there, which featured such teachers as Karel Shook (a co-founder with Arthur Mitchell of Dance Theatre of Harlem)

²⁹⁷ Dunning, "Louise Roberts..."

²⁹⁸ Roberts, "Dance On: With Billie Mahoney."

²⁹⁹ Roberts, "Dance On: With Billie Mahoney."

and Jacques D'Amboise. Taylor's school also offered dance training and performing opportunities for children and teens. It was also a place where dancers gathered socially, and it is in this social function that Taylor's studio was perhaps most akin to Clark Center.

Shelley Frankel, who would go on to become a Clark Center teacher, recalled that Roberts was the first person she encountered when entering the June Taylor School as a young adult. Frankel, with no dance training but an assured confidence that she could be a dancer, asked Roberts for help. Roberts sent her out to buy a leotard and ballet shoes. When Frankel returned, Roberts "had a whole schedule" ready for her.³⁰⁰ As it turned out, Frankel did in fact have an aptitude for dance, and Roberts fanned the flames. Roberts was working as producer for Donald McKayle at the time and took Frankel to a concert—her first dance concert. In it, she witnessed *Rainbow* 'Round My Shoulder (today one of McKayle's most iconic works), featuring Mary Hinkson in the sole female role. (Hinkson was an African American woman who also danced for Martha Graham and would later teach at Clark Center.) Frankel was enamored. After rigorous study as a Clark Center scholarship student and some early performing experiences, Roberts recommended Frankel to McKayle. Not only would she go on to dance the role in *Rainbow*, but McKayle would find her performance to be unparalleled, declaring that she "brought an alluring sensuality that was never duplicated by any of the many excellent soloists who later essayed the coveted role."³⁰¹

If Roberts' fervent advocacy of dance and dancers was forged in the crucible of the June Taylor School, it was fully ablaze as director of Clark Center. Multiple interviewees who would go on to renowned careers as choreographers spoke of Roberts as the initiating force in their professional lives. She was often referred to as a mother figure as well. These dual, co-

³⁰⁰ Shelley Frankel, in discussion with the author, November 2024.

³⁰¹ McKayle, 147.

constituting roles were perhaps best summarized by Dianne McIntyre, who referred to Roberts as her “producer-mother.”³⁰² Dance artist Kei Takei described how Roberts “became like family.”³⁰³ Dancer Noel Hall described how, even after he became too busy touring with the Rod Rodgers Company to go to Clark Center regularly, he would still “stop in to see Ms. Roberts.”³⁰⁴ Several described how Roberts would host social gatherings and meals at her apartment and in the Center. Such accounts make it clear that if Clark Center was a home for dance, this is because Roberts actively cultivated familial spaces for dancers.

Vital Experimentation: “Theatre of Beginning, Discovery, Nourishment”

Clark Center’s class offerings expanded considerably in the 1970s, continuing growth that had begun the decade prior. By spring term of 1964, the Center was providing classes in Horton Technique, “jazz forms,” “American mime,” and ballet, in addition to modern dance, its sole offering when it started offering classes in 1960.³⁰⁵ Starting in fall 1965, classes were offered in “African dance,” “Hindu dance,” and “Spanish dance.”³⁰⁶ And in fall 1966, classes in Limón Technique (based on the modern dance idiom of José Limón) and “Lucas Hoving Modern Dance Technique” were added to the roster.³⁰⁷ Still several more dance offerings were added by

³⁰² McIntyre, discussion.

³⁰³ Kei Takei, in discussion with the author, November 2023.

³⁰⁴ Noel Hall, in discussion with the author, November 2023.

³⁰⁵ It is interesting to note the Center’s shifting nomenclature vis-à-vis modern dance and Horton technique. Some courses listed as “modern dance” surely included Horton technique or were even full Horton classes when taught by Horton-trained dancers, such as Ailey. Other “modern dance” classes likely centered whatever technique(s) constituted the teacher’s expertise. The modern dance class offered by Marvin Gordon in spring term 1964, for example, was likely based on Martha Graham’s technique, as he had trained at the Graham School according to his brochure biography. As the Center offered more dance classes, specification increased, such as “Lester Horton Modern Dance Technique” taught by James Truitte, seen on the spring 1964 schedule. Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, 1964.

³⁰⁶ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, 1965, Box 27, Folder 19, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

³⁰⁷ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, 1966, Box 27, Folder 19, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

the end of the decade. The 1968-69 season brochure included courses in “Dramatic Dance” (which it listed in scare quotes) with Eleo Pomare, Katherine Dunham Technique with Charles Moore, “Modern Dance Improvisation” with Eve Gentry, “Rhythmic Free Flow” with Rod Rodgers, “Swing” with Pepsi Bethel, and “Syvilla Fort Technique” with Syvilla Fort.³⁰⁸

It is also worth noting the introduction of associations with Joseph Pilates in this latter season, given that this was during Grant’s tenure in directorial positions at the Center. Eve Gentry’s improvisation class was described in the brochure as follows: “Based on Honya [sic] Holm, Joseph Pilates and Eve Gentry Technique with a basic ballet barre.”³⁰⁹ Additionally, ballet classes were offered for adults and children with Romana Kryzanowska, who—like Grant—was studying with Mr. Pilates and would go on to teach the method.

From Jane Taylor’s school, which was known for its exceptional teachers, Roberts understood the importance of tending to this aspect of Clark Center’s alchemy. She fostered and solidified a cadre of teachers for whom Clark Center would become well known, including Lucinda Ransom (ballet), Lenore Latimer (Limón Technique), Marjorie Perces (Horton Technique), Charles “Cookie” Cook (tap), and Eleanor Harris (tap). Roberts also generated and developed loyal relationships with choreographers, offering them resources to start or grow their companies at the Center, which made them not only resident artists of the Center but also resident teachers. Such choreographer-teachers, as I call them, included Charles Moore, Fred Benjamin, Pepsi Bethel, Loremil Machado, and Jelon Vieira (elaborated in Chapter 5). For these choreographers, teaching yielded not only income—perhaps the most common livelihood for a choreographer that would keep them within the arena of dance—but also a growing base of people who were familiar with their sensibility. Like Grant, Roberts also enfranchised

³⁰⁸ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, 1968-69.

³⁰⁹ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, 1968-69.

choreographers with institutional resources such as rehearsal space, administrative support, and performance opportunities and connections.

This model of supporting a choreographer in part by offering them teaching work was, of course, nothing new. It was the Center's *raison d'être*. When Holtz agreed to host Ailey as the YWCA's first resident artist, Ailey taught modern dance classes there. That said, Ailey was reticent to teach, a feeling which was amplified, if not produced, by his quick success as a choreographer. When Ailey left Clark Center only a decade after its founding, he likely desired an arrangement where he had more institutional autonomy. But there has, to this day, only been one Alvin Ailey. No other choreographer—of any identity—has surpassed, much less achieved, the solidity of Ailey's enduring legacy and operations.³¹⁰ Clark Center was alternatively committed to those who were not—or not yet—icons. Roberts wanted to discover and champion “emerging or middle level dance companies,”³¹¹ ones that did not have the infrastructural or financial heft to be autonomous or self-sustaining entities.

This threshold between smaller companies who needed the help of places like Clark Center and larger ones that were self-operational was also figured in terms of commercialism. That is, the Center was not aimed at dance artists who had experienced commercial success, nor did it explicitly aim to launch artists into the commercial fold. Rather, Clark Center's intention to serve emerging choreographers was a mission to incubate experimentation. In a particularly telling internal document, the Center referred to itself as a “Theatre of Beginning, Discovery, Nourishment.” Roberts, like Grant, was of the conviction that artists needed opportunities to try

³¹⁰ For more on the company's enduring financial solvency, see DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*.

³¹¹ Clark Center Fact Sheet, 1974, Box 11, Folder 4, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

things out, discover what worked, without the pressures of compulsory success. Artists needed space to take risks and fail.

Institutions funding artists are inevitably entangled in capitalistic logics of speculation. To fund or resource an artist is itself a financial investment imbued with risk, structured by questions of worthiness and worth. Whose potential worth is worthy of the institution's investment? On the one hand, Clark Center's mission-driven orientation towards emerging artists and underrepresented artists was a response to the capitalist system of valuation, seeking to undercut its hierarchies and exclusions. Much as the Center intended to reconfigure or resist the profit drive, it could not escape it altogether. Operationally, then, its corrective came in the form of blunting the deleterious effects of capitalism on creative process and experimentation. By broadening access to the resources for performing arts training and authorship, more people were given a place in the performing arts. One didn't have to already be valuable to gain a place, neither in terms of material wealth nor talent or promise. This reconfiguration stood in contrast to one of the most basic contradictions inherent to capitalism: needing to have capital to accumulate more capital—or, put another way, needing to be rich to get rich. Rather, the Center, in providing free and affordable classes, rehearsal space, and performance opportunities, lowered the cost of admission—figuratively and literally—for participation in the field.

Whether arts institutions behave like gatekeepers or gate-openers, their presence in the field is one of intermediary. They mediate between artists and funding bodies, and between art and audiences. Such funds may come from public or private sources, just as these audiences may be “the” public or a group of insiders. Thus, arts institutions mediate the public-private divide, broadly speaking, making them a salient site of economic, political, and social study. They can also be indicative of the imbrications of public and private entities that mark much of American

civic life. Clark Center, for example, received funding from both public and private entities over the course of its existence. The very entities that dole out public arts funding sometimes require the acquisition of private funds too.

The National Endowment for the Arts, “the largest nationwide federal arts funding entity in the United States,”³¹² is one such example. Calling its support “only quasi-public,” dance scholar Sarah Wilbur observes that since its inception, “all NEA grantees are mandated to secure nonfederal cost share to match the amount of federal support as a criterion of endowment.”³¹³ Bridging these public and private fault lines, institutions exhibit symptoms of the structural dynamics which give them shape and motivation, whether that motivation be a reproduction of the dominant order of power or a critical intervention upon it. In both cases, and in the many in-between cases, institutions’ situations can bring into stark relief the infrastructural forces that affect individuals and groups, bringing a clearer accounting for the material and ideological apparatuses at play in such stratifications as commercial versus experimental.

The Arts as a Vital(izing) Public Good

Clark Center’s first decade of being was a notably flourishing period for arts funding at the national and municipal level in New York City. In fact, dance scholar Naomi Jackson figures Clark Center’s very existence as evidence of the period’s fecundity—what she identifies as “an explosion of new venues and sources of funding.”³¹⁴ In 1960, New York State Governor Nelson Rockefeller had created the New York Arts Council. This was followed by watershed moments in American history on the federal level when President Lyndon B. Johnson extended the late

³¹² Sarah Wilbur, *Five Decades of Dance Making at the National Endowment for the Arts* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press), 8.

³¹³ Wilbur, 5.

³¹⁴ Jackson, 214.

President John F. Kennedy's commitment to the arts through the creation of multiple arts-dedicated governmental councils and agencies. This included the National Arts and Cultural Development Act of 1964, which established the National Council on the Arts, and the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act signed in 1965, which established the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities.³¹⁵ Dance was first designated as a distinct program within the NEA in 1967, initiated by the NEA's first chair Roger Stevens who appointed June Batten Arey as the inaugural leader of the dance division.³¹⁶

Such prioritization of the arts would be implemented at the municipal level by New York City Mayor John Lindsay during his 1966-1973 tenure. Lindsay was a Republican and his commitment to lessening the reach of government was expressed in fiscal decentralization policies. Also a proponent of racial equality and the arts, his conservative fiscal policies had an unusually progressive impact—what some, including Lindsay, might call a “democratization of the arts.”³¹⁷ That is, decentralized arts funding funneled money more horizontally into local community groups, including underrepresented racial and ethnic enclaves. As theater scholar Hillary Miller puts it, Lindsay's contributions manifested “not just through an altered map of available art and culture, but through the production of new representations of the city.”³¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, Lindsay was subject to reactionary conservative backlash, such as accusations of having produced or accelerated white flight. Nevertheless, the legacy of his arts-forward agenda was short lived, as an economic downturn in New York City beginning in the mid-1970s led to rapid austerity politicking by the end of the decade.

³¹⁵ Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, *NEA: A History, 1965-2008* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts).

³¹⁶ Wilbur, 40.

³¹⁷ Hilary Miller, *Drop Dead: Performance in Crisis, 1970s New York* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 8.

³¹⁸ Miller, 8.

Prior to the multi-scalar public funding initiative of the 1960s, private foundations had been crucial to the implementation of public infrastructure, resourcing such social and cultural institutions as schools, museums, and libraries.³¹⁹ While the new infusion of public funds may have been good news for the arts, it undercut the utility of organizations like the Y, which was private. As Jackson notes, “the [92nd Street] Y, like other privately run institutions, began in the 1960s to lose its unique place in the cultural geography of New York.”³²⁰ As a subsidiary of the YWCA, Clark Center was funded by the Y organization. In addition to paying for the Center’s “administrative salaries and services,” the YWCA “provid[ed] space rent-free.”³²¹ Thus, Clark Center had been extending the Y’s function as a foundation, providing accessible services to a broad public via private funding. Seen from a different angle, however, it was because the Center did not have to turn a great profit to stay afloat that *enabled* it to offer affordable training and free rehearsal space to emerging artists. As a privately funded entity, the Center could serve the public.³²²

To make the arts accessible to the American public is to assert that the arts do good in the lives of individuals and communities, that the arts are an essential component of a healthy polis and democracy. When Johnson signed pro-arts legislation into being in the mid-1960s, he was working against the current of more than a century of thwarted attempts by former presidents to establish federal arts-funding bodies. As Wilbur notes, these former presidents’ efforts had been “consistently blocked by arts agnostics,” officials who felt that such legislation amounted to “inappropriate areas of government oversight.”³²³ But for Johnson, the arts were a beacon of

³¹⁹ Jackson, 215.

³²⁰ Jackson, 215.

³²¹ “Clark Center Checking ‘To Let’ Signs,” *New York Times*, August 9, 1974.

³²² “The public” is used throughout to denote the broad, pluralistic group of people making up the city at large.

³²³ Wilbur, 30.

national well-being. He made this clear at the groundbreaking of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts on December 2, 1964: “It is important to know that the opportunity we give to the arts is a measure of the quality of our civilization. It is important to be aware that artistic activity can enrich the life of our people, which really is the central object of Government. It is important that our material prosperity liberate and not confine the creative spirit.”³²⁴ He went on to describe America’s subordinate position in terms of quantity of cultural institutions, declaring that “almost every industrialized nation in the world, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, has one or more national centers for the arts.”³²⁵ Indeed, the new Kennedy Center intended to rectify the American dearth.

Johnson’s statement made clear the competitive gambit that undergirded the government’s seemingly sudden investment in the arts. As Sally Banes notes, “Now the cold war was being recast as a cultural competition rather than a military one.”³²⁶ These federal maneuvers carried both domestic and international motivations, as historian Donna Bickiewicz elucidates: domestically, the new arts policies “began as a reaction to 1950s cultural criticism that accused the United States of having become conformist, materialist, complacent, and aesthetically deplorable.”³²⁷ Internationally, “American leaders endeavored to outshine the Soviets in cultural displays and by doing so entice developing nations away from the lures of communist culture. Moreover, U.S. Officials embraced the argument that America was the protector of Western culture after World War II and the cradle of even greater aesthetics

³²⁴ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks at the Ground-Breaking Ceremony for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts,” delivered on December 2, 1964, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-ground-breaking-ceremony-for-the-john-f-kennedy-center-for-the-performing-arts>.

³²⁵ Lyndon B. Johnson.

³²⁶ Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 5.

³²⁷ Donna M. Bickiewicz, *Federalizing the Muse: United States Arts Policy and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 3-4.

achievements in the prosperous postwar decades.”³²⁸ Governmental support for the arts in the 1960s, then, intended to both edify the nation *and* demonstrate to the world this edified polis as emblematic of Western, democratic exceptionalism.

With his establishment of organizations like the NEA, such arguments for the civic function of art had become a political imperative. Politicians now had to have a stance, rationalizing what they believed to be the value of art to tax-paying constituents and voters. Nowhere was this starker than in the nation’s culture capital, New York City. A 1973 *New York Times* piece profiling the candidates in the race for mayor included queries regarding their attitude on the arts. Candidates’ responses revealed that it was not a question of *if* the arts mattered. “That the arts would have a role to play in New York’s rejuvenation was assumed,” Miller notes. “All projected predictably arts-friendly stances.”³²⁹ They diverged on what sectors of the arts they foregrounded, and which audiences. These were tantamount to differences in social and economic policy. As Miller observes, a call to build back Broadway from candidate Mario Biaggi, for example, revealed a pro-business agenda; while Albert H. Blumenthal’s statement, “I want Tebaldi to sing in the Bronx,” revealed a commitment to “decentralizing cultural opportunities.”³³⁰ By the 1970s, the arts had become a major battleground for not only the definition of America but the identity of its show-biz city.

Dance by the 1970s had found in New York City an especially enduring home, a yoking that continues to this day. I phrase it this way not to over-imbue dance itself as some kind of agential being or unified subject. Rather, such wording intends to convey the energetic qualities that animate dance as a physical endeavor—a vigorous activity for a restless city. Less

³²⁸ Binkiewicz, 4.

³²⁹ Miller, 11.

³³⁰ Miller, 11.

(meta)physically, the socio-cultural construction of New York City as a dance city is the accumulation of over a century of pilgrimages and congregations, professional and amateur. As dance scholar Judith Hamera puts it, contrasting New York with Los Angeles (an underappreciated dance city, as her book intends to evidence), “Los Angeles is not New York. For dancers, more than other performers, this distinction is especially important...New York beckons like a siren song to committed dancers.”³³¹ As much as New York City has solidified as a dance city, in reality it is continually made and re-made as dancers come and go. This dynamic fuels and is fueled by the pulse of the city, its tireless, loud, dirty, glamorous, multifarious vitality.

Indeed, by the 1960s, American ideology had been imbued the arts in general with a singular kind of *vitality*. According to an NEA document about the agency’s history, the NEA was unlike other arts-focused American legislation preceding it. It was not creating artistic opportunities for the purpose of addressing unemployment or promoting economic recovery, as the Works Progress Administration of the New Deal had, for example. Rather, the NEA was concerned with artistic engagement “purely as an exaltation of spirit.”³³² Such spiritual terms functioned as rationales for the civic benefit of the arts, marking its salubrious impacts in quasi-divine terms. Interestingly, this rationale has also historically functioned to distinguish art that edifies from art that entertains. Such a paradigm takes many expressions: art versus entertainment, artistic versus commercial/industry, highbrow versus lowbrow, and so on.

In the realm of dance, as mentioned in the Introduction, this split pervades the history of dance in America with more specific terms. “Concert dance” describes the highbrow, which

³³¹ Judith Hamera, *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference and Connection in the Global City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 10.

³³² Bauerlein and Grantham, 2.

stands in contrast to vaudeville, social dance, street dance, commercial dance—forms which are not synonymous but are somewhat overlapping, depending on the era. Even before the creation of the NEA, the United States government was exporting modernist concert dance internationally “as part of a global rebranding effort aimed, in part, at quelling the pejorative image of America abroad as a nation crudely fixated on commercial entertainment.”³³³ Here again it is clear that the ideological role of the arts for the government was as a domestic purveyor of *and* a global performance of highbrow artistry. These were reactions to the cultural degradation and lack of sophistication thought to inhere in entertainment-oriented performances, such as musical theater on film and stage. Such work, which was made to be commercially viable—meaning financially lucrative—intended to appeal to the mainstream masses, putatively lacking the refinement of art works that required higher education and class status to appreciate.

The notion of the arts as vitalizing, then, present in the rhetorics employed by Johnson and his pro-arts agencies, was linked to highbrow art, to which commercialism was positioned as the enemy. This paradigmatic link was part of a host of anti-commercial sentiments in experimental, avant-garde theater movements that arose in this era and in New York City especially, spawning in part the off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway movements.³³⁴ Notably, Playwrights Horizons, an early player in these movements, got its start at Clark Center, an important history which will be detailed later in this chapter. For now, what is key here is the rhetoric of vitality (e.g., the “revitalizing” effects) of non-commercial arts, as this language would be absorbed and reproduced by Clark Center. From grant applications to donor letters to historical narratives intended for future historicizing, the people running Clark Center spoke of

³³³ Wilbur, 35.

³³⁴ See David A. Crespy, *Off-Off Broadway Explosion: How Provocative Playwrights of the 1960s Ignited a New American Theater* (New York, Back Stage Books: 2003); Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

its vitality and the benefit of its marginality vis-à-vis commercialism. The Center prided itself on supporting new and emerging artists—the “untried,” as they are described in one narrative—and especially those of marginalized racial and ethnic identities. By making space for such experimentation, for artists to try out ideas with room to fail, the Center purported to nourish the arts ecosystem and therefore the city and its polis. After all, the notion of the arts as salubrious—as revitalizing for people *and* against the deadening effects of commercialism—neatly aligned with the Y’s greater civic mission as a service foundation.

Arterial to Commercialism, A Midtown Dance Genealogy

Clark Center positioned itself as a place “based in the philosophy of love and respect for the process, the association of all the elements, including the audience, that create theatre.”³³⁵ This love for process was posed in contradistinction to commercial interests in art which privileged a financially lucrative *product* above all else. The Center’s experimental ethos stood in contrast to Roberts’ previous workplace, the June Taylor School. Roberts’ comment in 1989 that her time at the Taylor School gave her an appreciation for “commercial dance” should be understood in its retrospective context. That is, Roberts’ need to express this appreciation actually reiterated her more recent—and perhaps deeper—commitment to the smaller-scale values of Clark Center, experimentation and individual artistry.

That Clark Center defined itself in contrast to the commercial performing arts domain is not to say it was insular or isolated from this culture. After all, the Center was both geographically proximal to commercial ventures (i.e., the Broadway theater district) and provided training and resources for many who took commercial work at times. But to be *near*,

³³⁵ Clark Center Fact Sheet.

was not necessarily to be *of*. Or as Roberts put it, “Our value system can be considered arterial to the commercial theatre—but never to enter it.”³³⁶ In another telling statement, Roberts, commenting on a bump in box office revenue from \$2,000 to \$13,000 in 1974, stated: “We’re not dealing in Broadway grosses, just signs of vitality.”³³⁷ Thus, Clark Center proudly claimed its financial growth in the context of its marginality, a subordinate position which afforded experimentation—a vitalizing antidote to commercialism’s deadening effects.

Clark Center was not the only entity situating itself in contrast to commercialism in this era. The Judson Dance Theater and its milieu of postmodern dance artists emerging since the 1960s were self-determined renegades. As Yvonne Rainer’s “No Manifesto” forcefully underscored, postmodern dance was established as a disavowal of an orientation towards entertainment, beauty, and sophistication. “No to spectacle / No to virtuosity...No to the glamour and transcendency of the start image.”³³⁸ The geographic break generated by going “downtown” to the Judson Memorial Church expressed an ideological break with the commercialism of midtown (Broadway theater) and the propriety of uptown (dance). The same sort of disavowal was not available to dance artists of color, who were still working to establish legitimacy and gain a foothold in the concert and commercial dance arenas, as explained in the Introduction. In fact, the 1970s-80s saw a wave of black dancers in concert dance companies turning to commercial work. The success of *The Wiz*, a dance-heavy show, yielded a sudden swell in Broadway shows featuring black dancing ensembles.³³⁹ Meanwhile, the majority—though not all—of the Judsonites and postmodernists were white, a privilege which afforded them more

³³⁶ Clark Center Fact Sheet.

³³⁷ “Clark Center Checking ‘To Let’ Signs.”

³³⁸ Yvonne Rainer, “No Manifesto (1965, 2008),” in *Posthumanism in Art and Science*, eds. Susan McHugh and Giovanni Aloï (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 97.

³³⁹ Emily Hawk, “Civic Education and Artistic Innovation on New York City’s Dancemobile, 1967-1988,” *Journal of Urban History* (2023): 13.

mobility to turn against commercialism. Clark Center's predominantly of-color milieu, was less well positioned for such risk, such declarations of *anti*-commercialism.

Again, the geography is telling. As Jackson explains, the 92nd Street Y—much farther uptown than Clark Center and on the east side—“remained extremely active” in presenting dance in the 1960s, “but focused on more traditional forms of dance, with the occasional ballet company and ethnic dancer.”³⁴⁰ Jackson uses “traditional” here to describe modern dance and its various syncretisms with African and Asian influences authored by a number of choreographers. Such a broad deployment of the term is meant to contrast with the avant-garde—the postmodernists whose interventions were emerging in the same decade. But while dance-historical generalizations would lead us to believe these postmodern artists breaking with modern dance were solely downtown, Jackson is making an important historiographic intervention here. Postmodern dance artists *did* appear at the 92nd Street Y in this decade, “experimentalists” such as Sara Rudner, Laura Dean, Fred Herko, and Gus Solomons, Jr.³⁴¹ Their presence “indicate[d] that the Y was not completely disregarded by the new generation of choreographers.”³⁴² What's more, Jackson argues, the 92nd Street Y *prefigured* postmodernists' interventions. Their rebellious departures had been enabled and fostered through “the diverse choreographic ideas presented on the [92nd Street Y]'s stage” in the decades leading up to the 1960s.³⁴³

Jackson's maneuvers are well taken, as the history of Judson has dominated dance-historical discourse about the 1960s as though it were the only thing happening. Jackson makes clear that there was indeed *something else* happening, and that there was also *somewhere* else contributing to the incubation of that supposedly dominant thing of postmodern/downtown

³⁴⁰ Jackson, 217.

³⁴¹ Jackson, 218.

³⁴² Jackson, 218.

³⁴³ Jackson, 223.

dance. This history of Clark Center, too, labors to restore other places, peoples, and forms happening at the same time as Judson's emergence. As with the 92nd Street Y, there were also Clark Center people training and performing in postmodern forms, activities they undertook within the walls of Clark Center *and* downtown. As Wendy Perron points out, "a handful of dancers...shuttled between Clark Center and SoHo," a more specified part of downtown.³⁴⁴ In this handful, Perron identifies some of the same dancers as Jackson. Thus, one might make arguments akin to Jackson's but about Clark Center, contending that postmodernists were present at Clark Center and thus did not "disregard" this less-than-revolutionary place. While it would be hard to argue that Clark Center prefigured postmodernism, given that it was coeval with Judson, a related argument could still be made that Clark Center *contributed* to the emergence and development of postmodernism.

However, the particularities of Clark Center's pluralistic ethos and its midtown location ("arterial" to the commercial theater district) evidence an *altogether distinct genealogy*. Clark Center was its own multifarious crossing ground. In fact, part of what has made the midtown dance history of which Clark Center is a part difficult to historicize is the diffuseness born of its pluralism—of the many peoples and practices that came and went through its studios and programs. Postmodernism, while also marked by a great diversity of forms and approaches, has enjoyed a tidier historical narrative. The totalizing rhetoric of postmodernism is tractable. However any one individual did it, the group readily coheres as *against* modernism—if not in practice, then in discourse. Like Jackson's book, this project on Clark Center challenges the *intractable* hold of such accounts. It loosens up discursive space and bodies forth the

³⁴⁴ Wendy Perron, *The Grand Union: Accidental Anarchists of Downtown Dance, 1970-1976* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2020), 43.

un(der)historicized dancers, administrators, musicians, and audiences who congregated in midtown to participate in dance.

Clark Center's distinction was not just spatial and ideological but also material. The Center's facilities were modest, a condition the institution framed as a strength. "[Clark Center] has met, with prodigious success, the need for small arenas (maximum seating 350) for those emerging or middle level dance companies who works need either the intimacy of a small space or relief from the pressures of filling the over-sized theatres that abound."³⁴⁵ In this statement we see the critique of a capitalistic growth model that propounds expansion as the inevitable or universal goal. In contrast, some art may thrive in more intimate arrangements, necessitating a smaller scale. In the shadow of the commercial theater district, then, Clark Center not only flew in the face of the credo that bigger was better, providing "relief" from the exhaustion of inexhaustible growth, but it also undermined the exclusivity of the commercial industry, providing inclusive sanctuary for diverse peoples. Invoking the YWCA's greater mission of enfranchisement for the socially dispossessed, the statement declared, "We have created a relaxed, supportive, non-competitive atmosphere in which students, teachers, actors, dancers, choreographers, playwrights, directors, theatre technicians—members of the total ethnic and racial complexity of New York City—work together in uncommon harmony."³⁴⁶ Juxtaposing the diversity of performing arts workers with the ethnic and racial diversity of the city suggests a naturalness to these conditions—that one begets the other. If all artists are welcome, all colors are too—a wholly inclusive ethos. Thus, Clark Center is figured as multiply salubrious: a salve for the detriments of commercialism and also the ills of the color line.

³⁴⁵ Clark Center Fact Sheet.

³⁴⁶ Clark Center Fact Sheet.

These visions of relief, vitality, and inclusion included audiences too. For one, performing artists need audiences to try out their new works and ideas. Enabling artists to show their work in the same building in which they were making it was yet another aspect of Clark Center that the institution figured as a unique strength:

Clark Center's identity comes in large measure from the multiplicity of its activities. The school for dance is the only one that is an integral part of an organization that produces a wide variety of dance events in its own theatre—all part of the same facility. It is the only Off-Off-Broadway organization that undertakes to operate a full scale theatre for drama and for dance. There is an added vitality created by the fact that our performing arenas and the studios are jointly housed, and the support possibilities in the creation of new works are enhanced by this proximity. There is palpable evidence of a special energy created from the vibration of these diverse but synthesized elements.³⁴⁷

The metaphysical aura ascribed to the arts is especially evident here: “vitality,” “special energy,” “vibration.” Performance was key to this equation for Roberts, who was committed to stoking this synergy. From 1970 to 1974, the beginning of her tenure as director, the presentation of dance performances blossomed into a primary component of Clark Center's offerings. Notably, this period of expansion coincided with a decrease in the dance presenting operations of the 92nd Street Y. This downturn was occasioned by the retirement of William Kolodney, who had served as the 92nd Street Y's educational director since 1934.³⁴⁸ As Jackson details, it was Kolodney's efforts that had largely accounted for the emergence of the 92nd Street Y as an incubator for modern dance. While he was not a choreographer or dancer himself, his championing of dance was born of his “basic belief that the arts enrich the human spirit,” and a means towards his “overarching desire to bring together the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds.”³⁴⁹ Upon his departure, the 92nd Street Y's extensive offering of dance classes persisted but the presentation of dance

³⁴⁷ Clark Center Fact Sheet.

³⁴⁸ Jackson, 7.

³⁴⁹ Jackson, 8.

considerably waned.³⁵⁰ No doubt, this left a gap in the concert dance ecosystem, one which Roberts—ever the dance champion—was ready to fill.

Clark Center’s solidification as a venue for dance was facilitated by improvements to the 500-seat Clark Auditorium in the early part of the 1970s. These included renovations to the stage floor—which was enlarged, lowered, and sprung—as well as the acquisition of new technical elements, including sound equipment, soft goods, and lighting instruments. The enhanced production level and flexibility of the space resulted in a surge of interest. As Roberts recalled, “Clark Center was in such great demand, we could not keep up with requests to be part of its production schedule.”³⁵¹ Of the many choreographers and companies presented in these years, several were in their formative period. Clark Center’s stewardship proved a crucial step in their launch, growth, and establishment. In addition to Tina Ramirez’s Ballet Hispánico (Chapter 1), the careers of Dianne McIntyre and George Faison were also launched by the Center in this period. Both part of the New Choreographers cohort in 1971, McIntyre and Faison were given the resources to develop choreographic works for presentation. Within just a couple of years, McIntyre would start her own company and school (elaborated in Chapter 4), and Faison would win a Tony Award for choreographing *The Wiz* on Broadway, as previously mentioned. Roberts’ support was a catalyst in these trajectories. Speaking in the late 1970s, she proudly claimed the Center’s illustrious progeny, declaring: “The Faison’s, [Kei] Takei’s, [Fred] Benjamin’s and all the fabulous etceteras can be seen dancing all over the world.”³⁵²

³⁵⁰ Jackson, 218.

³⁵¹ Roberts, Clark Center 20-year Retrospective Statement.

³⁵² Roberts, Clark Center 20-year Retrospective Statement.

The Birth of Playwrights Horizons

Starting in 1972, Clark Center's dance productions and classes were placed under the banner of "Dance Horizons." This dance-specific moniker occurred as a result of a theater entity that emerged within Clark Center known as Playwrights Horizon. While Roberts was most committed to dance, she formalized organizational space for theater within Clark Center due to the presence of a physical space well suited to it within the YWCA. Initially a dilapidated studio, Roberts marked off this space she envisioned for theater purposes by hanging a sign that dubbed it "The Studio Theatre." To actualize this vision, in 1971 she sought out Robert Moss, director of the recently shuttered Playwrights Unit.

Playwrights Unit had been founded in 1963 as a theater-producing venture collaboratively helmed by playwright Edward Albee and theater producers Richard Barr and Clinton Wilder. Under the auspices of their jointly held not-for-profit organization Albarwild Theatre Arts, Inc. (a portmanteau of their last names), Playwrights Unit was initially funded by Albee, who drew from the profits of his hugely successful play on Broadway, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* While the Albarwild trio had already been producing shows at the Cherry Lane Theatre, an off-Broadway house, their new Playwrights Unit was based at the Village South Theatre in Manhattan's Hudson Square neighborhood.³⁵³ Between 1963 and 1971, dozens of new plays were produced there, most of them mounted as full productions brought to life by theater professionals.³⁵⁴

³⁵³ The address of the Cherry Lane Theatre was 15 Vandam Street, New York, New York. Today it is known as SoHo Playhouse.

³⁵⁴ David Crespy, "Paradigm for New Play Development: The Albee-Barr-Wilder Playwrights Unit," in *The Sixties, Center Stage: Mainstream and Popular Performances in a Turbulent Decade*, edited by James M. Harding and Cindy Rosenthal (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 121.

Such full-scale productions were a defining aspect of the model of play development inaugurated by Playwrights Unit, theater scholar David Crespy explains. As opposed to protracted trial periods in which plays were subjected to incremental tweaks (whether in out-of-town previews or workshops and readings), Barr and Wilder in particular believed in mounting productions of new plays from the outset, as this provided a fuller and truer sense of its commercial viability.³⁵⁵ This interest in commercial viability, however, did not mean that they shied away from supporting experimental works—quite the contrary. Playwright Units was fundamentally guided by a playwright-centered ethos that valued and made space for experimentation. Quoting Albee from a personal interview, Crespy offers the insight that “Albee’s guiding instruction when it comes to the training of playwrights in the theater, now and during the tenure of the Playwrights Unit, is, ‘Every time you write a play, try to fail...Do what you don’t know you can do.’”³⁵⁶ Playwrights were given such space by a light-handed approach from the organization’s managers and producers, a reconfiguration of hierarchies that prioritized the relationship between playwright and director.³⁵⁷

Playwrights Unit’s model of theater development as a “playwrights’ workshop” or “playwrights’ laboratory” would prove a formative intervention in New York City’s—and thus the national—theater industry despite its short life. Firstly, this model had troubled the line dividing commercial and experimental theater, or Broadway and off-/off-Broadway theater. Several of the new plays produced by Playwrights Unit went on to bigger theaters and proved commercially successful. Of particular note in the list of plays that started at Playwrights Unit were *Dutchman* by Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones at the time), produced in its inaugural 1963-64

³⁵⁵ Crespy, “Paradigm for New Play Development,” 119.

³⁵⁶ Crespy, “Paradigm for New Play Development,” 118.

³⁵⁷ Crespy, “Paradigm for New Play Development,” 121.

season, and *The Boys in the Band* by Matt Crowley, produced in 1968. As Crespy puts it, “the Unit gave off-off-Broadway playwrights crossover opportunities to the commercial theater, blurring the boundaries between the two.”³⁵⁸ In so doing, Playwrights Unit “made it possible for the experimentation of noncommercial radical theater to organically influence and, ultimately, to transform the commercial mainstream theater.”³⁵⁹ Moreover, when it folded in 1971, it spawned several new playwright-centered theater spaces, most directly Playwrights Horizons.³⁶⁰

It is no surprise that Moss, when looking for a new home to continue the Unit’s experimental paradigm of theater making, must have found with Roberts a quick affinity. The invitation-to-fail ethos guiding the Unit bore resounding resonance with statements made by Roberts vis-à-vis Clark Center. While Roberts sought to provide space for artistic experimentation, too, her sights were set on dance. By convincing Moss to merge their interests under the banner of Clark Center,³⁶¹ Roberts was freed up to focus more intently on the Center’s dance-based activities. This merger occasioned an institutional split: Moss would helm a new sub-organization within Clark Center known as Playwrights Horizons, while Clark Center’s dance programming would now fall under the new title of Dance Horizons. Officially and functionally, however, Roberts maintained her role as director of Clark Center, ultimately overseeing the entire operation. That Playwrights Horizons originated in Clark Center and the West Side YWCA is historiographically significant. The legacy of the playwrights-workshop model of theater making is indebted to the black-centric, dance-based, social service-oriented institutions with which it shared space in ways that warrant further study.

³⁵⁸ Crespy, “Paradigm for New Play Development,” 117.

³⁵⁹ Crespy, “Paradigm for New Play Development,” 117.

³⁶⁰ Crespy, “Paradigm for New Play Development,” 118.

³⁶¹ Joan Chanin (Clark Center’s administrative director) described Roberts’ impassioned efforts to persuade Moss to join Clark Center. Roberts even offered that she could share her salary with him—“not that her salary was big enough for her to do that.” Chanin, discussion.

Playwrights Horizons moved into the large room Roberts had cleaned up and named the Studio Theatre. Within a few months, in the summer of 1972, the space was further refurbished. Enhancements to the lighting system expanded the possibilities for inviting audiences to experience new plays with production elements,³⁶² as had been the case at Playwrights Unit. While the Studio Theatre was an “unstructured,” flexible space,³⁶³ it could accommodate an audience of up to 100, constituting an off-off-Broadway theater. Plus, unlike Clark Center’s dance spaces, the Studio Theatre was air conditioned, as Roberts was sure to point out in her mailer announcing the inauguration of Playwrights Horizons.³⁶⁴ Moss sent his own mailers, too, using the Unit’s former mailing list.³⁶⁵ With that, Playwrights Horizons’ activities grew quickly.

The 1972-73 season featured several productions of varying formats. As Moss described in a letter to patrons, opening that season was a split-bill program featuring works by three writers: “two short ‘animal fantasies’ by Jonathan Levy, followed by a “‘traditional, realistic, mordant comedy-drama by Harvey Zuckerman in seventeen pages.’ Concluding the evening will be ‘a piece by Tom Topor ‘with all the colors of paradise, plus peanut brittle.’”³⁶⁶ He went on to advertise a work “by the Quarry Theatre Corps, under the direction of Barnet Kellman, emanating from Colgate University,” to be performed in the Clark Auditorium due to its large scale. Following this were several more works happening in the Studio Theatre all before Thanksgiving, including one-act plays, an opera, and a musical.³⁶⁷ While many of Playwrights

³⁶² Robert Moss, 1972-1973 Playwrights Horizons season announcement, Letter, Undated, Box 11, Folder 10, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

³⁶³ Louise Roberts, Playwrights Horizons announcement, Letter, Undated, Box 11, Folder 10, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

³⁶⁴ Roberts, Playwrights Horizons season announcement.

³⁶⁵ “With a mailing list borrowed from the Playwrights Unit, Moss then founded Playwrights Horizons at the Clark Center for the Performing Arts. In a very real sense, Playwrights Horizons sprang forth directly from that mailing list, which Moss took as his final payment as the Unit’s last manager” (Crespy, 127).

³⁶⁶ Moss.

³⁶⁷ Moss.

Horizons' shows were free, some charged a low cost for admission. Additionally, Moss would stand at the doorway after performances with a bag to collect voluntary donations from those in attendance.³⁶⁸ At once acknowledging the importance of these contributions and underscoring the process-based orientation of the organization, Moss concluded his season announcement mailer thusly: "Your dollars at each performance are a vital contribution to our operation, but your physical presence, giving unbiased feedback to the new writer is the primary and wonderful contribution that you make!"³⁶⁹

By 1974, Playwrights Horizons had managed to live up to the legacy of Playwrights Unit, becoming a pipeline through which new works were transferred to larger venues. Such transfers to off-Broadway and/or Broadway included: *Santa Anita* by Allan Knee, *Boo Hoo* by Philip Magdalany, and *Secret Place* by Garret Morris.³⁷⁰ As previously mentioned, the hope of identifying commercially viable new works had been on the minds of the founders of the Unit; experimentation was not seen as something at odds with commercialism but rather as something that could nourish commercial theater with its next gems. Ironically, however, it was the immense critical acclaim (and subsequent commercial success) garnered by some of the Unit's productions—and one in particular—to which the organization's demise would be attributed. When *The Boys in the Band* premiered at the Unit in 1968, it received a swell of attention uncharacteristic for off-off-Broadway theater. What was once a marginal pocket of the theater world, became subject to—if not incorporated into—the fold of mainstream critical press.³⁷¹

³⁶⁸ Moss.

³⁶⁹ Moss.

³⁷⁰ Clark Center Fact Sheet.

³⁷¹ The increasing critical attention paid off-off-Broadway began at the Circle Repertory Company, according to Mary S. Ryzuk. "Until the establishment of the Circle Theatre and, several years later, Playwrights Horizons, the only off-off-Broadway theatre had been the Cino—now gone—along with La Mama and the Judson Poets Theatre. The Circle Rep was the first major off-off-Broadway theatre to attract prominent critics by providing new American plays for off-Broadway after their premieres at the loft." Mary S. Ryzuk, *The Circle Repertory Company: The First Fifteen Years* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989), 117.

While some may have celebrated the increased critical attention, others lamented the loss of artistic liberty born of being peripheral.³⁷²

On Broadway/No Broadway: Theater versus Dance

That Playwrights Horizons and Dance Horizons were both under the same auspices at the YWCA makes Clark Center a salient site of comparison for theater versus dance in 1970s New York City. The position of each vis-à-vis commercialism varied greatly. For one, theater had the stratification of theater sizes—ranging from off-off-Broadway to Broadway—providing a shorthand for degrees of commercial success. Whether the playwright of a show originating off-/off-Broadway had any desire to “ascend” to Broadway, this paradigm inevitably structured discourse around her show, haunting it with the presumption of ascension as *the* proper goal.³⁷³ Theater was, after all, a business and an industry. Producers and theater managers, tending to the financial circumstances of a given project, were the inevitable reminder of this reality. It was the primacy of these theater professionals and their eyes on the “bottom line” that made the playwrights-workshop model of theater (in which these figures were less central) an intervention. When the necessity for a lucrative product did not dictate operations, creative process could be prioritized.

Concert dance is also, of course, a business. Or at the very least, it has always existed in relation to the same market logics, ideologies, and structures as every other aspect of life and livelihood under American capitalism. Crucially, however, for what Broadway is to theater,

³⁷² Crespy quotes playwright John Guare speaking to the freedom he had once felt on off-off-Broadway. Guare sums up the change brought on by the increased critical attention this way: “Off-off-Broadway had become something that fed commercial theatre rather than being experimental.” Crespy, “Paradigm for New Play Development,” 130.

³⁷³ Banes notes the following distinction: “The goal for Off-Broadway actors and productions had been to move up to Broadway. But for Off-Off-Broadway, graduating to Off-Broadway—leaving the alternative home and the alternative community—was a fate to be avoided, for it altered the relations of production, turning artists into alienated labor.” Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963*, 46.

concert dance has no analogue. Shows on Broadway hope to run for a long time. Musicals that have run for record-setting lengths of time, such as *Phantom of the Opera* and *Wicked*, are household pop-cultural factoids. As such, the “business” of Broadway is no secret. It is well understood that shows will persist for as long as they are lucrative, and that a process of speculation predicated on good profits preceded anything having made it to that stage (in both senses of the word). With concert dance, however, long show runs in a single theater have not been a convention. To this day, even popular, financially successful companies have shows that run for a few weeks at most, but more often only for a single weekend. A 1976 *New York Times* article mentioning the work of Clark Center dance artist Kei Takei, for example, described her “18-performance run” as “an unusually long season for a modern-dance company.”³⁷⁴ The norm of brief show runs evidences the peripheral position of concert dance in relation to commercial show business. While commercial viability hinges upon mainstream success, concert dance both in its identifications *and* dis-identifications with high culture has tended to evade such an orientation. In her discussion of the Brooklyn Academy of Music as a presenter of avant-garde performance, urban historian Julia Foulkes calls this the “marginality of modern dance.”³⁷⁵

While concert dance, then, has always already been peripheral to commercialism,³⁷⁶ I hasten to add that there are concert dance entities that have achieved what might rightly be called commercial successes. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AADT) is the exemplar. This company has enjoyed unparalleled success as a full-time dance company to this day.

³⁷⁴ “Dancing Will Honor Clark Center Head,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1976.

³⁷⁵ Julia Foulkes, “Streets and Stages: Urban Renewal and the Arts After World War II,” *Journal of Social History* 44, No. 2 (Winter 2010), 429.

³⁷⁶ This isn’t to say dance is absent from the commercial arena. It certainly exists there, and “commercial dance” is a meaningful term. Commercial dance has tended to refer to dance in the context of popular film, television, and music (e.g., music videos, backup dancers). This was previously discussed vis-à-vis Roberts’ time at the June Taylor School, where dancers were training for and working in gigs like the Jackie Gleason Show and *West Side Story* on Broadway.

Unparalleled, nevertheless, in the context of concert dance is still a great distance from the operating budgets and show runs (in terms of frequency) of Broadway. The case of Ailey is a telling one for distinguishing between Clark Center and Playwrights Horizons. Playwrights Horizons (like Playwrights Unit before it) maintained an orientation—or at least an openness—towards the commercial arena. Ailey could be considered in a similar vein: a hugely successful artist who was first nurtured and therefore “discovered” by the fledgling Clark Center. But, as previously discussed, Ailey’s trajectory was not the one that Roberts had in mind when fostering talent at the Center. And yet, this difference could have as much to do with the general lack of infrastructure for such a career within concert dance as it was Roberts’ personal conviction. That is, her intentions may have been delimited by the shape of the dance field and what tended to be possible.

Given the condition of concert dance as generally un-commercial, when Roberts declared in her Clark Center description that the Center’s “value system can be considered arterial to the commercial theatre—but never to enter it,”³⁷⁷ she was actually reiterating a fundamental condition rather than a unique institutional ethos. Especially telling of the paradigmatic split between theater and dance in their relationship to commercialism was a 1974 “Fact Sheet” compiled by Clark Center’s staff. This document listed a number of choreographers “whose creative lives have been launched, assisted or enhanced by Clark Center.”³⁷⁸ Following this was a description of Playwrights Horizons, including the cheerful mention of the off-Broadway/Broadway transfers mentioned above. And then, “Our pride in this history and achievement extends to a remarkable list of dance teachers which includes James Truitte, Thelma

³⁷⁷ Clark Center Fact Sheet.

³⁷⁸ Clark Center Fact Sheet.

Hill, Charles Moore, Pepsi Bethel and Lenore Latimer...³⁷⁹ Nowhere in this list of teachers or the list of choreographers preceding it was there a mention of the kinds of accolades referenced about Playwrights Horizons. There were, after all, no metrics for concert dance that rivaled the grandiosity of a Broadway transfer. This is not to argue that the illustrious dance artists in these lists were any lesser than the theater artists. It is, rather, to point out this discursive difference as indicative of an infrastructural difference vis-à-vis commercialism in New York City theater versus dance.

However uninterested Roberts may have been in casting Clark Center into the commercial fold, she was deeply devoted to producing and presenting live dance performances. This commitment was clearly evidenced by the robust slate of dance shows presented during the first few years of her directorship and her decision to funnel funds into refurbishing both Clark Auditorium and the Studio Theatre. Additionally, these decisions were preceded by an institutional commitment already firmly in place. A course schedule from 1964, almost six years before Roberts' start, indicated that classes were offered on Mondays through Thursdays, with Friday, Saturdays, and Sundays blocked off for "rehearsals and performances."³⁸⁰ As with Playwrights Horizons, performances produced under the auspices of Dance Horizons were similarly affordably priced, often enabling audiences to see the work of multiple choreographers for a dollar or two. It was not just that Roberts understood live performance to be an essential opportunity for the creative development of dance works and dance companies, but it was also about developing dance audiences, introducing them and the field to a greater diversity of voices, and cultivating dance literacies. This necessitated pluralistic curation, as Roberts explained in 1974: "I strive for variety in programming, and that means trying out experimental

³⁷⁹ Clark Center Fact Sheet.

³⁸⁰ Clark Center for the Performing Arts Spring Term, 1964.

works...Reviews don't influence me at all in choosing groups because they contain a strong element of personal taste."³⁸¹

This quote from an article in *Dance Magazine* was part of a special issue dedicated to what it termed "new dance." As the opening editorial statement made clear, the issue intended to interrogate the new paradigm as much as celebrate it:

Call it avant-garde, experimental, 'new dance' or whatever you like, the work of young, innovative choreographers who choose to think of themselves as equally divorced from 'ballet' and 'modern dance' is becoming increasingly significant to the dance world as a whole. This month's entire feature section examines this current phenomenon, attempting some sort of definition and explanation...and examining the spaces where new dances are happening...and the 'schools' where the new 'techniques' are being taught.³⁸²

In 1974, the hardened, now-commonplace terms of "postmodern" and "downtown" had not yet emerged, at least not in this popular press. But the use of scare quotes and flippant tone regarding "new dance" suggest a skepticism about all this purported new-ness.³⁸³ That this was the tenor of the statement framing this *Dance Magazine* is striking for the lack of seriousness it granted the very thing to which it had chosen to devote a special issue. Notably, several of the choreographers profiled across the issue had ties with Clark Center, including Phoebe Neville, Rudy Perez, Kei Takei, and Meredith Monk.³⁸⁴ Clark Center itself was profiled in an article by Louise Pastore called "Here, There and Everywhere: Oases for Modern Dance." Pastore started with the 92nd Street Y and its historic past before turning to "another 'Y,'" the West Side

³⁸¹ Louise Roberts quoted in Pastore, 63.

³⁸² *Dance Magazine*, April 1974, 3.

³⁸³ Notably, what would come to be called "modern dance" was also first termed "new dance" when it emerged in the early 20th century. "Modern," like "new," generates a problematic temporal paradigm whereby successive phenomena must define themselves with labels designating something newer *yet*. The new(er) "new dance" succeeding "modern dance" (that this special issue was examining) would be "postmodern" dance, which would also be variously marked as "downtown," "experimental," and "avant-garde" dance. See Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 11.

³⁸⁴ Clark Center is first referenced by name in an article by Marcia Siegel. She mentions that the eighth installment of Kei Takei's *Light* series premiered at Clark Center's 1974 festival of solos. Marcia Siegel, "Individuality, Image and the Demise of the Coterie," *Dance Magazine*, April 1974, 42.

YWCA's Clark Center. While the article's coverage of Clark Center stayed firmly in the realm of reportage—detailing updates to the theater space and the resources offered to the choreographers it presented—Clark Center's very inclusion in this survey of spaces spoke to its significance in “new” dance, at least in Pastore's estimation.

More overtly laudatory was a statement by theater critic Emory Lewis in his review for Playwrights Horizons' production of Dennis Andersen's *The Girls Most Likely to Succeed* in May of 1973. Before saying anything of the play itself, Lewis began, “The Clark Center for the Performing Arts on West 51st Street has become one of New York's most valuable laboratories for new theater and dance directions. Louise Roberts and her enterprising staff should be given all sorts of foundation money.”³⁸⁵ Interestingly, Lewis too used the term “new,” yet he seemed to do so uncritically as a general description of the as-yet-unproduced works Clark Center presented. Undoubtedly, Roberts and Moss were immeasurably grateful for the superlative recognition, particularly its fundraising declaration. For, however important the space and resources they were providing may have been, the organization struggled financially. As Roberts put it in 1974, “We continue to live by the beg, borrow and scrounge rule.”³⁸⁶

And it wasn't just Clark Center that was financially squeezed. Later that same year, “the YWCA suffered a sharp financial reversal that forced it to close six of its branches, 51st Street included, in August 1974.”³⁸⁷ Clark Center was losing its home of fifteen years.

³⁸⁵ Emory Lewis, Review of Dennis Andersen's play “The Girls Most Likely to Succeed,” *The Record*, May 11, 1973.

³⁸⁶ Louise Roberts quoted in Pastore, 63.

³⁸⁷ Bianco, 184.

Turning Outdoors: Vital Public Space

The YWCA reported that its Manhattan locations “hav[ing] declined in popularity in recent years” necessitated the closure of the West Side building and others due to a “lack of funds and customers.”³⁸⁸ The closure entailed the displacement not only of Clark Center and its sub-organizations but the West Side YWCA’s other departments too. In the case of the Laura Spelman Residence Club, this meant the eviction of residents, including students of a City University program known as SEEK. A *New York Daily News* article from August 28, 1974 described a protest by these students: “150 strong, picket[ed] intermittently to dramatize their desire to stay in the residence club” rather than relocate to a Times Square hotel where they would be temporarily housed. Yet not all departments were left to fend for their own fates. The popular Craft Students League was relocated by the YWCA organization to its building on the east side of Manhattan at 53rd Street and Lexington Avenue.³⁸⁹ Roberts was disturbed by the Y’s unwillingness to continue hosting Clark Center. While the Y had funded the Center, the Center had also “operated without a deficit since its inception,” Roberts pointed out.³⁹⁰ She tried convincing the Y to let Clark Center continue temporarily, but to no avail.³⁹¹ “[I]n closing down the building,” she declared, “the directors of the YWCA have shown no regard for the prospering youthful people project.”³⁹²

Meanwhile, Ailey’s company was experiencing difficulties of its own in the early 1970s. Despite promising economic growth in the middle part of the decade—years which included a statement by *Variety* magazine that Ailey’s company was the highest-grossing dance company in

³⁸⁸ “Students Seek Stay of Eviction,” *New York Daily News*, August 28, 1974.

³⁸⁹ Damien Cave, “Y.W.C.A.’s Sale Costs Longtime Crafts League its Home,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/13/nyregion/ywcas-sale-costs-longtime-crafts-league-its-home.html>.

³⁹⁰ “Clark Center Seeking New Home: YWCA Closing Down Its Building,” *Show Business*, July 18, 1974.

³⁹¹ “Clark Center Checking ‘To Let’ Signs.”

³⁹² Louise Roberts quoted in *Show Business*.

the U.S.³⁹³—ongoing financial precarity was the norm, not the exception.³⁹⁴ By June of 1977, deficits were so severe that Ailey cancelled a two-week show run scheduled at the New York State Theater.³⁹⁵ Each fiscal year brought a renewed possibility of shuttering, often requiring last-minute financial wizardry to make ends meet and stay afloat.³⁹⁶ This work fell to his close confidants-cum-administrators—Ivy Clarke in the 1970s—but also to himself. Dancer Lelia Goldoni recounted Ailey lamenting “that he was so busy being an administrator he had no time to be a choreographer.”³⁹⁷ It was perhaps then a great relief when in 1974, the company was granted \$35,000 to put on a series of outdoor park concerts in New York City. Specifically, the company was to give five concerts, one in each borough, free to the public. A *Dance Magazine* article from that April, which captured how the city intended for the series to act as a lifeboat for the company, is worth quoting at length.

In announcing the allocation, Edwin L. Weisl, Jr., Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs administrator, said that by engaging the Ailey company for the summer performances, ‘we will not only bring productions by this outstanding organization to the public, but we also are clearly and emphatically declaring the city’s support of this company, and all that it has grown to mean in our city and in the world of dance.’...Mr. Weisl, referring to the financial problems plaguing the Ailey company, said he hoped the city’s ‘declaration of governmental backing would launch a series of contributions from individuals, foundations and the business sector.’...Calling the company, ‘more uniquely New York than any company in the city now,’ Mr. Weisl said that ‘for New York to lose Alvin Ailey would be a lot more serious than it would be for it to lose one of its treasured landmarks...It cannot be allowed to be lost.’...The Parks administration has, in the past, supported park programs by the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera, the New York Public Theater’s Shakespeare Company and such umbrella projects as Dancemobile. However, the \$35,000 allocation to Ailey is believed to be the administration’s largest allocation to a single dance company.³⁹⁸

³⁹³ Jennifer Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 311.

³⁹⁴ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 311.

³⁹⁵ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 312.

³⁹⁶ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 284.

³⁹⁷ Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 312.

³⁹⁸ *Dance Magazine*, April 1974, 4.

The superlative tone of Weisl's comments made clear how widely beloved Ailey's company was by this point. The article gave little context as to the causes for the company's financial strain, but it offered from Weisl a key rationale for the free concerts: that audiences and entities of all scales—public and private—would be moved to donate. In essence, he casted the concerts as a kind of public announcement, hailing his fellow New Yorkers to help save the ailing company. His grandiose terms labored towards that end, both reflecting and further generating veneration of the company.

Strikingly, that same year, Clark Center underwent a change that would lead Roberts to turn to outdoor space for performances too. Utilizing the CUNY Graduate Center Mall—an outdoor walkway across the street from Bryant Park—Roberts inaugurated a summer dance festival series. This festival will be elaborated later in the chapter, but suffice it to say for now that passersby on the street witnessed the activities of this festival. Given this use of public space, many more people were exposed to concert dance in those encounters than would have been otherwise. Both Ailey's company and Clark Center, in the face of hardship, benefitted from public, outdoor engagements that would help sustain them and bring them closer to the public. Thus, although they were administratively split by the 1970s, notable parallels between Ailey's company and Clark Center persisted into this decade.

Dancemobile was another notable example of the use of public street space that sought to bring concert dance to people who might not otherwise see it. Mentioned above in Weisl's list of recipients of city funds, Dancemobile was an initiative of the Harlem Cultural Council. Utilizing a flatbed truck outfitted as a makeshift stage, the Dancemobile was a moveable dance theater that brought concert dance by black choreographers into black communities in Harlem and the other four boroughs. Inaugurating the Dancemobile was a performance by Eleo Pomare of his solo

Junkie at the intersection of 134th Street and Lenox Avenue in July 1967. Its theme of drug addiction was indicative of the kinds of social and political issues plaguing black communities that were often featured in Dancemobile’s programming. That said, a wide range of aesthetics, choreographic approaches, and dance forms appeared on the stage through the years, reflecting the breadth of black expression. Many Clark Center-affiliated artists presented work on the Dancemobile, including McIntyre and Faison. Moreover, auditions to perform in its season were held at Clark Center in the early 1970s.³⁹⁹ Operating until 1988, its reach and impacts were significant. As cultural historian Emily Hawks notes,

By bringing dance directly into communities...Dancemobile reached a diverse audience in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and age—far more diverse than audiences for mainstream, proscenium stage performances in the same era. Dancemobile choreographers trusted that their audiences did not need concert-going experience to enjoy a dance performance, appreciate its aesthetics, or glean its political message. As choreographer Rod Rodgers mused at a 1969 Dancemobile performance, ‘It doesn’t take years of concertgoing to develop a taste for this, does it? To understand it, to dance it?’ Dancemobile thus deployed live performance as a course of action to combat the isolating effects of New York’s postwar urban renewal projects, as it brought marginalized communities into public spaces for fellowship, entertainment, and conversation.⁴⁰⁰

Such generative use of public space was wrought of lack. Harlem had a dearth of theater spaces, despite its status as a cultural mecca of black culture engendered during the Harlem Renaissance.⁴⁰¹ In addition to Dancemobile and its roving possibilities, other cultural gatherings specific to Harlem’s outdoors were implemented.

The Harlem Cultural Festival, also started in the summer of 1967, entailed weeks of cultural programming, including concerts featuring jazz, gospel, soul, and funk musical legends. These outdoor concerts became part of a coordinated effort by the municipal government and

³⁹⁹ See “Dancemobile - 1970,” *The Feet* 1, no. 1 (June 1970): 2.

⁴⁰⁰ Hawk, 3-4.

⁴⁰¹ Hawk, 5.

law enforcement to pacify unrest and tone down political uprisings in black neighborhoods, a tactic known as “cool out.” Perhaps the most prominent example of such an effort came in the wake of the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., which resulted in outpourings of grief and rage in the streets. To quell the intensity and encourage people to stay in, officials in Boston arranged for James Brown to give a concert which would be nationally televised. As Dixon Gottschild notes, “Brown was brokered as a political tool, part of a bread-and-circuses move to offset potential racial unrest following the murder.”⁴⁰² New York City Mayor Lindsay, looking for ways to pacify the streets in his own city, is well known for having “walked in Harlem on the night of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination in 1968, a gesture credited with preventing riots in New York in the aftermath.”⁴⁰³ Lindsay deployed the Harlem Cultural Festival and Dancemobile towards similar ends, intending to quell political uprising via cultural programming. Thus, contradictory factors were at play in government-supported transfusions of black culture into the public. Such efforts both energized the vitality of black communities *and* aimed to zap any energy that could spill over into insurgency.

A related contradiction marked Lincoln Center’s Out of Doors Festival. Inaugurated in 1970, this outdoor performance series on its Fountain Plaza continues to this day.⁴⁰⁴ Located ten blocks north of the West Side YWCA, Lincoln Center was an illustrious, federally funded complex of performing arts venues masterminded by urban planner Robert Moses, which will be further detailed in Chapter 3. A grand plan in urban renewal, the Center occupied land that had been razed for its construction, obliterating the San Juan Hill neighborhood and displacing the predominantly working-class Puerto Rican and African American communities living there. The

⁴⁰² Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 119.

⁴⁰³ Hawk, 7.

⁴⁰⁴ Foulkes, “Streets and Stages,” 420.

area's new residents were whiter and more affluent, a social profile intended to match Lincoln Center's high-culture fare in opera, symphonic music, and ballet.

As Foulkes notes, however, the area's residents and audiences were not altogether homogenous; people of color continued to live in and frequent the area.⁴⁰⁵ Putting her analysis in terms of the "street" versus the "stage," Foulkes notes that while such people in the surrounding streets may not have been historically represented in the Europeanist art forms appearing on Lincoln Center's stages, the venue did make some effort to bridge this gap. By hosting performances on Fountain Plaza, the large outdoor space at the center of the complex, Lincoln Center extended its stage space out into the street—or, put another way, turned its street space into a stage. The Out of Doors Festival "featured a wider variety of people and art" than Lincoln Center's typical programming, "from Latin American popular music to community-based organizations and youth groups."⁴⁰⁶ Notably, it also "served as the first major formal performance venue for hip hop" in August 1981.⁴⁰⁷ Yet while Out of Doors made space for artists of color and non-Europeanist art forms, its spatial arrangement reproduced the very hierarchy on which it was clearly predicated. Artists and forms belonging to the "street" remained relegated to that outdoor space, invited to be proximal to the gleaming fortress that was Lincoln Center but not to enter it. The enfranchisement was a partial one, and tokenization was its cost of admission. As with Dancemobile, such a tradeoff evidenced the contradictions of institutional support. Clark Center, too, would reveal contradictions that inhered in municipal support for the arts but of a different sort, as I will show.

⁴⁰⁵ Foulkes, "Streets and Stages," 419.

⁴⁰⁶ Foulkes, "Streets and Stages," 420.

⁴⁰⁷ Foulkes, "Streets and Stages," 420.

Playwrights Horizons Moves to 42nd Street

Reeling from the news of the YWCA's closure, Roberts and Moss initially intended to stay together. They attempted to find a new space that could accommodate both the dance and the theater-based activities that had comprised the Center since Playwrights Horizons' emergence in 1972. Broadcasting their need far and wide, the *New York Times* ran an article on Friday, August 9, 1974 titled "Clark Center Checking 'To Let' Signs." Capitalizing on its association with the illustrious Ailey, the article featured a large photograph of the choreographer, arms akimbo, looking wistfully into the distance beyond the camera. The presence of a ballet barre behind him with a person leaning against it alerted the viewer to the dance studio setting of the photograph. Whether or not the photo was taken inside Clark Center is uncertain. But the article made clear that while Ailey's company was no longer based at the Center, "company members still gather[ed] at the Center to board the buses which [took] them on our," adding that Ailey referred to it as "our ritual home."⁴⁰⁸ Ailey was further quoted on the dearth of dance studios "which opened themselves to black dancers," citing Clark Center and the New Dance Group as important exceptions. The achievements of Playwrights Horizons were also touted—having "produced 70 plays in the two and half years since [its] start"⁴⁰⁹—foregrounding Roberts' intention to keep the organization intact.

Part of the difficulty in doing so proved to be finding a space suitable for dance. To be safe for the repeated high-impact actions on the body, a floor needed to be not too hard, and more ideally yet, the floor would be sprung. Moreover, floors needed to be smooth and clean, so students in modern dance, Hindu dance, and other classes could dance barefoot without acquiring splinters or cuts. Ballet classes called for barres along the sides of the room and

⁴⁰⁸ "Clark Center Checking 'To Let' Signs."

⁴⁰⁹ "Clark Center Checking 'To Let' Signs."

mirrors, too. Tap, on the other hand, needed a floor that could withstand the percussive footwork of shoes with taps. And all of this was to say nothing of dressing rooms, bathrooms, administrative offices, and a theater—key to presenting dance performances, now a vital part of Clark Center’s dance offerings.

As Roberts noted some years after the fact, “The problems of finding adequate, suitable, affordable space were multiplied by the phenomenal growth of interest in the 1970s in participating in dance and physical fitness programs.”⁴¹⁰ This was the beginning of what would become the full-blown aerobics trend of the 1980s. Thus, exercise classes became a contender and potential competitor for the same spaces (and students) in which Clark Center was situated. Many dance teachers and studios capitalized on this trend, offering exercise-oriented classes.⁴¹¹ But while it offered “Body Conditioning” (i.e., Pilates), Clark Center was first and foremost a dance organization and was committed to maintaining that identity. It needed to find a dance-ready space it could afford, and location mattered. Key to the YWCA’s ideality had been its position in midtown, close to the theater district, other dance studios, as well as major subway hubs. A July 1974 article in *Show Business* about the Center’s search for a new home quoted Roberts as saying she believed the Center “should remain on the Westside to ‘continue to attract its universal audiences and students.’”

As Clark Center’s fate hung in the balance, the urgency expressed in newspaper articles clearly resonated. At least two letters dated August and addressed to Roberts from prospective spaces mention the press coverage, expressing sympathy for Clark Center’s plight. One from the Executive Director of the Dance Notation Bureau - Center for Movement Research and Analysis,

⁴¹⁰ Roberts, Clark Center 20-year Retrospective Statement.

⁴¹¹ For example, Clark Center student Dr. Jacqueline Sawyer began offering her own Pilates-based exercise class she called “Sawyer-obics” at a studio above the Center (elaborated in Conclusion).

located at 19 Union Square West, extended a helping hand with a studio rental offer.⁴¹² This, of course, was an unfit long-term solution, as Clark Center was its own institution and was not looking to be the client of another. Another letter from Franklin Savings Bank explained that while they were no longer using their “old Bank building” after their relocation to Madison Avenue, they were following the guidance of a hired firm who advised demolition of the building.⁴¹³ In the context of redevelopment efforts in Manhattan, this was especially telling. Real estate logics of development, privileging profits above all else, meant destruction rather than re-use, even in the face of humanistic, if not humanitarian, need.

It was these same logics that accounted in part for the financial circumstances that led to the YWCA’s closing as well as what would happen next for Playwrights Horizons. While Roberts was searching for a joint home, Moss had his eye on a space on 42nd Street, that storied boulevard of commercial theater fame. This rundown theater space, however, was further west than what was considered the theater district at that point, between Ninth and Tenth Avenues. When Moss decided to sign the lease on 422 West 42nd Street, he materialized what would prove to be a formative step in radical and swift changes to the identity of Times Square and its surrounding neighborhoods. Euphemistically termed “redevelopment,” the idea was that a glamorous Times Square of the early twentieth century was being restored. While the politics animating this past—both imagined and real—will be further explored in Chapter 3, such redevelopment efforts entailed a series of demolitions and investments starting in the 1970s through which the municipal government and real estate developers sought to “clean up” the area.

⁴¹² Herbert Kummel, Herbert Kummel to Louise Roberts, Letter, August 9, 1974, Box 11, Folder 18, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁴¹³ Richard C. Nehring, Richard C. Nehring to Louise Roberts, Letter, August 19, 1974, Box 11, Folder 18, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Times Square in the 1970s was worlds different from the commercial, touristic playground we know today. As one of the SEEK students protesting their ejection from the YWCA and relocation to a Times Square hotel put it, “There are too many people in the area of the Woodstock Hotel who are into prostitution, alcohol and drugs for it to be a decent place for us to stay.”⁴¹⁴ Such attitudes were common at the time. In the aforementioned 1971 radio interview with Kathy Grant and her YWCA co-worker Mary Wolf, when Wolf described narcotics programs offered by the Y, the interviewer Marian Horosko quickly quipped, “Well, you’ve got the right neighborhood for that!”⁴¹⁵ Wolf and Grant responded affirmatively, chuckling.

In addition to drug users and sex workers, Times Square at the time was lined with porn theaters and peep shows. These were businesses frequented by all manner of people seeking pleasure and release. Common perceptions of such illicit social spaces often conjure images of affluent, out-of-town businessmen stopping in to buy sex. But, as accounts like Samuel R. Delany’s *Time Square Red, Times Square Blue* evidence, many of those who frequented the porn theaters were social outcasts who needed basic care and resources.⁴¹⁶ In lieu of access to social services and/or the privileges afforded the heterosexual nuclear family, encounters in porn theaters became life-affirming, if not life-saving. People gave each other food, advice, and support; kept each other company; kept each other safe. Sexual encounters were part and parcel of these dynamics. Sex was not fundamental in the sense that not all social interactions in these spaces were sexual. Sex and sexuality were, however, foundational insofar as people sought out such spaces as ones that recognized their bodily needs—and their desires—as legitimate. This

⁴¹⁴ “Students Seek Stay of Eviction.”

⁴¹⁵ Grant, Radio interview.

⁴¹⁶ Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue: 20th Anniversary Edition* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

was in contrast to all other parts of civic life, structured and policed by white, patriarchal, heterosexist, bourgeois norms, that tended to figure bodily needs as inconvenient and bodily desires as dangerous. Rather, a space where people gathered consciously for scopophilic and sometimes physically sexual encounters enacted an altogether different kind of social possibility with profoundly political implications. These implications, of course, necessitated tight circumscription by normative society so as not to threaten the political order of the day.

Times Square, indeed, became a political problem. Bodily economies of pleasure, sex, and drugs socially marked as deviant and politically marked as criminal necessitated “cleaning up.” The capitalistic interests of the city government converged with those of real estate developers towards the fashioning of the “Disneyfied,” family-friendly touristic mecca it would become. Amazingly, Playwrights Horizons, a small organization, played a major role in precipitating and catalyzing the redevelopment of Times Square. As Anthony Bianco puts it,

The renaissance of 42nd Street was the product of a complex layering action and reaction, of cause and effect, heaped up over decades. But if there was a turning point—the beginning of the beginning of the new 42nd Street—it was the cold day in December 1974 that Robert Moss called on Irving Maidman in his office in the Crossroads Building and leased the moldering two-story pile of lumber and concrete that was 422 West 42nd Street.⁴¹⁷

That Moss’s actions would go on to great consequence isn’t however to say that he acted from a place of grand vision. His leasing of the dilapidated new space was a quick and desperate move. Playwrights Horizons as a space for producing new works was in high demand, and Moss needed a space to continue its crucial work. What ensued, however, was far bigger than a single theater. On 42nd Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues, Playwrights Horizons spawned a whole block of adjacent off-Broadway theaters, rehearsal studios, and restaurants, dubbed Theater Row.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁷ Bianco, 181.

⁴¹⁸ Bianco, 182.

Although Playwrights Horizons was a partner in these efforts, it was Fred Papert, “a retired advertising millionaire seeking personal redemption through civic improvements,” who led the charge, forming a not-for-profit 42nd Street Development Corporation.⁴¹⁹ While Theater Row was a boon for theater professionals and audiences, Papert’s business goals aligned with and capitalized on the clean up efforts of politicians. The putatively positive impacts of this confluence were celebrated in a 1981 guide to off-off-Broadway theaters written by Mindy N. Levine. Playwrights Horizon’s brief profile began, “Playwrights Horizons moved to 42nd Street when it was an urban wasteland composed of porno movies and burlesque houses. Its pioneering efforts have helped transform this area into the bustling Theatre Row, composed of eight theatres, adjoining restaurants, interesting shops and cafes.”⁴²⁰ The equation is stark. Uprooting the porn theaters and their illicit content and activities, the off-off-Broadway theaters were a respectable replacement, showing theatrical productions of the bourgeois variety. In just over five years, legitimate theaters had replaced illegitimate ones, and it had all started with Playwrights Horizons. Today, fifty years later, Theater Row persists, and Playwrights Horizons—still on that block but in a different building—thrives. The 2022 Tony Award winner for Best Musical, for example—*A Strange Loop* by Michael R. Jackson—premiered at Playwrights Horizons in 2019 before transferring to Broadway.

Clark Center Moves to Pilates’ Studio/The Van Dyck Studios

Since Playwrights Horizons’ new venue could not accommodate dance, Roberts had to take Clark Center for the Performing Arts—now a dance-specific organization—elsewhere.

⁴¹⁹ Bianco, 5.

⁴²⁰ Mindy N. Levine, *New York’s Other Theatre: A Guide to Off Off Broadway* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), 145.

After a panicked search, Roberts landed on a new space at 939 Eighth Avenue. Located between 55th and 56th Streets, this location was just five blocks north of the former YWCA location. While it was a meager second-story facility into which Clark Center was moving, it wasn't just any space. This was the studio where Joseph Pilates and wife Clara Pilates had begun their contrology practice upon arriving in America from Germany in 1927. In the ensuing decades, it was in this room that Mr. and Mrs. Pilates developed and disseminated the method that has become a household name today. Its midtown location made it easily accessible to the growing group of professional dancers who would flock to the method for injury recovery and conditioning, like Grant. As athletes, actors, and celebrities turned to the practice as well, interest in it both fueled and was fueled by the more general exercise craze starting in the 1970s. Upon Mr. Pilates' death in 1967, Mrs. Pilates maintained the practice in the couple's original studio, living in the building as well. While it is unclear how exactly the connection with Mrs. Pilates was made when Clark Center suddenly needed space, there were already a number of preeminent Pilates teachers with ties to Clark Center at that point—Grant, Lolita San Miguel, and Romana Kryzanowska. When Clark Center took over in 1974, it was moving into a space with nearly fifty years of formative Pilates history.

Moreover, the larger building had a storied history. Known as the Van Dyck Studio Building (sometimes spelled "Van Dyke"), it had served as a residence for artists since the late nineteenth century. The building, functioning as what we would today call live-work spaces, contained between forty and fifty studios populated mostly by painters, some of renown. While the complex had been named for Anthony Van Dyck, the seventeenth-century Flemish Baroque painter, other kinds of visual artists and performing artists lived and worked there too. As noted by the New York Historical Society, "It stood around the corner from Carnegie Hall, which

included 180 artists' studios in its towers. Together, these two buildings formed one of the main art communities in late-nineteenth-century New York City."⁴²¹ The Van Dyck building was a prototype for other such artist-studio residences to come in twentieth-century Manhattan.

However illustrious, the space in the Van Dyck building was far from ideal for the robust suite of activities to which Clark Center had become host. But, as Roberts put it, "The move was made in desperation."⁴²² It was intended only as a temporary home, a place where Clark Center's important class and rehearsal space offerings could continue until a more comprehensive space was found. Out of these initial accommodations, Clark Center managed to fashion two studios, an office space, plus dressing rooms made from large closets. Less than three years later, a neighboring studio on the second floor would open up which Clark Center acquired,⁴²³ one that had belonged to Sandra Seacat, a renowned acting teacher.⁴²⁴ A fourth studio would also be acquired eventually, this one on the fourth floor.

Many, though not all, of its former students and teachers followed Clark Center to its new location.⁴²⁵ Joan Chanin, who had been working as Clark Center's office manager since 1972,⁴²⁶ took on increased responsibilities implementing the new day-to-day operations of the Center. With Roberts, she managed class schedules, staffing, scholarship students, in addition to tending to the shortcomings of the building. As Roberts noted, "The aesthetics of the new location were

⁴²¹ "View from the Van Dyck Studios," New York Historical Society, <https://emuseum.nyhistory.org/objects/95898/view-from-the-van-dyck-studios?ctx=e695cad7702577dd40a15556f9e3710e0752ceeb&idx=0>.

⁴²² Roberts, Clark Center 20-year Retrospective Statement.

⁴²³ Clark Center Board Meeting Notes, April 1977, Box 11, Folder 2, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁴²⁴ Chanin, discussion.

⁴²⁵ Chanin noted that Lolita San Miguel, for example, did not come to teach at the new space.

⁴²⁶ Clark Center organizational profile statement, undated, Box 11, Folder 4, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Chanin noted that her official title shifted through the years. At one point, it was "administrative director," which I have opted to use in all other instances. Joan Chanin, in email correspondence with the author, February 25, 2025.

virtually impossible...With accustomed Clark Center vigor, verve and imagination, major conversions were accomplished. The atmosphere changed from dismal and grubby to moderately comfortable. Our new home ultimately became an inviting workmanlike place for the joyous, serious study of dance.”⁴²⁷

It was the study of dance which had become the focus in this new space. But, while they did “manage to get the school back,” as Chanin put it, there was one glaring absence. 939 Eighth Avenue did not have a theater. Performances had become a vital component of Clark Center’s offerings, not just to serve audiences but as a resource for choreographers who needed opportunities to show their work. The New Choreographers series hinged on such an opportunity, as did the stewardship of the numerous emerging and mid-size companies with whom the Center had a relationship. While they did manage a few small presentations with the studio spaces at hand, these were not fit for the magnitude of production they had grown into at the YWCA.⁴²⁸ Coincidentally, the previously discussed downturn in the 92nd Street Y’s dance programming through the early 1970s was exacerbated by the near-total loss of its theater, the Kaufmann Concert Hall, in 1977. The theater had unionized, and “dance concerts simply could not pay for themselves under the new union regulations.”⁴²⁹ A series of new directors spanning into the early 1990s—all of them women—made do with other smaller spaces, but “none...could fully revitalize the Y’s dance performance programming.”⁴³⁰ While the Jewish woman running Clark Center would work tenaciously to turn things around, the same would ultimately be true

⁴²⁷ Roberts, Clark Center 20-year Retrospective Statement.

⁴²⁸ Chanin explained, “Louise arranged to have some small performances in the largest room including the [New York] Mime Duet.” Chanin, email, February 28, 2025.

⁴²⁹ Jackson, 220.

⁴³⁰ Jackson, 222. That said, an infusion of fiscal support from the Harkness Foundation for Dance under the direction of Joan Finkelstein aided a rebound in the 92nd Street Y’s dance programming in the late 1990s (Jackson, 226). It continues to present dance to this day.

for her institution, which, upon its 1989 termination, would not have gone on to present dance at the same capacity as it had at the YWCA.

Now at 939 Eighth Avenue, Clark Center experienced two important developmental milestones. First, no longer under the aegis of the YWCA and therefore no longer funded by it, the decision was made to incorporate as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation. The founding Board of Directors of the newly minted Clark Center for the Performing Arts, Inc. was comprised of Louise Roberts, her daughter Karen DeFrancis (who had been assisting at the Center for some time and working as a lighting designer and stage manager),⁴³¹ and Clarence Allsopp.⁴³² Second, now primarily a school, the Center made a sizable expansion in its course offerings and attracted a greater number of students. Upon the opening of the new space in 1974, thirty-nine classes were offered weekly in six forms: “Ballet, Modern, Jazz, Afro-Ethnic, Body-Conditioning, and Mime.”⁴³³ Less than three years later, weekly classes totaled fifty, with additional classes in ballet and modern offered as well as the addition of tap. An internal memo reported a class revenue of \$38,000 in 1974-75, \$55,000 in 1975-76, and the expectation for continued growth. Other aspirations were also expressed. While it operated across three studios in the Van Dyck building at this point, there was great need for a fourth. This would enable the Center to offer more varied levels of jazz and modern, which would help “to attract students with vocational as well as avocational interests in dance.”⁴³⁴ There was also a desire to solidify the Saturday program of children’s dance classes.

⁴³¹ Clark Center for the Performing Arts, Inc. Board of Directors, Undated, Box 11, Folder 1, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁴³² Certificate of Incorporation of Clark Center for the Performing Arts, Inc. Under Section 402 of the Not-for-Profit Corporation Law, October 4, 1974, Box 20, Folder 13, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁴³³ Administrative Files/Board of Directors Meeting Notes, April 25, 1977, Box 11, Folder 2, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁴³⁴ Administrative Files/Board of Directors Meeting Notes, April 25, 1977.

Dance Festival at The Mall

Given the absence of a theater, Roberts had to look elsewhere for a solution to what was supposed to be a temporary lack. What she went on to do—inaugurate a summer dance festival in the CUNY Graduate Center Mall—was a brilliant exemplar of innovation wrought from lack—lemonade from lemons. According to Chanin, the idea for this festival was sparked after a vacation to Provincetown, Massachusetts, one of Roberts’ favorite places. On the bus ride home, Roberts met a person who worked at CUNY and discussed the possibility of using the Graduate Center’s Mall to present dance.⁴³⁵ The Mall, “a pedestrian space that stretched between” 42nd and 43rd Streets,⁴³⁶ was essentially a public walkway. Located just across the street from Bryant Park and a New York Public Library branch, the area was densely populated by foot traffic, locals and tourists alike. CUNY had first acquired space in the building there at 33 West 42nd Street in 1966, and in 1971, “it devote[d] its first-floor mall...to public art exhibitions. The local planning board praised it as ‘the only free cultural center’ in midtown Manhattan.”⁴³⁷ Thus, the notion of the mall as a space for cultural programming was not new in the summer of 1975, when Clark Center presented its first Dance Festival at the Mall.

It was not an easy affair. Chanin described the many aspects of the Mall that had to be transformed to be suitable for the presentation of concert dance: “You’ve got floor issues, you’ve got lighting issues, you’ve got seating issues. You have to figure out how to run a box office.”⁴³⁸ With the help of an engineer and designers, systems were installed to produce a makeshift

⁴³⁵ Chanin, email, February 28, 2025.

⁴³⁶ “60 Years at the Graduate Center,” CUNY Graduate Center, September 1, 2021, <https://www.gc.cuny.edu/news/60-years-graduate-center>.

⁴³⁷ “60 Years at the Graduate Center.”

⁴³⁸ Chanin, discussion.

theater, complete with a stage, house, and covering for protection from the elements.⁴³⁹ What resulted was the “the kind of magic usually associated only with interior spaces.”⁴⁴⁰

While the Festival performances were ticketed events, one of the inadvertent but innovative outcomes of using the Mall as a venue was that it exposed scores of people to concert dance who otherwise would not have encountered it. All preparations for the shows, including set up of the theater and dress rehearsals by dance companies happened within public view, in the very midst of the area’s hustle and bustle. Noting the presence of pedestrians until 6:00 p.m., Roberts wrote, “The dancers were therefore in effect doing street performances for the passersby, the aggregation of 42nd Street street [sic] people, visitors from exotic foreign lands, office workers, and all of the etceteras. Many stayed to watch, many bought tickets, and some did become dance aficionados [sic].”⁴⁴¹ Writing retrospectively in 2016, dance critic Jennifer Dunning found this impact of the Festival to be particularly praise-worthy, noting how it “ingeniously drew its audiences from casual passersby, novice dancegoers in many cases who lingered bravely.”⁴⁴²

Not only did the Festival fill a space previously uninhabited by dance with dance performances, but also a *time*. With the notable exception of the Dancemobile, there was little in the way of dance presentations in New York City during the summers. Then, as now, most venues’ seasons spanned from the fall to the spring, with summers dark. Becoming an annual event, Dunning captured how the Festival was *sui generis* in a way *so very New York*. In 1976, after the Festival’s second year, she wrote:

⁴³⁹After much research, the stage floor was constructed of a special foam, plywood, battleship linoleum, and marley. The box office, which was fashioned from pipes and canvas, was used at every Festival on the Mall thereafter. Chanin, email, February 28, 2025.

⁴⁴⁰ Roberts, Clark Center 20-year Retrospective Statement.

⁴⁴¹ Roberts, Clark Center 20-year Retrospective Statement.

⁴⁴² Jennifer Dunning, “Dance: Clark Center,” *Art Times* (Spring 2016), https://www.arttimesjournal.com/dance/spring_16_jennifer_dunning/clark_center.html.

...people passing the open-ended City University Graduate Center Mall on West 42nd Street most nights in July and early August could hear the sound of drums, calliopes or Vivaldi, and waves of clapping or yells of approval. For the Festival is a real New York happening, bubbling out of the pavements and studios of the city, a little scruffy and very gutsy.⁴⁴³

As it continued, each summer's Festival grew larger. An internal 1977 document recounts that while the inaugural Festival in 1975 comprised sixteen performances, 2,400 audience members, and \$7,000 in revenue, the 1976 Festival presented twenty-six performances, 4,900 audience members, and \$13,700. The 1977 Festival was to feature thirty-nine performances, and naturally, increases in audience count and revenue were also projected.⁴⁴⁴

Moreover, the Festival series presented a markedly diverse group of choreographers in terms of race and ethnicity, demonstratively fulfilling Clark Center's mission to support artists of color and their companies, and African American artists in particular. In 1976, the Festival presented the Fred Benjamin Dance Company, Kei Takei's Moving Earth, Otis Sallid New Art Ensemble, Theatre Dance Collection, and the Louis Johnson Dance Theatre. Spanning from mid-July through mid-August, each company received their own run of between three and five shows. The New Choreographers cohort also performed in their own split-bill three-night show. This cohort featured three choreographers of particular note, each of whom would go on to be presented individually in future Festivals: Bill T. Jones, whose company Dance Asylum (co-founded with Arnie Zane, Jill Becker, and Lois Welk⁴⁴⁵) appeared in 1977; Susan Dribble, whose own evening of dances appeared in 1978; and Carole Kariamum Welsh, whose group Kariamum and Company would appear in 1978. Asian and Asian American artists presented in the Festival included the Asian American Dance Theater (1978), Chiang Ching Dance Company

⁴⁴³ Jennifer Dunning, "Of Shouts and Stomps and Cultural Achievements," *Dance Magazine*, October 1976, 33.

⁴⁴⁴ Administrative Files/Board of Directors Meeting Notes, April 25, 1977.

⁴⁴⁵ Paris, "Will the Real Bill...", 65.

(1978), Mariko Sanjo (1977), and Satoru Shimazaki & Dancers (1977). Latinx artists included Ballet Hispánico of New York (under the direction of Tina Ramirez, 1977), Jose Coronado and Dancers (1977), and the Afro-Brazilian company Capoeiras of Bahia (under the direction of Josevaldo “Loremil” Machado and Jelon Vieira, 1978). Black artists included Gus Solomons Company/Dance (1977), Charles Moore Dances and Drums of Africa (1977), and Pepsi Bethel Authentic Jazz Dance Theatre (1977-78). Additionally, Philadanco, the Philadelphia-based black modern dance company, made its New York City debut at the 1978 Festival. As William Moore of *Dance Herald* reported, the company “won over critics and audiences alike in its program of difficult pieces. It seems that director Joan Myers was bent on showing the big city that her kids could really dance. She selected a battery of show-stopping dance pieces, mostly from the jazz dance vernacular, to display their technique.”⁴⁴⁶

An additional series of films and panel discussions accompanied the 1978 Festival, entitled “Dance Visions 78.” This program overtly signaled its intention to platform race, ethnicity, and gender as meaningful categories, including events such as “Latinos and American Dance” and “Women in American Modern Dance.” The event titled “Blacks and American Dance” featured performances by Katherine Dunham; Dance Theatre of Harlem; a tap portion featuring Fred Astaire and Brenda Bufalino; and a panel discussion with Dolores Brown from AADT, Joseph Nash from the Black Resources Center, and Roberts from Clark Center. Notably, programs themed by disciplinary category rather than race, ethnicity, or gender also included artists of color, such as “Cine-Dance,” which featured a work by black choreographer Gus Solomons, Jr. titled “City-Motion-Space-Game.”

⁴⁴⁶ William Moore, “Philadanco Comes to New York,” *Dance Herald: Black Dance Newsletter* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 4-5.

The fourth Dance Festival at the Mall in 1978 was special for several reasons. First, Clark Center was celebrating twenty years since its founding, dubbing 1978 its 20th Anniversary Season.⁴⁴⁷ The season was also dedicated to beloved Clark Center teacher Thelma Hill, who had died in November of the previous year. A note printed in each Festival program read, “For Thelma Hill...the 1978 Clark Center Festival Season, in loving remembrance. Friends, colleagues, dancers, almost dancers, choreographers new and not so new, her whole family at Clark Center, helped by the legacy of her inspiration, continue the search for truth and beauty in dance.”⁴⁴⁸ Finally, although this was not decided until after the fact, the 1978 Festival turned out to be the final one. Logistical and municipal bureaucratic issues proved too challenging to warrant continuing on the Mall.

But for the time it lasted, the program was both an intervention upon and an entrenchment of the forces around it. Having been displaced from the YWCA and unable to move to Theater Row like Playwrights Horizons, Clark Center turned to the city streets as a theater. It was not a seizure of private space per se, given that the Mall was the property of CUNY, a public institution.⁴⁴⁹ As such, it was funded in part with the tax dollars of New York City residents, some of whom used it daily as a walkway. In effect, then, the Dance Festival was publicly supported and became a public good, something to be beheld and enjoyed both by ticket buyers and passersby. Between Fifth and Sixth Avenues on 42nd Street, the Mall was a mere

⁴⁴⁷ “20th Anniversary Season, Fourth Annual Clark Center Dance Festival,” Playbills, July 5-August 6, 1978, Box 27, Folder 27, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁴⁴⁸ “New Choreographers ’78,” Playbill, July 1978, Box 27, Folder 27, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁴⁴⁹ For an example of the use of privately held outdoor space for the purposes of dance performance around this same time and place, see “Grid Variations.” In this essay, the authors argue that Lucinda Childs’ 1973 performance on Fordham University’s Robert Moses Plaza intervened upon Moses’ masculinist ideology of urban development by corporeally and aesthetically repurposing this space. Amanda Jane Graham and Lauren DiGiulio, “Grid Variations: Lucinda Childs Dance Company on Robert Moses Plaza,” *Feminist Modernist Studies* 4, no. 3 (2021): 375-388.

three avenues east of Theater Row. As the linearity of this geography suggests, the Dance Festival at the Mall may be rightly thought of as contiguous with the impacts of Theater Row. That is, just as Papert and Moss' project was "revitalizing" midtown through an infusion of legitimate theaters that uprooted sites of sex-based economies deemed illegitimate, so too was the Festival thought to be cleaning up the city for good. It was a "cultural contribution to a partially blighted neighborhood," as Clark Center staff put it in one institutional narrative.⁴⁵⁰

The municipal government clearly agreed. On July 9, 1976, New York City Mayor Abraham D. Beame granted Roberts a Certificate of Appreciation, stating that "her efforts have made the annual Dance Festival in the Mall on 42nd Street a major cultural event."⁴⁵¹ While this was the Festival's second year in existence, Mayor Beame had also recognized Clark Center itself with a Certificate of Appreciation the year before, on June 16, 1975, "in recognition of its 16 years of dedication to the art of the dance." The certificate continued, "Its efforts, under director Louise Roberts, are making strides in revitalizing 42nd Street as a cultural center of our City."⁴⁵² Such rhetoric of revitalization was of a piece with redevelopment, making manifestly clear the entanglements of art, civic good, and capitalist development in the bureaucratic and corporate rebranding of the city which had started to take root around that same time.

A contradiction emerges here: Clark Center's displacement and need to turn to outdoor space was in large part caused by the city's redevelopment efforts which had left non-profit art organizations to sink or swim. In turn, the city applauded the Center's civic contributions.

Happening more in spite of the municipal government than because of it, Clark Center and the

⁴⁵⁰ "History and Purpose," Administrative Files, Undated, Box 11, Folder 4, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁴⁵¹ Mayor of the City of New York Certificate of Appreciation, July 9, 1976, Box 38, Folder 2, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁴⁵² Mayor of the City of New York Certificate of Appreciation, June 16, 1975, Box 38, Folder 2, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Festival revealed the fault lines of the government's purported support for the arts. This contradictory dynamic is akin to Lincoln Center's Out of Doors Festival, which sought to showcase the same communities that the construction of Lincoln Center's buildings had displaced, thus obscuring the institution's culpability. A comparison with Dancemobile yields a related insight. The "cool out" efforts described earlier evidenced a contradictory dynamic in which the arts were supported to stoke vitality for black communities and simultaneously to quell street activism. In the case of Clark Center, energy was first zapped as the conditions to exist were made near impossible for Clark Center, but then the Center's resourceful persistence against these odds was celebrated by the government as a common good, obscuring the government's role in undercutting these efforts. Celebrating Clark Center was, in effect, celebrating the Center's ability to "pull itself up by its bootstraps"—that is, to persist of its own accord—as the government implemented austerity measures in an increasingly neoliberalizing New York City by the end of the decade.

Remaining Vital: The Search Continues

The mid- to late 1970s at Clark Center were significant in the life of the institution. In addition to the Festival garnering the Center an enlarged public and municipal recognition, the number of weekly class offerings and enrollment steadily increased. The Festival may have filled a summer void in terms of dance concerts, but dancers did not necessarily break for the summer just because theaters did. The summers could be embraced as "a good time to concentrate on dance technique and composition," a 1977 issue of *Dance Herald*, pointed out. The article went on to list places in New York City where students could do so "with some of the leading Black instructors in the world," including the studios and/or schools of Ailey, Eleo Pomare, Frank

Ashley, and Eugene James. Clark Center made the list, too: “a bargain basement of dance...Charles Moore teaches there as does Thelma Hill, Pepsi Bethel and two young Brazilians who are probably the only regular instructors of Samba and Candomble in the USA.”⁴⁵³ These Brazilians were Loremil Machado and Jelon Vieira, beloved Clark Center teachers, who were indeed amongst the first *capoeiristas* to bring that practice to the United States.

With its expanding operations as a school and its makeshift continuation as a dance presenter, the already too-meager accommodations at 939 Eighth Avenue were by the end of the decade a downright detriment to Clark Center’s vitality. The search, in fact, for a permanent home with a theater had never ceased, even during the successful four-year run of the Festival. But its end renewed the urgent need for a space that could comfortably host all of Clark Center’s activities under one roof. Towards that end, in 1978 the Center’s Board compiled a “Space Survey” of theaters in the vicinity. Spanning “the area from 42nd Street to 72nd Street, between Fifth and Eleventh Avenues,” their survey included “both possible rentals for the upcoming season and the long-term plan to acquire a permanent theater.”⁴⁵⁴ Totalling sixteen candidates, the list included such spaces as the Robert Kennedy Theatre on 48th Street, St. Clements at 423 West 46th Street, and Hotel Diplomat at 108 West 43rd Street. It also included at least one space falling outside of their intended perimeter—Elgin Theatre, listed at 18th Street and Eighth Avenue.

What ensued was a bid for an off-Broadway theater space devoted to dance on Theater Row, detailed in Chapter 3. Roberts would secure the space, amass the necessary funds, and work with contractors to plan the customized dance complex of her dreams. In the meantime,

⁴⁵³ William Moore, “NYC is Best Summer Study Place for Dance,” *Dance Herald: A Journal of Black Dance* 1, no. 2 (1977): 2. (Note: there are two different sets of this journal labeled Volume 1. The first set began in 1975.)

⁴⁵⁴ Clark Center Board Meeting Notes, 1978, Box 11, Folder 2, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Clark Center would be riddled with financial strain, and unable to pay rent, hit with multiple evictions. As Roberts continued her dogged efforts against the odds to build a dance theater amidst a redeveloping 42nd Street, she would continue to draw on and amplify rhetorics of “vitality,” arguing for Clark Center’s unique place in the New York City arts ecosystem as one of humanistic good and experimental grit.

Chapter 3: Dancing in Mixed Company: Clark Center’s Bid for Theatre Row in the Late 1970s to Early 1980s

When Ailey and his company’s operations left Clark Center in 1969, they moved to the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). Whereas Clark Center was only a decade old at that point, the institution of BAM had first opened more than a century earlier, in 1861. First located in Brooklyn Heights, a neighborhood just across the East River from Manhattan, a fire forced it to relocate in 1908 to what is now known as the Fort Greene neighborhood,⁴⁵⁵ where it continues to operate today. As urban historian Julia Foulkes chronicles, just two years prior to Ailey’s residency at BAM, Harvey Lichtenstein had been named director of the institution as part of its efforts to better acknowledge the culture of its geographic context. At that point, BAM was largely disconnected from the predominantly African American and Puerto Rican communities residing around it.⁴⁵⁶ Moreover, the institution was seeking to rebound from a decades-long period of lagging concert revenue which had been precipitated by the Great Depression. While its concert fare in the early part of the century was comprised primarily of classical music and modern dance, BAM’s overseers realized that in order to revamp operations in the 1960s required connecting with its surrounding demography—“tie[s] between its streets and stages,” as Foulkes puts it.⁴⁵⁷ Lichtenstein started programming “more calypso and jazz,” hoping to represent African American musical traditions.⁴⁵⁸ He also brought on Lloyd Hezekiah, a Trinidadian living in the neighborhood, to liaise community outreach efforts. One of Hezekiah’s contributions to BAM was that “he invited Alvin Ailey to teach dance for 25cents/lesson.”⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁵ Foulkes, “Streets and Stages,” 420.

⁴⁵⁶ Foulkes, “Streets and Stages,” 422.

⁴⁵⁷ Foulkes, “Streets and Stages,” 429.

⁴⁵⁸ Foulkes, “Streets and Stages,” 423.

⁴⁵⁹ Foulkes, “Streets and Stages,” 423.

Concurrently, Lichtenstein inaugurated another significant shift in BAM's presenting profile, prioritizing avant-garde theater and dance.⁴⁶⁰ Lichtenstein was especially keen on presenting dance, having been a dancer himself. "From 1968-69, BAM put on the first comprehensive modern dance series that included performances by all the major companies of the day—Martha Graham, Anna Sokolow, Paul Taylor, Erick Hawkins, [Merce] Cunningham, [Alvin] Ailey, José Limón, and Alwin Nikolais."⁴⁶¹ As his recruitment by both Hezekiah and Lichtenstein points to, Ailey straddled both of BAM's new programming commitments. Like BAM's neighbors, he was black; like BAM's patrons, many of whom came in from Manhattan, he was highbrow, or at least his work exuded these associations. Moving his company's operations to BAM was further evidence of the institution's investment in him.

Ailey, however, was not pleased with the ways that Lichtenstein proceeded to use Ailey's blackness towards the institution's own ends. As DeFrantz notes, Lichtenstein solicited donations from middle-class black businesspeople by touting Ailey's presence at BAM. Ailey found such "racialized business tactics" repugnant, as his "strict integrationist stance" meant that he wanted to be an artist first, not a *black* artist.⁴⁶² While the separatism of the Black Power ideology animated the work of many artists at the time, such as choreographer Eleo Pomare, "Ailey resisted stating a commitment to the emergent black aesthetic of the late 1960s."⁴⁶³ Defining himself on his own terms not only required distancing himself from this aesthetic, but it also necessitated an institutional home where he was not poached for his blackness. Moreover, BAM failed to provide its resident choreographers with consistent rehearsal space. As Leona

⁴⁶⁰ This new identity for BAM as a home of avant-garde theater and dance continues to define the institution today. Its New Wave Festival, which was established in 1983 and persists, is central to this identity. Foulkes, "Streets and Stages," 427.

⁴⁶¹ Foulkes, "Streets and Stages," 424.

⁴⁶² DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 86.

⁴⁶³ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 86.

Johnson noted in *The Feet* at the time, “This was not a problem for the other two resident companies (Eliot Feld and Merce Cunningham) who have their own ‘homes’ elsewhere where they can rehearse, teach, etc.”⁴⁶⁴ Ailey had no such home, and he was also “tired of being a gypsy,” as company manager Ivy Clarke put it.⁴⁶⁵ Rather than being stretched across multiple sites, he desired an all-inclusive institutional base, one that supported his company’s operations under one roof.

While it was certain, then, that being based at BAM was untenable, where to go next was unclear. This liminality exacerbated an already-precarious financial picture, leaving Ailey’s company teetering on the brink of closure. Rather than let the company fizzle out, however, Johnson implored readers to “keep this issue on the bonfire”: “Think for a moment what it would mean to each of us, black dance, as a whole, and dance period, if Alvin Ailey were to die!!! And when you get tired of thinking about it, feel it...then figure out what you can do to help!”⁴⁶⁶ Ailey’s company did manage to survive the transition and secure its next home. In a shared space with Pearl Lang, the choreographer and Martha Graham dancer mentioned in Chapter 2, Ailey moved his company to the east side of midtown Manhattan. Both choreographers rehearsed and taught there, co-operatively.

When Ailey moved again ten years later, it was a return to the west side, and it was finally a space all his own—a first in his career. But it was also significant for another reason: it was located “in the heart of NYCs [sic] Times Square area at 1515 Broadway.”⁴⁶⁷ The *Dance Herald* announcing the news further reported: “The center headquarters operates from the

⁴⁶⁴ Leona Johnson, “A House but Not a Home,” *The Feet* 1, no. 1 (June 1970): 1. Punctuation and styling in original.

⁴⁶⁵ L. Johnson, 1.

⁴⁶⁶ L. Johnson, 6, emphasis and style in original.

⁴⁶⁷ William Moore, “Ailey Inaugurates New Dance Center,” *Dance Herald: Black Dance Newsletter* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1979): 6.

modern new Minskoff office building. Its offices are located on the 8th floor while the school operates from the arcade and mezzanine levels with public areas, office space and four magnificent new studios.”⁴⁶⁸ By 1979, the year of the new studio’s opening, Times Square was in the midst of redevelopment efforts which were dramatically altering the built environment and its social make up. Public and private investments were coalescing to “clean up” the area, replacing the pornography and prostitution that had come to define Times Square with office towers and respectable forms of entertainment.

As introduced in Chapter 2, an early project in these redevelopment efforts was Theatre Row, the block of off-Broadway theaters conceived by Fred Papert’s 42nd Street Development Corporation. Located west of the Broadway theater district, Playwrights Horizons had been its inaugural tenant. In effect, the new block geographically solidified the commercialization sweeping the Times Square region. Thus, Clark Center’s two major entities which had splintered off by the 1970s—Ailey and Playwrights Horizons—had managed to secure spaces in a rapidly shifting Times Square area. Clark Center tried to follow suit, succeeding in the late 1970s to secure a space on Theatre Row, just a few doors down from Playwrights Horizons. In so doing, it was participating in the convergence of forces seeking to combat “urban decline” in Times Square.

Moreover, Chapter 2 showed how the rhetoric of “vitality” began to frame the arts politically, forming the pretext for the arts to be deployed as an ideological tool of revitalization towards “clean up” efforts. This chapter takes a deepened look at this dynamic, homing in on how this arts-based approach to urban renewal obscured the race- and class-based exclusions that were at its core. The federal, municipal, and corporate efforts involved in these efforts played on

⁴⁶⁸ Moore, “Ailey Inaugurates New Dance Center,” 6.

a public imaginary which linked the large population of black and Latinx people—and men in particular—who visited and congregated in Times Square to the area’s illicit and illegal activities. Such associations were more bias than reality. Nevertheless, redevelopment efforts which sought to attract capital, business, and affluent clientele uprooted the deviant activities and their putative participants from the area, engineering a homogenization of what had been an exceedingly heterogenous place vis-à-vis race and class.

Chapter 3 draws connections between Clark Center and midtown/Times Square as spaces of great diversity. As Times Square was redeveloped, however, Clark Center did not seek to change its pluralistic profile even as it attempted to participate in these efforts by joining Theatre Row. While redevelopment generated and relied upon a social and economic homogenization, Clark Center was rendered incommensurate with the commercializing area. To examine the historical contexts producing this eventual incommensurability, *mixedness* is used as the central analytic. The multiple deployments of mixedness include: Times Square as a mixed-use space per municipal policy; Times Square as host to a vast mix of activities both highbrow and lowbrow, public and private, “red light” and “white light,” legal and not; and Times Square as a place of great social mixing amongst its visitors across lines of class, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. Thus, as the mixedness that had marked Times Square as variously vibrant and dangerous was systematically squashed by business interests in favor of commercial investment, so too were places like Clark Center which were host to mixed company. Clark Center, then, is a potent foil for revealing that the thoroughly commercialized Times Square of today was not an inevitability but rather a carefully engineered project that stamped out its alternatives.

“The Great White Way” and “The Deuce”: Mixing Images of Times Square

Times Square is many things. As much as it is a real, material place, it is also a symbol—a synecdoche of New York City; a beacon of glitz, glam, and showbiz; an emblem of the New Year; a celebration of commercial consumerism; an embodiment of the restlessness of the city that never sleeps. All of these figurations are neatly reflected by its current state: a Disney-style, family-friendly, tourist mecca of fun and entertainment. There is a smooth patina to these cultural functions, one that glosses business, leisure, the arts, and urbanity into one easy-to-swallow whole. This homogenized monumentality belies a history of great change and contestation.

Less than half a century ago, Times Square was no less exceptionalized than it is today. But whereas today it is popularly venerated, it was once denounced. As political scientist Alexander J. Reichl notes, “From the 1960s through the 1980s, Times Square—particularly West Forty-second street—had come to serve as a metaphor for urban decline in the United States, symbolizing for many the plagues of crime and drugs and the takeover of central cities by a menacing population of racial and ethnic minorities.”⁴⁶⁹ Calls at that time for the area to be “cleaned up”—which were couched in such economic and euphemistic terms as redevelopment, renewal, and revitalization⁴⁷⁰—initiated the sweeping series of demolitions and constructions that yielded the high-rise lined blocks that make up Times Square today. But critiques of Times Square as a cesspool of moral depravity were not, in fact, new. As Reichl lays out, similar repudiations were being waged against the area almost a century earlier, revealing a cyclical

⁴⁶⁹ Alexander J. Reichl, *Reconstructing Times Square: Politics and Culture in Urban Development* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas), 44.

⁴⁷⁰ Stephen Pritchard notes this general trend thusly: “Urban change is commonly dressed-up with terms such as ‘renaissance,’ ‘regeneration,’ ‘revitalisation,’ and ‘renewal’ which, in turn, serve to disguise gentrification and the processes of dispossession and displacement that accompany it.” Stephen Pritchard, “The Artwashing of Gentrification and Social Cleansing,” in *The Handbook of Displacement*, eds. Peter Adey et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 181.

dynamic in its recent history. Tracing Times Square's shift from the "Great White Way"—a name given the area in the early twentieth century for its density of brightly lit marquees—to "the Deuce"—a name later ascribed to 42nd Street for its density of pornography and prostitution—Reichl shows the heterogeneity of activities and peoples who have defined the area over time to be its most vital characteristic. While the particulars have changed given industrial and technological advancements, the groundwork for Times Square as host to a multifarious mix of economies—highbrow and lowbrow, public and private, legal and not—was laid nearly two-hundred years ago.

The small region of midtown Manhattan today called Times Square was farmland in the early nineteenth century and known as Longacre Square. By the late 1830s, the land was being divided into lots for individual ownership, initiating the creation of a grid of numbered streets and avenues. Economic elites at the time implemented "[a] number of important public policy decisions...establish[ing] that midtown Manhattan, and specifically Forty-second Street, would be a central focus of the economic and social life of the New York City region far into the future."⁴⁷¹ This central stature would be entrenched geographically later in the century when the city's annexation of the four other boroughs positioned Manhattan—and the public transit running through midtown—as an actual center point.⁴⁷²

Around the middle of the century, Longacre Square had become suburbanized by wealthy residents. Soon thereafter, these residents moved uptown as businesses took root (e.g., hotels, offices, carriage houses, stables), and the area began to industrialize. This turn brought a large population of Italian and Irish workers who had only the means to live in tight, shabby quarters. In addition to such tenement housing in Longacre Square, gangs emerged amongst this

⁴⁷¹ Reichl, 45.

⁴⁷² Reichl, 47.

dispossessed working-class population with little political voice. Thus began a prevalence of street violence for which the area would become heavily policed. The local police station, in fact, became one of the city's most active—a status, Reichl notes, that the same station would share “almost a century later, when the cries for redevelopment—and a return to the glory years of Times Square—reached their crescendo around 1980.”⁴⁷³

Underscoring the illusory nature of such “glory years,” Reichl's history of Times Square intends to reveal the ideological construction of such a past for economic and political ends. While some may have believed the prevalent prostitution in Times Square in the 1970s and 1980s to be a recent aberration, it, too, was the continuation of a dynamic set into motion the previous century. Just as industrialization moving northward had pushed suburbanites farther uptown, the entertainment industry underwent a similar migration. While prostitution was one central pillar of this industry, the other was theater. “It was an age-old symbiosis,” as theater scholar Laurence Senelick puts it,⁴⁷⁴ arguing that “a similar voyeurism” motivates customers seeking out sexual encounters as those seeking theatrical ones.⁴⁷⁵ “In the early nineteenth century,” he notes, “American theaters had stayed solvent because of receipts from their bars and admissions to the third tier, a haunt of prostitutes.”⁴⁷⁶ By the latter part of the century in Longacre Square, venues for sex work and theater shared the same city blocks and clientele, both frequented by the affluent class.⁴⁷⁷ Before long, moral crusaders began decrying the degraded state of the area. As commercial investors and public officials turned their attention to these streets as well, a multitude of conflicting interests converged at this site.

⁴⁷³ Reichl, 49.

⁴⁷⁴ Laurence Senelick, “Private Parts in Public Places,” in *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World*, ed. William R. Taylor (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991), 332.

⁴⁷⁵ Senelick, 333.

⁴⁷⁶ Senelick, 332-333.

⁴⁷⁷ Reichl, 50-51.

Thus, by the time Longacre Square was officially dubbed Times Square in 1904, it had already undergone a shift from a homogenous suburb to a place of heterogenous mixing of social and economic relations. The renaming was occasioned by the opening of Times Tower—the new *New York Times* headquarters—spanning 42nd Street, from Broadway to Seventh Avenue. That same year, the emergent subway system’s first line had opened a stop in the newly minted Times Square. Other forms of transportation would soon follow, including ferry, elevated rail, ground rail, and bus.⁴⁷⁸ Such ease of access by public transit was key to the area’s establishment as the metropole’s center, producing a place where a great diversity of people encountered each other every day.

Mixed-Use, Mixed Uses, Mixed Groups

In addition to this *mélange* of people for whom the area was increasingly accessible, another sort of mix distinguished Times Square. In 1916, the city had implemented a large-scale zoning policy—the first of its kind nationally—that designated Times Square a “*mixed-use* commercial district.”⁴⁷⁹ Marking Times Square thusly cleared the way for its flourishing as not just a center of commerce but, more crucially, its visibilization as one. The regulation allowed the installation of the flashy, bright billboards that would soon saturate the area with iconic advertorial glare. While a wider area had initially been granted the mixed-use designation, business owners on blocks with more upscale brands—i.e., 5th Avenue—successfully campaigned to oust their locales of the gaudy signs,⁴⁸⁰ further solidifying Times Square’s singularity as a visual, commercial feast.

⁴⁷⁸ Reichl, 47.

⁴⁷⁹ Reichl, 52, emphasis is mine.

⁴⁸⁰ Reichl, 52.

The mixed-use ascription also distinguished Times Square in another way. In all other parts of the city, class and morality were the structuring principles that determined an area's value. That is, expensive areas for affluent residents were deemed morally superior. The classist logic worked tautologically such that greater moral character was taken to be evidenced by low levels of crime and vagrancy. Times Square, on the other hand, was thoroughly entrenched as a hub of conspicuous commerce such that "commercial successes clearly superseded notions of moral character as the measure of real-estate values."⁴⁸¹ That the movement of money was the area's animating principle privileged lucrateness over respectability. By such calculus, brothels and insurance companies were equals. Moreover, transactional flow often happened across "moral" lines—that is, across socio-economic disparities—linking, for example, affluent businesspeople with underclass sex workers. Thus, this mixed-use district both generated and was generated by a mix of people across lines of class.

A significant portion of the business activity that comprised Times Square was made up of theaters. At the heart of the theater district was one block of 42nd Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. As Reichl notes, the block had become so synonymous with theater shortly after the birth of Times Square that some venues extended their entryways such that they could purport to be positioned on it. "At its peak in the 1920s, no fewer than thirteen theaters had entrances and marquees on this one-block stretch of Forty-second street."⁴⁸² If this block was a cultural capital, this would later be reflected in actual capital some decades later when, despite its designation as the "worst [block] in town,"⁴⁸³ its land value persisted at an extremely high price.

⁴⁸¹ Reichl, 53.

⁴⁸² Reichl, 44.

⁴⁸³ Milton Bracker, "Life on W. 42d St.: A Study in Decay," *New York Times*, March 14, 1960.

To this day, many of the block's century-old theaters remain in operation due to arts-based preservation efforts, which became a feature of redevelopment efforts in the late 1970s.

The placement of this theater-lined block has solidified 42nd Street as a metonym for the larger area. "42nd Street," "midtown Manhattan," and "Times Square" might be used interchangeably in colloquial parlance. Interestingly, however, the famed portion of 42nd Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues falls outside of the technical bounds of Times Square. Officially, Times Square is only the bowtie-shaped region between 42nd and 47th Streets, where Broadway cuts diagonally across Seventh Avenue. The upper triangle region bears its own name—Father Duffy Square, named for a pastor who served in WWI.⁴⁸⁴ In practice, however, "Times Square" has come to refer to the wider surrounding area extending north and west. The Broadway theater industry today is constitutive of the area's renown, and theaters have long been a central architectural feature in the area's composition. And yet, theater itself has not been a reliably lucrative business. As New York City architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable puts it, "Theater is always tenuous."⁴⁸⁵

Except for a brief few years in the late 1910s when Times Square "closely resembled the romantic imagery that now defines its early days,"⁴⁸⁶ theaters in the 1920s started to encounter financial hardship. They could not keep pace with the increasingly commercializing district. As a live art form that depended on popular interest for profits, it hung on the whims of the public. Other limits, such as the number of shows that could be run in a day, meant that theaters in Times Square were supplementing their revenues with companion bars that served alcohol. But as prohibition precluded this additional income in the 1920s and the Great Depression set in,

⁴⁸⁴ Reichl, 43.

⁴⁸⁵ Ada Louise Huxtable, "Re-Inventing Times Square: 1990," in *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World*, ed. William R. Taylor (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991), 357.

⁴⁸⁶ Reichl, 51.

theaters were dealt a fatal blow. Moving uptown (as businesses had in the past) was no longer an option due to development that had already occurred north of Times Square.⁴⁸⁷ At the same time, the movie industry was on the rise. Theaters were ripe spaces for transformation into movie houses, and thus, many of 42nd Streets former theaters became “grinders,” known for “continually grinding out B-quality action and adventures movies oriented primarily to a male audience.”⁴⁸⁸ Some other theaters turned into sites of low-brow entertainment and thrill, such as game arcades and “dime museums.” These so-called museums aimed to titillate through the exhibition of freaky, anatomical phenomena, such as “wax casts of venereal ailments, deformed genitalia, and graphic depictions of embryo development.”⁴⁸⁹ Social historian George Chauncey notes how this economic downturn was widely critiqued as “transform[ing] the Square in the 1920s from a genteel theater district to a ‘tawdry’ amusement district.”⁴⁹⁰

Key to this characterization was the emergence of burlesque shows, a form to which many theaters pivoted. Thus, dance entered the scene as a primary source of entertainment. Burlesque is a form that features scantily clad dancers erotically showcasing the surfaces of their bodies. The libidinal charge of this dancing gestured towards and dovetailed with the sex-based economies of the area. The direct sexual encounter a client experienced with a prostitute was now transmuted into a staged exchange, where body to body contact was replaced with a visual encounter. Analyzing dime museums, theater scholar Laurence Senelick describes the shift for the customer as one of “spectation” rather than participation.⁴⁹¹ “The joys of the dime museum

⁴⁸⁷ Reichl, 54.

⁴⁸⁸ Reichl, 54. Interestingly, Brooklyn Academy of Music mirrors this trajectory. After financial decline from the Great Depression, BAM’s regular performance fare waned. In the 1950s-60s, “it survived by renting out its facilities to various organizations and featuring travelogues and adventure films, which drew the largest audiences.” Foulkes, “Streets and Stages,” 422.

⁴⁸⁹ Senelick, 333.

⁴⁹⁰ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 305.

⁴⁹¹ Senelick, 332.

are passive: the imagination is stimulated without an outlet for physical gratification.”⁴⁹² Peep shows would soon become part of this constellation of scopophilic offerings as well, wherein customers gazed upon a naked performer, sometimes separated by a glass partition.⁴⁹³ For some customers, such visual encounters were preferable to physical ones, as they offered more control and fantasy.⁴⁹⁴ Peeps shows did at times permit touching,⁴⁹⁵ and perhaps so did burlesque shows; nevertheless, this was not the coital exchange that distinguished prostitution. Thus, we might apply Senelick’s term to burlesque, too, and call it a spectatorial supplement to sex-based transactions. As a quickly profitable act in the 1920s, burlesque became the dominant form of live entertainment in Times Square.

Before even two full decades of burlesque’s reign, however, the cumulative moral outcry of various groups pinned the form as a political problem too big to ignore. With the shift in theatrical form had come a shift in clientele. The visitors to Times Square by the 1930s were less variegated in terms of socio-economic status. The more affluent clientele who had been previously drawn by theater now waned. While morality had not been a fundamental principle in Times Square’s formation, it became a tactical calling card when elite business interests were jeopardized. That is, the invocation of a threat to moral order was an effective cover for economic interests. In the name of public safety, policies cracking down on purportedly immoral activities and peoples could be quickly ushered in with little resistance. To such an end, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, a “reform” mayor in office from 1934 to 1945, implemented a ban on burlesque in 1942, effectively banishing it from the street scene.

⁴⁹² Senelick, 333.

⁴⁹³ Senelick, 341-342.

⁴⁹⁴ Senelick, 344.

⁴⁹⁵ Reichl, 342.

While some burlesque performance continued underground, such moral lines enshrined into law a division of the activities in Times Square between those that could be visibly advertised and conspicuously practiced versus those that had to happen covertly. This dividing line could also be put in terms of public and private—the legal activities that could be engaged publicly versus the illicit and illegal that occurred in private. In his article “Private Parts in Public Places,” Senelick examines the salient convergence of public and private domains in the sexual economies that have defined the tight space of Times Square. One such phenomenon described is the sexual tourism that saw an uptick in the years around World War II—those “who could breathe a heady aroma of freedom small-town mores in Times Square, and, submerged in its crowds, experience a reassuring assumption of anonymity.”⁴⁹⁶ Huxtable comments on this straddling of private and public too, remarking that Times Square’s “size and anonymity make it both a private and a public place, where offbeat or off-color desires can be openly or secretly satisfied.”⁴⁹⁷

This mixing of the public and private domains also leant an ideal social arrangement for homosexual encounters. On the surface, much of Times Square’s entertainment economies catered to men, and more specifically heterosexual men. The lust for violence and sex figured as base desires of normative masculinity could be satisfied at the area’s buffet of grinders, brothels, and burlesque shows. But the homosociality of such large groups of men also occasioned homosexual possibility and desire. As Chauncey notes, some grinders and burlesque houses “let themselves be used as gay meeting grounds.”⁴⁹⁸ Starting in the 1920s, male prostitution—men paying for sex with men—became a central feature in Times Square’s constitution as a red-light

⁴⁹⁶ Senelick, 338.

⁴⁹⁷ Huxtable, 360.

⁴⁹⁸ Chauncey, 305.

district. Given the illegality of homosexual sex, such activity very well flew under the radar for those who were not looking. But the hidden-in-plain-sight prevalence of male prostitution “highlights the extent to which the apparent chaos of the most active street scenes masked a highly organized street culture, whose boundaries and conventions were well known to the initiated.”⁴⁹⁹ Some of these sexual encounters did happen in public, as those engaged had no other place to do it. Yet even those middle-class and upward men who could afford otherwise sometimes chose to have sex in public, finding enhanced thrill in the danger of doing so.

The sexual topography of gay relations in Times Square—and the necessarily improvised veering that kept this map ever changing⁵⁰⁰—was charted by a multifarious group of men who lived and worked in the area around Times Square. This included theater workers (a profession which was generally more tolerant of sexual dissidents⁵⁰¹), restaurant workers, bartenders, hustlers, “gay migrants from the American heartland,” professional men who were only “out” with gay friends and liaisons, and single men.⁵⁰² Both Times Square and Hell’s Kitchen to its west contained an unusually large amount of housing geared towards single adults. As Chauncey notes, gay enclaves in New York City tended to emerge in such places with a concentration of furnished-room housing, such as the Bowery, Greenwich Village, and Harlem, and the same was true of lesbian enclaves, which developed in the latter two areas.⁵⁰³ In addition to temporary housing like YWCAs and YMCAs, Times Square also included a number of even more transient private quarters that could be rented by the hour, which supported its sex-based economies and relations.⁵⁰⁴

⁴⁹⁹ Chauncey, 191.

⁵⁰⁰ Chauncey, 195.

⁵⁰¹ Chauncey, 302.

⁵⁰² Chauncey, 304.

⁵⁰³ Chauncey, 136.

⁵⁰⁴ Chauncey, 304.

As gay encounters became more conspicuous with an influx of World War II sailors and servicemen into midtown,⁵⁰⁵ the city government took measures to prohibit such sociality. The flourishing gay world of Times Square became fuel to the fire of the moral crusaders. Mayor La Guardia repudiated the “various types of undesirables” who engaged in homosexual sex.⁵⁰⁶ In another linking of morality with social and economic order, the mixing of homosexuality into the patriarchally straight world of business was regarded as a threat that needed to be stamped out. Those who made up the gay world were comprised of a great diversity unto themselves. Thus, the attempt to banish gays and gay life from the city was in effect a doubled attempt at homogenization, marking a mixed gay group as incommensurable with the straightening of the commercial district.

Mixing Race/Fixing Race: Times Square Discourse and Social Homogenization

Despite such moral clean-up efforts, the “honky tonk” character of Times Square which had solidified in the 1930s persisted through the ensuing decades.⁵⁰⁷ The male-clientele-oriented businesses such as game arcades, grinders, and sex-magazine and bookstores were supplemented with other sex-based ventures such as porn theaters, peep shows, and live sex shows. Prostitution continued under the cover of other businesses. Drugs, another feature of the area since the 1930s,⁵⁰⁸ persisted and Times Square would become a hotspot for dealers and users of crack in the 1980s. These illicit economies partially accounted for white flight—the departure of not only white residents but also private capital—a dynamic which had been further exacerbated in the 1960s when large groups of African Americans and allies engaged in uprisings against state

⁵⁰⁵ Senelick, 338.

⁵⁰⁶ Senelick, 339.

⁵⁰⁷ Reichl, 55.

⁵⁰⁸ Reichl, 57.

racism (Chapter 2). As it has tended to do, Times Square came to stand for something much bigger than itself: “In the public mind, Times Square symbolized this seemingly irreversible process of urban failure and decline that justified flight from the nation’s decaying cities.”⁵⁰⁹ Times Square was the exemplar of urban blight.

Key to this ideological construction was not only class but race. By the 1980s, the Times Square area was exceedingly racially mixed. To understand this in such a transient place, it is necessary to look at the street activity. As Huxtable states, “The movement that counts in Times Square is on foot...this is an unparalleled pedestrian precinct.”⁵¹⁰ 42nd Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues was one of the city’s most heavily trafficked streets in the late 1970s, at its busiest hosting up to 8,000 passersby an hour.⁵¹¹ Fittingly, this block was the focus of a CUNY sociological study conducted around this time to collect demographic information. The study found that the racial and ethnic makeup of these pedestrians was more or less representative of that of Manhattan’s population.⁵¹² Key to these findings was the way they disproved a widely held assumption about the area at the time, which was that it was *disproportionately* populated by black and Latinx people. Other parts of the city tended to be more segregated, as stratifications of race and class segmented the city’s geographic space into enclaves. Accordingly, whites likely encountered more people of color in Times Square than they did elsewhere. This concentration of people of color played into the perception of Times Square as blighted and degraded, as the area’s density of immoral and illegal activity was figured as evidence of their presence. Thus, while the study confirmed the area to be frequented by a diverse group in terms of race and ethnicity, it was actually most revelatory for its demonstration

⁵⁰⁹ Reichl, 58.

⁵¹⁰ Huxtable, 359.

⁵¹¹ Reichl, 62.

⁵¹² Reichl, 62.

that the predominant racial group was the same as that of the city's general population—white people.⁵¹³

The racial imaginary that fabricated Times Square as “overrun” with black and brown people was revealed for what it was: racist anxiety. Such racism conceived of a place of mixed racial makeup—of racial mixing itself—as a transgression. The very presence of black and brown people disrupted the perceived naturalness of a homogeneously white space, registering as a threat to the white-dominant social order. Various ideological strategies were marshaled to describe such threats and justify efforts to expunge them. As mentioned in the Introduction, in the book *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*, cultural geographer Tim Cresswell examines how “place” is wielded in such a way to designate certain behaviors—and thus people—as “out of place.” Cresswell simultaneously underscores how the discourse of place is central to the discursive construction of normativity, *and* how the behaviors it marks as transgressions—behaviors enacted in improper places—reveal this construction to be contestable.⁵¹⁴

A major case study in the book focuses on New York City in the 1970s and the act of graffiti. The discourse constructed by government officials and others who decried the presence of graffiti in public places cast it in terms of contagion and illness. Mayor Lindsay, for example—whom Cresswell dubs “the sworn enemy of graffiti”⁵¹⁵—declared that “the rash of graffiti madness was related to mental health problems.”⁵¹⁶ Such discourse also linked cleanliness with morality, suggesting that the diseased, immoral behavior was indicative of

⁵¹³ Reichl, 62.

⁵¹⁴ Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 8-9.

⁵¹⁵ Cresswell, 36.

⁵¹⁶ John Lindsay quoted in Cresswell, 42.

disorder and needed to be cut off or quarantined for the restoration of moral order.⁵¹⁷ The graffiti itself was of course but a trace of a behavior, begging the question of *whom* left such marks. Unsurprisingly, the same discursive matrix that linked morality and cleanliness also favored whiteness, casting racial Others as trespassers upon the rightful order of things, as out of place. As Creswell explains, the “assumed source” of the graffiti was “the ethnic minorities of urban New York,” an assumption which “slip[s] into a discourse that repeatedly makes reference to the ‘third world,’ which exists outside of the dominant value structure of the United States and the ‘West.’”⁵¹⁸ Graffiti, then, could be taken as a kind of evidence of the out of place-ness of people of color in New York City, too primitive for the advanced civilization of the West.

Such racist assumptions animated the discourse about Times Square in the 1970s and 1980s too. As with graffiti, the behaviors defining the area—drug use, sex work, engagement with pornography—were cast as improper and a symptom of the density of people of color. Thus, Times Square emerged especially clearly in this era as a contested space, one in which the very definition of the *place* was at stake, with multiple competing parties and interests. Those whose interests were driven by corporate financial gain—the city, private investors, developers, corporations—saw its seedy activities as a threat to commercial viability. Securing its stability as a site of commerce required transforming its place-ness into something more homogenous. The mix of activities and peoples had to be smoothed out and cleaned up. Uprooting the depraved behavior necessitated uprooting its assumed black and brown perpetrators. The mongrelized Times Square needed whitening.

As had been the case in late nineteenth-century Longacre Square, morality became a deputized endeavor. Moral order would be imposed by the weaponized might of the police. To

⁵¹⁷ Creswell, 41-42.

⁵¹⁸ Creswell, 43.

this end, in the early 1970s Mayor Lindsay divided the area around Times Square into two “super precincts,” Midtown North and Midtown South, with a police force designated for each. Despite the intensity of their efforts—“raids of massage parlors, closings of bookstores, mass arrests of prostitutes”⁵¹⁹—little changed. The reality was that many of these establishments were run by organized crime and thus were well equipped to persist even in the face of legal and financial punishment.⁵²⁰ Efforts to sanitize the area via ramped-up policing were continued by Mayor Abraham Beame, who succeeded Lindsay starting in 1974. In 1976, Beame inaugurated the Mayor’s Office of Midtown Enforcement (OME). Consisting of police officers and city inspectors, the OME inspected massage parlors and other such covers for commercial sex, closing down dozens for various purported safety infractions.⁵²¹ “Its goal was not to chastise vice but to return Times Square real estate to ‘good commercial uses.’”⁵²² That is, while policing the streets of Times Square was motivated by a supposed interest in public safety and morality, the true purpose was to maximize the flow of capital.

Further evidence of such prioritization of profits could be seen in the actions of Mayor Edward Koch, who succeeded Beame and served until 1989. Koch attempted to clear the city of “loiterers,” a term he used to describe various marginalized groups, including people of color and houseless people. At one point, he went so far as to implement “anti-loitering” legislation, which deployed police to force houseless people out of public spaces.⁵²³ While the State Supreme Court did not let the law stand, it nevertheless revealed the calculus underpinning Koch’s agenda. In order to allow for the smooth flow of commercialization, Koch marshaled state power to remove

⁵¹⁹ Senelick, 345.

⁵²⁰ Senelick, 345.

⁵²¹ Reichl, 59.

⁵²² Senelick, 345.

⁵²³ Creswell, 4.

people who were deemed impediments to this process. To justify such removal, he positioned houseless people as out of place, which figured them as not properly part of the public. Creswell underscores the irony of Koch's attempts, pointing out that "at the same time as urban 'development' create[d] more and more homeless people, Koch denie[d] the homeless any right to the public spaces of the city."⁵²⁴ That is, Koch's approach redoubled a dispossession of the very same people that it had already uprooted in the first place.

By 1984, Koch's policies had precipitated a "process of taking property and evicting tenants."⁵²⁵ In effect, he had turned the city into a turf war. He pitted Times Squares' "loiterers" against the white investors and middle-class families visiting the area who were putatively frightened of the area's illicit activities. The reality, however, was that roughly half of those who frequented sex-related business, which were assumed to be the province of men of color, were white, middle-class men.⁵²⁶ At the same time, such discourse lumped all black and brown people in the area as a problem, obscuring class and other kinds of difference amongst and within these groups. The area, for example, included business owned and frequented by middle-class families of color.⁵²⁷ But for Koch, "[t]he African-Americans and Latinos who were a visible presence in Times Square...provided the material for a constructed political enemy that could be defeated only through redevelopment."⁵²⁸ Thus, he stoked and instrumentalized the racial anxieties of whites towards a righteous, business-driven reclamation of the area.

Underscoring the entanglement of real estate and politics in New York City, Huxtable states, "Private profit, not public policy, is the bottom line, and there is a fairly straight line from

⁵²⁴ Creswell, 5.

⁵²⁵ Reichl, 69.

⁵²⁶ Reichl, 66.

⁵²⁷ Reichl, 69.

⁵²⁸ Reichl, 117.

one to the other.”⁵²⁹ Koch deepened this line that had started with the mayors preceding him, and Times Square was a common fulcrum in such efforts. As a generator of capital, the public and private sectors converged on the area, rendering the municipal government an increasingly dutiful servant of business. When Mayor Beame’s OME closed sex businesses, it was making space for more lucrative investments that would ultimately fatten the city’s wallet. While the OME was a public entity designated to condemn illegitimate businesses, Mayor Beame hired a *private* entity to flip the resultant buildings, one that—like the OME—had also been founded in 1976: Fred Papert’s 42nd Street Development Corporation.

Clark Center Bids for Theatre Row

Mayor Beame and the 42nd Street Development Corporation figured prominently around this time in Clark Center’s trajectory too. As previously mentioned, in 1975 and 1976, Mayor Beame granted Clark Center and director Louise Roberts Certificates of Appreciation, bestowing especial recognition on them “on behalf of all New Yorkers.”⁵³⁰ In the latter year, recognition also came from a more locally elected municipal authority—the President of the Borough of Manhattan, Percy E. Sutton. On July 21, 1976, three days before the opening of its Dance Festival on The Mall, Sutton issued a Proclamation commending Clark Center and Louise Roberts for their outstanding cultural contributions to the city. In their honor, he declared July 18th-24th, 1976, “CLARK CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS WEEK.” Amidst the otherwise celebratory language, one line stood out for its acknowledgement of the challenges Clark Center had faced. “Our valuable New Yorker Louise Roberts has sustained the Clark

⁵²⁹ Huxtable, 361.

⁵³⁰ Mayor of the City of New York Certificate of Appreciation, July 9, 1976.

Center for the Performing Arts through many trying and difficult financial periods.”⁵³¹ Indeed, with the closure of the YWCA just two years prior, the very fate of Clark Center’s existence hung in the balance. Roberts’ will, vision, and conviction had been put to the test. Even after the loss of its home, funding, and Playwrights Horizons which it had birthed, Clark Center lived on, albeit theater-less.

While this was a triumph in its own right, another Proclamation that came just three years later would seem to foretell a success of more heft. On May 22, 1979, then-Manhattan Borough President Andrew Stein issued a Proclamation “commend[ing] all those who have played a part in the development and maintenance of the Clark Center and extend best wishes on the occasion of the opening of [their] new facilities on Theatre Row.”⁵³² By all accounts, then, it seemed official. Years of searching and finally, Roberts and her team had secured a new facility. Not only would this one have a theater—it would be on Theatre Row, the boulevard of off-Broadway venues inaugurated by Playwrights Horizons. Thus, Clark Center’s new location would also mean a new position for dance in the cultural landscape of New York City. While dance had not previously figured in to the Broadway venue classification system, the presence of a dance theater on Theatre Row would bring dance into the fold of this hyper-visible system. It could afford dance a new legitimacy alongside theater.

Boarding Meeting notes from April 1977 show that Clark Center—represented by its lawyer Stanley Stairs⁵³³—proposed in its earliest meetings with the 42nd Street Development Corporation—represented by Fred Papert and Elaine Daley—that its new theater be constructed

⁵³¹ President of the Borough of Manhattan Proclamation, July 21, 1976, Box 38, Folder 2, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁵³² President of the Borough of Manhattan Proclamation, May 22, 1979, Box 38, Folder 2, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁵³³ An internal administrative document from the early 1980s describes the Center’s legal team thusly: “Clark Center’s legal affairs are handled by Stanley Stairs of Breed, Stairs and Berger, and auditing functions are handled by George P. O’Neill, a partner in the firm of Ernst and Whinney.” Clark Center institutional history narrative.

within the former West Side Airlines Terminal building.⁵³⁴ Now a relic of the past, such airlines terminals in Manhattan were sites where customers could fulfill their air travel needs including buying tickets, depositing checked luggage, and catching busses to the area's airports.

Specifically servicing Newark International Airport, this West Side location was located on the southeast corner of West 42nd Street and Tenth Avenue, meaning it was the westernmost building on the block that constituted Theatre Row. In addition to constructing its new theater there, the Center expressed interest in leasing the remainder of the building to house its school, which would once again enable all of its activities to operate under one roof.⁵³⁵

Negotiations between the two parties yielded more detailed possibilities. Next door to the Airlines Terminal was an old Citibank building that could accommodate it all. As later Board Meeting notes explain, "It is estimated that there is sufficient space to contain both an expanded teaching program (4 studios) and a small, well-designed theatre suitable to the needs of dancers."⁵³⁶ They continue, "The sense of the discussion was that 42nd Street is a good location for Clark Center since it is on its way to becoming the hub of Off Off Broadway theatre activity, and Clark Center is somewhat in that relation to the production of dance."⁵³⁷ The understated tone of this sentence belies its enormous dance-historical significance. As examined in Chapter 2, concert dance was a field that had an ambivalent relationship to commercialism. Concert dance did not have an analogue to Broadway, the commercial center for theater. Broadway as a paradigm afforded its offshoots—off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway—a legible identity. To be off-Broadway, for example, may have meant to be categorically *not* on Broadway—i.e., not popular enough to fill Broadway houses night after night. It did, nevertheless, mean being

⁵³⁴ Administrative Files/Board of Directors Meeting Notes, April 25, 1977.

⁵³⁵ Administrative Files/Board of Directors Meeting Notes, April 25, 1977.

⁵³⁶ Clark Center Board Meeting Notes, 1978.

⁵³⁷ Clark Center Board Meeting Notes, 1978.

proximal to it. To be in the shadow of the popular is still to be near it, identifiable and(/as) marginal.

Comments given by Roberts a couple of years later both support and complicate these analyses. At a press conference in 1979 given on the occasion of Clark Center's official acquisition of a space on Theatre Row, Roberts spoke to her excitement for what the move would do for Clark Center: "The magic adhesive that glues all of this together is being part of the adventurous master plan for 42nd Street. Add the delights of having Theatre Row for neighbors, and you can understand why we can't wait to take our place in this community of artists as the Dance Theatre on the block."⁵³⁸ These comments speak to the belief that the Center could fully step into its role as an off-Broadway equivalent of dance by being geographically proximal to these kinds of theater spaces and their Broadway referent. Remarkably, Roberts was simultaneously unabashed in her continued commitment to Clark Center's mission: "Since our production focus is on development, *on beginners*, the only way to encourage and teach excellence, is to provide excellence."⁵³⁹ To maintain a focus on training beginners was decidedly un-commercial. It was not just off-Broadway, but *un*-Broadway. Thus, the geographical proximity in Roberts' mind had little to do with "moving on up" in terms of its target clientele. Yes, they would teach excellence, but preexisting excellence would not be required for entry. Her vision was one that would bring new, young, emerging dance artists into proximity with theater professionals on the block.

While the Board agreed that the Theatre Row option should be "seriously considered and pursued,"⁵⁴⁰ they continued their search for other spaces too. In the meantime, it was brought to

⁵³⁸ Louise Roberts, Press Conference Remarks, May 22, 1979, Box 11, Folder 4, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁵³⁹ Roberts, Press Conference Remarks, emphasis mine.

⁵⁴⁰ Clark Center Board Meeting Notes, 1978.

the Center's attention that the West Side YWCA was purchased and would be restored to use of some kind. Roberts, with hopes of moving back into Clark Center's inaugural space, wrote to Benjamin Rosen of A. Rosen & Son, which had purchased the building, on April 25, 1977. She described the Center's plight of being theater-less and requested a meeting with Rosen, signing off thusly: "Please accept our best wishes for success with the revitalization of our old home."⁵⁴¹ She was warm yet unmistakably proprietary. Such assertions of the Center's claim on the site, however, would be to no avail. The familiar old space now fully out of reach, Clark Center yoked itself to the rush of new energies seeking to revitalize"42nd Street.

Historical Preservation as a Cover for Redevelopment

The 42nd Street Development Corporation was just the beginning of a host of public and private entities with commercial interests in Times Square that co-conspired to revitalize the area through the 1980s. But ridding the area of its illicit activities and their presumed perpetrators for the sake of commercial businesses was not a great strategy from a public relations standpoint. Something less apparently business-driven was needed to appease affluent residents and visitors who wanted to frequent the area and preserve it as a hub of culture—high culture, that is. While it was already known as a theater district and many of the iconic theaters remained—at least in their facades—the arts became the lubricant for smoothing the area's redevelopment towards commercial interests. The approach was both preservationist and cultural, as it purported to preserve the area's historic theaters and restore the respectable culture to which they had once been host. It would also fulfill the homogenizing goals of redevelopment vis-à-vis race and class but under the innocuous cover of the arts. As Reichl puts it, "According to the original plan for

⁵⁴¹ Louise Roberts, Louise Roberts to Benjamin Rosen, Letter, April 25, 1977, Box 11, Folder 2, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Forty-second Street, new office towers would draw whiter and wealthier people to the street by day, and the restored historic theaters would entice them there at night. The physical presence of the magnificent Broadway theaters would thus constitute a cultural code—aptly defined as a Great White Way—demarcating the street as an area for upscale users.⁵⁴² Thus, the white lights of the Broadway theater marquees, which were deployed as an emblem of high culture, came to signify racial whiteness too.

If redevelopment meant restoring Times Square’s white lights and white patrons, this entailed dimming the “red lights” and their presumed black and brown patrons. The area’s long history as a mixed red-light/white-light district would soon be over. An early and stark example of such homogenizing was Theatre Row. Just two years after Fred Papert established the nonprofit in 1976, the Corporation had completed what it called Phase I of Theatre Row:

This involved the conversion of six dilapidated tenement buildings between Ninth and Tenth Avenues—previously home to such disreputable establishments as the French Palace, the Body Rub Institute, the Studio \$10 (‘Complete satisfaction featuring the most beautiful conversationalists’)—into a complex of off-off-Broadway theaters with twelve floors of supporting rehearsal and office space and an upscale French restaurant.⁵⁴³

Theatre Row’s first theaters replaced former sex businesses. The transformation had been swift, and the re-branding followed. The front page of the *New York Times*’ “Weekend” section on February 8, 1980 featured “The New Hell’s Kitchen: A Theater and Restaurant Guide,” inviting its readership to explore the refurbished neighborhood. The theater portion, written by Mel Gussow, touted Theatre Row as “one square city block...[with] more theatrical activity than on almost any other street in New York,” generating “an atmosphere that may yet rival London’s Covent Garden.”⁵⁴⁴ The restaurant guide by Mimi Sheraton highlighted the “half-a-dozen or so

⁵⁴² Reichl, 172.

⁵⁴³ Reichl, 80-81.

⁵⁴⁴ Mel Gussow, “Stage Lights Are Getting Brighter on the Far West Side,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1980.

interesting and attractive restaurants” that opened around that time, giving each an individual star rating.⁵⁴⁵ Such treatment from the city’s primary newspaper was a clear indication of the rising social profile of the area that came with the establishment of the block as a theater district.

The “upscale users” that redevelopment efforts sought to draw to the area did in fact find their way there, however gradually. In a *New York Times* article four years later, Samuel G. Freedmen wrote, “Although Playwrights Horizons began the rehabilitation of the block with its arrival almost a decade ago, Theatre Row is still being discovered by uptown and suburban audiences.”⁵⁴⁶ He went on to quote Jack Garfein, the artistic director of the Actors and Directors Theater: “The most exciting thing...was the night I saw five limousines out front of the Beckett plays. I said to myself, ‘We finally got the carriage trade.’”⁵⁴⁷ While the limousine as evidence of affluence spoke for itself, Freedmen’s references to uptown and the suburbs operated similarly, denoting a moneyed audience coming into the city for their cultural fix.

Papert’s 42nd Street Development Corporation, which had been formed to redevelop West 42nd Street, soon thereafter widened its scope to the surrounding Times Square area as a local development corporation (LDC).⁵⁴⁸ The LDC was indicative of the convergence of public and private entities that marked the deep entanglement of these domains when it came to business. It was a nonprofit corporation and therefore technically private, receiving funding from foundations and corporations. It was, however, also the beneficiary of special federal privileges and public support, including tax-exempt status, federal and municipal funds, and “the right to lease or buy city properties without going through the normal process of competitive bidding.”⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁵ Mimi Sheraton, “Dining Spots Get into the Act in a Variety of Scenes and Settings,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1980.

⁵⁴⁶ Samuel G. Freedmen, “A Choice of 9 Plays on the Boards,” *New York Times*, February 10, 1984.

⁵⁴⁷ Jack Garfein quoted in Freedmen, “A Choice of 9 Plays...”

⁵⁴⁸ Reichl, 79. For ease of reference, I use “42nd Street Development Corporation” throughout this document to refer to the overarching entity, except in this brief portion where the distinction is important.

⁵⁴⁹ Reichl, 79.

This was a clear example of the way the city incentivized real estate business, devising methods to mitigate the financial risk and “create a package acceptable to conventional real estate practice.”⁵⁵⁰

Before he was helming the 42nd Street LDC, Papert had been president of the Municipal Arts Society (MAS). This was a civic group comprised of upper-crust socialites, including Jaqueline Kennedy Onassis, who advocated for the city’s arts and historic preservation. That preservation was a movement and cause backed by elites was telling of its aims, which dovetailed with those of redevelopment efforts. Preservationists were not interested in preserving Times Square as it was in the late 1970s—quite the contrary. They dreamed of a cleaned-up Times Square that glittered with the classy theater marquees and high society clientele that they imagined to predate the area’s decline. While it was not wholly a fantasy, it was not a very real past either. It was a vision that romanticized what had just been a few years’ period at the dawn of Times Square’s invention, as previously mentioned.⁵⁵¹

What’s more, redevelopment efforts entailed the demolition of that which was also marked for preservation. Huxtable flags this contradiction as it came into particularly stark relief in a 1987 zoning amendment, dubbing it a catch-22:

The zoning defines the characteristics of the area brilliantly and supplies the criteria meant to protect and preserve those characteristics; but because they are being destroyed by the new construction, and because the new construction is also destroying the place that supplied the characteristics, recreating them is an exercise in artifice and futility. They become a kind of splendid wallpaper, or light show for a performance that isn’t there.⁵⁵²

Such artifice was indicative of redevelopment’s fundamental investment in appearances. The process was more about reproducing the *look* of an earlier Times Square than its activities, more

⁵⁵⁰ Huxtable, 362.

⁵⁵¹ Reichl, 51.

⁵⁵² Huxtable, 366.

about money than people. The ideology of *re*-development was belied by its two internal contradictions—the return to a Times Square that never really existed, and the requisite demolition of an area that was simultaneously framed as worthy of preservation. Nevertheless, preservation was attractive for the ways it emphasized culture and the arts as self-evidently good things while obscuring the very narrow set of cultural forms it actually entailed—bourgeois and Europeanist. Upper- and middle-class whites could advocate for a return to the historic days of the Great White Way without having to mention what this actually signified—the elimination of sex work, pornography, drugs, and people of color.

Arts and Artists as Agents of Redevelopment

This use of the arts as a tool of redevelopment was not incidental. Rather, Papert was on to something that virtually all gentrified urban centers in the United States today illustrate to be a surefire formula. That is, an infusion of the arts and artists creates a highbrow veneer that then draws affluent residents. By the 1970s, a prominent example of this strategy had already been shown to work in Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Indeed, Papert cited Lincoln Center as his inspiration for Theatre Row. Still in operation as a bustling complex of high culture to this day, Lincoln Center was a redevelopment project led by Robert Moses, a long-time New York City public official. From the 1920s through the 1970s, he held a multitude of different city roles, including Parks Commissioner and Chairman of the Mayor’s Committee on Slum Clearance.⁵⁵³ Various celebrated and reviled, Moses came to stand for a “bird’s eye” vision of urban planning, one that maximized efficiency, both the flow of people and capital.

⁵⁵³ Anthony Flint, *Wrestling with Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took on New York’s Master Builder and Transformed the American City* (New York: Random House, 2009), 62.

One of his grand plans that gained traction in the 1950s, for example, involved the extension of Fifth Avenue into lower Manhattan by cutting into Washington Square Park. While this “was a critical piece of Moses’s larger vision for Greenwich Village” and its bulldozer-style urban renewal,⁵⁵⁴ Jane Jacobs emerged as his public adversary, fiercely protective of the park as an “oasis amid the concrete, bricks, and asphalt of the city.”⁵⁵⁵ She became a towering figure in the national consciousness, one who embodied the fight against urban renewal. She cogently articulated its deleterious impacts in her 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Organizing locally in opposition to Moses’ development efforts, her grassroots approach itself was illustrative of her fundamentally different commitments when it came to urban life—communities, neighborhoods, green space, and civic well-being. Notably, Jacobs and her fellow community activists managed to bar some of Moses’ schemes, including the Fifth Avenue extension. They saved Washington Square Park.⁵⁵⁶

Moses’ Lincoln Square Urban Renewal Project, on the other hand, did result in the demolition of several blocks of the San Juan Hill neighborhood. Situated on Manhattan’s west side between 59th and 65th Streets, this was less than ten blocks north of Clark Center’s original location at the West Side YWCA. As Charles Blackwell was wandering the streets of midtown in 1959 in search of an institutional home for Ailey’s emergent dance company, Moses’ Lincoln Center plan, which had already been years in the making, was breaking ground. As the front-page story of the *New York Times* reported on May 15, 1959, President Eisenhower had made a thirteen-hour visit to the city the previous day for the momentous occasion: “Jovial and vigorous, the President shoveled up freshly softened dirt to break ground for the \$75,000,000 music, opera,

⁵⁵⁴ Flint, 62.

⁵⁵⁵ Flint, 63.

⁵⁵⁶ Flint, 88.

theatre and dance project at West Sixty-fourth Street and Broadway.”⁵⁵⁷ The smiling Eisenhower was pictured with his full shovel.

The president’s presence was fitting, as Moses’ project was “the largest federal urban renewal project ever granted.”⁵⁵⁸ Moses’ original vision entailed the construction of a “cultural district” that would have included theaters, shopping, middle- and upper-income apartments, a hotel, school campuses, parking garages, an office tower, and a high-rise hotel, requiring the razing of nearly twenty blocks.⁵⁵⁹ As Foulkes put it, “high culture would supplant so-called blight.”⁵⁶⁰ At the heart of Moses’ strategy was a fundamental linking of class and culture, of the industries of real estate and the arts. Generating an elevation in value of one was a means of elevating the other, in a dynamic of mutual justification and reinforcement. Nowhere is this clearer than in the plan for the cultural district’s new apartments, the vast majority of which were designated for affluent residents. Where there once had been 7,000 apartments for low-income residents, there would now be fewer than 500.⁵⁶¹

Moreover, these displaced residents were primarily Puerto Rican and African American. As with the redevelopment efforts which would succeed him, race and ethnicity were fundamental to Moses’ urban renewal. Urban blight was associated with—and blamed on—racialized peoples, subsuming race and class in an ideological entwinement that linked brownness and blackness with poverty and its outcomes—crime and dirtiness.⁵⁶² Thus, urban renewal entailed replacing such peoples with the standard bearers of demographic normativity: those who were white and affluent. Renewal, then, produced and relied on a process of

⁵⁵⁷ Peter Kihss, “President Turns Earth to Start Lincoln Center,” *New York Times*, May 15, 1959.

⁵⁵⁸ Foulkes, “Streets and Stages,” 414.

⁵⁵⁹ Foulkes, “Streets and Stages,” 414.

⁵⁶⁰ Foulkes, “Streets and Stages,” 414.

⁵⁶¹ Foulkes, “Streets and Stages,” 416.

⁵⁶² Creswell also describes this phenomenon of dirtiness in his discussion of graffiti and the discourse marshaled to end it. See Creswell, 38-40.

homogenization. While San Juan Hill had once been home to a mix of black and brown people, their cultural institutions and practices, and “two to five-story brownstone buildings, small shops, and local businesses,” there would now be a social and cultural hollowing out and a commercial takeover. Labeling San Juan Hill as “blight” reduced and erased the great diversity of life there, smoothing the way for a clean-up process that would replace it all with a set of peoples and practices both narrower and more purportedly respectable.

Notably, however, the Lincoln Center project was advertised by its administrators in populist terms. Foulkes points out the tendency for this fuller historical context to be missed in critiques of the project that are quick to highlight its elitism. Like the Kennedy Center (Chapter 2), the construction of Lincoln Center was a Cold War political maneuver asserting America’s artistic sophistication as part and parcel of its global might. Thus, Lincoln Center *was* intended as a display of superiority on the international stage, but this was not the case on the domestic one. Domestically, Lincoln Center was framed as an arts hub for everyone. Put in terms of “mass vs. class,” Lincoln Center’s administrators emphasized the masses, touting the way it would expand audiences for the high arts of opera, ballet, and symphonic music. Lincoln Center, then, as an emblem of international elitism and yet domestic populism “played both sides of the cultural Cold War.”⁵⁶³

The effects on the ground, which clearly favored class over mass, revealed that this marketing was more rhetorical strategy than anything. The Lincoln Square project destroyed San Juan Hill, displacing many low-income people of color, all in the name of art. Some residents continued to live nearby and participated in Lincoln Center programming,⁵⁶⁴ but the demographic and architectural transformations were swift and significant. Thus, the various arts-

⁵⁶³ Foulkes, “Streets and Stages,” 414.

⁵⁶⁴ Foulkes, “Streets and Stages,” 419.

based redevelopment efforts of the 1970s and 1980s were not *sui generis*. They were a continuation of preceding efforts like Lincoln Center, which precipitated the spread of commercialization over the island of Manhattan, neighborhood by neighborhood. Moses had shown the arts to be not only an effective stimulus of commerce, but—more importantly—a strategic cover for the human costs of such efforts. It was not that Moses and his many corporate and federal partners were ignorant of such costs, nor did they willfully ignore them. Rather, there was a clear calculus at play, which ascribed value unevenly across social difference. For Moses and his partners, the loss of homes and livelihoods for Puerto Ricans and African Americans was deemed a worthy tradeoff for all that would be gained. As Foulkes puts it, there was the suggestion “that whatever social costs the urban renewal project might accrue would be more than compensated for by the crowning artistic achievements of the country’s most renowned artists, directors, and producers.”⁵⁶⁵

This compensatory dynamic wherein the arts also function to obscure the underlying calculus of displacement has been described as “artwashing.” Coined amongst activists, the term refers to the use of art to “to smooth and gloss over social cleansing and gentrification, functioning as a ‘social licence [sic],’ a public relations tool, and a means of pacifying local communities.”⁵⁶⁶ That is, as gentrification dispossesses people of their homes and livelihoods, the appearance of the arts, artists, and “arts districts” are used to “wash” away these deleterious impacts. The putative beautification and elevation associated with the arts serves to either distract from the displacement or to justify it as a net good. The notion of “washing” is particularly resonant with the ideology of “clean up” often driving urban redevelopment efforts, which affixes dirtiness to lower-class and racialized peoples. Moreover, the term can be extended

⁵⁶⁵ Foulkes, “Streets and Stages,” 414-415.

⁵⁶⁶ Pritchard, 179.

to highlight the racial ideology at place in redevelopment and gentrification. When a neighborhood of racialized peoples is displaced to be replaced by a majority of white residents, as with the demolition of San Juan Hill,⁵⁶⁷ racial mixing is avoided. In such a case, art is used to wash away racial mixing, helping bring about social, cultural, and economic homogenization.⁵⁶⁸

Often, however, gentrification is more gradual. The original residents and businesses of a neighborhood are priced out a block at a time. In such cases, artists have often been key players as the first new residents to move in. While artists are drawn by low rents, real estate developers exploit the cultural cachet that artists carry as evidence of a neighborhood's elevation, from blighted to chic. One of New York City's clearest examples of this dynamic—figuring “among the most famous examples of artist-transformed urban space”—occurred in SoHo.⁵⁶⁹ Deriving its name from being “South of Houston Street,” this neighborhood in lower Manhattan which is today home to high fashion boutiques and some of the city's most expensive residences, was in the 1950s “a struggling industrial enclave.”⁵⁷⁰ By the 1960s, however, artists began to settle in the neighborhood, converting industrial spaces into loft apartments. Art galleries, high-end shops, and restaurants followed, drawing an increasingly affluent class of visitors and soon-to-be neighbors. Converted loft apartments became stylish and desirable; the artists who had inaugurated this trend had—however unknowingly—paid the way for a real estate boon. By the mid-1970s, these same artists were sometimes being outbid by the influx of new, moneyed

⁵⁶⁷ Foulkes, “Streets and Stages,” 416.

⁵⁶⁸ Despite the social and cultural homogenization gentrification is designed to bring out, it is sometimes “perversely” justified as a “liberal mission to ‘increase diversity,’” as sociologist David Madden notes. David Madden, “Gentrification doesn't trickle down to help everyone,” *The Guardian*, October 10, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/10/gentrification-not-urban-renaissance>.

⁵⁶⁹ Aaron Shkuda, “The Artist as Developer and Advocate: Real Estate and Public Policy in SoHo, New York,” *Journal of Urban History* 41, No. 6 (2015): 1000.

⁵⁷⁰ Shkuda, 1000.

residents. As loft conversions spread to other parts of Manhattan, including midtown,⁵⁷¹ Papert was hatching a plan of his own that capitalized on the allure of artists.

In 1978, Manhattan Plaza, a high-rise apartment complex with nearly 1,700 units, was opened across the street from Theatre Row. Its high rents necessitated affluent clientele, but the area was not yet one that could attract such residents. While it would be necessary to make a portion of the building available as Section 8 subsidized housing for low-income residents, developers did not want such residents in this area with a social profile they were trying to elevate. Papert proposed renting only to Section 8 residents who were artists, as such residents exhibited the aura of culture even though they were low income—or as one such tenant put it, they “looked like luxury tenants—but weren’t.”⁵⁷²

Further solidifying the engineered association between artists and socio-economic uplift was the inclusion of a small portion of units in Manhattan Plaza for more well-to-do residents. Writer Mimi Sheraton, in her 1980 *New York Times* restaurant review for the block’s new eateries, noted the mix, referring to the “the Manhattan Plaza tenants [as] made up to some extent of established and affluent middle-aged and elderly people but primarily of members of the performing arts, most of whom are young and relatively impecunious.”⁵⁷³ Even Sheraton’s sidestepping of the word “poor,” opting for the erudite alternative of “impecunious,” seemed to participate in the efforts to raise the area’s social profile. Nevertheless, her statement also made clear that the block was not demographically homogenous but rather socio-economically mixed. Artists were intermediaries in the redevelopment trajectory, agents of change that were at once

⁵⁷¹ Shkuda, 1009.

⁵⁷² Reichl, 82.

⁵⁷³ Sheraton.

complicit in and evidence of the incompleteness of commercial homogenization. Notably, some of Clark Center's artists would go on to live in Manhattan Plaza.

Theatre Row Phase II: Louise Roberts, The Mayor and Minister of Dance

In an essay critiquing dance and gentrification, dance artist Caroline Walthall observes, “the relationship of artists to urban regeneration is often fraught with competing tensions.”⁵⁷⁴ This statement could be extended to artistic institutions too. Clark Center was in tension with the ideology underpinning 42nd Street's redevelopment and Theatre Row specifically, as it simultaneously angled to be a beneficiary of these transformational efforts yet resist their commercial motivations. The opening of Manhattan Plaza had converged with “Phase I” of Theatre Row's construction, completed in 1978. Clark Center's acquisition of real estate on the block had not yet solidified at that point. Roberts and her staff were still in negotiations with Papert's 42nd Street Development Corporation. They would, however, manage to strike a deal in time for Clark Center to become part of Theatre Row's Phase II:

[A] \$6 million project involving the construction of two 200-seat theaters and the renovation of an existing 99-seat theater, the rehabilitation of the former West Side Airlines Terminal for use as a television recording studio, the creation of additional rehearsal and restaurant space, and the improvement of a collection of outdoor public amenities, including trees, sidewalks, signs, and gardens.⁵⁷⁵

The site of the new Clark Center was to be at 444-448 West 42nd Street, overtaking the old Citibank building and an adjoining tenement, the former of which was gutted and the latter of which was demolished, to make way for the construction of the Center's new school and dance

⁵⁷⁴ Caroline Walthall, “Dancing the History of Urban Change in the Bay and Beyond,” in *Moving Sites: Investigating Site-Specific Dance Performance*, ed. Victoria Hunter (New York: Routledge, 2015), 227.

⁵⁷⁵ Reichl, 81.

theater. A twenty-five-year lease was signed, officiating the Center's status as the "second largest tenant in the block-long complex."

Despite the shortcomings of its space at 939 Eighth Avenue (and contra the financial crisis facing the city into the end of the 1970s), Clark Center was in fact experiencing considerable growth in its annual operating budgets through this time and into the 1980s. An institutional document from the time specified that this financial upturn was not a product of increases in class prices but rather in the number of people signing up for and attending classes.⁵⁷⁶ Yet the move to Theatre Row was a heftier financial lift than the Center could be prepared for. An initial sum of \$500,000 was needed.⁵⁷⁷ While critical attention given the Dance Festival on the Mall series had established Clark Center as a prominent presence in dance presentation, its termination in 1978 was followed by an overall suspension in dance presenting as administrative efforts were funneled into fundraising for the new space instead.⁵⁷⁸

These temporary cuts in programming were, however, a small concession for the considerable upgrades Clark Center would experience by leaving 939 Eighth Avenue. When speaking at the aforementioned press conference, which announced Clark Center's move to Theatre Row and was held at the 42nd Street Development Corporation's headquarters on May 22, 1979,⁵⁷⁹ Roberts emphasized the hardships of the current space demonstratively: after "five years of battling slum conditions," she said, Clark Center would "bid a delirious farewell to requiring administrative personnel to double as plumbers...to bandaged floors, and asking faculty

⁵⁷⁶ "Since 1977, however, the size of our operating budget has increased steadily, from \$186,000 in that year, to \$233,000 in 1982. This growth is due exclusively to the demand for the Center's classes, not to fee increases — in ten years we have raised class fees only 75 cents. Class attendance has tripled since 1974, and registrations have jumped 360%." Louise Roberts, "Clark Center General Description."

⁵⁷⁷ Roberts, Press Conference Remarks.

⁵⁷⁸ Roberts, "Clark Center General Description."

⁵⁷⁹ "Clark Center Press Conference Regarding Move to Theatre Row," May 22, 1979, Box 27, Folder 27, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. The 42nd Street Development Corporation headquarters were located at 326 West 42nd Street, 26th Floor.

to change in the stairwell.”⁵⁸⁰ In other documents, too, Roberts narrativized Clark Center as “having survived” and “having withstood twenty years of trials and tribulations, ups and downs, highs and lows.”⁵⁸¹ The new space, then, would not only rectify the shortcomings of the current space. It was an emblem of the Center’s triumph against great odds. Roberts spoke of it in almost utopian terms, drawing on similar vitalist and Protestant-work-ethic suffused language as in the past:

Our new home will provide four beautiful, workmanlike studios with all of the essential accessory conveniences in the kind of environment to which the students and the faculty are entitled, and permit the natural growth of our program besides...[W]ith our 250 seat theatre, designed for dancers, equipped for their needs and dreams, and the comfort of the audience, we will guarantee the future.⁵⁸²

Such pontificating of grandiose and forward-looking visions suggests the rhetorical strategies of a politician. Her cause, it would seem, had grown beyond advocating for the persistence of Clark Center. When it came to Theatre Row, she was leading the charge for what would be the block’s “only theater devoted exclusively to dance.”⁵⁸³ By joining this emerging block, Clark Center was “rightfully tak[ing] its place” there.⁵⁸⁴ Armed with the fervor of righteousness, she was like the mayor and the minister of dance—representing underrepresented practitioners of an underrepresented art form in the heart of the nation’s culture capital.

Shelley Frankel, long-time Clark Center jazz dance teacher and close friend of Roberts, explained that it had been Roberts’ dream to open a dance theater. Her visioning preceded The Joyce, a dance-specific theater which would open in Chelsea in 1982 (and which continues to

⁵⁸⁰ Roberts, “Clark Center General Description.”

⁵⁸¹ Clark Center narrative, Addressed to Arts and Business Council, Inc., Encore Awards Committee, Undated, Box 12, Folder 2, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁵⁸² Roberts, Press Conference Remarks.

⁵⁸³ “Clark Center: 23 Years of Dance,” Undated, Box 11, Folder 4, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁵⁸⁴ Clark Center narrative, Addressed to Arts and Business Council, Inc., Encore Awards Committee.

offer robust programming to this day). Ideally, Roberts dreamt of a venue with an attached school, and thus the Theatre Row project was going to make possible “the combination of everything she'd always dreamed of.”⁵⁸⁵ As an expression of her daily commitment to its materialization, she wore a medallion emblazoned with the date May 22, 1979, the day of the project’s official announcement.⁵⁸⁶ The agreement with the 42nd Street Development Corporation was that it would provide the raw space on Theatre Row, and the Center would arrange the design and build out of its new facility. This was an opportunity for Roberts to customize things; she would get to have her cake and eat it too. To schematize these visions, Mayers & Schiff Architects Planners, a New York City-based architectural firm, was hired. Robert Mayers and John Schiff had together designed the TKTS Booth in 1973. This booth for discounted tickets to Broadway shows, which persists to this day and functions as a visual synecdoche for Times Square, was originally intended as a provisional measure to boost theater sales, a project supported by Mayor Lindsay’s administration.⁵⁸⁷

Coordinating the design and construction efforts on behalf of Clark Center was Don Coleman, the Theater Development Project Director.⁵⁸⁸ Mayers & Schiff’s blueprints for the construction of Clark Center showed two possible layouts for the projected three-story structure. One plan positioned a 300-seat theater on the street level, with the ceiling space cut through to the floor above to accommodate fly and lighting systems. A lobby with a box office led into the theater, and an adjacent street-level space was designated for retail. Next to the stage were

⁵⁸⁵ Frankel.

⁵⁸⁶ John Alliotts, “Clark Center Theater Caught in City Snag,” *Dance Magazine*, January 1984, 7.

⁵⁸⁷ Miller, 67-68.

⁵⁸⁸ An administrative document from the early 1980s describes Don Coleman’s role thusly: “Don Coleman has been theater development project director since 1979. His primary responsibility is to coordinate the theater project with the architects, and work closely with the contractor once construction has begun.” Clark Center Administrative Files, Undated, Box 11, Folder 4, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

dressing rooms with showers and bathrooms as well as storage and technical space, including a production office.⁵⁸⁹ The upper level contained further technical storage, plus a lounge and bathrooms for patrons. The basement, which was designated for the school, contained four studios of varying sizes joined by a main corridor and waiting area,⁵⁹⁰ dressing rooms and bathrooms with showers, a business office, a director's office, and a small storage space. An alternative plan, which made additional space for retail on the first and second floors, reduced the theater size to 250 seats instead of 300 and three dance studios instead of four.

This new space would boast all the requisite spaces dance activities necessitated. With this physical augmentation, program growth was projected, which was but in terms of growth for the whole block. An internal document from the time elaborating the anticipated expansions and benefits is worth quoting at length.

[The new facility] will make it possible to employ many new teachers, musicians, technicians, dancers, administrative personnel and so on. The instruction program, which at the present time has a daily class attendance of 280, will be increased to 380. There are 75 classes scheduled weekly which will be increased to a minimum of 85. The theatre and the school will send large numbers of potential buyers to the retail shops, restaurants and other theatres in the development.

The school will continue to provide high quality professional training at low cost. The scholarship program, which provides free instruction to needy students who show evidence of potential as dancers or in some dance-related field, will be continued and expanded. The expansion of the teaching program will finally make it possible to initiate a serious children's program. Such expansion will extend the assistance offered to 'minorities' students [sic] who are organic to the life of Clark Center.

The creation of the new theatre will offer much needed physical space and artistic improvements to performers, technicians, and audiences. The 250-seat theatre will be an important cultural attraction and will contribute significantly to the revitalization of West 42nd Street.

The language of dance being universal, the major thrust of the production schedule will

⁵⁸⁹ "Clark Center Plan 'A' - Street Level Plan," November 9, 1978, Box 38, Folder 1, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁵⁹⁰ Two of the studios were 1,064 square feet, one was 828 sq. ft., and one was 400 sq. ft. "Clark Center Plan 'A' - Basement Plan," November 9, 1978, Box 38, Folder 1, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

therefore be of particular interest to foreign non-English speaking tourists. The events will provide a formidable list of attractions to a still growing audience for dance, bringing large numbers of persons to the theatre and the school, both of which will operate on a 52-week basis, [and] will add to the vitality of the area and the theatre community at large.⁵⁹¹

This statement pointed to multiple scales to tout the symbiosis of Clark Center and Theatre Row. Everything, it seemed, would grow in quantity: classes, employees, clientele, shows, programs, and weeks in operation. Beneficiaries of this expansion would include not only its own group of artists, students, parents, and audiences, but also the block's other businesses, for whom the Center's clientele would boost sales. Of particular note were the lines that mirror the language of urban renewal guiding the efforts of Papert, Koch, and the host of public and private interests conspiring to restore Times Square. This was not new, of course, as the Center's administrators had been using the rhetoric of "vitality" since at least 1974, as discussed in Chapter 2. Now, however, given Clark Center's new context on Theatre Row, the statement bore more geographic and disciplinary specificity. The Center's "vital" contributions were emplaced within "the theatre community at large." As the sole dance-specific organization on the block, Clark Center represented something different—something more purportedly universal in its non-verbalness. Accordingly, its presence would diversify the block's offerings of performing art disciplines for the area's mix of visitors.

Despite construction beginning in the early 1980s, however, Clark Center would soon be "caught in [a] city snag."⁵⁹² The medallion Roberts donned in 1979 had by this point become her "albatross."⁵⁹³ Since that initial announcement of the move to Theatre Row, Roberts and her team had worked to secure funding for the hefty construction costs. Securing funds from private

⁵⁹¹ "Clark Center: 23 Years of Dance."

⁵⁹² Alliotts, 7.

⁵⁹³ Alliotts, 7.

foundations and corporations, including the NEA, Mobil, and Chase,⁵⁹⁴ the greatest fortune had come in late 1982—or so it seemed. The Center struck a bargain with the city’s Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), headed at that time by Commissioner Gordon J. Davis under Mayor Koch. In exchange for \$650,000 in capital funds, the Center agreed to provide “community services including scholarships for city youngsters, free dance classes, and free performance tickets for the next fifteen years.”⁵⁹⁵ After the deal received the requisite approvals from the city’s Corporation Counsel and Board of Estimate, the Center proceeded to spend an initial \$250,000 on numerous steps. These included hiring an architecture firm, project director, and theater manager; commencing the demolition process; and acquiring the theater seats of the former City Center.⁵⁹⁶

In April 1983, however, trouble came when Commissioner Davis resigned and his predecessor, Henry J. Stern, challenged the validity of the deal. Following the determination of Lloyd Deutsch, an assistant member of the Corporation Counsel to whom Stern had delegated the matter,⁵⁹⁷ Stern maintained that the Center was not in fact eligible for capital funds. At issue was the status of the land on which the new space stood. This city land had been leased to Papert’s nonprofit which had then leased it to Theatre Row Phase II Associates in a limited partnership deal. Clark Center had preferred to buy the space but was only given the option to lease it by Theatre Row Phase II Associates, resulting in a lease agreement with its private developer William Condren.⁵⁹⁸ As Stern saw it, “You can’t use city funds for what would eventually be private land.”⁵⁹⁹ But not all of Stern’s colleagues agreed. A *New York Times* article

⁵⁹⁴ Elizabeth Zimmer, “Clark Center Theatre Row Project Collapses,” *Village Voice*, October 29, 1985, 86.

⁵⁹⁵ Alliotts, 10.

⁵⁹⁶ Alliotts, 10.

⁵⁹⁷ Zimmer, 86.

⁵⁹⁸ Zimmer, 86.

⁵⁹⁹ Henry Stern quoted in Deirdre Carmody, “Dance Group’s Fate in City Hands,” *New York Times*, October 7, 1983.

highlighting Clark Center's plight in late 1983 detailed internal conflict, stating that some on the legal team comprising the Corporation Counsel found fault with Stern's determination.⁶⁰⁰ In spite of the dissent and the Board of Estimate's prior authorization of the funds, the Center was left in an excruciating standstill. As Stanley Stairs, the Center's lawyer, put it, "It was as if a great black hole developed. You couldn't even find out the status of the contract."⁶⁰¹

Various entities met with Commissioner Stern in an attempt to resolve the impasse, including Mayor Koch's Chief of Staff, Diane Coffey, and City Council President Carol Bellamy.⁶⁰² While Coffey maintained the impropriety of the capital funding deal, she directed the Center to seek out city funds designated for "community development" instead. When the Center initiated a demographic survey to prove its suitability for such civic-oriented resources, the Corporation Counsel denied eligibility, resulting in another dead end.⁶⁰³ As the funding from the original deal continued to sit in suspension, the DPR "found ways of contributing \$150,000 in exchange for scholarships to the center."⁶⁰⁴ Publicly, Stern had expressed a "moral commitment to help [Clark Center]" in 1983.⁶⁰⁵ By 1985, however, while he maintained that delivering on the deal was the "the right thing to do," he said his hands were ultimately tied by its illegality.⁶⁰⁶

If the city deal proved futile, its cancellation would prove fatal. Clark Center was left to its own devices not only to fund the remainder of the Theatre Row construction but also to repay the money it now owed back to the city. Moreover, Theatre Row Phase II Associates had taken Clark Center to civil court in October 1983. Accusing the Center of having defaulted on its

⁶⁰⁰ Carmody.

⁶⁰¹ Stanley Stairs quoted in Carmody.

⁶⁰² Carmody.

⁶⁰³ Alliotts, 10.

⁶⁰⁴ Zimmer, 86.

⁶⁰⁵ Carmody.

⁶⁰⁶ Zimmer, 86.

monthly rent of \$7,440 since August 1982, the company claimed it was owed \$104,160 in back rent.⁶⁰⁷ Despite Clark Center's successes obtaining money from private sources, including a new grant from the Ford Foundation, still more was needed to repay all its debts. Roberts applied for bank loans, but none were approved.⁶⁰⁸ On August 1, 1985, Clark Center received a "72 Hour Notice of Eviction" by the Civil Court of the City of New York to vacate the Theatre Row space.⁶⁰⁹ The new facility would never come to be.

Losing Heart, Losing Publics, Losing Places

Around that same time, in 1984, a key piece of Mayor Koch's redevelopment strategy had gained approval, nearly three years after its initial proposal in 1981. Known as the 42nd Street Development Project, it bore a strikingly similar name to Papert's organization. Koch's project was a publicly funded initiative that overturned The City at 42nd Street, a plan which had slated a portion of Times Square for private investment. While on its face the 42nd Street Development Project, then, would seem to be a move towards public investment in the area's renewal, it was in actuality a decision that evidenced business practice as a kind a politicking, a dynamic that would come to characterize Koch's overall tenure. The Development Project placed the region between 40th and 43rd Streets, from Seventh to Eighth Avenues, into the hands of the city. This included the iconic lower half of Times Square's "bowtie" as well as the historic, theater-lined block of 42nd Street. For Koch, control of this region became critical to

⁶⁰⁷ Gerald M. Levine, Gerald M. Levine (Attorneys for Petition/Landlord) to the Civil Court of the City of New York, "Civil Court: New York County Landlord & Tenant Commercial Housing Part," October 17, 1983, Box 20, Folder 15, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁶⁰⁸ Zimmer, 86.

⁶⁰⁹ "Civil Court of the City of New York: 72 Hour Notice of Eviction," July 8, 1985, Box 20, Folder 17, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

(re)inventing the Great White Way in all its romanticized glory.⁶¹⁰ Accordingly, key to this project was the restoration of the historic theaters on 42nd Street. But, as Huxtable notes, “There was no neighborhood or citywide planning objectives beyond the promotion of new commercial construction.”⁶¹¹ As with efforts preceding him, Koch’s investment in the theater was a pro-business maneuver.

And yet, construction in the area under the jurisdiction of the 42nd Street Development Project was slow. Investors wanted to build office towers, not theaters. The mandate for historic theater preservation backfired. Meanwhile, the surrounding Times Square area saw rapid commercial growth, stoked by the city government’s implementation of a series of incentives for private investment. Just as Koch had done with Papert’s organization, private companies were provided with governmental assistance and privileges. Koch’s government became a servant of business in this way, instigating a more comprehensive enmeshment of the public and private sectors. As a result, several office tower skyscrapers—an iconic architectural feature of Times Square today—had already been built by the late 1980s.⁶¹² Particularly devastating was that even while the Development Project sat unmoving, its planned public subsidies were not rerouted towards civic infrastructure. Rather, “catastrophic cuts were made in human and city services while these subsidies remained inviolate.”⁶¹³ The city’s privileging of profits over people was plain.

Clark Center, on the other hand, which had continually privileged people over profits was barely financially viable. Not only had Clark Center been evicted from the Theatre Row space for failure to pay rent. By 1981, the Center was evicted from a garage space it was renting at 562

⁶¹⁰ Reichl, 77.

⁶¹¹ Huxtable, 364.

⁶¹² Huxtable, 365.

⁶¹³ Huxtable, 365.

West 52nd Street for storage purposes, having failed to pay its \$100 monthly rent for over a year.⁶¹⁴ And in April 1985, it had been issued an eviction for 939 Eighth Avenue, having defaulted on its monthly rent, which ranged from \$3,500 to \$4,000, since 1982.⁶¹⁵ Understood in the context of this financial precarity, the Theatre Row project and the DPR deal would have been lifelines. And yet, these years-long, dogged efforts were squashed in a matter of months. In a 1989 interview, the pain for Roberts was still raw. “You see before you the living symbol of a broken heart, from which I think I’ll never recover.”⁶¹⁶ While the cancellation of the deal “was the beginning of the end” for Clark Center,⁶¹⁷ for Roberts it ended even sooner. In August 1986, less than a year after the Center had left Eighth Avenue for a new space on Ninth Avenue, she resigned.

Clark Center forged ahead for another three years under the direction of Jerry Cole, the Center’s finance manager. Under dire financial straits, the Center relocated yet again to its fourth and final space, which it rented from the New Dance Group. There it would continue to offer dance classes and produce occasional shows at offsite theaters until it formally closed in 1989. While the details of these last few years will be discussed in Chapter 4, one of Clark Center’s most enduring legacies today is—ironically—its absence. The kind of school and theater that Roberts envisioned on Theatre Row could have made a home for dance in midtown that

⁶¹⁴ Joan Chanin explained that there were ongoing problems with leaking and flooding in the garage. It was used to store items saved from the YWCA space, including lighting equipment and seats. Joan Chanin, in email correspondence with the author, November 15, 2024. “Petition by City of New York against Clarks Performing Arts [sic],” 1990, Box 20, Folder 15, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Hamdi Muhtasib, Hamdi Muhtasib (Supervisor Account Receivable, Department of Housing Preservation and Development) to Clark’s [sic] Center for the Performing Arts, Letter, February 10, 1981, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁶¹⁵ “Civil Court of the City of New York, 72 Hour Notice of Eviction,” April 23, 1985, Box 20, Folder 17, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. “Civil Court of the City of New York: Petition, Non-Payment, Business,” May 24, 1982, Box 20, Folder 15, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁶¹⁶ Roberts, “Dance On: With Billie Mahoney.”

⁶¹⁷ Roberts, “Dance On: With Billie Mahoney.”

profoundly nourished New York City’s concert dance scene. It could have continued to employ teachers and choreographers for whom the Center would be a launching pad, a long-term institutional home, or both. It could have continued to provide opportunities for dancers of color to train recreationally or professionally. It could have continued to serve dancers who needed a warm-up class before heading down the block for a Broadway audition. It could have continued to serve as a hangout, a refuge, a home for dancers in midtown, those who came from uptown, from downtown, from other boroughs, and from out of town. It could have continued to serve as a site of multiple kinds of social mixing, both within and across lines of race, ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, sexuality, and ability.

In an increasingly commercializing midtown and its concomitant homogenization, Clark Center, as a place continually committed to diversity, accessibility, and inclusivity, was rendered out of step. While Clark Center maintained its initial commitments, these became figured in the rhetoric of urban renewal, which celebrated the arts and preservation. For the Center, the expression was genuine. But for developers and city officials, these commitments were just a cloak. As Reichl notes, “development is ultimately about making money, not solving social problems.”⁶¹⁸ The people that Clark Center wanted to enfranchise—people of color, people with few professional credentials—were the very people that redevelopment efforts were designed to displace and exclude. Clark Center was too mixed for redevelopment’s Great White(ning) Way.

Clark Center as Democratic Possibility

Sociologist David Madden and urban planner Peter Marcuse, writing on housing injustice, speak to the need to disabuse ourselves of the euphemisms driving gentrification

⁶¹⁸ Reichl, 2.

efforts. “Redevelopment” and its host of similar positively inflected terms (e.g. renewal, regeneration, revitalization) are themselves a cover, forming “part of the process by which housing crisis and urban inequality are normalized.” Against such normalization, “the language of housing needs to be repoliticized. We can start by refusing to engage in euphemism.”⁶¹⁹ When we call redevelopment what it is—commercially-driven gentrification that further dispossesses those already marginalized—the binaristic paradigm on which it is predicated is also revealed to be fallacious. Gentrification is not the only available option. As Madden puts it, the “opposite of gentrification isn't urban decay; it's the democratization of urban space.”⁶²⁰ This conceptual intervention is useful for understanding Clark Center. While it may have participated in the rhetoric of urban revitalization, Clark Center was ultimately something more pluralistic than these efforts entailed. Clark Center was a democratizing possibility snuffed out by the drive of capital and its dutiful architects.

Writing in 1990, Huxtable sees the writing on Manhattan’s walls. Analyzing Times Square’s full-tilt commercialization, she decries what will soon be a homogenized district of high-rise buildings, shrines to and vehicles of American capitalism. What results is the replication of facades lacking life, empty of the vitality of the peoples and activities that used to animate the unruly streets of Times Square. Describing the mixed bag of entertainment forms and peoples populating the area before redevelopment, she says: “It is the activities...that bring the people...who *are* the life of the place.”⁶²¹

Similarly critical and melancholic, Reichl ends his book-length analysis of Times Square’s redevelopment lamenting the area’s homogenization.

⁶¹⁹ David Madden and Peter Marcuse, *In Defense of House: The Politics of Crisis* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2016), 138.

⁶²⁰ Madden, “Gentrification...”

⁶²¹ Huxtable, 366.

In an effort to create a place marketable to mainstream tourists and corporate tenants, a coalition of public and private elites imposed a Disney model of controlled, themed public space on an area of remarkable, if unsettling, diversity. In so doing, they sacrificed the provocative, raw energy produced by the friction of different social groups in close interaction for the stultifying hum of a smooth functioning machine for commercial consumption. In this way, public and private elites arguably destroyed the essence of Times Square as a contested public space. And this, more than any physical characteristic, may have been the truly meaningful theme of the place.⁶²²

For Reichl, the great diversity of people who used to encounter each other in the space of Times Square was generative. As people of difference races, sexualities, genders, classes, and abilities came into contact, the potentiality of “a democratic public space” was engendered.⁶²³ Key to this dynamic was risk—risk of bad feeling, of danger, of crime, of misunderstanding. But also, of everything else that can unfurl from encountering an/other: greater understanding, political solidarity, friendship, consensual sex, pleasure, and on...

Thus, the mixedness of Times Square emerges as its constitutive, if historic, element. Designated a mixed-use space shortly after its 1904 renaming, the multifarious business entities which it could host attracted an array of people across great social and economic difference. A white-light and red-light district, host to highbrow and lowbrow entertainment, a transient zone in which people encountered each other for all different kinds of reasons, Times Square was a region of just a few blocks where a microcosm of the city at large converged. Such mixedness may have been good for democracy, but it was bad for the unfettered growth of real estate and commerce. So-called redevelopment efforts were designed to homogenize the area, to systematically stamp out Times Square’s pluralism. Places like Clark Center, guided by a pluralistic ethos, were rendered incommensurate with a changing midtown. While redevelopment

⁶²² Reichl, 179.

⁶²³ Reichl, 179.

purported to be a revitalization of the city, a truly public revitalization would mean the restoration of the area's Clark Centers.

Coda

Standing next to the building that contained Ailey's midtown studio today is the Shubert Theatre. As of this writing, the theater is running the new Broadway show, *Hell's Kitchen*, written by and loosely based on the life of superstar R&B singer/songwriter Alicia Keys. The musical follows teenager Ali who is growing up in Manhattan Plaza in the 1990s, as Keys herself had. The opening song of the musical ("The Elevator Prologue") introduces the audience to the building's motley crew of residents, artists of all different stripes. As Ali comes of age—fighting with her protective mother, dealing with her absent father, falling in love—she discovers her true calling, music. A chance encounter with a piano teacher in the building seals this fate.

The musical ends while Ali is still young, her newly music-filled life ahead of her. This works because we know what Keys' trajectory looks like. She would ascend to the highest echelon of global superstardom, shattering album-sales records and setting new ones. Such figures are the key to Broadway viability today. Producers need the assurance of major names and brands to justify financial risk. It is fitting, then, that Keys would return to midtown, in the form of her authorship (having written the show) and her avatar (the show's protagonist)—a commercial star for a commercial district. But Keys is the exception. Most of Manhattan Plaza's artist-residents were not commercially famous, nor would they go on to be. Neither would most of Clark Center's figures—and for Roberts, that was the point. *Lots of people should get to dance, never mind that they won't be Aileys.*

Chapter 4: “Midtown Dance”: Clark Center and the Late 1980s

Writing in 1992 for *The New Republic*, Mindy Aloff penned an obituary for tap-dancer legend Charles “Honi” Coles that began thusly:

Charles ‘Honi’ Coles, the venerated tap dancer, died recently at the age of eighty-one. He happened to be black, and he happened to be great; but the main reason to go to his funeral is that you think you can bear it. There are so many funerals these days of dancers cut off in their prime that you’ve stopped attending them to protect yourself from becoming callous, or from overdosing on pain. But here’s a man who lived a long, full life, and who gained the recognition he deserved when he could hear it, too.⁶²⁴

Aloff’s framing of Coles’ race—“he happened to be black”—could be read in different ways. On the one hand, we might read it in the race-blind terms in vogue in the 1980s and ’90s, which is to say that she was downplaying the import of his racial designation on the stuff of his life. On the other, we might take it to mean that his blackness matters profoundly, a reason unto itself “to go to his funeral.” The second statement, which frames his dancerly excellence in the same rhetorical flourish—“he happened to be great”—makes clear, however, that she indeed was listing aspects of Coles she found to be salient. It was his greatness, after all, that occasioned such an obituary about his illustrious career. But what was Aloff getting at with this coy set up? It was all pointing towards a third statement, one which she left in the realm of implication. To say “the main reason to go to his funeral is that you think you can bear it” was really to say: he happened not to die of HIV/AIDS-related illness. This was the disease wreaking havoc on New York City at the time, disproportionately impacting communities of gay men, men who had sex with men (MSM, who did not necessarily identify as gay), and intravenous drug users. Gay men and MSM had long found dance (amongst other arts disciplines) to be a safe haven in America. It

⁶²⁴ Mindy Aloff, “Honi Coles: 1911-1992,” *The New Republic*, December 21, 1992, in *Reading Dance*, ed. Robert Gottlieb (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008), 965.

was the particularly high concentration of these groups within New York City’s dance community that accounted for the “many funerals” Aloff described in 1992.

This chapter moves into the late 1980s to historicize the last years of Clark Center’s institutional life. While HIV/AIDS is not its main focus, it forms an extended introduction to this chapter. Any history (and historical *recovery*, no less) of New York City’s dance field in the 1980s must contend with the illness and its devastating impacts. Aloff’s obituary of Coles, which must announce its not-about-AIDS-ness,⁶²⁵ is illustrative. At this point, it is commonly known that HIV/AIDs marked and continues to mark American dance. Certainly this has to do with the overlapping perceptions of effeminacy and male homosexuality within the American cultural imaginary that have been ascribed to dance.⁶²⁶ But beyond this generalization, some of America’s most notable choreographers of the latter twentieth century are now publicly known as both gay and HIV-positive.

This is true of Alvin Ailey, who died of AIDS-related complications in 1989. While he was not publicly “out” during his lifetime, nor was his serostatus part of the public discourse about his death at the time of its occurrence, these facts have since been documented in autobiographical, biographical, and scholarly accounts. After Ailey, perhaps the other best-known American choreographer—“the most written-about figure in the dance world in the last

⁶²⁵ Here I rhetorically invoke a dance work by Neil Greenberg, *Not-About-AIDS-Dance*, which premiered in 1994 at The Kitchen in New York City. The title worked inversely to mark the dance as very much about AIDS within a larger cultural landscape of silence around AIDS. In the dance, Greenberg reveals his own status as HIV-positive as well as his brother Jon’s death from AIDS-related illness. See David Román, “Not-About-Aids,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6, no. 1 (2000): 14-18.

⁶²⁶ For more on dance and/as effeminacy in the American cultural imaginary, see, for example, See Susan Leigh Foster, “Choreographing History,” in *Choreographing History*, edited by Susan Leigh Foster (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Ann Cooper Albright, “Mining the Dancefield: Feminist Theory in Contemporary Dance,” in *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997). For more on dance and male (homo)sexuality in the American cultural imaginary, see, for example, Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 2022); Ramsay Burt, “Dissolving in Pleasure: The Threat of the Queer Male Dancing Body,” in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage*, edited by Jane C. Desmond (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

quarter century”⁶²⁷—is Bill T. Jones, who is also gay and HIV-positive. Born in 1952, Jones continues to perform, run a dance company and institution (New York Live Arts), and make new works to this day. Unlike Ailey, Jones has been publicly out about both his sexual identity and serostatus for much of his career, and these have been central themes in his choreographic works and his presence in public discourse.

Several things are striking here. Ailey and Jones are both black. What’s more, both figures are known to have distanced themselves from the “black” designation thrust upon them at some point in their careers, claiming self-definition as “artists” as opposed to “black artists.” In contrast, I name their blackness here full stop (with my full chest). I do so *not* to discount such distancing; indeed, for each man it was strategic within the particular social and political conditions of his time, considerations of which others have taken up.⁶²⁸ Rather, I do so to fully claim them as central within the history of African American culture. Additionally, Ailey and Jones are also both figures for whom Clark Center was formative. Jones’ work was presented by Clark Center in the late 1970s, providing him early-career opportunities to perform and share choreography in New York City. That a space initially intended to incubate Ailey’s professional establishment went on to play a part in stewarding Jones’s career warrants deeper consideration of these two figures alongside each other.

Born a generation after Ailey, Jones forged his path in a dance field already structured by Ailey’s status as African American choreographer *par excellence* (a dynamic elaborated later in this chapter).⁶²⁹ If not the culture bearer of African Americanness in concert dance—Ailey’s

⁶²⁷ Ariel Nereson, *Democracy Moving: Bill T. Jones, Contemporary American Performance, and the Racial Past* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022), 4.

⁶²⁸ On Jones, see Carl Paris, “Will the Real Bill T. Jones Please Stand Up?” *TDR/The Drama Review* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 64-74. On Ailey, see DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 85-89.

⁶²⁹ At “Edges of Ailey,” an exhibition about Alvin Ailey at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Jones presented a collection of solos thinking through his life and work “as someone who went in a different direction than Alvin Ailey.” The piece was titled *Memory Piece: Mr. Ailey, Alvin... the un-Ailey?* “Bill T. Jones, Memory Piece: Mr.

mantle—who was Jones going to be? While that question may at first seem to identify a disadvantaged position for all those black choreographers who would not be raised up to the iconicity of Ailey, it also points to the discursive possibility wrought by Ailey’s shadow. As discussed earlier, Ailey’s blazing of the trail that established the rightful place of African Americans in American concert dance mandated respectability and excellence, normative imperatives which left little room for him to be publicly gay, much less HIV-positive. With Ailey’s legacy in place, Jones was less burdened by such social dictates; he could be black *and*... That is, he could risk expressing a multiplicity of marginalized identities while carving a life that would eventually yield civic inclusion and professional incorporation. Of course, America by the 1970s, when Jones was coming of age, was a fundamentally different place than when Ailey was doing so twenty years earlier. That is, Jones was forging himself as a citizen and a dance artist in an era of more public LGBT social and political activity. Sexual difference and dissidence were becoming central axes around which to mobilize and demand a variety of kinds of change, including civil rights, justice, and liberation. Taken in this context, Jones’ work can be seen as both shaped by and shaping these movements.

Jones’s earliest performances produced through Clark Center were with the American Dance Asylum, a company he had co-founded with Arnie Zane, Lois Welk, and Jill Becker in 1974.⁶³⁰ In addition to being artistic collaborators, Zane and Jones were also romantic partners. They were seeming opposites—Jones was tall and black, while Zane was short and Jewish-Italian—differences which made them a compelling duet. Contextualizing the cultural politics of their partnership in America of the 1970s-80s, dance scholar Carl Paris notes, “While the

Ailey, Alvin...the un-Ailey?”, Whitney Museum of American Art, November 2024, <https://whitney.org/events/ailey-memory-piece>.

⁶³⁰ Paris, “Will the Real Bill...”, 65.

spectacle of their bodies together as an offbeat same-sex duo may have challenged established expectations of mainstream aesthetic sensibilities, it also celebrated the identities and physicalities of the two dancers.”⁶³¹ That is, the assertion of their partnership was also an assertion of themselves as different. Notably, however, as dance scholar David Gere notes, Jones and Zane did not initially foreground “their gay love relationship” in public discourse about their work.⁶³² (This would change after Zane went public in 1987 about his AIDS diagnosis, discussed below.) Beyond the appearance of their bodies, then, difference was further activated in Jones and Zane’s work through the juxtaposition of divergent forms. Such “postmodern practices of assemblage,” as dance scholar Ariel Nereson posits, included “drawing from both formal and vernacular movement vocabularies.”⁶³³

In 1982, Jones and Zane forged their own company, the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company (BTJAZDC). They hired a diverse group of dancers, including founding company member Amy Pivar, whom I interviewed for this project. Pivar, who is white and Jewish, described feeling caught between worlds as a young dancer in New York City. She was “too juicy” and “too sexy” for the downtown dance scene of the 1970s and its analytic postmodernism.⁶³⁴ Yet she also did not fit into Ailey’s black modernism associated with the uptown scene. At Clark Center, where she studied with multiple teachers including her mentor Bernard Johnson, she felt her outsidership as a non-black person. She was, however, embraced in the Afro-Brazilian and *capoeira* classes of Loremil Machado and Jelon Vieira, going on to perform as both a dancer and musician with each figure. Pivar did not see Jones and Zane’s

⁶³¹ Paris, “Will the Real Bill...”, 66.

⁶³² David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 122.

⁶³³ Nereson, 4-5.

⁶³⁴ Dance historian and critic Sally Banes categorizes the early period of postmodern dance (1960-early 1970s) as “analytic postmodernism.” “It combined low-key presentation and physical intelligence in a way that seemed to define a new virtuosity—a heroism of the ordinary.” Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*,” xxii.

initial performances at Clark Center with the American Dance Asylum. But when she later learned of the pair, she recalled thinking, “That’s completely me.”⁶³⁵ The mixture of forms and identities that converged in their partnership resonated with her own diverse affinities, offering a potential reconciliation of her mis-placed-ness between uptown dance and downtown dance. Going on to become a founding member of the BTJAZDC, she performed and toured with the company through the late 1980s.

In the 1990s, she started her own company, Amy Pivar Dances. Her performance works brought leftist, feminist critique to bear on a wide range of social issues, including sexual violence and race relations.⁶³⁶ Pivar was featured in a 1997 *New York Times* article about former BTJAZDC members who had pursued their own choreographic careers after leaving the company. Speaking on her motivations to make work, she explained, “I didn't think the world needed another choreographer to make another dance...If you're not going to take up your concerns as a human being, why bother?”⁶³⁷ She was witnessing the AIDS epidemic up close, as many people she knew through dance were losing their lives to the virus. Machado died of AIDS-related illness in the 1990s. Pivar was present at the home of Jones and Zane during Zane’s last days when he died in 1988 at age 39. At Zane’s parents’ request, she sang Brazilian lullabies to him.⁶³⁸

Both Jones and Zane had been diagnosed with HIV in 1984. Amidst rumors that he may have the virus due to being visibly ill, Zane publicly disclosed his AIDS diagnosis in 1987. Accompanied by Jones, he did so on a special “AIDS and the Arts” episode of the MacNeil-

⁶³⁵ Amy Pivar, in discussion with the author, October 2023.

⁶³⁶ Pivar, discussion.

⁶³⁷ Ann Daly, “When Dancers Move on to Making Dances,” *New York Times*, April 6, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/04/06/arts/when-dancers-move-on-to-making-dances.html>.

⁶³⁸ Amy Pivar, in email correspondence with the author, March 14, 2025.

Lehrer Newshour. In his book *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS*, dance scholar David Gere explains, “until that moment, no other major dance maker had come forward as having HIV or AIDS,” making it “a bold decision, for which he deserves great honor.”⁶³⁹ In mourning Zane’s passing, Jones made dances that laid bare his grief and desire for his lost partner.⁶⁴⁰ In 1990, his own serostatus became part of the public discourse upon the publishing of an article in *Advocate*, a gay mass print magazine, for which he was interviewed.⁶⁴¹ As a memorial to Zane, Jones maintained the dance company under its original name.⁶⁴² The Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company—and thus Zane’s legacy—remains active to this day.

Ailey, who died in 1989, lives on in his continuously operational dance company, too. Although his operations had left Clark Center twenty years prior, the Center folded the same year of his death. The coincidence is striking. Unsurprising, however, is the fact that the Clark Center community lost many to the virus in the 1980s. We could think of Ailey’s and Jones’ companies as extending the legacy of Clark Center. We could think of this persistence—and Jones’ survival—as a triumph of the social, political, and medical interventions that have de-stigmatized the disease and enabled people with AIDS to live long lives. Indeed, we should.

The current operations of Ailey’s posthumous and Jones’ continuous companies are contained in brick-and-mortar spaces in New York City—physical buildings that grant the organizations stability, legitimacy, and funding opportunities. Ailey’s company and school are based at the Joan Weill Center for Dance, a facility built specifically for the Ailey organization and opened in 2005. Located at Ninth Avenue and West 55th Street, its website claims it to be

⁶³⁹ Gere, 123.

⁶⁴⁰ Gere, 124-137.

⁶⁴¹ Román, “Not-About-Aids,” 10-12.

⁶⁴² Bud Coleman, “Jones, Bill T.,” GLBTQ Encyclopedia, 2015, http://glbtqarchive.com/arts/jones_bt_A.pdf.

“the largest building dedicated to dance in New York City.”⁶⁴³ Jones’ company is housed at New York Live Arts (NYLA), located in Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood on 19th Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. The former site of Dance Theater Workshop, NYLA was the result of a merger with Jones’ dance company in 2011. Jones serves as Artistic Director of the overall organization, which presents dance performances and hosts choreographic residency programs in addition to serving as a home for the BTJAZDC.

It should come as no surprise that this historical recovery project on Clark Center, by virtue of its very existence, is invested in and asserts the importance of brick-and-mortar spaces for dance. While Chapters 2 and 3 fleshed out the social and political histories of Clark Center’s geographic context in Times Square, this chapter now turns more specifically to the dance-historical aspect of that context. It does so by looking to the other dance spaces in the Times Square area, arguing that they constituted a distinct network that can meaningfully be called “midtown dance.” As the Introduction laid out, the under-historicization of Clark Center is part of a larger gap in dance-historical discourse on Manhattan’s midtown region. A discursive splitting of “downtown dance” and “uptown dance” within New York City’s dance field has been both mirrored and reinforced in dance scholarship, leaving midtown in the dark. While the two extant terms have tended to designate a particular aesthetic or set of values that united those to whom the term was ascribed, dance in midtown was characterized by its plurality of forms, sensibilities, and peoples. Thus, this chapter inaugurates the term “midtown dance” to designate a *network of dance spaces in midtown*, at the heart of which was Clark Center. Many students and teachers frequented multiple of the midtown spaces, sometimes in the same day. Key to this dynamic was the ability to walk from one to another easily. Thus, geographic proximity and

⁶⁴³ “The Joan Weill Center for Dance,” AILEY, <https://ailey.org/joan-weill-center-dance>.

shared groups of dance artists connected the spaces that constitute midtown dance rather than a unified aesthetic.

Before profiling several of the spaces in the midtown network, the chapter begins by historicizing the final years of Clark Center's existence in the late 1980s. In these final years, director Louise Roberts resigned and the Center relocated under financial strain twice more. Clark Center's last physical home was a space owned and operated by the New Dance Group (NDG), an organization dating back to the 1930s. That the Center and the NDG briefly converged spatially is especially notable, given the many overlaps in their missions and motivations. That said, the organizations' years of peak activity diverge, and thus each was responsive to a different set of political and social circumstances. Also located in midtown for much of its institutional life, the NDG is given sustained attention as one in the network of midtown dance spaces. Ultimately, the chapter argues that within the midtown dance network, Clark Center centralized and extended lineages of dance education and choreographic development for black students.

Rapacious Landlords and Reaganomics

As Louise Roberts encountered hurdles to the Theatre Row project by the mid-1980s, she was becoming acutely aware of Clark Center's multiple plights as interconnected symptoms of something larger. Writing in November 1984, she lamented the "flagrant deteriorating disrepair and the many violations to health and personal safety ignored by the landlord" at 939 Eighth Avenue. She then asked, "Is there a solution to the dilemma of art versus real estate interests and rapacious landlords?"⁶⁴⁴ Roberts contextualized the specific trials plaguing Clark Center within

⁶⁴⁴ Louise Roberts, Louise Roberts to Anne E. Kelly, Letter, November 9, 1984, Box 12, Folder 13, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

the general dismantling of the arts wrought by city-wide redevelopment efforts. By doing so, her career-long championing of dance took on heightened stakes. She was no longer just advocating for dance artists of color and emerging choreographers, the two groups Clark Center intended to serve from its beginnings; she was fighting to save what little precious space existed for dance training and performance in a commercializing and gentrifying New York City.

In addition to the real estate woes undercutting Clark Center's powerful work as a sanctuary for dancers, the organization's familial sense was also interrupted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. As with the larger dance community, Clark Center was roiled by the epidemic. Many of the Center's beloved students and teachers perished, victims of President Ronald Reagan's recalcitrance to respond to the outbreak with urgency. As Gere notes, "Reagan was so reticent to address the disease that he did not speak publicly about AIDS in any substantive way until 1987, almost at the end of his second term."⁶⁴⁵ Instead, the conservative government capitalized on the opportunity to disparage homosexuality and construe the virus as proof of its purported immorality and sinfulness.

In the face of governmental neglect, courageous groups of queers and their allies mobilized grassroots efforts to fight and care for the sick and dying. These included service organizations as well as those that engaged in direct action protests, notably the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP).⁶⁴⁶ These emergent, corporeal forms of gathering and protest can be meaningfully understood as choreographic⁶⁴⁷ and structured by performative acts,⁶⁴⁸ as dance

⁶⁴⁵ Gere, 146.

⁶⁴⁶ For more on ACT UP, see Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993* (New York: Picador/Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2022).

⁶⁴⁷ See Gere. In addition to analyzing activist and artist responses to the AIDS epidemic as "choreographic," Gere also calls them "tactics": "The importance of choreographic insurgencies (or tactics) in the AIDS era becomes clear when considering the dearth of (strategic) response from the U.S. government to the AIDS epidemic" (146).

⁶⁴⁸ See David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1998).

and theater scholars have shown. Dance and theater also became mediums through which artists gathered, galvanized, educated, and forged coalition around AIDS activism. Fundraising efforts tied specifically to the performing arts emerged as well, occurring both on the industry level (e.g., Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS) and the community level.⁶⁴⁹

The work of Reagan's administration, 1981-1989, decimated basic governmental structures that had supported the lives of everyday people, including dancers. In addition to its bungling of the AIDS epidemic, Reagan enacted significant cuts in federal funding for social services. While this process did not start with Reagan,⁶⁵⁰ it was intensified in ways that continue to play out in America to this day. New York City was not only subject to austerity measures enacted at the federal level, but its own financial emergencies actually shaped such policy changes in the years before Reagan. As theater scholar Hillary Miller argues, "New York City enacted a rehearsal for a larger, national restructuring. Municipal agendas echoed from the city's fiscal crisis as a model for the policies of presidents Ford, Carter, and Reagan."⁶⁵¹

This was the now-well-critiqued process of neoliberalization,⁶⁵² whereby classical notions of liberalism were deployed towards a pro-business agenda. That is, the "free" market and a minimization of government were touted as ideal for the protection of individual liberties. Such an emphasis on freedom and individuality enacted a cover for the systemic and historical causes of unequal access to wealth. As such inequities were concealed, wealth became privatized and corporate profits maximized. The Reagan administration's signature approach to this

⁶⁴⁹ For more on fundraisers and AIDS-based performance events, see Román, *Acts of Intervention*, 10-20 and whole book.

⁶⁵⁰ See, for example, Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017), which argues that the process of neoliberalization often ascribed to Reagan's administration had actually begun under prior presidents.

⁶⁵¹ Miller, 191.

⁶⁵² See, for example, See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

process—variously dubbed Reaganomics and “trickle down” economics—justified resourcing the already-wealthy with the claim that such prosperity would “trickle down” to the masses. This economic and political redistribution instead exacerbated the dispossession of the most vulnerable—those already marginalized by class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and citizenship status. These same populations were scapegoated as a drain on government resources, rationalizing the putative need for the government’s tightening of its fiscal waist.

Reaganomics further entailed a slashing of federal funding for the arts, a particularly sore point given Reagan’s early career as a Hollywood actor. For example, his administration ended the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA) Arts Program, an initiative inaugurated in 1975 by the Nixon and Ford administration to address artist unemployment brought on by the fiscal recession.⁶⁵³ Moreover, the Reagan administration proposed a 50% reduction in funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).⁶⁵⁴ While the work of congressional representatives successfully curbed the severity of the cuts (efforts helmed by democratic New York Representative Fred Richardson),⁶⁵⁵ the proposition had made the administration’s stance clear: the arts were undeserving of tax-payer dollars. Interestingly, dance scholar Sarah Wilbur points out that the cuts to NEA funding that did occur impacted its dance program less than some other disciplines. According to one insider quoted by Wilbur, this was in part due to the ephemerality of dance, which made it less subject to scrutiny and worry of its enduring impact.⁶⁵⁶ While Reagan had little to do with the internal routing of funds within the NEA, however, an anecdote from his personal life is indicative of his attitude toward dance.

⁶⁵³ Miller, 49.

⁶⁵⁴ Matthew C. Moen, “Congress and the National Endowment for the Arts: Institutional Patterns and Arts Funding, 1965–1994,” *The Social Science Journal* 34, no. 2 (1997): 190.

⁶⁵⁵ Moen, 191.

⁶⁵⁶ Wilbur, 105.

Reagan's son, Ronald Prescott Reagan, who goes by "Ron," worked for a time as a professional ballet dancer. With little prior experience, he had dropped out of Yale University in 1976 for this pursuit, much to his parents' displeasure.⁶⁵⁷ He trained as a scholarship student at the Joffrey Ballet School in New York City and initially danced in Joffrey II, the second company for young dancers. While Ronald and Nancy Reagan would eventually attend a performance in 1981, their years-long failure to do so up until that point had caught media attention.⁶⁵⁸ It has since been revealed that President Reagan was embarrassed by his son's interest in ballet. Dance—and ballet especially—was an improperly masculine endeavor for the son of a president, it would seem. Meanwhile, Ron was promoted to the main company of Joffrey Ballet in 1982, but he resigned mid-season to "pursue other interests."⁶⁵⁹

Ron's balletic proclivity had spurred public suspicion that he was gay, a claim he refuted. The website for the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum contains a current page detailing members of the former president's family. Of Ron, it notes: "After he joined the Joffrey Ballet, speculation arose over his sexuality, which has persisted to this day, in spite of his marriages and recent statements that he is heterosexual. Ron Reagan holds mostly liberal philosophies and is actively opposed to Republicans."⁶⁶⁰ As a family member who went on to publicly diverge from his parents' politics, these statements enact a distancing from Ron that is unsurprising for an organization committed to preserving Reagan's presidential legacy. The

⁶⁵⁷ Frederick M. Winship, "Ronald Prescott Reagan's Decision to Give up Ballet Dancing...", January 27, 1983, United Press International, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1983/01/27/Ronald-Prescott-Reagans-decision-to-give-up-ballet-dancing/4317412491600/>.

⁶⁵⁸ Roger Rosenblatt, "Out of the Past, Fresh Choices for the Future," *Time Magazine*, January 5, 1981, <https://time.com/archive/6856173/out-of-the-past-fresh-choices-for-the-future/>.

⁶⁵⁹ "Ron Reagan Leaves Joffrey Ballet Company," *New York Times*, January 18, 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/01/18/arts/ron-reagan-leaves-joffrey-ballet-company.html>.

⁶⁶⁰ "Ronald Reagan's Family," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/reagans/ronald-reagan/ronald-reagans-family>.

juxtaposition of these two statements, however, which implicatively links the purported homosexuality of ballet with liberal politics so as to denigrate both, is no less troubling.

It is a cruel and remarkable irony that Reagan would finally attend the ballet in 1981. This was the same year that the first cases of what would come to be known as HIV/AIDS were linked to the deaths of five homosexual men in the Center for Disease Control's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.⁶⁶¹ While the epidemic would not peak until the following decade, the severity and timeline of this peak could have been curtailed by swifter and more substantive action by Reagan's administration. It is hard not to see a mirroring of Reagan's reticence to attend Ron's ballet performances in his slowness to respond to the epidemic. While not equivalent situations, they were linked by a (presumed) association with homosexuality. We could read in both situations then a masculinist disavowal predicated on homophobia.

While Ron is not gay, he nevertheless came to see the harm of his father's political persuasions, eventually using his public persona to advocate for a more progressive vision of America. AIDS activists, on the other hand, were more direct in their spurn of President Reagan, burning effigies of him in the streets.⁶⁶² Reagan's actions, inactions, and their afterlives have been injurious to the lives of many, especially those who congregated at Clark Center. The Center was a site for artists, many of whom were gay/MSM, some of whom were HIV-positive, and most of whom were working-class and people of color. The potential for the Center to serve as a brick-and-mortar site to gather socially and organize politically took on heightened stakes as the 1980s wore on. Instead, the institution was buckling under the weight of federal and municipal shifts that were undermining the viability of its existence in midtown.

⁶⁶¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Pneumocystis Pneumonia—Los Angeles," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 30, no. 21 (June 5, 1981), 1-3, https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/june_5.htm.

⁶⁶² Gere, 65.

The Sudden Move to Ninth Avenue

Amidst the desperation and the stalled construction of the Theatre Row project, the Center hosted a benefit event in its unfinished space—its “Theatre to be,” as the program dubbed it, listed as 450 West 42nd Street.⁶⁶³ Held on the evening of Saturday, March 23, 1985, it was a gala-like party, featuring cabaret performances, a champagne toast, dinner (catered by a company run by Karen de Francis, Roberts’ daughter), and disco dancing to cap off the night. Guests could pay \$100 to attend the whole event or \$20 at the door for just the afterparty.⁶⁶⁴ The title of the evening, “Dancing in the Dark,” was a nod to the gutted state of the building. “Despite the surroundings,” Chanin explained, “it was an elegant affair.”⁶⁶⁵ In addition to lighting the space with candles, the Center staff had furnished it with tables, chairs, portable bathrooms, and hand wipes. A *New York Times* article advertising the event referred to it as a “champagne and cinderblocks” party.⁶⁶⁶ The contradictions abounded, as the Center gestured toward its potential to be an abundant resource in spite of its current scarcity.

Meanwhile, redevelopment efforts were causing dramatic hikes in the rent at 939 Eighth Avenue. Rent had risen from \$3,500 in 1982 to \$5,000 by 1985, an increase of nearly 43% in just three years. Inversely, the space—inadequately sized and outfitted for Clark Center from the beginning—fell into greater decay. What was supposed to have been a temporary location had turned into a decade-long tenancy, but staying was no longer tenable. The Center had failed to pay its rent reliably since 1982, and in April 1985, it was delivered an eviction notice. Unable to

⁶⁶³ “Dancing in the Dark,” Playbill, March 23 [no year], Box 27, Folder 28, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁶⁶⁴ “Clark Center Reception,” March 22, 1985, *New York Times*, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1985/03/22/110265.html?pageNumber=71>.

⁶⁶⁵ Chanin, discussion.

⁶⁶⁶ “Clark Center Reception.”

move into its half-completed Theatre Row space, Clark Center was forcibly displaced for the second time in its life as an institution. Elizabeth Zimmer writing for the *Village Voice* in October 1985 captures the abruptness of the relocation, as well as the grit and determination to persist that motivated it. As she reported it, the Center “picked up and moved the operation over the Labor Day weekend. Not a day of classes was lost in the shift.”⁶⁶⁷ The new facility encompassed the second floor of the building at 588 Ninth Avenue. Located on the northeast corner of the intersection with West 42nd Street, this was quite literally across the street from Manhattan Plaza and Theatre Row, with Clark Center’s partially constructed space within view.

The point of Zimmer’s article, however, was less to do with the move to Ninth Avenue. Zimmer was announcing the final collapse of the Theatre Row project, and with it, she captured not only Roberts’ heartbreak but pessimism too. “I feel like I’m making funeral calls,” Roberts began. But then she zoomed out, just as she had started to do in the aforementioned 1984 statements: “For me personally it’s a heartache, but for the dance community it’s a devastation.”⁶⁶⁸ Roberts saw Clark Center’s loss as a deadly blow to the whole of New York City’s dance ecosystem. Her commitments remained keenly clear: “The loss of that theater is a major catastrophe in relation to small, developing, adventurous dance companies.”⁶⁶⁹ She touted the Center’s uniqueness as a place where a great diversity of dance artists and forms commingled, noting that “‘in a community where the aesthetics tend to cluster, Clark Center has been famous for the kind of wild spread’ that, in 1980 at Symphony Space, put George Faison, Hinton Battle, Kei Takei, and Elizabeth Keen on a single gala program.”⁶⁷⁰ Roberts’ comments here hint at the central argument of Chapter 3, which was that the mix of peoples and aesthetics

⁶⁶⁷ Zimmer, 86.

⁶⁶⁸ Louise Roberts quoted in Zimmer, 86.

⁶⁶⁹ Louise Roberts quoted in Zimmer, 86.

⁶⁷⁰ Zimmer, 86.

distinguishing Clark Center rendered it at odds with the homogenization of a commercializing Times Square area. Notably, Roberts did not have faith that Theatre Row would last, seeing it as a provisional step in the drive of capital. “[W]hen everyone else’s 15-year leases are up in 1995, the buildings will be pulled down and replaced with more profitable structures.”⁶⁷¹ In other words, she believed that this new theater district would soon be a casualty of the very same voracious, profit-driven processes that accounted for its birth.

Theatre Row outlived 1995. Rather than succumbing to commercialism, its theaters got glitzier. Some of the original institutions remain, including the one that started it all—Playwrights Horizons, albeit in a renovated building.⁶⁷² New off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway theaters, restaurants, and other businesses have opened through the years, extending the area to include the West 42nd Street block between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues. These additions include Theatre Row, an organization bearing the same name as the area, which boasts a suite of six small theaters that opened in 2002. Ranging in size from 99 to 199 seats, its multiple venues are clustered in a complex at 410-412 West 42nd Street.⁶⁷³ According to its website, the organization is host to resident theater companies and “offers theater rentals, rehearsal studio rentals, office space, ticketing and box office, as well as tech support to actors, producers, dancers, and musicians.”⁶⁷⁴ The footprint originally slated and partially reconstructed for Clark Center is today occupied by Signature Theatre (480 West 42nd Street), which opened its new complex there in 2012—“a custom-built, 75,000-square-foot, multi-theatre space, designed,

⁶⁷¹ Zimmer, 86.

⁶⁷² Sandra Mardenfeld, “A New and Improved Theatre Row Appears,” Playbill.com, January 28, 2003, <https://playbill.com/article/a-new-and-improved-theatre-row-appears-com-111206>.

⁶⁷³ Mardenfeld.

⁶⁷⁴ “Theatre Row Off-Broadway Theatre Complex,” Building for the Arts NY, <https://bfany.org/theatre-row/about-theatre-row/>.

at a cost of \$70 million, by renowned architect Frank Gehry.”⁶⁷⁵ While Signature Theatre had humble beginnings dating back to 1995, according to Robert Simonson writing for *Playbill*, this new venture “was the ultimate culmination of the company’s mission, a facility to rival Lincoln Center Theater in size and ambition.”⁶⁷⁶

While the Theatre Row space denied to Clark Center in 1985 was much less glamorous, it still must have been salt on the wound to suddenly be located across the street from its now-failed prospect, forced to gaze upon it daily. The swiftness of the Center’s move to 588 Ninth Avenue is underscored by a form letter sent to students just a few months after the fact. It started, “Dear Friend: Is it possible we forgot to let you know we moved...” Roberts went on to say, “The new place is much nicer and we hope you will come visit and rejoin the Saturday classes.”⁶⁷⁷ The relocation entailed a better-equipped space for lower rent. It had been a complete upgrade, or so it would seem. Class attendance had actually fallen since the move, likely instigating the need for the letter. Thirteen classes on which the Center had at least broken even in the past were no longer paying for themselves.⁶⁷⁸ Prior to the move, the Center’s monthly revenue in combination with funding from New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) and the NEA had enabled it to “pay its own way.”⁶⁷⁹ But with less revenue and its still-looming debts, the Center’s financial viability had reached a breaking point by April 1986.

In her invitation to an emergency meeting, Roberts rang the alarm: “I am writing now, in perhaps the grimest [sic] mode of all, because we are faced with the agonizing possibility of the

⁶⁷⁵ Robert Simonson, “James Houghton, Founder of Off-Broadway’s Signature Theatre, Dies,” *Playbill.com*, August 2, 2016, <https://playbill.com/article/james-houghton-founder-of-off-broadways-signature-theatre-dies>.

⁶⁷⁶ Simonson.

⁶⁷⁷ Louise Roberts, Letter to Clark Center mailing list, December 7, 1985, Box 11, Folder 10, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁶⁷⁸ “Re: Loss of Attendance and Loss of Income,” Board of Director Meeting Minutes, undated, Box 11, Folder 2, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁶⁷⁹ Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, May 3, 1986, Box 11, Folder 2, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

forced closing of Clark Center.”⁶⁸⁰ She set the scene with details of the Center’s debts, due in part to the foiled Theatre Row project and in part to the “usurious rent” at the Eighth Avenue location that had forced the Center out. She selectively shared the outcomes of litigation taken against the Center by its various landlords, sparing readers most of the legal details. She did not mention the triple bill of evictions (Chapter 3). Nor did she specify that the \$33,000 Clark Center paid to Theatre Row Phase II Associates (TRA) was a sum that TRA agreed to accept in lieu of the \$141,390 it had won in court. (The payment was actually \$33,026.11, the exact holdings of one of the Center’s bank accounts.⁶⁸¹)

Roberts did, however, name the threat of eviction from the Center’s new Ninth Avenue location. While the move and renovations to the new space had cost the “modest sum” of \$10,000, she explained that the Center had already defaulted on monthly payments, owing three months’ back rent.⁶⁸² Exacerbating the shortage in funds was the continued lack of a theater. Grants the Center had already procured but were earmarked for the purpose of dance presentation could not be disbursed until the Center’s ability to produce shows was restored. Nevertheless, she acknowledged that ultimately the Center was faring better than many individual dancers attempting to live and work in an increasingly inhospitable city. “Finding the space on 9th Avenue was a major piece of good fortune in a time when dancers are daily losing their studios and being forced into the street.”⁶⁸³ Such attention to conditions for dancers was consistent with Roberts’ lifelong commitments to being a steward of their lives and livelihoods, to creating space for them.

⁶⁸⁰ Louise Roberts, Letter to Clark Center mailing list, April 22, 1986, Box 11, Folder 2, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁶⁸¹ “Mutual General Release,” March 3, 1986, Box 20, Folder 17, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁶⁸² Roberts, Letter to Clark Center mailing list, April 22, 1986.

⁶⁸³ Roberts, Letter to Clark Center mailing list, April 22, 1986.

That the fate of dancers and spaces for dance are intimately interlinked may seem self-evident. But those who experience dance as students or audience may take this dynamic for granted. The people working to create such sites are often behind the scenes, making their existence seem like a given. (A Capezio Foundation Award given to Roberts in 1991 recognized her for “behind-the-scenes work that enriched the history of American modern dance,” as the organization’s citation put it.⁶⁸⁴) Roberts’ statements and notes from around this time began to express the connection between dancers and spaces for dance more overtly. Not only did dancers need places to live, but they needed brick-and-mortar places to train, gather, and perform. Dance spaces needed dancers too, of course, to keep them alive; students, choreographers, and companies were sources of income. They were akin to tenants,⁶⁸⁵ temporarily renting space from the Center to train, hold rehearsals, or host performances. As the Center’s financial woes threatened its very existence, Roberts spoke of the distress in terms of the strain dancers were experiencing too.

This interlinking is clearest in notes Roberts prepared for the emergency meeting. Primary on the agenda was to understand what accounted for the Center’s reduced class attendance (and therefore revenue) at the Ninth Avenue space. A list of possibilities began in collective terms: “I believe that the dance world is being victimized by the economy in New York City, the excessively high cost of living.”⁶⁸⁶ Skyrocketing rents wrought by redevelopment

⁶⁸⁴ Fellow honorees that year were John Curry, Katherine Dunham, Darci Kistler, Igor Youskevitch, and June Taylor (whose studio Roberts had managed prior to Clark Center). Dunning, “Honoring a Lifelong...”

⁶⁸⁵ While I use the concept of “tenant” here literally (to point to the users of dance spaces as renters), a more theoretical use of the term coined by Crystal U. Davis and Jesse Phillips-Fein could also be meaningfully pursued. In their article, “Tendus and Tenancy: Black Dancers and the White Landscape of Dance Education,” Davis and Phillips-Fein critique the racial politics of American dance education, wherein they refer to the hegemonic hold of whiteness on the field as a “homeowner,” relegating black students and black dance forms to the realm of “tenancy.” See Crystal U. Davis and Jesse Phillips-Fein, “Tendus and Tenancy: Black Dancers and the White Landscape of Dance Education,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Race and the Arts in Education*, 571-584 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁶⁸⁶ Board of Director Meeting Minutes, May 3, 1986.

efforts affected both dancers and spaces for dance. What followed were items that specifically targeted each entity. For dancers, Roberts noted that “the drive to find a professional life in dance may have leveled off” with reduced opportunities for work on Broadway and television. She also identified a “reduced number of small dance companies,” the kind that Roberts prided Clark Center for championing.⁶⁸⁷ For dance studios and schools, Roberts lamented the loss of clientele to “more accessible exercise diversions such as aerobics, jazzercise and so on.” And she noted that “attendance at most major dance institutions appears to be off.”⁶⁸⁸ These last two points may have indicated a drop-off in the general public’s interest in dance, yet this trend affected dance artists too in that many relied on students and/or audience to make their work viable.

In addition to these general speculations, Roberts also included the findings of an inquiry the Center had conducted with students regarding the waning class attendance. Four primary reasons emerged:

1. Students do not want to come to this neighborhood because they do not want to deal with the 42nd Street subway station and environs.
2. Complain that they do not have a proper place to hang their clothes.
3. Complain that there is no place to stretch before class.
4. Location not widely known yet.⁶⁸⁹

She noted immediate possible solutions to address these complaints, including the installation of hooks in the dressing rooms as well as a “major promotion campaign,” although she questioned how the latter would be funded.⁶⁹⁰ The issue of location was a more complex one, of course. Redevelopment efforts had already initiated much of the transformation to the Times Square area that would accelerate through the 1990s. While this response from students evidenced that this

⁶⁸⁷ Board of Director Meeting Minutes, May 3, 1986.

⁶⁸⁸ Board of Director Meeting Minutes, May 3, 1986.

⁶⁸⁹ “Re: Loss of Attendance...”

⁶⁹⁰ “Re: Loss of Attendance...”

process was still in its early stages, it also suggested the persistence of prior perceptions of the area as blighted and dangerous. Roberts proposed a few solutions to navigating the commute to the new location: “Students could walk east on 43 Street...Bus travel is available which avoids the Times Square problems.” Ultimately, however, she was unsympathetic, as she felt students misperceived the area. “Actually there are many attractions in the neighborhood...The fact is that this is where we are, and lucky to have the space...Our location is inalterable.”⁶⁹¹

Inventorying the causes of lowered class attendance was a step towards the emergency meeting’s overarching purpose: to brainstorm solutions to keep the Center financially solvent. Towards this end, Roberts’ notes plainly spelled out how the Center had been weathering the situation thus far. The fact was that the Center had managed to operate in severe financial precarity for years. By this point, Roberts had pared down to as slim an operation as possible. Administrative costs were minimized, including Roberts’ own salary. As she stated, “In order to ease the cash flow problems, characteristic of not-for-profit organizations, I have for five years accepted \$100 a week as full payment for my services.”⁶⁹² This pay was so nominal in relation to the enormity of her labors as to be symbolic.⁶⁹³

Moreover, the Center did not have the funds to employ administrators who could have helped the Center to procure more funding. This catch-22, as Roberts called it, meant there was no full-time financial staff or sustained advertising campaigns. Moreover, there was no longer enough funding for an administrative director; Joan Chanin had left in 1985 after thirteen years of dedicated work to helping make the Center run.⁶⁹⁴ Maintaining skilled accompanists to play

⁶⁹¹ “Re: Loss of Attendance...”

⁶⁹² Board of Director Meeting Minutes, May 3, 1986.

⁶⁹³ Clark Center teacher Shelley Frankel recounted that Roberts typically funneled even this small salary back into the Center, prioritizing its persistence over her own basic needs at times. Frankel, discussion.

⁶⁹⁴ Chanin, email, November 15, 2024.

music for classes was also proving difficult, given the very low payment the Center was able to offer. In an effort to mitigate fiscal catastrophe, the Center had implemented an increase in class prices at the beginning of 1986. While this helped revenue, Roberts was reluctant to raise prices any further, as doing so would violate the financial accessibility fundamental to the Center's mission.

Roberts' Resignation

In the summer of 1986, the Center was able to piece together things well enough to produce an eight-week series, a feat Dunning called "ambitious" and a "rebound."⁶⁹⁵ The shows were held at the Douglas Fairbanks Theater, a venue on Theatre Row just two buildings east of Clark Center's abandoned space.⁶⁹⁶ Roberts was clearly emotional: "We're going to be dancing on 42d [sic] Street. I may cry a lot, but that's what we're going to do."⁶⁹⁷ Indeed, the Center's use of Theatre Row could be seen as the next best thing to having its own venue there. While the same might be said of the Ninth Avenue studio space's proximity to the block, the time there would be short-lived. Unable to pay the rent, the Center had to move again by 1988. Finance manager Jerry Cole and some other staff looked to the New Dance Group (NDG), an organization that was renting out studio space in its midtown facility on West 47th Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. As Frankel recounted, Roberts did not have a good feeling about Rick Schussel, the organization's director. (As later litigation would reveal, she was right to

⁶⁹⁵ Jennifer Dunning, "Dance: Clark Center Bill," *New York Times*, June 22, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/06/22/arts/dance-clark-center-bill.html>.

⁶⁹⁶ The building in between them was the Nat Horne Musical Theatre. As Zimmer reported in her *Village Voice* article, upon the termination of Clark Center's lease at its Theatre Row space, Theatre Row Phase II Associates then leased the building to Eric Krebs. Krebs had built the Douglas Fairbanks Theater as well. The playbill for Clark Center's Summer Dance Festival at the Fairbanks Theater confirms that it was "under the direction of Eric Krebs Theatrical Management, Inc." "Celebrate Clark Center."

⁶⁹⁷ Dunning, "Louise Roberts..."

sense red flags.) If her staff wanted to move forward with the rental, Roberts told them she was going to leave Clark Center. They did, and she resigned.

Roberts was in her mid-70s at that point. The failure of the Theatre Row project, to which she had devoted several years of intense focus, hung over everything. The devastation did not, however, extinguish her drive to continue stewarding dance, albeit no longer at Clark Center. She would go on to work as an independent producer of choreographers with whom she had established relationships, such as Kei Takei and her Moving Earth company.⁶⁹⁸ In the year of her retirement from Clark Center, 1986, Roberts was honored with a Bessie Award. It was the third annual presentation of these awards designated for dance and performance art in New York City, named for choreographer and dance professor Bessie Schoenberg. Presented by Schoenberg herself, Roberts was recognized in the category of Special Achievement for having “encourag[ed] many new choreographers” in her years helming Clark Center.⁶⁹⁹

In 1991, Roberts was presented with a prestigious award from the Capezio Dance Foundation. Her fellow awardees included June Taylor, for whom Roberts had previously worked; it was a full circle moment, then, wherein Roberts was now being recognized for her own profound contributions. In a *New York Times* piece chronicling this high point, Roberts was quoted saying, “The truth is, old as I am, if I had a place I'd like to shake up the whole dance establishment.”⁷⁰⁰ With that, she dislodged any notion that this award represented a completion of her work, much less a satisfaction with the dance world as it was. These comments also emphasized the necessity of a brick-and-mortar space to the viability of dance stewardship.

⁶⁹⁸ For example, Roberts worked on an installment of Takei’s *Light* series at Cathedral of St. John the Divine’s Synod House, as did Chanin. Chanin, email, February 28, 2025.

⁶⁹⁹ “Dancers and Performers Receive Bessie Awards,” *New York Times*, September 19, 1986. “Bessie Award Archive (1984 to the Present),” The Bessies New York Dance & Performance Awards, <https://bessies.org/archive/>.

⁷⁰⁰ Jennifer Dunning, “Honoring a Lifelong Love...”

Before receiving the Bessie and Capezio Awards, however, she was honored at home. One evening of the Center's Summer Dance Festival was dedicated to her. Taking place on August 7-9, 1986, the Festival program featured work by Carmen de Lavallade, George Faison and Company, Lenore Latimer, and Charles Moore Dance Theatre.⁷⁰¹ Each of these figures and companies had a mutually formative relationship with the Center. It was a fitting program, as in addition to honoring Roberts, the show was intended as a celebration of Clark Center itself. That the same show carried these dual tributes underscored the indistinguishability of the two entities during Roberts' tenure. (The writing in this document at times mirrors this dynamic, too, as Roberts embodied the Center's mission so fully that to speak of "the Center's" aims is to speak of Roberts'.)

As she had with so many previous Clark Center presentations, Dunning reviewed this show for the *New York Times*. While she spoke highly of all the work on stage, she underlined the significance of the night, capturing its tender intent. "It was family night on Friday at the Douglas Fairbanks Theater...No ordinary family celebration, the evening was a tribute to Louise Roberts, director of the center, whom Alvin Ailey called 'a great mother figure.'"⁷⁰² She went on to describe remarks made by George Faison, who explained that he agreed to participate in the show "to give back a little of the love, warmth, sincerity and kindness Louise showed us."⁷⁰³ Moreover, a statement on the title page of the program conveyed a sense of legacy and perseverance that Clark Center's history both evidenced and had come to embody. It read,

Name the names beginning with A for Ailey, and you will hear the wonderful tale of Clark Center.

It will speak of courage and commitment, beauty and love...the thrill of moving

⁷⁰¹ "Celebrate Clark Center."

⁷⁰² Jennifer Dunning, "Dance: Family Night for the Clark Center," *New York Times*, August 10, 1986.

⁷⁰³ Dunning, "Honoring a Lifelong Love..."

bodies...the dreamers and the doers...the lovers of dance.

And tell about survival...about vision...about the joys of discovery...about the singular harmonies of mixed colors, sounds, and shapes.

A place to learn...for the gifted to flourish and the not so gifted to have a chance...a place to dare to fail and to succeed.

A house alive with the animating spirit of Thelma Hill, Charles Moore, Clarence Allsopp, Harold Youngblood, Jorge, Beau, Arisa, Andy...⁷⁰⁴

This statement extolling Clark Center celebrated its people, past and present. It was the people that made the place, and yet it was the place that made possible the continued gathering of people. At its heart, then, the statement evinced a co-constitution: Ailey and Clark Center made each other, *through* each other (Chapter 1). A similar rhetorical toggling was evident in Roberts' 1986 list that outlined the plight of dancers and dance spaces, demonstrating how they were fundamentally reliant on one other. Their co-creation was at the heart of the dance ecosystem.

Midtown Dance

Clark Center did not stand alone in midtown. It was one in a larger network of dance studios and spaces clustered in the bustling streets of Times Square and the area west of it. This composite region contained several overlapping neighborhoods, including Hell's Kitchen, the Theater District, and the Garment District. The exact borders of each of these neighborhoods varies by time period and source, and new regions and designations have come and gone, each the product of different—sometimes competing—interests. In the early 1970s, for example, midtown was split into Midtown North and Midtown South. As explained in Chapter 2, this severing was implemented under Mayor Lindsay for the purposes of policing. A decade earlier, Hell's Kitchen was rebranded as the Clinton Historic District (also known as Clinton Heights, or

⁷⁰⁴ "Celebrate Clark Center," all ellipses in original.

simply Clinton) as part of the redevelopment efforts that would soon sweep the surrounding area. According to John Freeman Gill writing for the *New York Times*, “Hell’s Kitchen” persisted due to locals’ preference for the long-standing name. Lest we consider the triumph of the colloquialism a people’s victory, Gill further points out that the old name quickly “acquired a kind of gritty cachet” as it was incorporated into new upscale businesses opening in the area.⁷⁰⁵

Labor scholar Joseph J. Varga in his book *Hell’s Kitchen and the Battle for Urban Space: Class Struggle and Progressive Reform in New York City, 1894-1914* historicizes the region at the fin-de-siècle by looking to its built environment as a site of social and political contestation.⁷⁰⁶ These struggles, which prefigure the area’s corporate rebranding several decades later, situate the redevelopment of midtown in a longer history of power that accounts for shifts in urban and geographic identity. Throughout his book, Varga refers to the area as the “Middle West Side.” This term, which was in use since at least the early twentieth century, privileged geographic orientation. That is, it established a conception of the island that fixed this area as a westerly midpoint. The name Hell’s Kitchen arose as a signifier of the area’s high concentration of crime, and this was the perception against which “Clinton” was inaugurated in the mid-twentieth century to assert a new, cleaner era. All of the aforementioned examples evince the power of a name, or the power enacted via (re)naming. Put another way, each name both reflected and enacted a discursive strategy, whether for the purposes of state power, business, social self-determination, historical recovery, or something else.

⁷⁰⁵ John Freeman Gill, “With All its Contrasts, it Needed an Alias,” *New York Times*, September 23, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/25/realestate/a-place-of-contrasts-and-even-an-alien-living-in-hells-kitchen-north.html?smid=url-share>.

⁷⁰⁶ Joseph J. Varga, *Hell’s Kitchen and the Battle for Urban Space: Class Struggle and Progressive Reform in New York City, 1894-1914* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013).

Naming as a strategy of historical recovery comes into relief in these final two chapters. Chapter 5 (which follows) will name individuals—teachers and students of Clark Center—and thus enacts a repetition, saying (into historical discourse) the names of those who lived and continue to live. This chapter, however, coins a new name to inaugurate a new paradigm: *midtown dance*. Midtown dance intends to visibilize a Manhattan network of dance studios that shared overlapping groups of students and teachers in the mid- to late twentieth century. This region was loosely bounded by (and included) Times Square on the east (i.e., Broadway/7th Avenue), the Hudson River on the west, 59th Street on the north, and 42nd Street on the south. Thus, while the term “midtown” generally refers to the entirety of the central portion of the island of Manhattan from east to west, “midtown dance” specifically designates the western portion. Key to the conceptualization of these studios as a network was the ability to walk amongst studios (within fifteen minutes or so). Studios in the eastern part of midtown generally fell outside of this scope. They may have required a bus or subway ride for convenient access. (Even if they did not, their location east of Times Square figured them as geographically distant in the New York City imaginary.)

While the western part of midtown is known by various designations—“midtown west,” the “middle west side,” or the various neighborhoods comprising it, most significantly Hell’s Kitchen—“midtown dance” opts for the general term. It does so in order to reflect the rhetorical constructions (and the underlying geographical generalizations) of the “uptown” and “downtown dance” paradigms. However, given that these extant paradigms have accounted for the heretofore occlusion of what I am calling midtown dance (as detailed and theorized in the Introduction), this rhetorical participation does not signal an allegiance to these paradigms. On the contrary, it participates in a rhetorical mirroring in order to make clear *that upon which it intervenes*.

Clark Center was a central node of midtown dance. As prior chapters have discussed, the Center was multiply pluralistic, host to a multifarious mix of dance forms, peoples, and relationships to dance. As Chapter 3 argued, Clark Center's pluralism was mirrored in midtown's mixedness (until it wasn't, with the onset of redevelopment). But while the homogenization brought on by the area's commercialization was bad for places like Clark Center institutionally, on the street level, the changing face of the area was part of the landscape. The city was alive, always in motion, with a great crush of people coming and going by day and night. The physical structures were dynamic, as various stages of redevelopment abounded cyclically—demolition, construction, more concrete and glass, less sky. Some buildings sat suspended, empty shells. Amidst all this, groups of dancers, choreographers, and teachers were weaving and bobbing their way from studio to studio. They were taking and teaching dance classes, attending and holding auditions, seeing shows and performing. Places for dance were also places where dancers were hanging out, engaged in the full complexity of all that gathering around dance entails—making friends, giving each other advice, hooking up, quietly daydreaming, doing drugs, sizing each other up, falling in love, gossiping, etc.

For many, getting to midtown required a trek from elsewhere—perhaps coming from a show downtown at the Judson Memorial Church, or perhaps a rehearsal uptown at Lincoln Center. For some, it required a trip from an apartment in Brooklyn or Queens, or an even longer trek from New Jersey. Bus, train, subway, ferry. But once one was in midtown, there was a whole dance world unto itself in these western Manhattan blocks. One could go from studio to studio, class to class, without having to leave this region. One could go from their day job in an office tower, to a Broadway audition at lunchtime, to an evening dance class at Clark Center, all

without having to get back on the subway. Walking through midtown gave one access to a whole network of dance spaces that formed a pulsing core of New York City's dance ecosystem.

Walking, however, is not a universal experience. As dance scholar Anna B. Scott points out, we may be wont to forget this because of how public space structures our movement: "The sidewalk facilitates order, external patterning of footprints. This choreography of power appears natural and easy, like your heel striking the pavement. One foot in front of the other."⁷⁰⁷ But as the particularities of this foot—and the body to which it belongs—come into view, a different phenomenological reality emerges: "...so many bodies experience the public as punishment, as a disciplining force. In a neighborhood transitioning from one social class to the next—gentrifying—the dust from generations of soles attached to bodies that look like me, a geography of meandering, holds no sway against the 'real use value' of the sidewalk. Step aside, or buy your own right of way."⁷⁰⁸ Scott invokes a history of American anti-blackness that has deemed black people idle and aimless, justifying continued forms of oppression and policing.⁷⁰⁹ In a capitalist cosmopolitan center, the sidewalks are not for meandering (black) people; they are to be ever clearer and smoother for the efficient flow of capital.

The sidewalks of a commercializing midtown are paradigmatic, as Chapter 3 bore out. In this geographical context, then, the brick-and-mortar spaces residing on such streets could reproduce the capitalist rhythm of the streets, or they carried the potential of moving to a

⁷⁰⁷ Anna B. Scott, "Cityscaped: Ethnospheres," in *Black Performance Theory*, eds. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 161.

⁷⁰⁸ Scott, 161.

⁷⁰⁹ Saidiya Hartman explains the historical emergence of this discourse of idleness and its resultant machinations after the abolition of slavery in the United States: "However incongruous and inconceivable, nearly three centuries of black servitude could not relieve the nation's anxiety about the productivity of black labor or assuage the fear that the freed would be idle if not compelled to work. Thus the advent of freedom was plagued with anxieties about black indolence that hinted at the need to manage free black workers by perhaps more compelling means." Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 127.

different beat. Clark Center materialized such potential, as did other dance studios in midtown that were hospitable to dancers of color. This network of studios functioned like sanctuaries, where people could gather around dance without having to “step aside, or buy [their] own right of way.”⁷¹⁰ In the studios, above the street (as they often were), there was respite, belonging, home.

A Network of Studios and Dancers

Since its formation in 1959 and through its two relocations in 1974 and 1985, Clark Center had always been in midtown. This continued to be true even after Roberts’ departure, when finance manager Jerry Cole took over as director of the Center.⁷¹¹ Cole was not of the dance world, but by stepping up to the role, he helped Clark Center to live on just a bit longer. He oversaw the institution’s move to its fourth and final space, which was rented from the New Dance Group (NDG) at 254 West 47th Street, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. While it would be a short-lived arrangement, a schedule from October 1988 showed that the Center was attempting to offer a full slate of classes for adults out of the NDG. Monday through Friday classes were offered in the following forms, including multiple levels in some: Graham Technique (taught by Bertram Ross), Ballet (Ron Alexander and Joel Dabin), Jazz (Pepsi Bethel, Ronn Forella, Shelley Frankel, Alfred Gallman, and Charles Lewis), Modern (Barbara Fraser), Body Conditioning (Shelley Frankel and Ella Thompson Moore), Limón Technique (Lenore

⁷¹⁰ Scott, 161.

⁷¹¹ An internal administrative document from the early 1980s (before Cole took over as director), described his role as finance manager thusly: “Jerry R. Cole and Associates, a financial management firm, handles Clark Center’s bookkeeping, fiscal planning, financial reporting, and government grant processing. Mr. Cole, a former contributions officer for Chase Manhattan Bank, is responsible for the overall fiscal management. His associate, G. Douglas Wagner, former assistant director of the Cultural Council Foundation, manages day-to-day operation.” Clark Center institutional narrative, Box 11, Folder 4, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Latimer), Brazilian (Loremil Machado), Horton Technique (Tee Ross), Dunham Technique (Charles Moore), and Tap (Charles “Cookie” Cooke and Germaine Goodson). An \$8 annual registration fee gave avocational students access to the rate of \$5.50 per class and professionals \$5.00 per class. For unregistered students, classes rates were one dollar higher. A “series card” was also available to registered students at \$50 for ten classes.⁷¹²

Being in the NDG facility was the closest Clark Center would come to its original YWCA location again, just four blocks to its south. The Center’s second location at 939 Eighth Avenue was also not far, just ten blocks north, an easily walkable distance by New York City standards. Thus, in the decades prior to Clark Center’s spatial merging with the NDG, the two organizations shared many of the same students and teachers. Other significant similarities between these two institutions vis-à-vis mission and history bear examination, which will be taken up at the end of this chapter. For now, suffice it to say that it was not uncommon for dancers to visit both in a single day, taking a class at one and then the other, as several interviewees recounted. Clark Center shared students and teachers with other dance studios clustered in the blocks around it, comprising the distinct yet heretofore unexamined dance network of midtown dance. As Frankel put it, “At the time that I was dancing, if you walked down Broadway and you looked up, every building had a dance studio. Dance was so huge, it was called the Golden Age of Dance. You could hear tap coming from one, you could see people at a [ballet] barre. Everything was right there in midtown.”⁷¹³ These studios were linked by geography but also by how that spatial proximity yielded a group of people that connected them.

⁷¹² “Clark Center at the New Dance Group Studio,” October 1, 1988, Box 20, Folder 6, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁷¹³ Frankel.

Of course, this group was not formalized. Most studios offered drop-in classes, meaning that students came and went as their schedules permitted. Attendance shifted per students' needs, desires, and whims. Interviewee Noel Hall, for example, who had attended Clark Center as a student beginning in the 1960s, described no longer attending the Center once his tour schedule with the Rod Rodgers Dance Company became prohibitively busy.⁷¹⁴ Certain teachers had devotees, students who would follow them wherever they taught. Several students, for example, studied with Pepsi Bethel at both Clark Center and Ailey's East 59th Street studio (a dynamic elaborated in Chapter 5). Following a teacher may have entailed commuting elsewhere. Interviewee Shirin Stave-Matias, a member of the Fred Benjamin Dance Company, described taking Benjamin's jazz classes at Clark Center and then later at Steps on Broadway.⁷¹⁵ By this point, Steps (as it is colloquially known) had relocated uptown.⁷¹⁶ Originally, however, when Steps opened in 1979, it was located at 56th Street and Broadway, just around the corner from Clark Center's Eighth Avenue location. Situated squarely within the midtown network, many interviewees described walking between the two studios regularly.

Some students, on the other hand, may have stuck with one studio as their primary or exclusive place of training. This was especially true of scholarship students at Clark Center, as the program stipulations were rigorous. Students were required to take no fewer than six classes weekly and complete a two-hour work shift, which entailed menial administrative or housekeeping tasks. Additionally, Clark Center was the kind of dance studio that offered numerous classes spanning a wide range of forms. Thus, as Frankel noted, students looking for a general training in a diversity of forms could find it at the Center. Rather than going from studio

⁷¹⁴ Hall.

⁷¹⁵ Shirin Stave-Matias, in email correspondence with the author, February 24, 2025.

⁷¹⁶ "About Steps on Broadway," Steps on Broadway, <https://www.stepsnyc.com/about-steps/>. In 1984, Steps moved uptown to 74th Street and Broadway, where it continues to operate today.

to studio, one could simply go from class to class within the Center itself. That said, Clark Center did not offer everything. Stave-Matias, for example, attended Fazil's—a studio in the midtown network, detailed below—to study Middle Eastern dance forms with Elena Lentini.⁷¹⁷ Indeed, the majority of interviewees described frequenting multiple studios, often simultaneously.

In one sense, we could think of studios as competitors, each vying to maximize business by offering superior experiences and cultivating repeat customers. This business orientation, however, was strikingly absent from the accounts of Clark Center consulted and collected for this project. Many of the documents in the archives were authored by Roberts. While her desperation wrought by Clark Center's financial strain through the years was plainly evident, typically the target of her ire was those responsible for the commercial redevelopment of midtown—developers, landlords, and politicians. There was little talk about (much less finger-pointing at) other studios or dance institutions.

Interviewees, on the other hand, who had been Clark Center students did speak frequently of other studios. But while they may have noted differences amongst studios vis-à-vis atmosphere or clientele, their perspectives also bore little sense of them as competitors. Rather, for students, Clark Center and its neighboring studios were complementary sites of dance training. Inevitably, the commercialization of midtown underscored and even deepened the competitive relationship that inhered between businesses under capitalism. This antagonism is perhaps best evidenced by the studios that would replace Clark Center and others in the midtown network in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A look at one such studio-rental business, Ripley-Grier, is taken up later in this chapter.

⁷¹⁷ Shirin Stave-Matias, in email correspondence with the author, February 26, 2025.

JoJo's Dance Factory

Within a three-minute walk of Clark Center was not only Steps but also JoJo's Dance Factory, located at 1733 Broadway (between 55th and 56th Streets). JoJo Smith, known as "Choreographer to the Stars," was a dancer and teacher with an extensive performing career that included Broadway and television. His father was a tap dancer and drummer who had performed with Cab Calloway and the Nicholas Brothers, and his mother had been a dancer in Katherine Dunham's company. Some of Smith's early training had come from Dunham too, informing his eventual style which also incorporated jazz, disco, and black and Latinx social dances. He had opened JoJo's Dance Factory with his wife Sue Samuels, and they employed other teachers as well.⁷¹⁸

Frank Hatchett, a famed jazz teacher known for "VOP" (a style and term he coined),⁷¹⁹ began teaching at JoJo's in 1980.⁷²⁰ In 1982, he and renowned tap dancer Maurice Hines took over the operation, renaming it Hines-Hatchett Performing Arts Center. With the new ownership, came a new vision. As Hines explained in an article in the *New York Amsterdam News*,

The idea is to provide all of the things that a performer needs to make it out here in this tough, demanding work of show business. You've got to be able to sing, dance and act to impress producers. We intend to have everything an artist needs under one roof. There will be a lot of creative energy around the place, in part due to the cross-pollination that will occur between the various disciplines.⁷²¹

The breadth of training and resultant synergy Hines described sounded a lot like Horton's former school in Los Angeles (Chapter 1), or like Clark Center for that matter—but with a commercial

⁷¹⁸ "Harlem Fave and Famed Choreographer to the Stars JoJo Smith Has Transitioned," *Harlem World Magazine*, January 28, 2019, https://www.harlemworldmagazine.com/harlem-fave-and-famed-choreographer-to-the-stars-jojo-smith-has-transitioned/?fbclid=IwAR1q52dUDOOHgtEDDAi9k1Kr9IyBSzHyzm2VhCRG7zxj5bVc_SVfqnhKJNw.

⁷¹⁹ Bob Boross, "Frank Hatchett's Jazz Dance," in *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*, ed. Lindsay Guarino and Wendy Oliver (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 109.

⁷²⁰ Boross, 110.

⁷²¹ Maurice Hines quoted in "Maurice Hines and Frank Hatchett take over JoJo's Dance Factory," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 11, 1982.

bent. As noted in Chapter 2, Clark Center positioned itself ambivalently in relation to the commercial theater industry to which it was spatially proximal. The Center was not specifically oriented towards training or preparing performers for commercial work, but neither did it discourage such work. But whereas the Center's lack of commercial aim made a capacious space for dancers of many persuasions, motivations, and skill levels to coexist, Hines' quote about his joint venture with Hatchett made clear their intended clientele: those training to be show-biz-ready "triple threats." This arrangement would be short lived, however. In 1984, Richard Ellner assumed ownership of the studio, changing its name to Broadway Dance Center (BDC).⁷²² Maintaining a similarly commercial orientation, as the name suggested, BDC persists to this day, albeit in a different location.⁷²³

Fazil's

Another in the network of studios clustered in midtown was Fazil's, named for its owner Fazil Cengiz. Located at 743 Eighth Avenue (between 46th and 47th Streets), Fazil's was best known for hosting percussive dance forms, namely tap and flamenco, but other forms too, such as Middle Eastern, hip hop, and ballroom styles.⁷²⁴ It was a family affair. Cengiz, who "had grown up in a dancing family of Turkish descent," ran the studio with his sister Serpil Civan, who managed the day-to-day operations.⁷²⁵ His life partner, Elena Lentini, a noted dance artist and teacher of Middle Eastern forms, taught there. The diversity of dancers rehearsing in adjacent studios would sometimes converge, particularly when Cengiz hosted holiday parties.

⁷²² Boross, 110. "About Broadway Dance Center," Broadway Dance Center, <https://www.broadwaydancecenter.com/about-us>.

⁷²³ Broadway Dance Center is currently located at 322 West 45th Street, New York, New York 10036. Since 2017, there is also a Children and Teens School located at 37 W65th St, New York, New York 10023

⁷²⁴ Jennifer Dunning, "A Legendary Dance Studio that's Still Kicking," *New York Times*, June 15, 1989.

⁷²⁵ Jennifer Dunning, "Last Dance: A Studio Tears up its Floors," *New York Times*, February 9, 2008.

Footage in the documentary *Ode to Fazil's* shows one such scene in which hip hop dancer Raymond "Spex" Abbiw, who taught at the studio, shares the floor with Civan, as they dance to live Middle Eastern music. The party footage then cuts to various other members of the Cenzig family, including another of Fazil's sisters and their mother. In a voiceover, Spex remarks, "It was home, it was family oriented."⁷²⁶ Documentarian Marcel Rosa-Salas grew up frequenting the studio with her sister, a place where they would hang out while their flamenco-dancer mother rehearsed. Rosa-Salas affirms the sentiment: "For myself and many others, Fazil's was our home."⁷²⁷

Amongst tap dancers in particular, Fazil's was legendary. Many of the greats trained, rehearsed, and taught there. This included The Copasetics, a tap-dancing ensemble credited with preserving and reviving interest in tap into the latter twentieth century. Through a period of waning public interest, Copasetics' members like Charles "Honi" Coles (mentioned at the opening of this chapter) were continuing to train dancers like Brenda Bufalino, inaugurating a new generation of tap prodigies. As a photo of Coles and Bufalino flashes onto the screen in Rosa-Salas' documentary, Bufalino remarks about Fazil's, "That's where Honi Coles and myself gave the first tap class in the tap revival."⁷²⁸ Another member of the Copasetics, Charles "Cookie" Cook, is shown tap dancing up the studio's stairs. Cook represented an important link between Fazil's and Clark Center, as he also taught tap classes at both dance studios. Another link was interviewee Alde Lewis, who trained with Coles at Fazil's. As Lewis put it, "If you

⁷²⁶ Raymond "Spex" Abbiw quoted in Marcel Rosa-Salas, *Ode to Fazil's* (2017, Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources), <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/storiesfromthearchive/348693018>.

⁷²⁷ Rosa-Salas.

⁷²⁸ Rosa-Salas.

were a tap dancer in New York, that was the studio to go to—even though it was dilapidated in terms of the studio look and floors, that’s where all the tap dancers went.”⁷²⁹

Photographs and videos in Rosa-Salas’ documentary give a clear sense of what Lewis meant. The floors were uneven, the walls and ceiling were crumbling in places, a piano in one studio (on which we hear a toddler-aged Rosa-Salas and her sister plunking away) was missing most of its keys, and the signage was handwritten. A retrospective look at Fazil’s might misunderstand all this grittiness as a condition against which the studio’s liveliness happened—that its brilliant dancing occurred *despite* the decaying environs. The documentary, however, stands as a clear record of the studio’s grungy state as constitutive of its homeyness, as an expression and extension of the earthy sociality that engendered and was engendered by ardent dancing.

Such a corrective reminds me of moments in my own interview process regarding Clark Center. When speaking with people who had attended its 939 Eighth Avenue location, I asked about its dilapidated state. (Roberts’ accounts in the archive emphasized the space’s inadequacy so forthrightly that I felt it was an important aspect to ask about.) But time and again, interviewees reframed my supposition that this physical decay undermined their experience. What mattered was the joy, affirmation, camaraderie, and growth they experienced there. I came to realize that Roberts’ statements regarding lack were intended for potential donors and funders. As the caretaker of the institution, she aimed for better, and the poor condition of the space was an important rationale for asking for money. But to dancers at the Center, the grit was all part of the picture. As Stave-Matias explained, “though the place was run down and somewhat

⁷²⁹ Lewis. Lewis’ career has traversed many different dance forms and milieus. In addition to studying tap with Coles, he has worked in commercial theater (including Broadway) and danced for Talley Beatty and Dianne McIntyre’s Sounds in Motion. See A.L. Efficacy Movement, <https://www.alefficacymovement.org/home.html>.

dilapidated...there was an energetic beauty that filled the entire space, and it did so in various different classes.”⁷³⁰

At Fazil’s, too, it was the activity of dancing that imbued the space with life. Najma Harissiadis, a Kathak dancer interviewed by Rosa-Salas, put it this way: “All kinds of wonderful dancers would come in and rehearse, and the energy just doesn’t go with them; somehow it gets implanted in the fiber of the studio.”⁷³¹ Yet there is a key difference in this statement from what I heard from Clark Center alumni. None pointed to the way that dancing imprinted onto the space quite like this, altering its cellular make up, as Harissiadis suggested. My conjecture is that it was Clark Center’s itineracy that accounts for this difference. While the Center persisted at its original YWCA location for about fifteen years, none of its subsequent locations lasted more than a decade. Fazil’s, on the other hand, maintained its same physical location in midtown Manhattan for nearly forty years. Across this longer period of time, multiple generations of dancers could develop an attachment to the studio’s location and physical materiality.

This investment was made manifestly clear when, in 2008, upon the studio’s closure, “the fine old maple floor” in one of the studios was “lifted and cut into pieces, to be distributed to Fazil’s habitués as souvenirs.”⁷³² Some of this decontextualized flooring, as well as some of the studio’s other accoutrements, can be seen in Rosa-Salas’ documentary. The final portion of the film depicts Rosa-Salas alone in a hotel room with her camera. As she explains in voiceover, “I only recently have been able to walk on the street where the studio used to be, and where the hotel now stands. For a long time it was too difficult.”⁷³³ The camera pans across the room’s freshly made bed. After the many scenes of Fazil’s gritty studios, the smooth patina of the high-

⁷³⁰ Stave-Matias, email, February 24, 2025.

⁷³¹ Najma Harissiadis quoted in Rosa-Salas.

⁷³² Dunning, “Last Dance.”

⁷³³ Rosa-Salas.

end hotel aesthetic is striking for its lifelessness. This fabricated sense of luxury could be anywhere in the world. Our one reminder that this is New York City comes from the mass-produced art hanging above the bed, which depicts the Manhattan Bridge in blues and black. Rosa-Salas has arranged artifacts from Fazil's around the room. A few panels of the old maple floor lay atop the glossy, faux-wood hotel floor. The former is seasoned with years of sweat, dirt, and shoe marks, while the latter is designed to look always new, traces of its past residents ever-erasable. These scenes are overlaid with footage of people dancing in Fazil's, a ghostly presence on the screen. Where does dancing go after it ends?

The loss of Fazil's was particularly acute for percussive dancers. Tap and flamenco practitioners had been embraced at the studio, allowed to use the wooden floors without issue. Ayodele Casel, a renowned Afro-Latinx tap dancer,⁷³⁴ traces the beginning of her career back to the space. Of a 1995 private lesson with Baakari Wilder, she says: "It was here that I realized I wanted to be a tap dancer for the rest of my life."⁷³⁵ In a 2013 blog post entitled "OH, HOW I MISS FAZIL'S," she mourns its closure not just for the formative experiences it held but also for the loss of unfussy rehearsal space for tap dancers. Speaking to the discrimination she and other percussive dancers have experienced in New York City, she renounces Ripley-Grier Studios for having banned tap dancers from renting wood-floored studios, allowing them only to utilize those with marley. But such floors are not conducive to tap dance, Casel explained; they yield "a muffled and flat" sound that renders them pointless.⁷³⁶ She further emphasizes, "You came to Fazil's NOT to be discovered by the casting agency holding auditions down the hall, but to work

⁷³⁴ Yamily Habib, "Meet Ayodele Casel: Dance Warrior, Activist, Nuyorican, and All-Around Badass," BELatina, May 23, 2020, <https://belatina.com/meet-ayodele-casel-dance-warrior-activist-nuyorican-and-all-around-badass/>.

⁷³⁵ Ayodele Casel, "OH, HOW I MISS FAZIL'S," August 8, 2013, THATGILR006, Blog by Torya Beard, <http://thatgirl006.blogspot.com/2013/08/oh-how-i-miss-fazils.html>.

⁷³⁶ Casel.

tirelessly and diligently on your craft, your skill AND as a TAP dancer you were able to do that on a WOOD floor.”⁷³⁷

Casel’s critical invocation of getting “discovered” suggests a link between this sort of business-minded approach to dance and the business practice of Ripley-Grier, which has deprioritized the needs of percussive dancers. Notably, Ripley-Grier is the company that has replaced multiple studio spaces in midtown previously held by more civic-oriented dance organizations, including Clark Center’s Eighth Avenue location. While Ripley-Grier will be examined in detail below, its growth amidst a wave of redevelopment that has shuttered other institutions speaks for itself. Ripley-Grier has embraced and catered to the profit-oriented motive rendered compulsory by capitalist commerce, especially in a region of targeted and accelerated commercialization such as midtown. Casel’s comments bring to light how such a business-oriented imperative impacts the field in ways that are not only financial. That is, it is not only that Ripley-Grier is more expensive for renters than the studios it replaced but also that their policies stratify dance forms in ways that have proved inhospitable to Casel and many others. As midtown has changed, so too has its space(s) for dance.

Alvin Ailey’s Studios

The two major studios in the midtown network examined thus far, JoJo’s and Fazil’s, remained in this region of Manhattan throughout the span of Clark Center’s life. But one of the other most-mentioned spaces amongst interviewees—Alvin Ailey’s studio—was not exclusively in midtown from the 1960s-80s. For the bulk of the 1970s, Ailey’s studio was located at 229 East 59th Street. This was east of Times Square. Too far to be a convenient walk from the hub of

⁷³⁷ Casel, emphasis in original.

dance activity on the west side, this situated it outside of the region considered “midtown dance.” To get to Clark Center and its surrounding studios, many interviewees mentioned taking the A train to the 59th Street/Columbus Circle station. But this subway line ran north to south on the west side. Getting to Ailey’s space would have required a subway transfer or an alternative form of transportation that ran west to east.

Many people engaged in this route, no doubt, but by the end of the decade, they would no longer have to. In 1979, Ailey’s operation moved into the lower levels of a Times Square office tower (1515 Broadway), placing him once again in the midtown network. There his operation would remain until 1989, through the last year of Ailey’s life and Clark Center’s life as an institution.⁷³⁸ As earlier chapters have underscored the legacy of Ailey and the history of his operations, the activities of his studio will not be further detailed here. Instead, the shifting geography of these studios will be considered for their symbolic salience.

That Ailey was variously inside and outside of midtown geographically mirrored his ambivalent positioning within its paradigm, especially for black dancers and choreographers. Ailey’s meteoric professional ascension meant that his iconicity permeated the dance field; he was omnipresent. Whether one identified with Ailey’s lineage or not, dancers inevitably had to define themselves in relation to him as a pillar of modern dance and *the* pillar of black concert dance. As DeFrantz explains, if early modern dance had emerged as an expression of white women’s subjectivity, “Ailey’s goal and achievement was to make black bodies visible, if not dominant, in the discourse of modernist American dance.”⁷³⁹ He was, however, so successful in this visibilizing—that is, so thoroughly embraced by the (white) establishment—that his work was positioned as the essential representation of African Americanness, a dynamic DeFrantz

⁷³⁸ In 1989, Ailey’s studio moved to the Upper West Side, 211 West 61st Street.

⁷³⁹ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 22.

calls an “overexposure of visible black bodies.”⁷⁴⁰ *Revelations*, Ailey’s 1960 magnum opus that conveyed African American history and depicted cultural and spiritual resources, played prominently into this overexposure. “For generations, any African American concert dance artist might have been expected to make a *Revelations*-style dance.”⁷⁴¹

Not surprisingly, then, some interviewees positioned the Ailey lineage as foreign to their own formation, whether as an act of self-definition, or because Ailey was out of reach, or both. Speaking to her own negotiation of the Ailey legacy upon arriving in New York City in 1980, choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar recounted, “I knew I wasn’t going to be an Ailey dancer. I didn’t have the feet or the legs.”⁷⁴² These are the stretched feet and legs of Europeanist concert dance forms, based in a balletic sensibility. Emphasizing a long body that lifts up and away from the ground, this Europeanist dance body is distinct from the dropped, bent, and weighted qualities of Africanist dance forms. While Ailey’s vocabulary entailed a syncretistic marriage of the two paradigms—informed by Horton’s eclectic amalgamations (Chapter 1)—it was fundamentally grounded in a Europeanist sensibility. The result was not just an exceptionally physically demanding movement language but also an ideal body type that in many respects reproduced a preexisting standard in the concert dance world, or what dance scholar Nadine George-Graves describes as the “constructed physical limitations of professional dance aesthetics.”⁷⁴³ Such aesthetics were oriented towards Eurocentric beauty, grace, and virtuosity.⁷⁴⁴ Part of what made Ailey’s company successful was its overt demonstration of black

⁷⁴⁰ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 22.

⁷⁴¹ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 22.

⁷⁴² Nadine George-Graves, *Urban Bush Women: Twenty Years of African American Dance Theater, Community Engagement, and Working it Out* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 10.

⁷⁴³ George-Graves, *Urban Bush Women*, 10.

⁷⁴⁴ For more on Ailey’s aesthetics, blackness, and virtuosity, see Ariel Osterweis’ book about long-time Ailey dancer Desmond Richardson. Ariel Osterweis, *Body Impossible: Desmond Richardson and the Politics of Virtuosity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

excellence—that is, of black people able to achieve this concert dance ideal, disproving the racist myth of racial inferiority and a lack of such aptitude. While many could choose to take classes taught by Ailey or his associates (e.g., Thelma Hill, James Truitte), the level of skill and body ideal his work required meant that most would never achieve a position in the ascendant company. Some found inspiration in other figures.

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar: Urban Bush Women and Dianne McIntyre: Sounds in Motion

Not right for the Ailey aesthetic, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar (born 1950) recounts looking elsewhere: “I had to find some other way to live in this love of dance. And when I saw Dianne [McIntyre]’s company, I thought, ‘Ah, it’s possible.’”⁷⁴⁵ This first encounter was in Tallahassee, where Zollar was earning her MFA in Dance at Florida State University. Upon graduation, she moved to New York City to study with McIntyre at her Harlem studio Sounds in Motion. Later she would discover Clark Center, and Pepsi Bethel’s class, which spoke to her in particular. Meanwhile, Roberts took note of Zollar’s penchant for choreography. When she first saw a work by Zollar featuring Clark Center scholarship students at the Ethnic Folks Arts Center, she “flipped out.”⁷⁴⁶

Roberts actualized her enthusiasm by extending free rehearsal space to Zollar at Clark Center. This institutional support proved formative for her emergent company, Urban Bush Women. In Clark Center’s 1986 Summer Festival at the Douglas Fairbanks Theater, the company was presented in its premiere performance of *Anarchy, Wild Women, and Dinah*,

⁷⁴⁵ George-Graves, *Urban Bush Women*, 10.

⁷⁴⁶ Louise Roberts in *Eye on Dance and the Arts*, Episode 201, “Nurturing New Generations of Dancers,” produced by Celia Ipiotis and Jeffrey Bush (1986, New York: ARC Videodance), videodisc.

featuring guest percussionist and singer Edwina Lee Tyler.⁷⁴⁷ A work George-Graves calls “classic Urban Bush Women,” it utilized “South Carolina Sea Island folklore, songs, personal anecdotes, and African traditions” to depict “women of color working together in joy and strife, a celebration and a journey.”⁷⁴⁸ As Zollar recounted to me, one of Roberts’ most supportive gestures came when she told Zollar that she had “the right to fail.”⁷⁴⁹ Such capacious support was indicative both of Roberts’ personal style of stewardship and reflected the Center’s mission to provide space for experimentation (Chapter 2).

In addition to Zollar, there were a multitude of African American choreographers and dancers with visions, aesthetic inventions, and virtuosic vocabularies that diverged from Ailey. One of Clark Center’s greatest contributions was that it provided an institutional home for many such dance artists in midtown. These were figures like Rod Rodgers, Fred Benjamin, Pepsi Bethel, and Charles Moore—black choreographers with mid-sized companies and something distinct to express. Clark Center gave them the encouragement and resources they needed to make their work, train and rehearse dancers, and cultivate a public. Such support also led some choreographers to open their own spaces elsewhere, such as Dianne McIntyre in Harlem. Thus, dance spaces in midtown had an impact that radiated out to other regions, stoking other cultural hubs.

Dance scholar Veta Goler asserts Dianne McIntyre (born 1946) as “the most important black woman dance artist in this country to emerge from the 1970s.”⁷⁵⁰ In a lineage of black women modern dance choreographers that begins with Dunham and Primus, Goler inserts

⁷⁴⁷ “Urban Bush Women to Premiere ‘Anarchy, Wild Women, and Dinah’ on the Clark Center Summer Dance Festival ’86,” Press Release, Audrey Ross Publicity, Box 27, Folder 7, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁷⁴⁸ George-Graves, *Urban Bush Women*, 125-126.

⁷⁴⁹ Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, in discussion with the author, April 2024.

⁷⁵⁰ Veta Goler, “Love Poems to God: The Contemplative Artistry of Dianne McIntyre,” *Dance, Movement & Spiritualities* 1, no. 1 (2014): 76.

McIntyre as the next major figure.⁷⁵¹ McIntyre grew up in Cleveland, Ohio and began dance training at four years old. Initially studying with Elaine Gibbs Redmond, who taught ballet and tap and “was the go-to teacher for black children” beginning in the 1950s,⁷⁵² McIntyre studied modern dance four or five years later with Virginia Dryansky. While Dryansky was white, she danced with the Karamu Concert Dancers, a resident company of the long-time bastion of African American arts in Cleveland known as Karamu House. For this reason, McIntyre explained, “some of the themes of our dances reflected African American culture.”⁷⁵³ What’s more, McIntyre’s dance classmates were all African American. This initial exposure to modern dance left her with the impression that it was “an expression of black people.”⁷⁵⁴ She gained new insights upon attending Ohio State University, a predominantly white setting, where she eventually decided to major in dance. Nevertheless, McIntyre connected with African American artistic traditions at Karamu House when she was home for the summers. There she taught classes for children, saw theater, and performed with the Karamu Concert Dancers. She met other black artists who introduced her to progressive black literature and the existence of black-specific venues in New York City.⁷⁵⁵

Moving to the big city after graduation, McIntyre received her earliest choreographic opportunity at Clark Center. Auditioning with a solo dance entitled *Melting Song*, she was selected for the 1971 cohort of the New Choreographers series. From there, Roberts’ championing only grew. Offering McIntyre free studio space, Roberts encouraged her to hold auditions and have a dance concert. This led to the formation of her own company, Sounds in

⁷⁵¹ Goler, “Love Poems to God,” 76.

⁷⁵² Dianne McIntyre, in email correspondence with the author, March 8, 2025.

⁷⁵³ McIntyre, email.

⁷⁵⁴ McIntyre, email.

⁷⁵⁵ McIntyre, email.

Motion, for which she would soon open a studio of the same name in Harlem in 1974.⁷⁵⁶ The name is indicative of her choreographic philosophy, which approached dance *as* music. As Goler explains, “McIntyre’s view...came out of an Africanist aesthetic—one in which the music and the dance are equal. The element of improvisation and the practice of call and response—in which dancers and musicians respond to each other in the moment—helps ensure equality. McIntyre took this idea even further: she saw dance and music not just as equal, but as the same.”⁷⁵⁷ Indeed, McIntyre’s company became known for bringing together African American dancers and avant-garde jazz musicians. Throughout the 1970s and ‘80s, her studio became a gathering site for black artists of all kinds. That it was in Harlem⁷⁵⁸—a historically African American neighborhood—meant that it was a nucleus of black culture not just *of* and *for* black people but also *near* them.⁷⁵⁹

McIntyre would go on to choreograph for major theater and film productions, including the film *Beloved* based on the book by Toni Morrison, as well as a televised version of Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*.⁷⁶⁰ McIntyre continues to make new works for the stage to this day. Her evening-length *In the Same Tongue* had its New York City premiere in 2024 at the Apollo Stages at The Victoria Theater. A newly opened black-box venue expanding Harlem’s iconic Apollo Theater, McIntyre’s piece was its inaugural dance performance. Contiguous with her choreographic signature, the work featured a group of dancers and musicians sharing the stage. At times they

⁷⁵⁶ Goler, “Dancing Herself: Choreography, Autobiography, and the Expression of the Black Woman Self in the Work of Dianne McIntyre, Blondell Cummings, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Emory University, 1994), 115.

⁷⁵⁷ Goler, “Love Poems to God,” 75.

⁷⁵⁸ Sounds in Motion was located at what is today Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard and 125th Street, New York, NY.

⁷⁵⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, in his manifesto-like call for black theater in the 1920s, laid out four tenets: that it must be *of*, *for*, *about*, and *near* black people. See Du Bois, *Krigwa Players*.

⁷⁶⁰ “Dianne McIntyre,” Dianne McIntyre, <http://www.diannemcintyre.com/>.

crossed over into each other's creative activities, materializing the interconnectedness of rhythm and movement. McIntyre herself also appeared for a brief—and glorious—solo.⁷⁶¹

Zollar and McIntyre are living legends who received formative career support from Clark Center within the context of midtown. They are particularly strong examples of the unique dynamics of this region in the 1970s and '80s, as both forged African American dance aesthetics that were distinct from Ailey's. Ailey's iconicity may have loomed large in ways that constrained black dance artists, yet he also extended the groundwork of a geographic region where some were able to pursue their own choreographic voices and build robust lives in dance. Moreover, Zollar and McIntyre's works are markedly distinct from each other, indicating the breadth of dance forms, approaches, and sensibilities to which midtown was host. Neither choreographer's work fits neatly into the paradigms of downtown dance or uptown dance. In midtown, where many dance aesthetics converged, generative space was made for diverse choreographic styles to emerge, and a multitude of expressions of blackness in particular.

Overlapping with the New Dance Group

A crucial antecedent to Clark Center in the midtown network of dance spaces was the New Dance Group (NDG). The NDG had been providing formative opportunities for African American artists since the 1930s. While this occurred within the institution's larger operations as an early hub of modern dance and leftist political activity, by the 1980s, it was an altogether different institution. It now operated primarily as a rental space, lacking the distinguished and coherent suite of dance offerings for which it had long been known. Not long before Clark Center moved into the NDG facility in the late 1980s, Rick Schussel had taken over as

⁷⁶¹ I attended the matinee on Saturday, April 13, 2024.

administrator of the nonprofit. Retrospectively, his interests seem to have been primarily money driven. Under Schussel, NDG's studio-rental policy stipulated that renters who exceeded their time were subject to a late fee of \$100 per fifteen minutes.⁷⁶² Such a late fee would be considered inordinate even today. Moreover, Schussel engaged in unscrupulous activity with the organization's finances and resources, resulting in criminal charges. As indicated in public court records from the mid-2000s, the State of New York (represented by Attorney General Eliot Spitzer) sued Schussel for "violat[ing] his fiduciary duties of loyalty and care to NDG by engaging in numerous self-dealing transactions."⁷⁶³

Around that same time, the NDG was embroiled in yet another legal controversy. Schussel and the organization were being sued for re-staging the dance works of choreographers associated with the organization's early history. The plaintiffs were comprised of three individuals: the choreographer Mary Anthony and the children of two other deceased choreographers, Sophie Maslow and Jane Dudley. Together, they claimed that the NDG did not have the right to remount these works without the permission of the choreographers (or their heirs), arguing that the artistic integrity of the works would be undermined in the planned performances. Schussel's lawyer claimed that the accusers were actually after money, seeking to be paid for the use of the dances.⁷⁶⁴ Meanwhile, with funds of dubious origins, the NDG had

⁷⁶² Felix Neals, "Administrative Law Tribunal" (New York, NY, 2004), https://docs.dos.ny.gov/ooah/decisions/non_indexed/TEAKGROU2.htm.

⁷⁶³ The alleged charges included Schussel's use of the NDG to avoid paying taxes; the making of secret loans to the organization at inordinate interest rates; the mortgaging of NDG to repay said loans; and illegal, personal use of a company-owned car and the NDG building as a rent-free residence for his family. Members of NDG's Board were also indicted in the case for their complicity in Schussel's crimes. See "Spitzer v Schussel," 2005, Justia U.S. Law, <https://law.justia.com/cases/new-york/other-courts/2005/2005-25024.html>. See also "Spitzer v. Schussel (2008)," 2008, FindLaw, <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/ny-supreme-court-appellate-division/1472541.html>. Prior litigation against Schussel includes a 2004 case in which Schussel was sued for misconstruing his experience renting out studios via the NDG as commensurate with the requisite credentials for licensure as a New York real estate broker. See Neals, "Administrative Law Tribunal."

⁷⁶⁴ Daniel J. Wakin, "Control of Dances is at Issue in Lawsuit," *New York Times*, September 4, 2007.

opened a gleaming, new facility at 305 West 38th Street in 2006. It did not last long. Amidst the opprobrium of Schussel's fraudulent business dealings, the NDG fully shuttered in 2009.

In a remarkable fate linking these two organizations retrospectively, the NDG's new building was acquired by the same company that had taken over Clark Center's Eighth Avenue location: Ripley-Grier Studios. Founded by life-partner duo Patricia Ripley and Butch Grier in the 1980s, the company owns and operates rehearsal studios throughout Manhattan to this day. Ripley-Grier bought Clark Center's Eighth Avenue space in 1990 and NDG's 38th Street space in 2017.⁷⁶⁵ In both, the company renovated to divide the extant studios into smaller rooms, each of which could be rented simultaneously, thus maximizing profits. Where there had once been twelve studios in the 38th Street building, for example, Ripley-Grier made twenty-two.⁷⁶⁶ Such smaller rooms are more suitable for musicians and theater practitioners than dancers. Moreover, Ripley-Grier's high hourly rental rates are a far cry from the affordability that made Clark Center (and the early NDG) accessible to small, emerging dance companies. Broadway productions commonly rehearse in Ripley-Grier Studios today, evidencing the commercial-leaning profile of its renters.

No doubt, Ripley-Grier's prices are necessarily high for the company to remain financially viable within a redeveloped Manhattan. But the company's orientation has resulted in decreased space for dance in midtown, especially for dance artists and companies of little means. While Chapter 3 revealed how culture has been deployed towards redevelopment (i.e., Theatre Row *as* a redevelopment project), the dynamic here evidences the inverse: how economic shifts yield cultural shifts, which are evidenced in the city's changing spaces for culture. With the redevelopment of Manhattan came a narrowing in the kinds of cultural institutions that remained

⁷⁶⁵ "Our Story," Ripley-Grier Studios, <https://ripleygrier.com/our-story.html>.

⁷⁶⁶ "Our Story."

viable. As illustrated by Casel's aforementioned criticism of Ripley-Grier, this in turn has narrowed the number of dance forms for which there remains accessible rehearsal space in New York City.

Just as the NDG had lost its social and political edge by the 1980s, Clark Center too, would operate as just a shell of what it once was in its short time renting space from the NDG.⁷⁶⁷ That said, the earlier profiles of these two once-robust organizations bore remarkable similarities. Like Clark Center, the NDG was forced to relocate several times in its life as an institution due to financial strain. The NDG was started in 1932 by dancers who had trained with Mary Wigman, the progenitor of German Expressionist dance.⁷⁶⁸ By the time it settled on East 59th Street in the mid-1940s, where it would remain for ten years, it had already moved multiple times.⁷⁶⁹ Its next location at 254 West 47th Street (in which Clark Center would rent space) was its longest home, residing there for nearly half a century.

Like Clark Center, from its earliest days, the NDG's classes were intentionally low-priced and course offerings spanned multiple dance forms. Both conditions were an expression of the group's animating philosophy: "the idea that dance belonged to everyone."⁷⁷⁰ This ideology emerged from the social and political context of 1930s America, evidenced in a number of dance and theater-based groups that used the performing arts as an embodied tool of leftist, socialist organizing. As dance historian Ellen Graff posits, such organizing stood in defiance of fascism taking root in Europe on the one hand (e.g., the ascent of National Socialism in Germany), and against the inequalities wrought by American capitalism on the other.⁷⁷¹ Thus,

⁷⁶⁷ Frankel.

⁷⁶⁸ Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 53.

⁷⁶⁹ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 159-161.

⁷⁷⁰ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 160.

⁷⁷¹ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 52.

the NDG's populist ethos was a corrective centering of the working class. Against the high-art exclusivity of modern dance companies like Martha Graham's, the NDG trained dancers towards the ultimate goal of class struggle. The training itself was meant to inculcate dancers into leftist ideology, and their danced (re)presentations were also intended to galvanize audiences.⁷⁷²

There was an irony to leftists' critiques of the modern dance establishment: it was barely yet *established*. Its leading progenitors—like Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Hanya Holm (carrying the Wigman legacy in the U.S.)—had only started their companies within the preceding decade. What's more, modern dance itself had emerged as a repudiation of the establishment of ballet and its aristocratic associations, and thus the founding of modern dance was carried by “antiacademy and, in that sense, antibourgeois sentiment.”⁷⁷³ Yet, despite ballet's long history in Europe, it was not an American tradition; it had only started to become popular since the turn of the century through the touring of overseas companies to the United States. In Graff's formulation, “If ballet had been an established form in the United States, the new modern dance forms might have been considered revolutionary.”⁷⁷⁴ Instead, the exalted individuals helming modern dance appeared out of touch with workers and their emancipatory politics. The NDG's members sought dance and choreography that fanned the flames of labor collectivization.

One crucial distinction between the two institutions is that the NDG had a resident dance troupe of the same name. Indeed, this dance company was key to its political mission, broadcasting its ideology via performance. Dance classes at the NDG were open to all, and theoretically anyone was eligible to contribute to and make dances for the purpose of performance. Professionals did, however, lead the charge, and a particular standard of

⁷⁷² Graff, *Stepping Left*, 54-55.

⁷⁷³ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 9.

⁷⁷⁴ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 9.

proficiency dictated who was permitted into the troupe.⁷⁷⁵ As for Clark Center, while it acted as a host institution for many choreographers and their companies, it never had its own company nor a singular ideological message. On the contrary, its very identity was defined by its artistic diversity. In this respect, the NDG was an important antecedent; it hosted a blend of people with vastly different relationships to dance, ranging from recreational to professional. Both organizations also had scholarship programs, which were critical to fulfilling their jointly held mission of making dance training widely accessible. Additionally, the NDG's dance company and its affiliate choreographers presented their work at other venues, including formative presentations at the 92nd Street Y, as would also be the case for some artists affiliated with Clark Center.⁷⁷⁶

While enfranchising African American dance artists was not its explicit mission in the way that it was for Clark Center, the NDG did provide foundational opportunities for several African Americans for whom opportunities within the realm of concert dance were otherwise extremely limited from the 1930s-1950s. Pearl Primus, who would go on to a pioneering career as an anthropologist and choreographer preserving and transmitting dances of Africa across its diaspora, was accepted on scholarship at the NDG, where she pursued early performance and teaching opportunities.⁷⁷⁷ Other African Americans who were resourced by the NDG included Talley Beatty, Ronne Aul, as well Donald McKayle,⁷⁷⁸ whom would go on to receive formative support from Clark Center. Moreover, Graff notes that “the first legitimately interracial casts appeared in New Dance Group productions.”⁷⁷⁹

⁷⁷⁵ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 56-57.

⁷⁷⁶ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 159.

⁷⁷⁷ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 160.

⁷⁷⁸ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 165.

⁷⁷⁹ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 165.

Examples included choreographer Sophie Maslow's casting of African Americans such as Aul, McKayle, and Primus in her dances.⁷⁸⁰ Maslow was the child of Russian Jews who had immigrated to the United States.⁷⁸¹ While Russians and Jews may have been more proximal to whiteness than African Americans, they were still considered "ethnics" in the early twentieth century and thus the target of discrimination, including in the domain of modern dance.⁷⁸² As many scholars have shown, Jews and African Americans in this era found solidarity in their overlapping exclusions from full citizenry, a coalitional possibility that was often activated—albeit unevenly—in the realm of the performing arts.⁷⁸³ Jackson notes that just as the work of African American modern dancers was labeled "Negro dance," the work of Jewish modern dancers was sometimes called "Jewish dance." Such designations both indicated and reinforced the exclusionary discursive logics that constructed modern dance as not just white but Anglo-Saxon and Protestant.⁷⁸⁴ In one of Maslow's dances featuring McKayle and Aul, *The Village I Knew*, the dancers were meant to represent the inhabitants of a Russian Jewish village. Such "race-blind" casting proposed a representational apparatus that assimilated the African American dancers' blackness toward a lighter (if not white) race/ethnicity.⁷⁸⁵ Moreover, this sort of interracial maneuver, which entailed integrating a minority of African Americans into a non-

⁷⁸⁰ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 165.

⁷⁸¹ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 20.

⁷⁸² Graff, *Stepping Left*, 20.

⁷⁸³ See, for example, Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁷⁸⁴ Jackson, 205.

⁷⁸⁵ Notably, white dance critic John Martin took issue with Maslow's use of African American dancers to represent Russian Jews, as McKayle recounted (Jackson, 205-206). Jackson and other dance scholars have noted this way that only white dancers were afforded the representational capacity to portray people of races/ethnicities other than their own in early modern dance. Another telling example of this dynamic includes Pearl Primus in *Strange Fruit*, her 1949 anti-lynching solo dance. Primus, an African American woman, intended to portray a white man in his anguish at having just witnessed the lynching of a black person. She was hoping to inspire white viewers towards a sympathetic identification. It was likely, however, that viewers were unaware of the intended identity of her character given Primus' dark-skinned female body and the representational logics that did not afford her body the capacity to stand (in) for a white man's. See Manning, 163-164.

black space, prefigured the dominant Civil Rights paradigm of racial integration to come. On the one hand, Clark Center stood in contrast to such a model, as Chapter 1 argued, offering a black-centric model of racial integration. On the other, the very possibility of concert dance as a site of racial integration (that Clark Center would extend) had been set into motion at the NDG.

The NDG's founding in leftist organizing meant that its intentions were overtly political and focused on class. The goal of stoking class struggle was ultimately oriented towards "the revolution," when the underclass would rise up against the capitalists who owned the means of production, dismantling this fundamentally unequal system towards a new, socialist order in which resources were more evenly distributed. Meanwhile, Clark Center was initially founded for individual interest—Ailey's—which was mobilized towards the enfranchisement of others like him, i.e. African Americans. Thus, the Center's animating principal was race not class, and its race-based mission held civic aims, not revolutionary ones. The Center intended to enfranchise African Americans to participate in New York City's dance world, both recreationally and professionally. Such inclusion was predicated on the continuation—not the dismantling—of the dance scene. That said, the enfranchisement of African Americans was not circumscribed by the limits of inclusion; Clark Center's activities actually engendered new social arrangements and political possibilities (Chapters 1 and 5).

Yet while Clark Center's mission foregrounded race, it was attuned towards class disparity (and its entwinement with race), as evidenced by its intentionally low-priced programs. That is, low-income and poor people of all races could benefit from the Center's affordability. Likewise, the NDG was attuned to race despite its foregrounding of class, as evidenced by the aforementioned inclusion of African Americans well before the Civil Rights Movement. I have not disaggregated race and class here, then, to suggest that they are discrete categories of

institutionalized difference or unrelated vectors of power. Rather, momentarily disentangling them reveals how the NDG and Clark Center were both formed by and gave form to their distinct social and political moments. The leftism forged in the crucible of the interwar period was figured in terms that emphasized class, just as the Civil Rights politics forming in the late 1950s were fundamentally concerned with race. In their respective contexts, both dance institutions sought to empower everyday people *to* dance and *through* dance, in service of inaugurating a new political and social order. Both did so by providing brick-and-mortar spaces for gathering, training, choreographing, and performing. Fundamental to the NDG's efficacy was its "sense of family within the studio's walls," as Graff puts it.⁷⁸⁶ Those words could just as easily be used to describe Clark Center.

In conclusion, a caveat: the hardened geographic lines suggested by terms like uptown, downtown, and—now—midtown dance are potentially misleading. They suggest that dancers were isolated—or isolated themselves—to one region. As my interviews bore out, this was not the case. The reality of dancers working in the mid- to late twentieth century in New York City was that they took work where they could get it. They followed the teachers with whom they wanted to study wherever they may have taught. This meant that dancers moved among the geographic regions and their attendant aesthetics as they followed opportunities and interests. This chapter, then, which has argued that a network of heretofore under-recognized dance spaces in midtown Manhattan warrants the unique designation of "midtown dance," does not intend to confirm or reinforce a faulty suggestion of isolation. On the contrary, it has shed light on this

⁷⁸⁶ Graff, *Stepping Left*, 161.

distinct region to help illuminate the multifarious routes through which dance was learned, made, and performed in the mid- to late twentieth century in New York City.

It is the emphasis on these routes that accounts for the designation of “midtown dance” as a *network* of studios and dancers, as opposed to a particular aesthetic or set of values, as has tended to characterize “uptown dance” and “downtown dance.” Indeed, those who would come to be associated with uptown dance—such as Ailey—and those who would come to be associated with downtown—such as Jones—engaged in formative dance activities *in midtown*. The same can be said of those who would open important studios elsewhere (e.g., McIntyre) and pursue careers in forms other than modern or postmodern dance (e.g., Casel). Thus, delimiting “midtown dance” reveals the *centrality of midtown* to New York City’s dance ecosystem. At its heart was Clark Center, which nourished and extended the region as supportive to cadres of African American dance artists and their distinctive choreographic expressions.

Postscript

Within the final days of writing this dissertation, the Martha Graham Dance Company made a major announcement: it will be moving to midtown. As the *New York Times* detailed, the company “would leave its offices in the West Village of Manhattan and relocate to a 30,000-square-foot space in Times Square, more than doubling its footprint. The troupe, the oldest in the United States, will build six new dance studios and expand its education programs.”⁷⁸⁷ These new facilities will occupy the eleventh story of the Paramount Building, located at 43rd Street and Broadway—quite literally in the heart of Times Square. The article further explains that this

⁷⁸⁷ Javier C. Hernández, “In Major Expansion, Martha Graham Dance Company will Move to Midtown,” *New York Times*, February 14, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/14/arts/dance/martha-graham-dance-company-midtown.html>.

move stands assertively as a sign of the company’s vitality despite the uncertainty wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic, which roiled performing arts organizations. Especially notable are the terms comprising the new lease. Paramount Leasehold, a real estate firm, will subsidize the necessary renovations, which “will allow the Graham troupe, a nonprofit organization, and Paramount Leasehold to claim an exemption from property taxes on the space.”⁷⁸⁸

This move follows on the heels of the Paul Taylor Dance Company, which opened a new space in midtown in January 2025 through a similar post-pandemic real estate deal.⁷⁸⁹ Occupying two floors of an office tower on West 38th Street, Executive Director John Tomlinson expressed his excitement about this location at “the center of the world.”⁷⁹⁰ In addition, the company continues to maintain its former location on the Lower East Side for programming and rentals. Interestingly, until the recent moves, both the Graham and Taylor companies had long been based in downtown Manhattan. That they are both paragons of “uptown dance” demonstrates the nature of these designations as more aesthetic than geographic.

The freshly congealing identity of midtown as a home base for concert dance behemoths is striking. In their solidity as icons, Graham and Taylor are—like Ailey—the analogues of commercial success within the realm of concert dance (Chapter 2). In this sense, it makes sense that they have become more geographically proximal to the commercial theater district. In their partnerships with a real estate firm, the Graham and Taylor companies are mirroring projects like Theatre Row and Playwrights Horizons, which conspired with redevelopment, enabling their viability amidst commercialization. One notable difference, however, is that after the turn to

⁷⁸⁸ Hernández, “In Major Expansion...”

⁷⁸⁹ Brian Seibert, “An Unlikely Winner in the Office Real Estate Slump? A Dance Troupe,” *New York Times*, October 28, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/28/arts/dance/paul-taylor-dance-company-midtown-real-estate.html>.

⁷⁹⁰ Paul Taylor Dance Company (@paultaylordance), “Thank you to everyone who came to the ribbon cutting...”, Instagram, January 13, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DExforpv4Af/?igsh=bW52NGVINTU0dGJ6&img_index=1.

digital space brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, real estate in midtown has fallen, as brick-and-mortar space is less needed.

Dance, unlike corporate commerce, still needs physical facilities. For both the Graham and Taylor companies, their new midtown facilities will house company activities and the school. This dual function is akin to Clark Center. Thus, on the one hand, these new spaces extend the tradition of midtown dance represented by the Center. On the other, Graham and Taylor maintain an allegiance to the choreographers whose names they bear—singular geniuses. Clark Center, of course, did not adhere to the genius model, offering horizontal support that served many different kinds of dance artists, forms, and aesthetics. Clark Center was rendered out of place in midtown, squeezed out of existence by the office towers erected in its midst. That Graham and Taylor's new operations are partnering with such commercial buildings towards their mutual benefit is a new, post-pandemic era for dance in midtown: one less horizontal, and—like its architecture—more vertical.

Chapter 5: Black Self-Making and World-Making: Choreographer-Teachers and Students of Clark Center

Clark Center was “electric,”⁷⁹¹ as one interviewee put it. “People were dancing their asses off and sweating,”⁷⁹² another said. Between classes, “everybody would just come out dripping and exhilarated.”⁷⁹³ The sweat soaked the uneven wooden floors of the studios,⁷⁹⁴ a scent which mixed with “cigarettes, coffee, and feet.”⁷⁹⁵ One interviewee described the composite result as the smell of “the arts,” one that should be bottled up as a good luck charm.⁷⁹⁶ Metaphoric invocations of heat abounded in interviewees’ descriptions as well: “There was this hotbed of creativity,” as one put it.⁷⁹⁷ Another contrasted the quiet atmosphere of the studio during the day-time classes with the “hot people” who came out for the evening classes.⁷⁹⁸

One of those classes which drew a big after-work crowd was Loremil Machado and Jelon Vieira’s Afro-Brazilian and *capoeira* classes. The energetic heat of these classes was generated in part by live musicians who accompanied them, a group which sometimes grew beyond the no-more-than-three rule set by Roberts. Roberts would interrupt class to get them to quiet down, an occurrence so frequent it was “like a comedy routine.”⁷⁹⁹ Describing this same class, another interviewee spoke of how she savored “the energy, the soul, the whole vibe in this place,” qualities that she feels have been lost in the commercialized midtown of today.⁸⁰⁰

⁷⁹¹ AbuBakr.

⁷⁹² Pivar, discussion.

⁷⁹³ Pivar, discussion.

⁷⁹⁴ Gonzalez, discussion.

⁷⁹⁵ Charles Epps, in discussion with the author, October 2023.

⁷⁹⁶ Epps.

⁷⁹⁷ Pivar, discussion.

⁷⁹⁸ Gonzalez, discussion.

⁷⁹⁹ Pivar, discussion.

⁸⁰⁰ Shirin Stave-Matias, in discussion with the author, October 2023.

This final chapter begins from inside Clark Center's walls, dwelling there to ask: what did dancing at Clark Center *do*? The anecdotes above are drawn from the interviews conducted for this project. Certainly the sweatiness had something to do with Clark Center's lack of air conditioning (both at the YWCA and Eighth Avenue locations); interviewees described large, noisy fans in the corners of the studios. This literal heat, however, merely amplified something already being generated at Clark Center: a *spiritual heat*, a fundamental liveliness. That dance—an embodied activity—engendered such an energetic quality should come as no surprise. More specifically, however, at the heart of Clark Center's activities was dance *education*. As is the convention in Western concert dance paradigms, such education occurred through group classes—typically with one teacher, one or more musicians, and many students. Thus, dance classes were not only embodied but they were *social*. Learning to dance happens together.

Expressive practices like dance and music are also engaged communally in Africanist paradigms. Moreover, it is understood that through such participation, people are *making* themselves, relationally. That is, one becomes oneself in relation to the group through dancing or playing music. Speaking to such self-making via Africanist expressive practices, African studies scholar John M. Chernoff describes this insight culled from his time spent learning to drum in Ghana:

Music is essential to life in Africa because Africans use music to mediate their involvement within a community, and a good musical performance reveals their orientation toward this crucial concern. As a style of human conduct, participation in an African musical event characterizes a sensibility with which Africans relate to the world and commit themselves to its affairs...The development of musical awareness in Africa constitutes a process of education: music's explicit purpose, in the various ways it might be defined by Africans, is, essentially, socialization. An individual learns the potentials and limitations of participation in a communal context dramatically arranged for the engagement, display, and critical examination of fundamental cultural values.⁸⁰¹

⁸⁰¹ John M. Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 154.

The socialization Chernoff describes concerns the process whereby an individual (a self) learns participation within community (a world). If such socialization occurs via Africanist music, then we could say music is a process of *self-making* and *world-making*.

This chapter springs from such theorizing to posit that African-diasporic dancing at Clark Center engendered processes of *black self-making* and *black world-making*. Through the study of dance, black students gleaned expanded conceptions of themselves as diasporically African and historically American. Put another way, this chapter posits dance as a resource of and for black subjectivity. Such processes were stoked by black dance teachers, as Chapter 1 began to illustrate. This chapter coins and highlights an additional category of Clark Center figure who was key to this process: choreographer-teachers. These were choreographers with mid-sized companies who received choreographic support from the Center, in addition to teaching as part of its regular, drop-in slate of classes. Occurring within the same site, these two activities—choreographing and teaching—came into relief as co-constitutive.

Dance Griots

The discursive tendency in dance discourse to privilege choreography and performance has resulted in an under-recognition of the centrality of dance teaching to the concert dance ecosystem. Looking at Clark Center intervenes upon this discursive tendency. The training of dancers was the Center's most enduring function, and thus its teachers and students were its central figures. The latter portion of Chapter 1 elaborated the particular salience of dance training for black students by black teachers at Clark Center in the Civil Rights era, highlighting Thelma Hill in particular. In addition to figures like Hill, whose work at the Center was primarily pedagogical, the Center fostered another crucial pedagogical phenomenon: that of the

choreographer-teacher. These were figures like Charles Moore and Pepsi Bethel, whose prodigious careers as choreographers might have obscured the salience of their work as teachers as well as the import of their teaching to their choreographic works. Members of the dance-going public and dance critics who did not attend dance classes may not have known—and, indeed, may have had little way of knowing—of the beloved teaching work engaged by such artists, much less how it fed into their choreographic work.

In addition to reorienting discursive attention to the significance of teachers and the phenomenon of choreographer-teachers, the work of Clark Center's figures also highlighted the agency of those on both sides of the pedagogical exchange. That is, teachers and students were not merely re-producers of inherited forms and traditions. They made choices—conscious and latent—to reconfigure what they taught and learned. They moved towards some spaces and people and away from others, shifting cultures and forms in the process. Sustained study of Clark Center's teachers and students points productively in many directions, recovering the multifarious routes by which dance travels and plays into subject formation. Each teacher touched many lives, producing a multitude of influences and impacts too variegated to trace, too ineffable to fully know. Yet some of those most impacted are conscious of these pedagogues' inflections on their lives, of themselves as living conduits of these legacies. Thus, if we understand each teacher as a kind of root, students enacted routes of transmission through which these teachers' contributions and interventions have been carried into a future beyond Clark Center.

As Chapters 1 and 4 foregrounded, Clark Center resourced many black dance artists—students, teachers, and choreographer-teachers alike. Black choreographer-teachers functioned like griots, a West African term denoting a culture bearer, one who serves one's community by

preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge and practices. In using the term here, I extend this designation applied by various dance scholars to the work of African-diasporic dance artists. Cynthia S'thembile West, for example, in her article "Dianne McIntyre: A Twentieth Century African-American Griot," points to both the content and form of McIntyre's works as demonstrative. "Like the ancient African griots who told their stories through the events that occurred over days, weeks, months, years decades and centuries, McIntyre's dances chronicle African-American history in the African way. For McIntyre 'dance is music moving' like the sound of the drum in the dancer's body."⁸⁰² West highlights McIntyre's enactment of dance and music as inter-animating forces, a fundamental Africanist principle, as key in how her work both springs from and then conveys cultural knowledge. She continues, "Although McIntyre's twentieth century dance stories are not exact recreations of specific events and deeds, they have firm roots in the traditions of African music... This African formula has been transferred in the traditions of African-American jazz musicians."⁸⁰³ Thus, the African American history encoded in McIntyre's work works not through narrative but in and through music. West highlights the diasporic link between African music and jazz to elucidate how McIntyre's use of music enacts a continuum of African-descended forms, a dynamic which is central to her work as a griot.

Another dance scholar, Elgie Gaynell Sherrod, uses the term griot to highlight the cultural valence of work by black dance artists in the early twentieth century. In her study titled "The Dance Griots: An Examination of the Dance Pedagogy of Katherine Dunham and Black Pioneering Dancers in Chicago and New York City, From 1931-1946," Sherrod examines how black dance pioneers in America transmitted their choreographic and corporeal knowledge. Early

⁸⁰² Cynthia S'thembile West, "Dianne McIntyre: A Twentieth Century African-American Griot," in *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry*, edited by Kariamuw Welsh-Asante, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2002), 131.

⁸⁰³ West, 138.

black dance artists codified dance vocabularies that both derived from African forms and innovated within and through them towards new forms. A denial of access to the institutions and conventions of American civic life, however, meant that they taught these forms in ways unregistered by historical documentation. Sherrod's work, then, is—like this project—one of recovery, seeking to document that which has been previously unrecorded or erased.

To uncover the instructional methods of early black dance artists is also to consider the particular social and political imperatives motivating and engendered by their work. Sherrod asserts them as “cultural leaders [who] viewed dance as a functional vehicle to strengthen and raise consciousness in the community.” She continues, “Their roles as teachers illustrated the usefulness of the dance for its performative, educative, and transformative components. Their roles as historians documented the ancient and contemporary stories of Black people in America through dance instruction and performance.”⁸⁰⁴ It is in these respects that Sherrod deems figures like Katherine Dunham, Asadata Dafora, and Syvilla Fort to be griots. By generating a concert dance milieu for black people in America—“developing a Black concert dance construct”⁸⁰⁵—they paved a way for black people, then and now, to participate and innovate in this art form.

Chapter 5 foregrounds the lives and work of two of Clark Center's longest-term choreographer-teachers, Charles Moore and Pepsi Bethel. Indeed, they can be meaningfully understood as griots. To highlight and animate the pedagogical dynamics of their work, the words of their students—culled from oral-historical interviews conducted for this project—are interpolated. Pertinent biographical details about the interviewees are at times woven into these larger profiles, a methodological strategy introduced at the beginning of Chapter 4, with the

⁸⁰⁴ Elgie Gaynell Sherrod, “The Dance Griots: An Examination of the Dance Pedagogy of Katherine Dunham and Black Pioneering Dancers in Chicago and New York City, From 1931-1946” (Ed.D. Dissertation, Temple University, 1998), 1.

⁸⁰⁵ Sherrod, iv.

interpolation of Amy Pivar's account within the profile of Bill T. Jones. The purpose of foregrounding students in this way is two-fold: 1) it activates the centrality of students at Clark Center towards a larger argument that students have been central figures within the American concert dance ecosystem historically; and 2) to emphasize how the work of choreographer-teachers was useful to black students towards the formation of their subjectivities. The latter point requires attending to the accounts of individual students, as to attend only to the work of the choreographer-teachers would leave the actual experience of students to the realm of speculation or, worse, assumption.

Moreover, focusing on individual accounts is important in illustrating the specific social and political context in which black students were studying dance at Clark Center—different from, for example, that of Sherrod's study about the 1930s and '40s. Students studying with black choreographer-teachers at Clark Center in the 1960s-80s were forging themselves as subjects in an era with increasingly more discursive space to do so. That is, with civic enfranchisement and continued black freedom struggles came more possibilities for what blackness could mean to black people and how it could be expressed. Studying dance with black teachers and amongst black peers engendered a greater sense of oneself as both diasporically African and historically American at the same time that it engendered a sense of freedom. In the process, Clark Center was imbued with a multivalent sense of place, connecting students to other sites and times via learning to dance. As blackness became a meaningful and viable way to *be* (a self) and to *be together* (a world), dance became a vehicle of *black self-making and black world-making*.

Choreographer-Teachers

As many interviewees emphasized, what made Clark Center special was not just the low cost of classes but also the unmatched variety and quality of study offered there. Many of the Center's teachers were choreographers-teachers, utilizing the institution's resources to start or run their dance companies. Some companies were launched in the Center and stuck around, such as the Fred Benjamin Dance Company. Some began elsewhere but were presented by the Center and became resident companies, such as Pepsi Bethel's American Authentic Jazz Dance Company. Others got their start at Clark Center but quickly established themselves in studios of their own, such as Dianne McIntyre's Sounds in Motion. While each possessing a distinct trajectory, choreographer-teachers embodied the overlapping operations of Clark Center as a school *and* presenter. Other prominent figures in this group included Charles Moore and Ella Thompson Moore (Charles Moore Dance Theatre), Loremil Machado (Loremil Machado Afro-Brazilian Dance Company), and Jelon Vieira (Capoeiras of Bahia, later DanceBrazil).

Each of these choreographer-teachers were discussed by multiple interviewees. It is clear that each was beloved in their own right. To take class with them was to experience how their work extended beyond the public presentations of their choreography as danced by their companies. Through their teaching, these choreographer-teachers continually forged and honed distinctive approaches to their respective forms, innovating in and through them along the way. By generating material, transmitting it, and watching, assessing, and responding to students as they inhabited the movement, choreographer-teachers could glean a deeper sense of how their movement translated from their own body to others.

This give and take can change the material in real time. As dance scholar Randy Martin has noted regarding dance pedagogy, "since the teacher will tend to indicate the movement rather

than dance it fully, it requires someone in the midst of the room to emerge as one who corporealizes it. This person...gets featured...as a model. This too may have an influence on what the phrase ultimately becomes, hence shifting the authority of movement from teacher to dancer.”⁸⁰⁶ Martin describes the co-authorship of dance classes, wherein dancers shape the material as their translations of the movement shift and inform what it becomes. Dance scholar Jasmine Johnson puts it this way: “One is never a perfect replica of the teacher; the teacher is growing, too. This gathering and vanishing are what make a dance class.”⁸⁰⁷ Thus, the pedagogical exchange is not uni-directional; students, however inadvertently, change the course of a class or contribute to a teacher’s emergent pedagogical style or choreographic vision.

At its best, a teacher can be inspired by this exchange, as Pepsi Bethel seemed to be. In his teaching at Clark Center, Bethel described the following: “I discovered that in running workshops for dancers, one finds there are those who have a wealth of creativity in their own right. For the sensitive and perceptive teacher, this opens up new and unexpected vistas to be explored in his own work.”⁸⁰⁸ Bethel also underscored “the invaluable assistance of Mr. Harold Youngblood” in his teaching, whose contributions gave Bethel “a great expansion of [his] own creativity.”⁸⁰⁹ Such generative interchange points to a collaborative ethos Bethel found and embraced as it emerged in his work at Clark Center.

I hasten to add here that by foregrounding such an ethos I do not mean to romanticize or elide a history of power differentials that have unduly disempowered dance students/dancers. As

⁸⁰⁶ Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 164.

⁸⁰⁷ Jasmine Elizabeth Johnson, “Casualties,” in “Black Performance and Reproduction: A Set of Four Essays in a Round,” edited by Kimberly Juanita Brown, Sarah Jane Cervenak, Jasmine Elizabeth Johnson, and Paige A. McGinley, *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 171.

⁸⁰⁸ Pepsi Bethel, *Authentic Jazz Dance: A Retrospective* (New York: American Authentic Jazz Dance Theatre, 1990), 39.

⁸⁰⁹ Bethel, 39.

Johnson reminds us, “a guiding philosophy of any dance class is to reproduce,” which entails not just the reproducing of dance moves but also the “reproduc[ing of] a social order.”⁸¹⁰ Teachers at Clark Center, given their positioning as authorities figures in the room, set an initial ethos, tone, and culture, and held the greatest sway. But to consider power uni-directionally would also be to miss how dance classes are sites of contestation and negotiation, if not collaboration. Just as students modify and reconfigure dance material, they too determine and shift the flow of a room. Students’ responses to teachers engender an emergent culture, one which solidifies as it is also always in flux. Johnson underscores this point thusly: “In addition to tutoring the body, to attend a dance class is to traffic in community building—however robust, thin, or fleeting.”⁸¹¹ This dynamic of provisional community at Clark Center was especially dynamic due to the Center’s “drop-in” class structure, meaning students could take single classes without committing to anything beyond that. The alchemy of the room was subject to change from class to class, dependent upon who was in attendance. It, of course, behooved teachers to offer a class that students would want to attend regularly. Teaching was a primary part of their livelihood, and they needed to reliably pull in a sizable crop of students in order to make their classes financially viable for the studio and themselves.

Each of Clark Center’s choreographer-teachers offered something unique, so students received more than a rote dance class. Benjamin, for example, was crafting a jazz dance vocabulary that was quick, sharp, and required balletic agility and technique. The famed playwright-poet Ntozake Shange was a regular in Benjamin’s class and relished the “inescapable sensuality” of his movement.⁸¹² Charles and Ella Thompson Moore “specialize[d] in authentic

⁸¹⁰ J. Johnson, 169.

⁸¹¹ J. Johnson, 169.

⁸¹² Ntozake Shange, *Dance We Do: A Poet Explores Black Dance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 14.

reconstructions of and original works based on African dances,” in addition to teaching the techniques of Katherine Dunham and Asadata Dafora.⁸¹³ Machado and Vieira carried the distinction as the first *capoeiristas* to bring this Afro-Brazilian form to the United States. That they established their teaching practice and companies out of Clark Center imbued the Center with a deep, abiding significance with regards to this form, one which warrants further study. As a form widely practiced all over the United States today, Clark Center made possible the transmission and proliferation of this tradition. According to scholar Karen Backstein who took Machado’s Clark Center class, Machado “succeeded in painting quite a full portrait of Brazilian choreography,” including

orixa dances (those of Xangô, Ogum, Iemanjá, Iansã, Oxumare, Omulú, Oxum, Ossãe, and his own saint, Oxossi, among them); multiple versions of samba, from Rio's upright style to Bahia's bent-low and shuffling samba de roda; the bounding, athletic *frevo* from Recife in the northeast; *caboclo*, with its tripping, almost drunken-looking motion; the *puxada de rede*, a fisherman's dance that mimics pulling in the net with the catch; *maculêlê*, a dance fight using sticks.⁸¹⁴

With each of these choreographer-teachers and others at the Center, students were immersed in distinctive convergences of tradition, pedagogy, and choreographic invention.

In their students, choreographer-teachers also had a ready stream of potential company members—people with whom they could forge their dance vocabulary in class and then hire to continually reproduce and deepen that vocabulary. Company members took classes. They were often used as assistants to demonstrate material, to lead groups in class, and to step in as substitute teachers when needed. In this way, drop-in classes functioned simultaneously as company classes, underscoring the function of this space as a kind of choreographic incubator.

⁸¹³ Emery, 306.

⁸¹⁴ Karen Backstein, “Taking ‘Class’ Into Account: Dance, the Studio, and Latino Culture,” in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City*, edited by Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 468-469, emphasis in original.

Moreover, in such classes, choreographer-teachers trained their company members alongside other students of different levels and abilities. This co-presence interrupted the idea that a stark division existed between neophytes and specialists in a given choreographer's vocabulary.

Not only did non-company members take classes with choreographer-teachers at Clark Center, but they also attended their shows.⁸¹⁵ That is, devotion to a particular choreographer-teacher's class could extend into fandom for their performance works. The link here is a deep affinity for a teacher's sensibility—if it felt meaningful to do, it was probably also gratifying to watch. On the other hand, some students may have found their way to a particular teacher's class by way of seeing their choreographic work first—if it was gratifying to watch, it might be meaningful to do. Indeed, students found their way to Clark Center through many different routes. Some students followed a particular figure whose class they first experienced elsewhere. Charles Moore was one such figure.

Charles Moore Dance Theatre: Ella Thompson Moore, Ramona Candy, Rita Littrean, Audrey Madison & Diasporic Blackness

Charles Moore was born in 1928 in Cleveland, Ohio. Like Dianne McIntyre (although many years prior), he grew up attending Karamu House, where he was exposed to a variety of performing arts. It was an interest in music and singing that initially drew him there, yet it was dance that he would find. Two instances proved particularly fateful: one was an encounter with Charles Weidman, a white progenitor of modern dance. Weidman, who visited Karamu House as a guest artist, invited Moore to New York City to study on scholarship. The other instance was an encounter with Asadata Dafora, the Sierra Leonean dancer and choreographer who was “the

⁸¹⁵ Interviewee Ruth-Terry Walden described to me how she was a devoted student of Fred Benjamin's class, and although she did not dance in his company, she attended shows as an ardent fan. Ruth-Terry Walden in discussion with the author, November 2023.

first native African artist to exert a strong influence on American concert dance and American culture in general.”⁸¹⁶ A young Moore witnessed Dafora dancing *Awassa Astrige*—also known as *Ostrich Dance*—at Cleveland’s Severance Hall. In this solo dance which had premiered in the 1930s, Dafora danced as a warrior embodying the movements and sensibilities of an ostrich, “the largest and most powerful of the birds on the continent of Africa.”⁸¹⁷ Bare-chested and barefooted in a skirt of feathers, Dafora’s choreography moved across the width of the stage with both a proud strut and a soft, undulating grace. It is a piece for which Dafora is particularly well remembered today, in large part due to Moore’s later re-stagings of it. Indeed, Moore would also become prominently associated with the piece, and his company—posthumously overseen by Ella Thompson Moore—continues to administer its transmission to other dancers and companies to this day.

Taking up Weidman on his scholarship invitation, Moore moved to New York City in 1948. He soon found Katherine Dunham. Perhaps Dunham’s combination of Africanist and Europeanist dance sensibilities struck a chord, reconciling divergent influences in his formative experiences. Moore went on to join her company, dancing and touring with her from 1952 to 1960. Concurrently, he studied and/or performed with a host of other choreographers, each of whom was innovating ways of framing African-diasporic materials within American concert dance infrastructures. These included Dafora, Pearl Primus, Babatunde Olatunji, Jean-Léon Destiné, Donald McKayle, Geoffrey Holder, and Alvin Ailey.⁸¹⁸ Moore was part of Ailey’s company from its early days, where he overlapped with many eventual Clark Center figures. On the company’s 1962 State Department-sponsored tour of Southeast Asia, for example, Moore

⁸¹⁶ Perpener, 101.

⁸¹⁷ “1976 Season—Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival—July 27-31,” Playbill, <https://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/themes-essays/african-diaspora/asadata-dafora/>.

⁸¹⁸ “Charles Moore Dance Theatre,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 8, no. 4 (1984): 205.

danced alongside Carmen de Lavallade, James Truitte, and Thelma Hill. The group also included Ella Thompson,⁸¹⁹ who would later marry Moore and adopt his surname.

Ella Thompson Moore was born in 1938 in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She moved frequently as a child; her preacher father worked to expand small churches, moving the family each time his work was complete. Being a preacher's daughter also meant that dancing was off limits. It was not until she attended Howard University that she engaged in her first formal dance training. Once she moved to New York City, she began attending the Dunham school, where she trained with renowned teachers including Syvilla Fort, Karel Shook, and Walter Nicks. When Nicks started a dance company in Mexico City in 1953—El Ballet Negro de Walter Nicks—he asked Thompson Moore to join. She went on to travel and perform with the company through various stays in the Caribbean, including Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. When Thompson Moore returned to the United States, she and Moore would work together in several contexts, including on the Broadway premiere of *Jamaica* (1957). Other Broadway premieres for Moore included *Kwamina* (1961) and *The Zulu and the Jayda* (1965), and for Thompson Moore, *House of Flowers* (1955).

As Thompson Moore explained in a 2015 interview, dancing on Broadway and dancing for Ailey were fundamentally different pursuits. Broadway paid and Ailey did not, and thus the former supported the latter. But if Ailey did not have money to pay his dancers in those early years, working with him provided another kind of fulfillment: “We would do these things with our peers because that was art.”⁸²⁰ Moore and Thompson Moore danced in the premiere of Ailey's *Blues Suite* amongst other works in his inaugural shows at the 92nd Street Y in 1958.⁸²¹

⁸¹⁹ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 61.

⁸²⁰ Thompson Moore, “Tea with Ella.”

⁸²¹ DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 242.

The couple's first meeting, however, had occurred at Dunham's school, when Thompson Moore attended Moore's class as a student. As she recounted, he expressed interest in her early on, chatting with her and her friend, taking them out for coffee. Moreover, he would accompany Thompson Moore when she needed an escort or companion. He complimented her dancing and encouraged her to join him in his artistic pursuits.⁸²² Thus, the creative and life partnership were forged in tandem.

Charles Moore's teaching extended to several other sites, including the New Dance Group and Harlem Youth Activities (Har-You-Act).⁸²³ He was also employed to teach dance by the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) as part of its community programming efforts (Chapter 3). Classes were held in the basement of the Hanson Place United Methodist Church,⁸²⁴ which shared the block with BAM. This is where Ramona Candy, a founding member of Moore's company, first encountered his teaching—albeit reluctantly. She aimed to be a ballerina, and Moore's barefoot dancing seemed antithetical to this dream. Yet the Dunham-based movement spoke to her; she “fell in love with the technique.”⁸²⁵ Even as the BAM program phased out, Moore continued to utilize the nearby church as a dance studio, and the site of his emergent dance company. Two other early company members, Audrey Madison and Rita Littrean, recalled rehearsing there. Each of them had first encountered Moore's teaching at other sites: Madison at Hunter College and Littrean at Ailey's 59th Street studio.

By the late 1960s, Moore had also started teaching at Clark Center, when it was housed in the West Side YWCA. Candy, Madison, and Littrean all specified Moore as their introduction to

⁸²² Thompson Moore, “Tea with Ella.”

⁸²³ Emery, 306.

⁸²⁴ Ailey also taught in the Hanson Place United Methodist Church as part of the BAM program for a short time in 1969. DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 86.

⁸²⁵ Ramona Candy, in discussion with the author, November 2023.

the Center, illustrating how individual teachers were a key route through which dancers found their way there. Moore's teaching in the Center incarnated a continuum of African dance within its walls. The Center's earliest classes in "African Dance" had begun by 1965, taught by Seth Ladzekpo. A course schedule from that year described Ladzekpo as "a native of Ghana [who] taught African Dance and Drumming at Columbia University and appeared in Pearl Primus' BLACK RHYTHMS at the Circle-in-the-Square Theatre. He was an instructor and research assistant in the Dance Division of the School of Music and Drama at the University of Ghana."⁸²⁶ Ladzekpo's Clark Center class was described as "an introductory course designed for beginners [that] will cover the ceremonial, warrior and folks dances of Ghana."⁸²⁷ Ladzekpo figured among the dancers and teachers from Africa with whom Moore would study or whose expertise he would draw upon for his eventual company.⁸²⁸ Such teachers were Moore's connection to the continent, as he never traveled there himself. This is especially notable given the fact that most of the other American figures whose lives and work were dedicated to the preservation and transmission of African dances *did* study or work in Africa at some point in their careers, such as Dunham, Pearl Primus, and Nana Yao Opare Dinizulu. Dinizulu, who taught African dance at the Harlem YMCA, "made several trips to Africa, particularly immersing himself in the African culture of Ghana."⁸²⁹ Such travel imbued his teaching and choreography with a direct connection to its African source.

On the one hand, it would seem that Moore did not claim to teach African dance per se at Clark Center—and yet, his classes seemed to stand in for such a class. In a 1968-69 brochure,

⁸²⁶ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, 1966-67, Box 27, Folder 19, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁸²⁷ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, 1966-67.

⁸²⁸ "The Charles Moore Dance Theatre," 205.

⁸²⁹ Long, 108. Dinizulu was the founder and director of Dinizulu and His African Dancers, Drummers, and Singers. His teaching at the Harlem YWCA started in 1947.

Ladzekpo's class no longer appeared. In its stead, Moore's class in Dunham Technique was the closest analogue, offering material "based on Miss Dunham's research into the rhythms and dances of the West Indies and Africa."⁸³⁰ The presence of African dance now came through the mediated forms of Dunham, as understood and embodied by Moore. Given Moore's continued study with other teachers, these additional influences inevitably inflected his class material, including African dance forms he learned from those like Ladzekpo. Yet Dunham's "was the strongest influence in Moore's own work,"⁸³¹ and ultimately her technique was *Africanist*, or African-diasporic, not African. Dunham's technique was rooted in Afro-Caribbean forms and sensibilities that she had studied firsthand via anthropological fieldwork. These were intermingled with Europeanist forms, ballet and modern dance, which she had also studied. Thus, its African-descended materials were generated within new cultural and geographic contexts. The resultant syncretism structured not only the movement vocabulary itself but also its context.

Emplacing African dances within the dance studio and theatrical stage entailed a decontextualization from their origins, one which was acknowledged in the Dunham Technique course description when it referred to Africa as a place "where Dance was a functional part of the people's daily life."⁸³² Whereas African dances emerged in settings where expressive practices were integrated as everyday activities, in the American context these forms became "extra daily," set aside from daily living in the frames and spaces of dance training and performance. These dances from elsewhere, however, had the ability to invoke the places from which they came. As African dance scholar Kariamuwelsh asserts, "As cultural phenomena in

⁸³⁰ Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, 1968-69.

⁸³¹ "The Charles Moore Dance Theatre," 205.

⁸³² Clark Center for the Performing Arts brochure mailer, 1968-69.

the United States, especially, and in other parts of the African Diaspora, African dances are artistic, nationalistic, and political. They have been linked historically to the struggles of African peoples in the Diaspora, and as such, the dances represent ancestral heritage for millions of Black people.”⁸³³ Just as the dances are linked to diasporic ancestry, the dances can *link* practitioners to such heritage. For those who learned African dances with Moore in the walls of Clark Center, there was the potential for a kind of meta-physical transport, for a (re)connection with geographic roots and diasporic routes.

In this regard, we can meaningfully extend Sherrod’s theorization of (dance) griots towards Moore. His own experiences learning dances of the African diaspora engendered in him a knowledge and understanding of great depth and breadth. He became both a keeper of African-diasporic culture and a conveyer via his teaching. Moreover, Dunham and Dafora are both foundational figures in Sherrod’s formulation of griots in black concert dance. As the two figures whose work were at the core of Moore’s education and subsequent pedagogy, he stands as a prismatic force both in his formation and extension of this griot genealogy.

Before formalizing a dance company, Moore presented a group of his Clark Center students in the YWCA auditorium. As Candy recalled, this performance featured a large, racially mixed collection of dancers.⁸³⁴ Through the 1970s, Moore began more intentionally to forge and maintain a company comprised of about a dozen members at a time, including dancers and musicians. Indeed, musicians figured prominently, an ethos which was clearly reflected in the group’s initial name: Charles Moore’s Dances and Drums of Africa. This co-constitution structuring the company enacted the Africanist paradigm that music and dance were

⁸³³ Kariamuwelsh, “The ‘Gospel’ of Memory: Inscribed Bodies in the African Diaspora,” in *Hot Feet and Social Change: African Dance and Diaspora Communities*, edited by Kariamuwelsh, Esailama G.A. Diouf, and Yvonne Daniel (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 95.

⁸³⁴ Candy.

fundamentally intertwined. When Clark Center lost its YWCA location and moved to 939 Eighth Avenue, Moore added “Body Conditioning” classes to his teaching roster in the new space. He had been a long-time student of Pilates teacher Lolita San Miguel (Chapter 2), who did not follow the Center in its relocation. At the same time that Clark Center became more of an institutional home for his work, his company also maintained an identity as a “Brooklyn-based company,” as Littrean noted.⁸³⁵ In 1974, Moore and Thompson Moore opened their own space in Brooklyn, the Charles Moore Center for Ethnic Studies.⁸³⁶ The company was renamed to Charles Moore Dance Theatre.

These two new monikers were illustrative of the dual motives that Moore and Thompson Moore’s activities straddled. Their work was both about study *and* theater—that is, it was both pedagogic and artistic. Performance on the concert dance stage was an opportunity to do important cultural work, even as it entertained, delighted, and presented audiences with beautiful dancing and music. The presence of “ethnic studies” in the center’s name expressed a larger cultural education within which dance and music were situated, a formulation that echoed the broad curricular array at Dunham’s school (Chapter 1). Moreover, the use of this term also aligned Moore’s center with the disciplinary formation of the same name emerging in the American academy in this era.

Universities and colleges were implementing ethnic studies programs in response to protest efforts on campuses that had begun in the late 1960s. Students criticized the Eurocentrism of the academy, calling for measures such as new curricula that centered the histories of “third-

⁸³⁵ Rita Littrean, in discussion with the author, November 2023.

⁸³⁶ Carl Paris, “Twenty Five Years of Tracing Ethnic Roots: Charles Moore Dance Theatre: The Dancers’ Monthly,” *Attitude: The Dancers’ Monthly*, Winter 2000.

world” peoples⁸³⁷ and the hiring of more professors of color.⁸³⁸ Under the umbrella of ethnic studies were various sub-disciplines, such as Black studies, Asian American studies, and American Indian/Indigenous studies. Moore’s Center’s curriculum of African-diasporic dance and music resonated with these efforts not only on account of its “ethnic” affiliation but also its epistemic intervention. That is, expressive practices within a Western academic paradigm had not been considered the proper stuff of intellectualism. Moore’s claiming of them as “studies” correctively legitimated them as sophisticated endeavors requiring specified education.

Moore was educating not only when he taught dance classes but also when he presented performances. To transplant African dance forms onto the concert dance stage was to put them before audiences who required contextual and historical information. In this regard, it was an inevitability that Moore’s work carried pedagogical imperatives in the American context. But Moore embraced the necessity, as playbills from the company’s concerts clearly evidenced. Individual dances presented in sequence were named and explained through remarks that gave a geographic origin as well as a function. For example, “STICK DANCE is a Nigerian dance using sticks in a highly skilled ritual and sometimes used as a test for young dancers ready to graduate into the dance society of their tribe. Stick dances like this one are found in all parts of Africa.”⁸³⁹ Such dramaturgical supplements imbued the dancing with veracity. The pedagogical intention, then, also conveyed a purported cultural authenticity.

Claims to authenticity, however, generated another inevitability—the degree of authenticity became a point of debate. Interestingly, doubts and critiques of the veracity of the

⁸³⁷ The term used at the time for people of the global majority.

⁸³⁸ Evelyn Hu-DeHart, “The History, Development, and Future of Ethnic Studies,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 75, no. 1 (September 1993): 50-54.

⁸³⁹ “Dances and Drums of Africa,” playbill, undated, Box 25, Folder 29, Clark Center Records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, emphasis in original.

dances often had less to do with the skill of Moore or his dancers and more to do with the fact of the dances being done out of their original context. Dance critic Suzanne Merry, for example, writing in 1979 for *Dance Magazine*, remarked:

I found myself both enjoying the dances and questioning their validity as cultural statements and representations...Charles Moore has a clear eye for staging his dances with an effective sense of pattern, and it's a graceful transition to the concert stage; but I wondered if these weren't rather dances composed of African forms, styles, and rhythms adapted for Western consumption; if perhaps some of the initial excitement had been lost in presenting the dances as theater pieces.⁸⁴⁰

Thomas Connors, writing for the same publication in 1981, initially praised Moore and the “expert and exciting company,”⁸⁴¹ before echoing similar concerns:

It is true that this dance, as it is performed on New York's Upper West Side, is many times removed from its original functional incarnation. One hopes for total authenticity, but certainly some indescribable aspects have been lost along the way. One cannot transfer intact to the stage an activity integral to a specific culture. Once the context has been changed, the nature of the dance changes. The seriousness of engagement, on both the part of the dancer and the viewer, cannot be the same as it was once the dance has been taken from its social setting and made into a theatrical event.⁸⁴²

For all this handwringing about what was lost when African dances were brought to the concert dance stages of New York City, little such scrutiny was brought to bear on the dancing itself.

This is, of course, not surprising, given that dance critics—like the concert dance establishment itself—were steeped in Eurocentric traditions of viewing and valuation, likely possessing little knowledge of Africanist forms (much less African ones).

Indeed, this problem persists almost four decades later, as evidenced by Gia Kourlas' 2017 review of *DanceAfrica* at BAM. The *New York Times* dance critic, in critiquing the show for its presumed shortcomings, betrayed a clear lack of cultural literacy with the show's

⁸⁴⁰ Suzanne Merry, untitled dance review, *Dance Magazine*, June 1979, 118.

⁸⁴¹ Thomas Connors, untitled dance review, *Dance Magazine*, April 1981, 46.

⁸⁴² Connors, 47.

Africanist materials. Thanks to open-letter responses published by black dance scholars Charmian Wells and Angela Fatou Gittens,⁸⁴³ which created waves in the dance field, the incident today stands as paradigmatic of the continued hold of hegemonic Eurocentrism on dance criticism and the need for change. Included in Wells' critiques was the following: "Kourlas' reference to Fritzlyn Hector's performance as the 'Trickster' (presumably gleaned from the program) contains no mention of the actual movement vocabulary, execution, or a comprehension of the rhythmic and iconographic references. It would appear that she does not possess the vocabulary to discuss it."⁸⁴⁴ Moore was subject to a similar dearth of critical acumen that symptomatically ignored the actual dancing done by his company.

Nevertheless, to watch dance and to do it are two different activities. The *Dance Magazine* reviews have little to tell us about the phenomenon of dancing for and with Moore. Students and company members had a corporeal experience; the act of embodying the dances engendered something in them. As the accounts below bear out, for black students, this process conjured a sense of transport and connection. To engage in African-diasporic dances with Moore, then, not only entailed moving but *being moved*. As students encountered dances from Haiti, Guinea, and other parts of Africa and its diasporas, their sense of themselves as *diasporically* black expanded. This dance(d) methodology of diasporic education and subjectivity formation were key to his pedagogy, generating for African American students a greater sense of belonging within a global community.

⁸⁴³ Angela Fatou Gittens, "My Response to Gia Kourlas' Insulting May 30, 2017 NY Times Article 'DanceAfrica Excels with Tradition. Why Go Beyond?'"

⁸⁴⁴ Charmian Wells, "Strong and Wrong: On Ignorance and Modes of White Spectatorship in Dance Criticism," *Movement Research Critical Correspondence*, June 30, 2017, <https://movementresearch.org/publications/critical-correspondence/strong-and-wrong-on-ignorance-and-modes-of-white-spectatorship-in-dance-criticism/>.

Former company member Audrey Madison, who is African American, explained, “[Moore] helped me discover myself...He exposed me to an authentic perception of Africa.”⁸⁴⁵ She first encountered Moore in college, and he was one of her first serious dance teachers. As a young girl raised in Brooklyn, she had loved dancing in a community ballet class for several years but as a teen had little opportunity to continue studying formally. She still danced, however; clearing out the furniture in her living room when her parents were gone, she choreographed her own pieces. As she also recalled, she watched golden-age musical movies as a child. Marveling at the dancing, she was troubled by the feeling that she was born too late. Yet she also could not help but notice that there were few people on the screen who were black like her. When Madison attended Hunter College in Manhattan, she signed up for a dance class with Moore, not because she knew who he was but because the course fulfilled a physical education requirement.

Upon taking his class, Madison was moved by Moore’s recommendation that she continue to take his classes at Clark Center. The awe only deepened when he asked her to join his company: “For him to see in me a dance company member, a person who could learn choreography, who could project performance and emotion and tell the stories he was trying to tell...”⁸⁴⁶ All of this made Madison feel seen. By becoming part of Moore’s world, she was entering a larger circle of black concert dance titans, some of whom she would encounter directly. “I got to meet Alvin Ailey and took a couple of classes with Katherine Dunham.”⁸⁴⁷ As she met dancers who had danced with other notable forebears, such as Asadata Dafora, connections begot connections: “the experiences were multiplying exponentially.”⁸⁴⁸ It was all

⁸⁴⁵ Audrey Madison, in discussion with the author, November 2023.

⁸⁴⁶ Madison.

⁸⁴⁷ Madison.

⁸⁴⁸ Madison.

amounting to an education in black concert dance lineages and their interrelations. But given that her own formation as a dancer was actively being forged within and through these experiences, it would take some time before she realized that her personal trajectory was contributing to the materialization of this legacy: “I did not even know I was becoming part of history.”⁸⁴⁹

In Moore’s company, Madison danced alongside Ramona Candy, who is also African American and from Brooklyn. As a founding member of Moore’s company, Candy stands as an important bearer of the company’s history. Her experiences dancing with the Moores engendered a sense of recovery of her Afro-Caribbean heritage. She had grown up knowing she possessed Haitian ancestry; both her father and her mother’s mother were Haitian. But after her father left at a young age, she felt estranged from this heritage. She grew up loving the arts and was involved in various community theater, dance, and visual art programs in Brooklyn. While her initial interest in dance was in ballet, the pain of dancing *en pointe* quickly discouraged her from pursuing it further. She had first met Moore when he choreographed a theater production of which she was a part as a teenager. As she recalled, Moore’s choreography for that show was not Africanist movement, as that was not what the show called for. At that point, then, it was simply that he was a good choreographer that drew Candy to his classes. She would go on to major in art in college, yet dance remained central. She attended dance classes and rehearsals around her collegiate schedule.

As a member of Moore’s dance company, Candy’s identity as a dancer blossomed—but not just any dancer. At Clark Center, she recalled, she carried the particular identity of being a Charles Moore dancer, and it was a distinction she wore with pride. She related, “one of things that I loved about taking his class was leading the line.”⁸⁵⁰ As with other teachers at the Center

⁸⁴⁹ Madison.

⁸⁵⁰ Candy.

who had companies, Moore's company members would attend his class. Candy explained that it was easy to identify when such dancers were present, as they tended to stand at the front of the room or lead lines of dancers as they traveled across the floor. Company members embodied the teacher's style with the kind of depth that can only come from time and experience in a practice. In this way, they were like model students, providing other students with someone to emulate, as previously discussed. Company members even led the class as teachers on occasion. Candy recounted times when Moore was running late and Roberts would appear at the studio door with a look of desperation. This was a signal for Candy to take the lead until Moore appeared. Madison, too, recounted times when the Moores would ask her to substitute-teach for them, experiences which deepened her own love for teaching dance.⁸⁵¹

As Candy explained, her many experiences with Moore generated a profound recovery of her Afro-Caribbean heritage. This process reconfigured the negative images of Haiti wrought by the American cultural imaginary with which she had been inculcated as a child. She underscored the significance of Moore's ability to make space for the healing of her African-diasporic disconnection despite not being African himself: "[W]hen Charles died, one of the things I remember saying as part of my eulogy speech at his memorial service was that it took Charles Moore from Cleveland, Ohio to tell us all who we were."⁸⁵² This "we" included company members from Puerto Rico, New Orleans, and the Caribbean. Littrean was from Trinidad and Tobago. These were vastly different places, and yet each was a part of the African diaspora, containing a history of African-descended peoples and cultures. "Even though he wasn't African and he wasn't Caribbean, he showed us who we were—through teaching us these beautiful dances and bringing people who taught us beautiful dances based on the places that most of us

⁸⁵¹ Madison.

⁸⁵² Candy.

were from or had history with.”⁸⁵³ Moore, then, as a vessel of Africanist practices in the American diaspora made it possible for his students to reconnect with various elsewheres that were under-explored parts of their histories or were homes from which they had immigrated.

Moore’s work in this respect extended that of Dunham’s. As Dee Das explains, “Dunham was part of a generation of intellectuals who reconceptualized diaspora as a way to forge transnational unity among people of African descent for purposes of liberation from racism and colonialism. A politics of diaspora emphasizes cultural ties but recognizes and allows space for difference.”⁸⁵⁴ Dancing with the Moores made possible a kind of traversal and transport to other times and places that helped students better understand themselves in relationship to Africa. This generated a sense of African-diasporic identification that pushed back on the overdetermined, disparaging conceptions of Africa and its diasporas forged by Western empires, limiting notions which also reduced Africanity to a monolith.

As dance scholar Jasmine Johnson has noted, “Scholarship on West African dance has tended to focus on its healing properties for African diasporic people and its capacity to suture difference.”⁸⁵⁵ Admittedly, I have pursued such an orientation thus far, drawing forward the kinds of reparative connections I heard in my interviewees’ experiences of Moore’s Africanist dance forms at Clark Center. While Johnson affirms that “dance is a means through which people (black and not) pursue a connection to the African diaspora,”⁸⁵⁶ what she intends to flag is the transactional nature of such engagement as structured by capitalism. That is, students procure such dancing “through monetary exchange.”⁸⁵⁷ While for African-diasporic people, the

⁸⁵³ Candy.

⁸⁵⁴ Dee Das, 3.

⁸⁵⁵ J. Johnson, 170.

⁸⁵⁶ J. Johnson, 170.

⁸⁵⁷ J. Johnson, 170.

exchange has the potential to be reparative, for others, this transaction may be extractive—i.e., paying for a taste of Africa. To contend with the machinations of capitalism, then, requires other ways of understanding the work of such dancing.

Shifting away from what is gained in West African classes, Johnson turns to loss, paying attention to the slippages that occur between teacher and student. These slippages are the result of the impossibility of replication; no matter how students try, they will never completely reproduce the class material or the teacher’s dancing. Due to this “choreographic casualty,” as Johnson terms it, people will continue to pay to return to class. Trying to get the moves right is really an attempt to belong in this diasporic space. Thus, she follows with a crucial caveat: “Focusing on what is lost in translation is not to say there is no cohesion, community, or family formation being constituted. Rather, it is to say that the proof of diaspora is where the body fails, does differently, or does extra.”⁸⁵⁸ Ultimately, then, “choreographic casualties are not bleak.”⁸⁵⁹ For Johnson, they are the very stuff of diasporic formation and transmission via dance.

For me, Johnson’s theorizing helps to underscore the individuality of the Clark Center students profiled above, to acknowledge the fact of their selfhood *before, through, and after* such dance training. By studying with Moore, they did not abandon their senses of self to become something altogether new, nor did they shed their former selves to become replicas of Moore. Rather, in the attempt to reproduce Moore’s dancing (and its African diasporic-ness), they inevitably failed, remaining themselves. But this choreographic casualty—this gap between his dancing and their own—was generative. In students’ individual reconstitutions of the material, which diverged from both Moore *and* each other, they were transformed. As they witnessed their divergences within the communal setting of the dance class, their senses of selves were shifted

⁸⁵⁸ J. Johnson, 171.

⁸⁵⁹ J. Johnson, 171.

and reconfigured. *These* are the “discoveries” my interviewees described—a deepened understanding of themselves in relation to (black) peoples and places elsewhere. This sense of oneself as African diasporic within a multidimensional diaspora full of difference was engendered via dancing in class together.

Clark Center was a generative context for these processes of diasporic subjectivity formation. Coming to the Center for Moore’s rehearsals and classes meant entering a space alive with dance artists of color, and African Americans in particular. Interviewees specified that this was particularly true in the evenings, when a concentration of black teachers were teaching: jazz classes with Pepsi Bethel and Fred Benjamin, Afro-Brazilian and *capoeira* classes with Loremil Machado and Jelon Vieira, and ballet classes with Lucinda Ransom. The inclusion of Ransom in this evening block is particularly striking, as it indicated that the predominance of black teachers in the evening classes was not a product of only Africanist dance forms. Rather, Ransom’s evening class catered to the black-centricity of the evenings and reinforced African Americans’ access to a breadth and diversity of dance forms, including Europeanist ones.

Moore encouraged his company members to train with other teachers as well. Clark Center made this easy, as they could take classes with others and attend rehearsals with Moore all in the same day without leaving the building. Littrean recalled that in one particularly busy period of her life as a company member, a single day entailed: working a non-dance-related day job, attending college classes at Long Island University in the early evening, and then heading to Clark Center for a 6:00 p.m. (or later) class followed by rehearsal with Moore, which could stretch well into the night. Even then, Candy recalled, the night may not be over, as sometimes Moore and company members would get a late-night dinner at a nearby establishment. Littrean

and Candy spoke of these long days fondly. Deep and abiding friendships were forged through these experiences as company members, bonds which remain to this day.

In the context of Clark Center, Moore's diasporic pedagogy came alive. Candy spoke to this cultural symbiosis thusly:

Dancing for Charles taught me so much about who I was, who I was in the world, in terms of my culture and where I'm from and where my family's from, where my ancestry is. So that was attractive to me. So when I walked into Clark Center—hearing the drums, or hearing jazz piano and the tambourine in Pepsi's class, or hearing in Loremil's class the *berimbau* and more drumming—that was very, very real to me and it really was very attractive to me.⁸⁶⁰

In highlighting the presence of music in different dance classes, Candy underscored the same Africanist paradigm at the heart of Moore's work—that music and dance are fundamentally interconnected. Her comments also foregrounded the centrality of music to the way she came into a diasporic understanding of herself at the Center. Alongside African American music (jazz) and Afro-Brazilian music, the African drumming in Moore's work could be experienced in its fundamental relation to these forms which may otherwise sound divergent. Madison described the multiplicity, too: “When I got to Clark Center, I felt like I was discovering a world that I didn't know I was searching for.”⁸⁶¹ Noting the many different dance forms she was able to take there, she said, “It was a place where I was exposed to black dance history that I never knew.”⁸⁶²

The sense of difference *within* diaspora that Johnson articulates was also activated contextually through Clark Center's programming of Moore's company alongside other companies helmed by black choreographers with divergent aesthetics, such as Fred Benjamin and Pepsi Bethel. Moore's company also participated in two significant events at BAM that similarly highlighted the breadth of black expressivity within concert dance. The first was

⁸⁶⁰ Candy.

⁸⁶¹ Madison.

⁸⁶² Madison.

DanceAfrica in 1979, organized by Baba Chuck Davis and others, which intended to showcase a wealth of African-diasporic dance companies. Becoming an annual event that continues to this day, Moore's company has appeared on the bill multiple years.⁸⁶³ Additionally, in April 1983, BAM hosted a three-day event entitled Dance Black America,⁸⁶⁴ which was filmed for the PBS Great Performances television series. The program offered dance classes and workshops for the public, some of which were taught by renowned choreographers whose works were also showcased in performance.

Dance Black America featured a markedly diverse group of African American choreographers, groups, and forms, including double dutch and breaking. Moore himself appeared twice on the bill: once in Dafora's *Ostrich Dance* solo, which opened the show, and again with his company in Dunham's work *Shango* (1945). All of the members of Moore's company mentioned in this chapter—Moore, Thompson Moore, Candy, Littrean,⁸⁶⁵ and Madison—danced that evening and can be seen in the PBS recording. These two offerings by Moore and the company were illustrative of its mission to preserve and restage the dance repertory of Dafora and Dunham. To honor their works was to recognize the way their dances pointed beyond themselves as choreographers. Dunham's *Shango*, for example, brought to the theatrical stage a sacrifice ritual Dunham had witnessed in Trinidad in which a man was possessed by Shango, the West African Yoruban thunder god.⁸⁶⁶ As an introduction to the piece in the PBS film, Moore is shown speaking backstage: "When I danced her dance *Shango*, I

⁸⁶³ Long, 111-113.

⁸⁶⁴ The event included work and/or teaching by a number of other dance artists with ties to Clark Center, including: Alvin Ailey, Baba Chuck Davis, Eleo Pomare, Al Perryman, Halifu Osumare, Lavinia Williams, Pearl Reynolds, Pearl Primus, JoJo Smith, and Louis Johnson.

⁸⁶⁵ Rita Littrean is listed in the film credits as "Rita Badel," which is a misspelling of her former married name Rita Badal.

⁸⁶⁶ Dee Das, 94.

wasn't Charles Moore anymore. I was possessed. You had to be in order to do the dance. We were all a little afraid.”⁸⁶⁷

When I asked interviewees what Moore was like, they each noted his humor. He was always ready with a joke or a funny story. Often his stories harked back to past points in his career.⁸⁶⁸ He was generous with his experiences and knowledge.⁸⁶⁹ Multiple former company members used familial terms to describe him. Candy said he was “sort of like your big brother and your father and, you know, the guy who lives around the corner, all combined into one.”⁸⁷⁰ Interviewees also stressed the centrality of Thompson Moore to the entities that bore only her husband's name. They emphasized how impactful her work had been on their lives. When Moore died in 1986, Thompson Moore continued the operations of the company and the Charles Moore Center for Ethnic Studies in Brooklyn. That center persisted until about 2010, when it was forced to close “due to gentrification.”⁸⁷¹ As Thompson Moore explained, the landlord had suddenly tripled their rent. If being displaced was not hard enough, not having a brick-and-mortar home created additional hurdles in procuring funding. The organization's financial viability had until that point relied upon funding from the New York State Council for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. These sources of funding, however, were predicated upon having their own physical space. Without one, the funding ties had been cut. Nevertheless, by 2015, the organization continued to stay afloat with partnerships that included Symphony Space and the Department of Education. Thompson Moore explained that their primary programming entailed educational programs and performances at schools and churches in all five boroughs.⁸⁷²

⁸⁶⁷ *Dance Black America*, produced by Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker with David Hawkins, Brooklyn Academy of Music (1984, Pennington, NJ: Dance Horizons Video, 1990), videocassette.

⁸⁶⁸ Madison.

⁸⁶⁹ Littrean.

⁸⁷⁰ Candy.

⁸⁷¹ Thompson Moore, “Tea with Ella.”

⁸⁷² Thompson Moore, “Tea with Ella.”

In the same interview, Thompson Moore described how she continued to travel to set the company's repertory on other companies, including Dafora's *Ostrich Dance*. As other dancers learn this work and additional dance companies hold such repertory, they become new keepers of the Moores' legacy. In so doing, they extend those whose work they kept, namely Dunham and Dafora. New generations have the opportunity to be transported by these works, finding through them a connection to other geographies and histories encompassed by the African diaspora. The founding and early company members also continue to do important cultural work to this day, which will be discussed in the Conclusion. Clark Center had been a key site that made possible the dancing and performing through which Moore created a diasporic world. His teaching there spanned all three decades of the institution's life, from the 1960s through the 1980s. This was true of very few other figures at the Center. Amongst them, only one began teaching even earlier than Moore, making him its longest-running fixture: Pepsi Bethel.

Pepsi Bethel's American Authentic Jazz Dance: Carl Paris & the Feeling of Freedom

Of all the Clark Center teachers mentioned by interviewees, Pepsi Bethel was invoked more readily than any. I say "readily" to say that while other teachers' names also recurred with frequency, Bethel's name seemed to come most quickly as interviewees listed the several teachers with whom they studied at the Center. Perhaps this immediacy was a product of Bethel's ineffable charisma, energy, and generosity, which had palpated the studio walls. Roberts spoke to this energetic profundity in 1978: "He is a man with the most prodigious pride and love in what he does...It's a palpable quality that he's got. The students recognize it, I'm not being sentimental—with Pepsi it's truly something rare, I wish I could bottle it."⁸⁷³ Clearly, the

⁸⁷³ Mark Deitch, "Pepsi Bethel—Master of Jazz Dance," *New York Times*, August 6, 1978, <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/08/06/archives/pepsi-bethel-master-of-jazz-dance-master-of-jazz-dance.html>.

appreciation flowed in both directions, as Bethel dedicated his 1990 autobiography to her: “Miss Louise Roberts, whose faith in my potential as a successful professional dancer never wavered, helped to open many a door of opportunity for me. Doors through which I might never been able to pass through on my own.”⁸⁷⁴

Bethel’s pedagogy sprang from his firsthand experiences. He taught what he termed “authentic jazz dance,” a collection of early twentieth-century black social dances, which he had learned in various social and professional settings. Born Alfred Bethel in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1918,⁸⁷⁵ he had acquired the nickname “Pepsi” in the 1940s while dancing at Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom. The name “referenced his adept and quick footwork,” as Bethel’s company member (and Clark Center teacher) Tee Ross recalled.⁸⁷⁶ By the time he became a resident teacher at Clark Center in the early 1970s,⁸⁷⁷ Bethel’s performing credits spanned decades and ranged widely.

In Greensboro, he had organized a group of local youth to perform at jazz clubs, dancing during the intermissions of renowned musicians from out of town. In New York, he had danced at iconic ballrooms, such as the Savoy; trained with Herbert White and performed with his famous Whiteys Lindy Hoppers; performed in the musical *Kwamina*, choreographed by Agnes de Mille; and studied ballet and modern dance at Adelphi College on a one-year scholarship with a roster of teachers that included Hanya Holm.⁸⁷⁸ In Los Angeles, he had performed with the Count Basie Orchestra for the movie *Crazy House*. In the 1960s, he was selected to perform in “a U.S. State Department tour of fourteen West African countries...The performance ‘presented an

⁸⁷⁴ Bethel, 3.

⁸⁷⁵ Karen Hubbard, “The Authentic Jazz Dance Legacy of Pepsi Bethel,” *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*, ed. Lindsay Guarino and Wendy Oliver (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 77.

⁸⁷⁶ Hubbard, 78.

⁸⁷⁷ Bethel, 39.

⁸⁷⁸ Bethel, 19; Hubbard, 77-78.

historical progression of vernacular dance' from the first half of the twentieth century."⁸⁷⁹ Also on this tour was the Mura Dehn Jazz Ballet, a company in which Bethel had performed.⁸⁸⁰ Dehn was a Russian filmmaker and dancer who had moved to the United States to document African American social dancing. Bethel would go on to be featured in her 1987 documentary film *The Spirit Moves*.⁸⁸¹

As the pedagogical and historical aims of the State Department tour and Dehn's documentary made clear, Bethel was regarded as a reservoir of early American jazz dance. This was a category comprised of multiple forms, including minstrelsy, lindy hop, the cakewalk, as well as a multitude of individually named moves (a phenomenon which characterizes black social dancing), such as the screwball, the rock, and the scarecrow.⁸⁸² Another way to say this is that Bethel was a *bridge*—transporting audiences back to the past, animating that past in the present. In addition to referring to the dance he practiced and taught as “authentic jazz dance,” he dubbed his company the American Authentic Jazz Dance Company.⁸⁸³ Announcing the company's formation in a 1975 issue of his *Dance Herald: A Journal of Black Dance*, editor William Moore remarked, “Only someone with Pepsi's background could dare work under a title like that,” conceding “he actually lives up to it too.”⁸⁸⁴ Bethel's breadth of experiences across early sites of jazz's emergence rendered him eligible for such a lofty claim. Thus, in foregrounding authenticity, Bethel was not just affirming a discursive ascription thrust onto him by the officiating apparatuses of the State Department and the documentary film genre. He was

⁸⁷⁹ Hubbard, 79.

⁸⁸⁰ Emery, 305.

⁸⁸¹ Hubbard, 79.

⁸⁸² Bethel uses photographs of himself to introduce these steps (and more) in Chapter 3 of his autobiography. See Bethel, 14-16.

⁸⁸³ Hubbard, 79.

⁸⁸⁴ William Moore, “Namedropping,” *Dance Herald: A Journal of Black Dance* 1, no. 2 (1975): 2.

fully *claiming* it, inhabiting his role as a bona fide original with pride and a deep sense of responsibility.

This dutiful motivation is particularly evident in Bethel's intentional approach to studying forms new to him. In order to learn minstrel forms, for example, Bethel traveled to South Carolina to learn from those older than he who had performed as minstrels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸⁸⁵ This particular embodied research was for a staged work entitled *Minstrel*, which Bethel's company performed in Clark Center's 1978 Summer Festival at The Mall. It may have seemed strange—then and now—to hear of Bethel's claiming of minstrelsy as an “authentic” form of jazz, particularly given its associations with blackface. While Bethel and his company members did not perform in blackface, we may still wonder why a black man was lending legitimacy to this tradition with racist origins. The history of blackface minstrelsy has been well documented by now, in addition to being variously critiqued and theorized for how it functioned for different groups along the lines of race, class, gender, and nation.⁸⁸⁶

While some historical accounts of blackface minstrelsy tie it to blackface characters who appeared in European plays in the late eighteenth century, dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild contends that the American form must be considered on its own terms given its distinct national race relations predicated on slavery.⁸⁸⁷ What's more, she critiques scholars such as Eric Lott, who writes of the white working-class progenitors of the form. Such attention to its white motivations displaces minstrelsy's Africanist presences, she contends, thus reproducing

⁸⁸⁵ “Pepsi Bethel—Master of Jazz Dance.”

⁸⁸⁶ On race and class, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, 20th-anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); on gender, see Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); on nation, see Anita Gonzalez, “Navigations: Diasporic Transports and Landings,” in *Black Performance Theory*, eds. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, 19-32 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁸⁸⁷ Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence...*, 86-87.

(its) white supremacy.⁸⁸⁸ Dixon Gottschild instead extends the work of Robert Toll, which began to acknowledge the incorporation of African American culture repurposed for the white gaze.⁸⁸⁹ By further uncovering the appropriation of Africanist forms within blackface minstrelsy, Dixon Gottschild foregrounds its ultimate contradiction, one she phrases as a declarative caveat: “Those who read and write about it today need to regard minstrelsy as, on the one hand, a white conceit having little to do with African American anything and, on the other hand, a genre that expropriated and imitated bona fide Africanist expressive forms.”⁸⁹⁰ Moreover, she underscores the enormous influence of blackface minstrelsy in American culture to this day, a point which is most striking in her claim of its influence on African America: “Almost everything that occurs in African-American performance, on stage and in life, is somehow predicated upon and circumscribed by the minstrel trope.”⁸⁹¹

Indeed, African Americans performed blackface minstrelsy since its early days, and by the time of emancipation, they were organizing their own troupes.⁸⁹² Various scholars, including Dixon Gottschild, have theorized ways in which black people in blackface enacted resistances and incursions upon the form (and the regime of race) within and through their performances. African American Studies scholar Louis Chude-Sokei writes about Bert Williams, an African American man whose career would span blackface minstrelsy’s segue to vaudeville. In vaudeville—the popular entertainment form that would come to define the early part of the twentieth century—Williams cultivated a career of great renown, performing as a duo with African American George Walker and also with his wife Ada Overton Walker, an illustrious

⁸⁸⁸ Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence...*, 88-92.

⁸⁸⁹ Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence...*, 93.

⁸⁹⁰ Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence...*, 83.

⁸⁹¹ Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence...*, 81-82.

⁸⁹² Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence...*, 111.

performer and important figure in her own right.⁸⁹³ As Chude-Sokei argues, shifting racial politics in America that have occasioned a renunciation of blackface minstrelsy have also erased historical figures with whom it was associated, such as Williams. “Despite the ostensibly simple reasons for Bert Williams’s dismissal in an era in which race pride, racial identity, and ‘blackness’ were being wrested from the racist discourses of slavery, Jim Crow, and colonialism, his very performance of race via minstrelsy was itself a politicized rejection of those very discourses.”⁸⁹⁴ Thus, to delete Williams from historical discourse and the nation’s cultural consciousness is to excise not only his performance work but its *performative work* as critique.

While a worthy endeavor, I will not attempt such a recovery or analysis of Bethel’s treatment of minstrel forms here. More salient to this chapter is how Bethel’s work historicized and educated, and thus, this brief consideration of blackface minstrelsy has intended to contextualize Bethel’s serious engagement of minstrelsy as “authentic jazz.” If we understand that minstrelsy appropriated and thus contained Africanist forms, was engaged by African Americans (and towards great professional success for some), and continues to underlie (African) American cultural production, Bethel’s interest in minstrelsy well beyond its heyday makes sense. He claimed minstrelsy as one amongst many in the repository of dances he was amassing under the banner of “authentic jazz dance.” This work to preserve and recreate the early dance forms engaged by African Americans was an act of historicization and education.

⁸⁹³ See Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁸⁹⁴ Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last “Darky”: Bert Williams, Black-no-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 4.

A 16-millimeter film recorded in 1981 (and viewable at the New York Public Library) makes these aims particularly clear.⁸⁹⁵ Titled “The Minstrel,” Bethel’s company performs a number of minstrel forms, such as the Minstrel Man and the Cakewalk, each of which Bethel introduces through brief comments on the history and legacy of the forms. Other performances include reenactments of renowned minstrel figures, such as “John Diamond—The Well-Known Anglo-Saxon” (a white minstrel performer) and “Juba” (a black minstrel performer named William Henry Lane, a progenitor of what would become tap dance). That Bethel traveled to learn these forms from historic practitioners of minstrelsy evidenced his commitment to authenticity. Such a commitment further substantiates how he intended his work to be a historical documentation.

Much of what comprised authentic jazz dancing was born in black social settings, such as ballrooms, pubs, and dance halls. The way these forms were learned, then, also happened socially, as opposed to institutionally or formally. It was in the absence of such institutionalization that early black dance educators functioned as griots, transmitting corporeal traditions. As Sherrod explains, “Black performers have always employed systems of training, systems of learning a skill, however rudimentary. Although many of these systems operated as apprenticeships, some were actual schools, but for the most part, these systems of learning depended on the knowledge, wisdom and lived experience of the ‘master’ at the craft, the griot.”⁸⁹⁶ Sherrod uses Bethel as illustrative of this dynamic. Speaking on how he and others learned to dance in dance halls, Bethel explained that “the dancer learned the movement in the

⁸⁹⁵ “Pepsi Bethel Authentic Jazz Dance Theatre (Motion Picture),” directed by Felix R. Limardo (New York: Pepsi Bethel Authentic Jazz Dance Theatre, 1981), 16-millimeter film, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

⁸⁹⁶ Sherrod, 130-131.

corner and then went out on the floor to perfect it.”⁸⁹⁷ Dance halls such as the Savoy Ballroom, attended by Bethel, were ideal sites for such learning because the best of the best went there to dance. Thus, to learn from a griot is a pedagogical strategy, and while it may have lacked codification, it was not un-systematic. Bethel’s comments evidenced a knowing mode of engagement. Such diligent study contributed to his own transformation into a griot, as he assembled and passed on authentic jazz dances to his students.

To highlight only the historical and pedagogical valence of Bethel’s work would be to miss another primary aim. As Bethel declared in his autobiography, he believed authentic jazz dance was not just “the epitome of entertainment” but “entertainment at its highest.”⁸⁹⁸ He aimed to delight audiences with his work for the concert dance stage. Indeed, bringing such dances to this setting illustrated how he was not just a bridge across history but also across context. Bethel choreographed pieces that showcased social dance forms for the theatrical stage, for a seated group of (often predominantly white) spectators. Bethel, of course, was far from the only choreographer whose work enacted such a transference; plenty of others were bringing Africanist forms into concert dance. But, unlike his predecessors like Dunham, or his contemporaries like Fred Benjamin,⁸⁹⁹ Bethel transplanted jazz forms onto the stage without fusing them with Europeanist concert dance idioms.⁹⁰⁰

In his teaching, too, Bethel resisted capitulation to the aesthetics that dominated concert dance, emphasizing that he “did not relish the balletic line.”⁹⁰¹ Rather, authentic jazz dance was about rhythm first. He taught with a tambourine in hand and “vocalized rhythmic scats” along

⁸⁹⁷ Sherrod, 133.

⁸⁹⁸ Bethel, 43.

⁸⁹⁹ These terms mark not their dates of birth but rather the active period of their choreographic careers in relation to Bethel’s.

⁹⁰⁰ Hubbard, 77.

⁹⁰¹ Sherrod, 115.

with the music of an accompanist. As Karen Hubbard recounts from attending his classes, Andre Strobert “played congas and piano simultaneously.”⁹⁰² Also fundamental to Bethel’s approach was a focus on the lower half of the body. “One’s virtuosity is revealed through one’s knees and feet,”⁹⁰³ he noted, and such precision of the feet required a bent-knee stance as a baseline. Dancers trained in ballet found this to be foreign and challenging, and yet they sought out Bethel’s class for how it engendered in them a sense of liberation: “That’s why so many wonderful ballet dancers—even from the [American] Ballet Theater—take classes with me. They just want to get away from it all. They come to me every time they get a break on their vacations, to get that feeling and freedom of movement.”⁹⁰⁴

When I asked interviewee Dr. Carl Paris if he experienced a sense of freedom at Clark Center, he pinpointed Bethel’s class. “Just his manner freed you up,” Paris remarked, going on to describe the warmth and energy with which Bethel taught. As he continued, he slipped seamlessly into Bethel’s voice and skat: “This is what I do, you can do—*da ba de ba da ba da*—this is it, go for it.”⁹⁰⁵ While Paris’ earliest training was in West African forms with the iconic teacher and drummer Babatunde Olatunji, he subsequently trained with Eleo Pomare and Martha Graham, joining both of their companies. He had made his way to Clark Center upon the recommendation that he engage in more jazz technique. What he found was deeper than a technical supplement. It was a liberatory experience of dance training: “The way [Bethel] counted things out, the way he had you move across the floor—which is what I remember the most—was also very freeing.”⁹⁰⁶

⁹⁰² Hubbard, 79.

⁹⁰³ Bethel, 43.

⁹⁰⁴ “Pepsi Bethel—Master of Jazz Dance.”

⁹⁰⁵ Carl Paris, in discussion with the author, January 2024.

⁹⁰⁶ Paris, discussion, January 2024.

While Paris recalled taking class with Bethel at Clark Center a couple of times, he primarily did so at Ailey's East 59th Street studio. It was there that Paris also engaged in jazz dance classes with Nat Horne, training that proved especially foundational for him. Paris' other Clark Center experiences entailed the Horton-based classes of Thelma Hill and James Truitte and the jazz classes of Fred Benjamin. Horton Technique challenged Paris' formation as a Graham dancer, developing new patterning, musculature, and sensibilities. Meanwhile, Benjamin's approach to jazz, which was infamously demanding, required a balletic facility that included leaps and turns. Not much of a "turner" prior to this, Paris shared that it was the emphasis on turning that especially drew him to Benjamin's class, where he could practice and improve upon this skill.⁹⁰⁷

Bethel's class, then, was part of a larger regimen of jazz and Horton training engaged by Paris in the 1970s, a pursuit which kept him moving between Clark Center and Ailey's studio. The Ailey context is meaningful, for as Paris' dancing body was imbued with new knowledge in these years, he caught the choreographer's eye. Ailey asked Paris to join his company. Clark Center had been a primary part of this equation which helped to forge an Ailey dancer. Paris' trajectory, then, which connected these two spaces, also reanimated Ailey as their common denominator. Paris shared that while on one of his tours with the Ailey company, his role in the iconic "Sinner Man" section of *Revelations* was switched. He would be performing the work's third variation, full of devilishly difficult turns. Paris has many fond performance memories today, but most prominent amongst them is something that occurred after the show that particular night when, aboard the tour bus, Ailey came over to congratulate him on a job well done.

⁹⁰⁷ Paris, discussion, January 2024.

In our conversation, Paris contextualized the sense of freedom he experienced in Bethel's jazz class within the larger black liberation struggles of the time. While he named a few political and cultural movements in particular—i.e., the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement—Paris opted ultimately to gather these under the “umbrella term” of the “black consciousness movement.”⁹⁰⁸ While not explicitly stated, I understood his umbrella term to reflect an investment in the coalitional possibility across movements that was generated by their shared goal of a freer world for all black peoples. Different visions of what liberation looked like or different means by which to get there were less important than the cumulative force of their shared drive.

Paris conjured the look and feel of the time, explaining that people grew out their afros, wore dashikis, and shared soul food. “We were getting in touch with our bodies in a different way,” as he put it.⁹⁰⁹ Yet while each of these expressions of the black consciousness movement was bodily in some sense, there was something particularly powerful about dancing as an embodied engagement with and of black culture. Dancing enabled a “sense of discovery” in blackness that was simultaneously personal and collective.⁹¹⁰ That is, Paris experienced his own dancing body (and its multitude of associations and sensations, including freedom) while also dancing in relation to others, including friends, colleagues, teachers, and choreographers. Mentioning Ailey and Pomare specifically, Paris described how the black consciousness movement was in the zeitgeist such that everyone around him was connecting to it. In this way, dancing mirrored the greater dynamic of the black consciousness movement, entailing an individual engagement with a collective endeavor.

⁹⁰⁸ Paris, discussion, January 2024.

⁹⁰⁹ Paris, discussion, January 2024.

⁹¹⁰ Paris, discussion, January 2024.

In the course of our interview, Paris used the word “home” to describe both Ailey’s company and Clark Center. Bethel had been key in this constellation. Bethel’s infectious love for authentic jazz enlivened both Ailey’s studio and Clark Center, and at the same time, the Center supported his sustained career. It was his continuous life of dancing that *kept* him dancing into his older age: “The jazz I can never lose, because I’ve lived it.”⁹¹¹ It was perhaps this embodied sense of legacy that attuned him to the lifespan of Clark Center beyond Roberts’ tenure, ardent champion though she was. The introductory chapter of Bethel’s autobiography ends with the following acknowledgement: “Finally, the author wishes to express his thanks to all of the directors, past and present, of The Clark Center for the Performing Arts for the cooperation and mutual respect always in evidence during our working relations.”⁹¹² Clearly, Bethel felt seen and supported by the institution at large. His statement brought into relief Clark Center’s uniqueness as both a school *and* a presenting organization. Bethel had started teaching at Ailey’s studio in 1968,⁹¹³ whereas his Clark Center teaching had commenced by 1965. While both supported and extended his career by giving him a teaching platform, only the Center additionally platformed his choreographic work. In so doing, authentic jazz dance became something that could be shared with many more people, not just class-takers but the theater-going public who encountered his American Authentic Jazz Dance Company.

And there was still one more thing the Center had brought to Bethel’s life and work: *camaraderie*. Bethel’s opening dedication is actually a duet, honoring “two great ladies.” Before Roberts, he recognized his fellow Clark Center teacher: “the late Thelma Hill, friend, confidant,

⁹¹¹ “Pepsi Bethel—Master of Jazz Dance.”

⁹¹² Bethel, 5.

⁹¹³ Bethel, 24.

and mentor...someone on whose moral support I could always depend during many difficult periods in my life. She was a great friend.”⁹¹⁴

Black Self-Making and World-Making

The friendship between Hill and Bethel is indicative of the multiple forms of supportive relationality that animated and were engendered by Clark Center. That is, in addition to administrators’ support of teachers/choreographers and teachers’ support of students, amicable relations between teachers provided sustenance and fellowship, helping them to withstand the challenges of making a life in dance, particularly while black. Indeed, blackness emerges as salient in the preceding accounts of Moore and Bethel and their impacts on students. Chapter 1 made reference to comments by Shawneequa Baker regarding her training with Thelma Hill and Syvilla Fort and how these experiences were much more than the transference of technical skills and knowledge. Just as Baker gleaned a sense of freedom, self, and fortitude from these teachers, so too were students of Moore and Bethel imbued with cultural and spiritual development in and through their dance and performance experiences with these figures.

In distinct yet related ways, each choreographer-teacher deepened students’ understanding of themselves as black, both as diasporically African subjects and historically American subjects. From Moore’s teaching of Africanist dances and drumming, black students were imbued with a greater sense of themselves as part of a global black diaspora tied to Africa. From Bethel’s teaching of early social dances and performance forms generated by and/or referential of black people in America, African American students were connected to the practices wrought by their forebears. Dance, in these cases, acted as a portal to history, traversing

⁹¹⁴ Bethel, 3.

space and time, and ultimately engendering subject formation as diasporically and historically black. Put another way, dance became a vehicle of black self-making and black world-making, as blackness became a meaningful way to *be* (a self) and to *be together* (a world).

Black self-making and world-making engendered via dance are not temporally linear processes. It is not that students accumulated experiences progressively at Clark Center so as to become black or become “more” black. Nor is it that a teleological conception of black history was deposited in them. Rather, dancing with Bethel, Moore, and other black choreographer-teachers engaged students in new corporeal modes that offered expanded conceptions of blackness. Such conceptions were prismatic, born of multiple temporalities and geographies, engendering a *mobile* sense of being black. This formulation is akin to what black performance scholar Soyica Diggs Colbert calls “black movements”—“embodied actions that participate in political movements by creating links across time and space, thus disrupting the accumulative force of blackness when it unfolds in linear time.”⁹¹⁵ A linear conception of time is insufficient for understanding how black people have forged themselves in and against Western conceptions of progress and uplift. Black performance scholar Julius Fleming further reveals regimes of time wielded against African Americans. In what he calls “black patience,” he identifies the ways black people in America have been told to wait patiently for change, a tactic designed to quell freedom struggles.⁹¹⁶ Such weaponizations of time have imbued time with a political imperative for black life: it is a resource, something to generatively manipulate.⁹¹⁷

⁹¹⁵ Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 19.

⁹¹⁶ Julius B. Fleming, Jr., *Black Patience: Performance, Civil Rights, and the Unfinished Project of Emancipation* (New York: New York University Press, 2022).

⁹¹⁷ Colbert, 7.

Dancing at Clark Center engendered such use of time for black students. Through what Colbert calls “webs of affiliation,” students “connected performance in the present to those enacted in the past but not through a direct line.”⁹¹⁸ As the accounts above evidence, students experienced a sense of (black) history and freedom, feelings in the present that were informed and animated by a multitude of (historical) practices and dynamics. Colbert further contends that such “temporal multiplicity...gives artists and activities in the post-civil rights era greater flexibility in shaping their relationship to blackness...”⁹¹⁹ Thus, black movements do not inaugurate a practitioner into a fixed or preformed black identity. Rather, such movements are mobilizing. History is deployed as a useful and generative source of making oneself and relating to others. I hasten to add that the sense of freedom, self, and collectivity born of black movements is not a sense that comes from being untethered or unmoored; it is not about being freed *from* history or culture. Rather, by becoming *embedded through practice in history and culture*, latitude is generated about how to move through the relations and identifications that structure these practices.

What I have called a “mobile” sense of being black is akin to what dance scholar Nadine George-Graves has called “diasporic spidering.” George-Graves looks to the enduring figure of Anansi, a mythical arachnid who spans the diaspora with changing regional specificity, to formulate this theory of contemporary black self-making rooted in the creativity and endurance of black peoples across histories and geographies. She defines diasporic spidering as “the multidirectional process by which people of African descent define their lives,” which entails “the lifelong ontological gathering of information by going out into the world and coming back

⁹¹⁸ Colbert, 7.

⁹¹⁹ Colbert, 7.

to the self.”⁹²⁰ Key to George-Graves formulation is a linking of movement and ontology.

Conventional notions of these concepts would conceive of them as contradictory—one indicating flux and the other stasis. But the tension between these two terms, indeed their co-constitution and inter-animation, is precisely the kind of contested space in which blackness exists and through which black people have forged life.

“Personally constructed identities around ontologically slippery notions of blackness fill the void of census records,”⁹²¹ George-Graves contends, speaking to the conditions of black self-making delimited by the absencing of black people in historical discourse. How does one make oneself when one’s history is obscured? The process is necessarily *creative*. If Saidiya Hartman’s “critical fabulation” has offered us a creative means of addressing the historical gaps in the census records, we might say George-Graves articulates how black people critically *fabricate* themselves in the present. Indeed, diasporic spidering is a contemporary phenomenon, what George-Graves calls “the project of the twenty-first century.”⁹²² Thus, I am risking anachronism by invoking it here in the context of dancing at Clark Center two or more decades before the new millennium.

Mitigating this risk is my commitment to locating that which has given form to shifting identificatory possibilities with blackness. On the note of such shifting, Colbert “distinguish[es] between *inheritance* as a practice that lays claim to the subject and *affiliation*, which the subject actively creates.”⁹²³ Her book examines artists in the post-Civil Rights period, “after the end of de jure segregation and the emergence of poststructuralism and multiculturalism,”⁹²⁴ changes

⁹²⁰ Nadine George-Graves, “Diasporic Spidering: Constructing Contemporary Black Identities,” in *Black Performance Theory*, eds. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 33.

⁹²¹ George-Graves, “Diasporic Spidering,” 39.

⁹²² George-Graves, “Diasporic Spidering,” 43.

⁹²³ Colbert, 14, emphasis in original.

⁹²⁴ Colbert, 9.

which were laying a course towards new social possibilities for black people. She is careful not to dismiss that meaningful differences exist amongst the various projects for black freedom. Yet ultimately, she contends that “conceptualizing black freedom as unfolding through repeated embodied movements...puts pressure on periodization.”⁹²⁵ Disaggregating black freedom projects within historical discourse has tended to privilege what separates them over what they share. Instead Colbert conceives of black freedom projects generally and inclusively, mobilizing an allegiance toward their shared goal of laboring towards black life.

Colbert’s investment in cultural production—“both the archive and repertoire”—has to do with its capacities as evidence of black ontology,⁹²⁶ of being (while) black. When historical claims on one’s subjectivity become looser, what forms of being black become possible? What processes produce and support this loosening? How is black history a generative resource for making oneself and making new worlds? Such making of a black self in relation to what we might call black history is the process Colbert calls affiliation. It is a creative process, whereby black people actively generate new ways of being (and being together) via black movements. I extend Colbert’s term here by applying it to dance, a maneuver which hardly needs framing as an extension, given the primacy of movement to dance. Black (dance) movements support and are themselves acts of affiliation. They are glances backward (in many directions) towards steps forward (in many directions). A multi-dimensional sankofa.⁹²⁷

Evincing similar commitments and methodological strategies, dance scholars Tara Aisha Willis and Thomas DeFrantz declared in their 2016 special issue of *The Black Scholar*: “We

⁹²⁵ Colbert, 9.

⁹²⁶ Colbert, 13.

⁹²⁷ An Africanist principle that refers to glancing backwards towards the making of a future.

claim Black Moves as we claim Black Lives.”⁹²⁸ They inaugurate the term “black moves” as a call to recognize the co-constitutive salience of blackness and dance across history and the African diaspora. Defining black moves as “dance that resists category and restores faith,” they *mobilize* discursive space, breaking up disciplinary boundaries to expand the scope of black studies and dance studies out towards each other. They avow these two discourses as having something distinctive and urgent to offer each other. While the Black Dance Studies for which they advocate maintains its grounding in the African diaspora, they underscore that what is shared is “the everyday ubiquity of many forms of physical expression among Black people and in circumstances rendered Black by social circumstance and experience.”⁹²⁹ The latter part of this statement is important, as it flags the social contingency of blackness—that blackness came into being in its encounter with non-blackness and that blackness can morph depending on context. As dance scholar Anita Gonzalez has put it, “Concepts about blackness are developed within the subject ‘blacks’ and also constructed by others in response to the presence of Africans and African descendants.”⁹³⁰ Ultimately, then, rather than defining black moves by geographical scope, historical origin, aesthetic designation, or a unified philosophy, Willis and DeFrantz instate a capacious blackness—one invested in contemporaneous social affinity. They offer a Black Dance Studies that serves as both a charge and an outpost for those committed to a politics that substantiates “how Black dance is foundational—and nurturing—to Black corporealities and Black life.”⁹³¹

⁹²⁸ Thomas F. DeFrantz and Tara Aisha Willis, “Black Moves: New Research in Black Dance Studies.” *The Black Scholar* 46, no. 1 (2016): 1.

⁹²⁹ DeFrantz and Willis, 1.

⁹³⁰ Anita Gonzalez, “Navigations: Diasporic Transports and Landings,” in *Black Performance Theory*, eds. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, 19-32 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 20.

⁹³¹ DeFrantz and Willis, 1.

As the accounts of interviewees in this chapter illustrated, black dance nurtured their lives. Their black move(ment)s were central to their making of selves and worlds. Black people have long found ways to engage in self-making and world-making under constraint and duress. Saidiya Hartman's paradigm-shifting work *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* unfurls the fraught complexities of this process during slavery and its afterlives, taking seriously the near-total domination of slavery while tentatively locating the fissures in which and forms through which black people reelaborated the terms of their conditional subjectivity. In so doing, Hartman has helped us to think about black social possibility with neither doom nor facile celebration. George-Graves charts a similar way through: of her concept diasporic spidering, she remarks, "It resists the fatalism of Afro-pessimism, the historical locking of the traditional concept of African diaspora, and challenges the uncritical glorifications of Afrocentrism."⁹³² Black performance scholar Sarah Jane Cervenak engages similarly to think about the possibilities of gathering in an anti-black world: "Black gatherings happen; some livingness, with neither sanction nor extraction, manages to get through."⁹³³

Indeed, the *place* of such gathering matters. Some places support more livingness than others. Clark Center was a place for robust black gatherings and a whole lot of sweaty, invigorating, and affirming livingness. Prior portions of this document have shed light on some of the conditions that made this so, such as its predominance of people of color (Chapter 1), its directors who embraced and actualized its mission to resource black artists (Chapters 2), its context within a midtown network of dance spaces that extended legacies of resourcing black artists (Chapters 3 and 4), and its black teachers (Chapter 1) and choreographer-teachers

⁹³² George-Graves, "Diasporic Spidering," 37.

⁹³³ Sarah Jane Cervenak, *Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 10.

(Chapter 5) who nurtured black students. This final portion has pointed towards the salience of *dance as a resource of and for black subjectivity*, for coming into a sense of diasporic and historical blackness. Such black move(ment)s made of Clark Center a multivalent place. To do a Haitian dance in Moore's class at the Center bodied forth the Caribbean island and its history in and through one's movement. To do a lindy-hop step in Bethel's class bodied forth places like the Savoy Ballroom in and through one's movement. Thus, dancing at Clark Center turned one place into many places. In so doing, Clark Center offered black people a place *in* dance, a place *to* dance, all while *being black*.

Coda: Owning (Y)our Own Center

If Chapter 1 illustrated how Clark Center in the 1960s offered a black-centric model of racial integration, this chapter has marked *how* dancing at Clark Center was generative for black people. Clark Center as a site for this process was not incidental but rather central. The distinct social, political, geographical, and cultural conditions elaborated throughout this project coalesced to produce this particular site and its generative capacities for black self-making and world-making. Though unique, Clark Center was not without precedent or analogue, as Chapter 4 made clear. Rather, it was a part of a midtown network that both shaped and was shaped by it. Moreover, Clark Center was not an end-all, be-all of black world-making. It remained limited by its institutional ties and its articulation with the larger concert dance infrastructure, itself structured by the nation's hegemony.

In a 1970 article from *The Feet*, editor Carole Johnson spoke to such limits. The article, which is a review of Charles Moore's company performing at Clark Center, is worth quoting at length for the ways it also conveys a sense of the choreographer's work:

You're sitting there in the stillness. Breathless. Cause you know something's bout to happen. Something Black. Exciting. Black bodies, all healthy shades of love that you just know is bound to excite you...with an assortment of drums wrapped in pink, purple, yellow/cymbals dancing to sound/*The drums and dances of Africa and the Caribbean* entered the back of auditorium, stood before the people and eased into a Trinidadian Road-Runner tune then onto the stage for some more drums.

Brother Daniel Barrajanos (the drummer) and Brother Charles Moore (who lo mo takes care some dance bidness) were in concert with each other at the Clark Center for Performing Arts where a whole lot more of us ought to go if we want to open spaces for our 'Soul' to grow.

The 'Center' is located in the YWCA at 51st Street and 8th Avenue. The Center is housing dance masters such as Jimmy Truitte, Thelma Hill, Pepsi Bethel, Charles Moore and others. Groups such as *Movements Black* relate to the 'Center' because of its rehearsal space and though it may appear that the dance staff works for the center, actually child, the 'Center' works for them. Of course, owning your own center for performing arts is the next step beyond mastery. If you can dig where I'm coming from?

Ali Abdoul ended this program by speaking on the initiation and circumcision practice throughout Africa and then joined Charles Moore in a 'Dance of Senegal.' If ever you can, you must check out Charles Moore's dance called 'Prayer, Protest and Peace'...put you in mind of the Abbie Lincoln/Max Roach 'We Insist' album...when our dance *and* our music gets together...check it out...whew! (and a 'Right On' for the 'Student' performers. The dancers were exquisite...the drummer/students aren't free enough yet...but their teacher...got it all together.)⁹³⁴

Johnson's review fleshed out the social and political context of Charles Moore's work in 1970. In his analysis, Charles Moore's showcasing of African and Caribbean dancing and drumming was an assertion of Black Power, of black pride. Johnson's very use of the word "Black" activated these politics, as not only was this identifier just starting to be resistively reclaimed at this time, but he also capitalized it, redoubling its declarative intentionality. These politics are further evidenced in the writer's underscoring of the beauty of black skin and its many hues—"all healthy shades of love." Moreover, Johnson, in likening Charles Moore's work to Lincoln

⁹³⁴ Carole Johnson, "Review: The Charles Moore Concert, Saturday, October 24, 1970," *The Feet* 1, no. 5 (December 1970): 7, emphasis and style in original.

and Roach's "We Insist," invoked a well-known cultural expression of the black consciousness movement, one particularly revered for its incisiveness and ferocity.⁹³⁵

Johnson paid particularly close attention to the site of Clark Center, celebrating it as a place where black people were producing life-giving culture—"Soul." In declaring it a place "where a whole lot more of us ought to go," he used the review to implore his black readership to attend the Center. By this point in 1970, Roberts had taken over as director from Grant, making Clark Center a white-led organization operating under the aegis of the YWCA. Thus, while the Center intended to serve African Americans and rectify the dearth of opportunities wrought by racial discrimination, it was not an organization owned or operated by black people. Given this fact, Johnson touted the degree to which the Center fostered the work of black "dance masters." In marking, however, a black-owned studio as "the next step beyond mastery," he was making a clear pitch for this need—places where black people were in command not only of their cultural production but also the means of this production.

In opening her own studio in Harlem, we can retrospectively understand Dianne McIntyre's actions as a response to this call. It was, of course, formative experiences at Clark Center and support from Roberts that had provided McIntyre the resources to start her company and school of the same name, Sounds in Motion, in the early 1970s (Chapter 4). Thus, Clark Center played a central role not only in the enfranchisement of black dance artists to integrate into the larger concert dance field; it also enabled black artists to establish their own institutions, ones in which they could be self-determining, authoring themselves and their choreographic work on their own—black—terms.

⁹³⁵ In one movement of the musical work, for example, Lincoln engages in sustained screams.

As a stepping stone to her company and studio, Clark Center was a place that begot McIntyre her own place. For this reason, McIntyre may be especially attuned to the importance of physical places for gathering via dance, evidenced in recent comments. In the midst of renewed global uprisings in support of black lives precipitated by the police murder of George Floyd, McIntyre was part of a 2020 panel discussion on the topic of dance and black liberation. Held online and live-streamed (due to the Covid-19 pandemic), a member of the audience commented, “I’m finding that we need safe and cultured brick-and-mortar space in our communities again.”⁹³⁶ Strikingly, in affirmative response, McIntyre invoked not her own Sounds in Motion studio but Clark Center instead. Encouraging people to “look [it] up,” she said, “It’s an historical institution that doesn’t exist anymore. However...the legacy of it continues.”⁹³⁷

⁹³⁶ Dianne McIntyre, Marles Yearby, grace shinae jun, Shamell Bell, and MiRi Park, “Street Dance Activism Global Dance Meditation for Black Liberation: Radical Embodied Dialogue, August 19, 2020, Recorded over Zoom,” *Dance Research Journal* 53, no. 2 (August 2021): 150.

⁹³⁷ McIntyre, et al., 150.

Conclusion: Clark Center's Legacies

“It is almost impossible to imagine an Edele, a Louise or a Clark Center putting down roots today in New York's less adventurous dance scene.”⁹³⁸ These are the words of Jennifer Dunning, the New York-based dance critic and writer who has been quoted repeatedly in the preceding chapters. In addition to writing a biography on Alvin Ailey, her *New York Times* dance reviews of the 1970s and 1980s have left an enduring trail of breadcrumbs about Clark Center's dance programming. Her insights on both Ailey and the Center have been invaluable to this project. This line about the impossibility of a Clark Center today was written in 2016, part of a short essay chronicling the Center's achievements and legacy. In the landscape of Clark Center's under-recognition, Dunning's recounting of its important history in this essay becomes an *assertion* of its importance. For me, a historian born too young to have experienced Clark Center firsthand, this essay calls out, bellowing a dance history of which I was fully unaware before pursuing this project. But for Dunning, the essay carries no such strain; it is actually quite tender. She reminisces about eating pancakes at an IHOP with Louise Roberts, about Edele Holtz's refined living room, about both of these women as firebrands for dance and for underrepresented communities. She highlights the motley array of dance artists Roberts supported, expressing gratitude for the audacious slate of Clark Center dance programming this support yielded, in turn nourishing the dance field and stimulating dance critics like herself.

Dunning's sense that “a Clark Center” does not—*could not*—exist today is not hers alone. On my standardized list of interview questions for this project (albeit one from which I would often veer) was: “Are there spaces like Clark Center today?” The general consensus was

⁹³⁸ Dunning, “Dance: Clark Center.”

no. Some interviewees pointed to the lessened need for an explicitly multi-racial/multi-ethnic space like Clark Center today. Others, however, expressed their continued necessity and lamented the general dearth today. Several spoke of the shrinking space in the dance field for choreographers to try things out and take risks. They underscored the need for space to fail as one finds one's choreographic voice and continues to develop as an artist. This, of course, was the kind of space that Clark Center had provided, giving dozens of artists early support that struck the unique balance of being both serious and low stakes. The New Choreographers program, in particular, gave dozens of dance artists the resources to make a dance and present it in public performance. Interviewees spoke to how the reduced opportunities for dance artists today have in turn created increased pressure for immediate success.

Nevertheless, dance artists are still moving to New York City, making dances, forging connections, supporting each other, teaching, doing all manner of non-dance-related work to piece it all together, and pooling resources to open collective spaces for rehearsal and performance. Some are also leaving the city to make lives in dance elsewhere. Since Clark Center's closure, other dance organizations have also closed, some have persisted, some have merged, and new ones have been instituted. A number of programs of varying lengths offering choreographic support exist, a concept for which Clark Center's New Choreographers series was an early model. These are programs like the two-year artist residencies offered by Movement Research and Brooklyn Arts Exchange, and Fresh Tracks, which provides one-year of support to emerging artists, offered by New York Live Arts. Notably, however, none of these organizations—as of this writing—function like Clark Center did in its long-term support of *multiple* choreographers and companies.⁹³⁹ Moreover, none are both a school and a theater in

⁹³⁹ Some organizations bear similarities to Clark Center. Gibney Dance, for example, offers a healthy array of weekly dance classes, rents rehearsal space, administers residency programs, and hosts its resident Gibney Dance

equal measure, offering a robust slate of weekly classes in addition to presenting dance, as Clark Center did in its heyday of the late 1960s-70s. Indeed, Roberts' vision, which sought to nourish these two activities under the same roof, has been shown to be a lofty ideal in the economic realities of New York City.

On the register of brick-and-mortar, this is the context of Dunning's pessimism. She does, however, locate two ways in which Clark Center glimmers on, one material and one immaterial. Dunning ends her piece by invoking the words of another dance critic: "Anna Kisselgoff once described Clark Center as 'a state of mind' as much as a physical space. That it was. And how lucky we all were."⁹⁴⁰ Kisselgoff's words here remind me of so many interviewees' sentiments. In talking to the former students, teachers, and administrators of the Center, much of what I heard had to do with the *feeling* of being at Clark Center. To put a "state of mind" next to a feeling might be an uneasy comparison, but both get at something ineffable, something energetic. Interviewees evocatively invited me into the experience of being in Clark Center's walls: Shirin Stave-Matias talked about "soul" and "spirit,"⁹⁴¹ Charles Epps spoke of "palpitating energy."⁹⁴² So, where have these potent vibrations gone? Can a state of mind live on beyond the place in which it was forged?

Clark Center's Legacy: People

Clark Center lives on. The abundant and creative lives of my interviewees attest to this truth. And then there are scores more people whom I have not (yet) interviewed, whose

Company. It does not, however, serve as an institutional home for other dance companies. In this way and others, it is fundamentally different from Clark Center.

⁹⁴⁰ Dunning, "Dance: Clark Center."

⁹⁴¹ Stave-Matias, discussion.

⁹⁴² Epps.

experiences at Clark Center—as students, teachers, musicians, administrators, technicians, children waiting for their parents, etc.—shaped their lives in ways that continue to unfold today. Many Clark Center alumni (a term I will henceforth use to describe the totality of those touched by Clark Center) continue to reside in the New York City area and dance to this day. Indeed, the legacy of the Center is most readily traceable through such macro continuities. But the spirit of Clark Center lives on in myriad expressions, imbuing people’s engagements in other mediums and activities with the animating principles of its legacy: black culture, civic service, community, access, gathering across and through difference.

Dr. Carl Paris (featured in Chapter 5) is today a scholar, whose teaching, research, and writing bridges multiple fields, including dance studies, black performance, Africana studies, and cultural studies.⁹⁴³ He currently teaches at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Long before this, while still in the midst of his performing career, Paris pivoted to teaching after a back injury prevented him from fulfilling the demands of company life with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Rather than letting him go, Ailey asked Paris to teach repertory to new company members. Paris was grateful for Ailey’s commitment to him—“He kept finding a place for me.”⁹⁴⁴ In the early 1980s, Paris was invited to return to Spain (where he had toured with Ailey) to teach modern and jazz dance classes. He moved to do so, living and teaching there until 1995.

Upon his return to the United States, Paris earned a Master’s Degree from New York University in Dance Education and Cultural Studies and a Ph.D. from Temple University in Dance Studies and Cultural Studies, with a focus on Black Performance Theory. His scholarly work has addressed a lacuna on the place of both blackness and black people in modern and postmodern dance history, work that has been instrumental to this dissertation project. In my

⁹⁴³ Carl Paris, in discussion with the author, March 2025.

⁹⁴⁴ Paris, discussion, March 2025.

estimation, his trajectory as a practitioner-scholar enacts the promise of dance studies, as his scholarship yokes experiential and embodied knowledge to academic frameworks. His presence in this project as both a cited scholar and an interviewee reflects this dual positionality.

I interviewed Paris for this dissertation project in January 2024. While we did not know it at the time of our conversation, just weeks later Paris and I would be giving consecutive paper presentations at the Collegium for African Diaspora Dance Conference held at Duke University.⁹⁴⁵ I gave a paper on the early findings of my Clark Center research, and Paris delivered a paper entitled “On Place and Freedom and My Black Male Dancing with Eleo Pomare and Alvin Ailey during the Civil Rights/Black Consciousness Era—with Contributions from John Parks and George Faison.” Indeed, the notion of freedom in relation to his dancing life had already been on Paris’ mind at the time of our conversation. While my profile of Paris in Chapter 5 contextualizes this theme through his comments on Pepsi Bethel’s class specifically, his presentation made clear that a sense of freedom in dance was generated across his experiences with many black mentors and peers. To share a conference panel with Paris was poignant; our co-presence enacted the continuum of Clark Center.

Ramona Candy (featured in Chapter 5) continues to generate African-diasporic cultural expression to this day, primarily in the realm of visual art. That said, the cultural knowledge she derives through dance practice directly informs and imbues her artworks, which range across media, including painting, printmaking, and collage. Calling herself “a choreographer on canvas” and a “motivational artist,” she explains, “Having communicated through movement most of my life, it’s only natural that it manifests in my works on paper and canvas.”⁹⁴⁶ The kineticism of her

⁹⁴⁵ Collegium for African Diaspora Dance Conference, Duke University, February 16-18, 2024, Theme: Body Geographies | Mapping Freedoms. Our presentations were on February 16, 2:00pm-3:20pm, in a panel shared with Noel Price-Bracey.

⁹⁴⁶ “About the Artist,” Ramona Candy, <https://ramonacandy.com/about-the-artist/>.

visual sensibility is evident in the bold and colorful patterns, strokes, and gestures of her works, which incorporate Africanist figures and forms. One recent series of “history portraits” features prominent African American figures, such as Aida Walker, Lena Horne, and Henry Box Brown. This series is especially indicative of the civic and pedagogical aims of Candy’s work “to comfort, heal, teach and inspire.”⁹⁴⁷

Audrey Madison (featured in Chapter 5) today runs a dance company called MoJazz Dance. This “modern jazz” company, which grew out of a dance class that Madison began teaching at a Brooklyn YWCA in 1995, gave its first performance in 1997. While the make-up of the company has changed throughout the years, today it is “comprised of women of a certain age, currently 50-75+ years young,” as the company website puts it. The statement continues, “Our choreographed works reflect themes that are relevant to our experiences as women of color.”⁹⁴⁸ In Madison’s mission, then, we see a continuation of principles forged by dancing with Charles Moore and—perhaps more pointedly, given the all-woman identity of her company—Ella Thompson Moore. Blackness, of color-ness, remains a salient aspect of the dancing, a shared affinity through which and about which this group gathers to dance and perform. Interviewees Rita Littrean, who used to dance in the Moores’ company with Madison, and Ruth-Terry Walden, who was an avid Clark Center student, are also in MoJazz. As Madison explained, several of the company members she “met or danced with in somebody's class at Clark Center.”⁹⁴⁹

Madison’s company enacts the Clark Center continuum in other ways too. When we spoke in November of 2023, MoJazz was just days away from performing live on the Carmen

⁹⁴⁷ “About the Artist.”

⁹⁴⁸ “About MoJazz Dance,” MoJazz Dance, <https://www.mojazzdance.com/about>.

⁹⁴⁹ Madison.

Mathis show. For this variety show aired by Manhattan Neighborhood Network (a public-access station), the company would be performing a piece choreographed by Madison. As she explained to me, “that piece has movements from [Fred] Benjamin’s class. It has movements from Pepsi Bethel’s class...” Going on to describe a semicircle structure including movements from African dances in the same piece, she concluded, “That fusion of all I’ve become is evident in what MoJazz Dance does.”⁹⁵⁰ Thus, Madison’s choreographic work is a coalescence of the multiple Clark Center teachers who shaped and informed her dancing. Through her company, the work of these Clark Center figures is continually animated in and through the dancers and conveyed to audiences in performance. As these influences are merged by Madison, they are re-mixed and innovated upon by her unique choreographic sensibility. Madison also underscored Clark Center’s ethos of inclusivity as an inheritance, pointing to the variety of dance backgrounds and experiences as well as ages of her company members. All of the aforementioned principles enacted by Madison’s choreographic work are generated by her teaching too, making her—like her mentors, Moore and Bethel—a choreographer-teacher (Chapter 5). For a time, she taught dance through New York City Public Schools, and today she continues to teach a weekly “modern jazz class for adults” at Dancewave, a studio in Brooklyn.⁹⁵¹

Multiple Clark Center alumni today work with Dances of a Variable Population (DVP). This organization, founded by Naomi Goldberg Hass in 2009, provides dance-based programming to older adults of all abilities in New York City. Its community-engaged mission is also conveyed through its multi-generational dance company, known for site-specific dance performances in public city spaces. To teach workshops and choreograph works, DVP hires local dance artists. At the time of our interview, Madison had been continually working with the

⁹⁵⁰ Madison.

⁹⁵¹ “About MoJazz Dance.”

organization in this capacity for seven years. “My older dancers in Queensbridge feel like my second company,” she shared, noting that she had worked with community members up to the age of 95.⁹⁵² Other Clark Center alumni interviewed for this project who have worked with DVP as guest artists and/or teaching artists include Sandra Rivera and Anthony Howell.

Howell was a scholarship student at Clark Center in the early 1980s. In addition to studying with many of the teachers already mentioned in this dissertation, he studied with Philip Stamps and Lavinia Williams. Howell had grown up training in Afro-Caribbean dance forms with Marie Brooks. A dancer of Caribbean heritage who trained with Dunham, Brooks’ commendable career of subsequent teaching endeavors included taking students abroad to perform and expand their cultural consciousness. As a child, Howell attended three of Brooks’ summer trips, performing in the Caribbean, West Africa, and Europe.⁹⁵³ Howell has gone on to a dance-teaching career of his own, including teaching for DVP. As Howell recounted to me, one of his DVP classes was particularly consequential. In attendance was Howell’s friend Charles Epps (another Clark Center alumnus interviewed for this project, who danced in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for several years). Afterwards, Epps encouraged Howell to pursue more teaching opportunities, and they together went looking for a space for Howell to offer his own classes. Their search landed them at the Ripley-Grier Studios location at 939 Eighth Avenue. This was not only one of the former sites of Clark Center, but it was the location at which both Howell and Epps had trained. On re-entering the building all these years later, Epps told me, “You just feel the energy coming out of the walls. You hear the ghosts of Clark Center.”⁹⁵⁴ Howell would in fact go on to host his class there—“*Dances of the African Diaspora*

⁹⁵² Madison.

⁹⁵³ Anthony Howell, in discussion with the author, October 2023.

⁹⁵⁴ Epps.

(with a Dunham barre)”⁹⁵⁵—which he continues to teach to this day. Describing his return to the space of the old Clark Center as “full circle,” I asked him how it felt: “meant to be.”⁹⁵⁶

Howell also taught at the Charles Moore Center for Ethnic Studies in Brooklyn as well as in schools and churches in the Bronx and Manhattan. In the last decade, his teaching has taken him abroad, notably to the Yolena Alonso Dance Studio in Havana, Cuba and to the Centro Coreográfico in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Howell also earned a Master’s of Social Work in 2018 and now works as a social worker. Dance continues to serve as a vehicle for working with people, offering support and social connection towards well-being and belonging. For example, Howell works for Services and Advocacy for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Elders (SAGE). At the SAGE Center in the Bronx, he teaches dance/movement classes to queer elders. This threads back to Howell’s experience of Clark Center, “a very gay space” as he put it.⁹⁵⁷ Interestingly, he spoke of the continuous presence of dance in his work as something surprising to him, as if it keeps *finding him*, rather than the other way around: “It’s like wherever I go, I’m teaching dance. Even if the title doesn’t say dance, or if the school doesn’t say dance [laughs], or the organization doesn’t say dance, I’m teaching *movement*—I’m teaching dance.” When I replied, “It’s your language,” he invoked spirit: “*Exactly*, yes, precisely. And it’s where God wants me to be. That’s the message that he’s giving me, and that’s what I’ve embraced, and I’m very grateful...how it has unfolded in my life.”⁹⁵⁸

Interviewee Dr. Jacqueline Sawyer spoke of spirituality and dance, too. Today a liturgical dancer, she “interpret[s] the word of God through movement.”⁹⁵⁹ Her early experiences at Clark

⁹⁵⁵ “About,” Tony Howell Dance, <https://www.tonyhowelldance.com/>.

⁹⁵⁶ Howell.

⁹⁵⁷ Howell.

⁹⁵⁸ Howell.

⁹⁵⁹ Sawyer.

Center inform this work, but whereas she was once training for her performing career, the intent of the dancing has shifted. She explained, “All my skills and all the genres of dance that I am trained in, depending on the music or the theme of what God is laying on my heart to do, those skills are being used, but they're not used for performance. They're used for salvation, for healing, for deliverance, and bringing glory to God, not to man.”⁹⁶⁰ Before Clark Center, Sawyer studied dance at Smith College in the early 1970s. As the only African American in her program, she sought out study with Diane Ramos, an African American choreographer and dancer who taught at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (part of the Five College Consortium, and therefore accessible to Sawyer). For her senior project, Sawyer “studied [her] roots as an African American,” choreographing a piece called *Rhythmic Trends* that traced African retentions in jazz and social dances.⁹⁶¹ Sawyer would go on to a number of formative experiences through the mid-to late 1970s, including: dancing and choreographing for the second company at Dance Theatre of Harlem; training in Pilates with Kathleen Stanford Grant and teaching at her studio in Bendel’s department store (Chapter 2); and performing as the Lady in Green in the touring company of Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*.

After returning from the trials of touring (bus life was hard on the body, she shared), Sawyer began study at Clark Center, training with multiple teachers, including Thelma Hill, Pepsi Bethel, Fred Benjamin, and Lucinda Ransom. Notably, some of her teachers were also her students at the Pilates studio; she spoke of the “symbiotic relationship” that emerged from this dual exchange with figures such as Hill.⁹⁶² In the swell of the aerobics trend (Chapter 2), Sawyer

⁹⁶⁰ Sawyer.

⁹⁶¹ Sawyer.

⁹⁶² Sawyer.

developed an exercise class that drew heavily from her Pilates knowledge. Calling it “Sawyer-obics,” she taught these classes at Lezley’s Skate and Dance School,⁹⁶³ a roller-skating school located above Clark Center at its 939 Eighth Avenue location. Sawyer also earned a Master’s in Dance Education from Columbia University and a PhD in Dance Education from New York University, and she taught dance in New York City Public Schools for twenty-six years. She emphasized that Clark Center figures had been foundational to the development of not just her dancing but her pedagogy. Citing Thelma Hill and Grant as her “main two sources of how to teach,” she underscored “their thoroughness, and the integrity of excellence that they both exhibited.”⁹⁶⁴

Sawyer said something during our interview that is still ringing in my ear. It resonates with Kisselgoff’s “state of mind” comment above. Speaking to the activities of a group of Clark Center alumni who have been meeting regularly for the last several years, Sawyer told me that they “are now pulled back together not because there’s a building, but because there was a root.”⁹⁶⁵ A root is deep; it’s historical. Roots beget other roots. They may be hidden from view, but they nourish life that continues to grow, bloom, and generate more life. Sawyer’s remark is a reminder that this historical recovery is less about Clark Center the building and more about the lives it nurtured, still unfurling—its legacies. Of course, roots need tending. While this project intends to bring light to the roots, they have been watered by one of their own. She is the instigator of the “pulling back together” Sawyer described: Jill Williams.

⁹⁶³ For more on Lezley Ziering and his school, see Bruce Weber, “Lezly Ziering, Dancer Who Rescued Roller-Skating in Central Park, Dies at 82,” *New York Times*, July 17, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/18/nyregion/lezly-ziering-who-rescued-roller-skating-dies-at-82.html>.

⁹⁶⁴ Sawyer.

⁹⁶⁵ Sawyer.

Clark Center NYC

Jill Williams (previously Albert, née Bass) was a Clark Center student and teacher. Originally from Long Island, Williams moved north as a young person to attend University of Connecticut. While she did not major in dance, in 1969 she attended the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College. There she studied with Kelvin Rotardier, a member of Ailey's company, who advised her to seek out James Truitte's Horton Technique classes at Clark Center when she returned to New York. She was subsequently offered a director position at the New Haven Dance Center, which kept her in Connecticut for a time. Yet she made good on Rotardier's advice, travelling to New York City weekly for Truitte's class. Clark Center's other resident Horton teacher, Thelma Hill, would soon become Williams' mentor. Hill took Williams to the Pilates studio at Bendel's and introduced her to Grant. Like Sawyer (and others described in Chapter 2), Williams went on to become Grant's teaching apprentice. Hill also got Williams a teaching position at Clark Center, where she would offer classes in both modern dance and body conditioning (i.e., Pilates). As Williams told me of Hill's generous mentorship in our conversation, I could not help but see Williams' kindness towards me as an extension of this fervent pedagogic stewardship.

I first connected with Williams in late 2021, when this project was but an idea. From our first phone call, she was a fount of all things Clark Center. What's more, she was a connector, pointing me towards other alumni. She was in touch with many due to Clark Center NYC, an organization she instituted to re-animate and celebrate the Center's important history. Its creation was sparked by an encounter in 2013 among Williams, Ramona Candy, and Sheila Rohan, a former company member of Dance Theatre of Harlem and Clark Center alumna. Running into each other at an event, they reveled in their shared love for Clark Center; at the same time,

however, they lamented how it was being forgotten, falling into historical obscurity. Knowing that they were far from alone in their desire to revivify the spirit of Clark Center, they began to gather people on Facebook.⁹⁶⁶ By the end of the year, despite little financial means, the emerging organization managed to pull together its first public presentation. At the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, Clark Center NYC offered a conversation with dancer Loretta Abbott. Using photographs from Schomburg’s collection, the presentation gave a historical overview of Abbott’s long and illustrious career, which had included dancing in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, a multitude of other companies, Broadway shows, and on television. She had been connected to Clark Center by many threads, including studying with Thelma Hill and James Truitte. As Williams recounted, the event was so well attended it became standing room only.⁹⁶⁷

Clark Center NYC, then, became more than a gathering for remembering—it became a platform for educating. Members of the public converged with Clark Center alumni to witness and learn about the Center’s significant history and its living legacies. As the organization became more established, it incorporated as a non-profit, helmed by Jill Williams. The current board is comprised of several Clark Center alumni: Ramona Candy (a founding board member), Sheila Rohan (Recording Secretary), Joan Chanin (Treasurer), John Claassen, Rita Littrean, Sandra Rivera, and Marie Rosenberg.⁹⁶⁸ Much programming has transpired in the decade-plus since its founding. This has included additional events like the inaugural program featuring Abbott that celebrate the lives and legacies of individual dance artists, such as “Tea with Ella:

⁹⁶⁶ Williams shared that it was Bruce Hawkins who recommended Facebook as the ideal forum for reconnecting people. Hawkins, who passed away in 2016, was a Clark Center student and later teacher and had a long and varied career as a performer and educator. For more on Hawkins, see Charmaine Warren, “News: Bruce Hawkins Has Joined the Ancestors,” December 13, 2016, <https://www.charmainewarren.com/blogspot/news-bruce-hawkins-has-joined-the-ancestors>.

⁹⁶⁷ Jill Williams, in discussion with the author, November 2021.

⁹⁶⁸ “Our Board of Directors,” Clark Center NYC, <https://www.clarkcenternyc.org/board-of-directors>.

An Intimate Conversation with Ella Thompson Moore” presented in November 2015.⁹⁶⁹ Some events have been larger in scope, such as “60 Years of Clark Center,” hosted by the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Conveying a broad history of the Center, it featured a panel discussion with multiple figures interpolated with pertinent footage sourced from the library’s archives.⁹⁷⁰ Clark Center NYC also hosted online programming at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, such as a panel discussion celebrating the life and work of the late choreographer Eleo Pomare. More recent activities have included a curated mixed-bill dance show featuring both emerging and established artists as well as new works and historical works.⁹⁷¹ Indeed, restaging historical dance works by Clark Center figures is an important part of the organization’s current planning.⁹⁷² Whether in person or virtual, Clark Center NYC’s events have typically been video-recorded and posted to the organization’s YouTube page for public viewing, further extending their utility as tools of preservation and education.⁹⁷³

These videos have been an invaluable resource for me. What’s more, my initial brush with the organization was a virtual one. When I first reached out to Williams via email in October of 2021, she invited me to the organization’s annual House Party which was taking place just a few days later. This was at the height of the pandemic, and so the event was to be held on Zoom. As Williams put it, “This may be a good place for you to meet many of our members and learn a little about us.”⁹⁷⁴ Not knowing quite what to expect, I accepted the warm invitation. When I logged into Zoom that Saturday, October 23, I saw a room full of faces a

⁹⁶⁹ Thompson Moore, “Tea with Ella.”

⁹⁷⁰ “60 Years of Clark Center,” Clark Center NYC, YouTube video, 1:35:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BUJ7LYPPT3o>.

⁹⁷¹ The Clark Center NYC Dance Showcase 2024 was held on September 7-8, 2024 at El Barrio Artspace PS 109. It featured a performance by Amy Pivar (Chapter 4) and a restaging of a dance by Nat Horne performed by Jamal Story, amongst other works.

⁹⁷² Jill Williams, in discussion with the author, March 2025.

⁹⁷³ See Clark Center NYC, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/@clarkcenternyc9031>.

⁹⁷⁴ Jill Williams, in email correspondence with the author, October 19, 2021.

generation or two older than me. Some people wrote privately in the chat to welcome me and inquire about my relationship to the Center. The event began with brief greetings and remarks from various figures I didn't yet know, followed by some photo slideshows and a game of Clark Center trivia in which participants typed their responses into the chat box.

The bulk of the event, however, was for dancing together. As a "live" DJ in the Zoom room united us in music, we boogied around our individual rooms, some in our chairs, some standing up. As we danced, we watched each other bounce in and out of our little Zoom frames. A virtual "spotlight" was toggled around the Zoom room, pinning one person's frame for a few seconds for all to see. I was a stranger in multiple ways, encountering these people for the first time, in this strange way, in this period full of isolation and grief. And yet the truth is, across the divides (generational, emotional, cultural, digital), I had a great time dancing with these Clark Center alumni. I was flush; my face hurt from smiling. I felt welcomed, seen, at home. Dancing can do that. This was the first thing my time studying Clark Center showed me.

In the months and years following that first encounter, I have met—virtually and in person—with many Clark Center alumni. Williams liaised the bulk of these meetings for me, advertising my desire to conduct oral history interviews through the organization's e-blast. On October 20, 2023, I attended the organization's first in-person Gathering since the onset of the pandemic. As I made my way to El Barrio Artspace, a cultural institution in East Harlem, where the event was held, I was imagining what it would be like to dance in person with these people I had only encountered virtually thus far. When I arrived, I was warmly greeted by Williams, but I was surprised to look around and see chairs in the center of the room. Where would we be dancing? I can't remember our exact exchange, but Williams quickly clarified this was the Gathering, not the House Party. I took a seat in one of the two-dozen or so folding chairs set in

a circle. Over the next two hours, while my dancing self was left hanging in the balance, my researching self was in heaven.

One by one around the circle, the Clark Center alumni in attendance introduced themselves to the group. They then took turns sharing memories of the Center. These ranged widely, from memories of the profound dedication of the Center's teachers to especially funny moments in their classes, from retrospective gratitude for Roberts to present declarations on the power of dance, from stories of grief to stories of triumph. Memories were shared as they arose, flowing forth from one person and then another across the circle. Not surprisingly, one person's memories lit up others', like a rhizome. Yet this had less the feeling of a raucous family reunion. While people laughed and verbally affirmed each other's memories, they did not interject or speak simultaneously. The process of sharing was carefully managed by Ramona Candy, who kept time, asking attendees to limit each story to two minutes. This structure ensured that many people would get to tell many stories and that each story was fully spotlighted, able to be received by the group.

This Gathering showed me how legacy is a *practice*. It is a practice of doing the work of remembering together. It must be cultivated, collectively held, and it requires leaders and caretakers. It requires disciplined structure and intention. For all the group's warmth and amiability with each other, the parameters structuring this Gathering were not oriented towards reveling in good feeling—that's what the House Parties are for. They were oriented towards keeping the spirit of Clark Center alive through storytelling. When engaged regularly and in community, this ritualistic re-telling is a practice that re-animates and confirms the contiguity of Clark Center—a feeling, a state of mind, a lifeline, a home. I won't recount the details of the stories here; some of the insights gleaned from that night have been woven throughout the

preceding chapters. I will, however, share one particularly potent memory that was shared, a collective one.

Fred Benjamin

With a mix of awe and fear, alumni at the Gathering mentioned Fred Benjamin and his jazz dance classes. Several spoke about how they would watch Benjamin's class from the hallway, too daunted to enter. Benjamin had a reputation for being demanding and forthright. His jazz dance vocabulary was challenging. It drew from ballet's precision of line, and Benjamin was unafraid to chastise students if they looked like they hadn't been keeping up with their ballet. While some alumni shared that after several months of watching, they mustered up the courage to join the class, at least one said she never crossed the threshold. Another got a big laugh from the group when she described her rookie faux pas. One day in class, she asked Benjamin to repeat a sequence. She could feel the room gasp, she said, as Benjamin looked incredulously towards another student: "What did she just say?" Before there was any response, Benjamin moved on, ignoring the request. She was learning the hard way what the veterans already knew: you never ask Benjamin to repeat himself.

By all accounts, the bigness of his personality was matched by the rigor and integrity of his work. The shared sentiment through these comments was reverence. Preceding chapters have made passing reference to Benjamin, such as how Roberts championed Benjamin and his dance company. In Elma Lewis, he had an even earlier advocate. Lewis' School of Fine Arts in Roxbury, Massachusetts (a Boston neighborhood), which she had opened in 1950, was a bastion of cultural education for African American youth.⁹⁷⁵ Benjamin began his dance training there

⁹⁷⁵ Elma Lewis' monumental work and lifetime of service as an educator was recognized with many honors, including the MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant," of which she was an inaugural recipient.

from an early age,⁹⁷⁶ and Lewis remained a crucial supporter as he began his career in New York City. Like Moore and Bethel, at Clark Center, Benjamin found an institutional home as both a teacher *and* choreographer. At a 1989 concert given by the Fred Benjamin Dance Company celebrating its twentieth anniversary, Roberts gave remarks. She was followed by Edward K. Taylor, the former president of the Harlem Cultural Council (HCC) who had been instrumental in the founding of Dancemobile (Chapter 2) where Benjamin's company had appeared regularly. He began, "Tonight you're watching a company that I love—not just because they're a black dance company and the HCC supports black people." Rather, Taylor clarified, he "fell actively in love" with Benjamin's company. He went on to call Benjamin "one of the major masters of the second black [dance] renaissance," a period he defined as having begun twenty-five years prior.⁹⁷⁷ As his statements performatively enacted their own historicization of the unfolding moment, he underscored the need for more historical work to be done on this period, as much of it was not documented on video, and "many of the people with memories in their head are dying off from us."⁹⁷⁸

A clear nod to HIV/AIDS as much as it was to aging, Taylor's statement carried a particular charge in this context, one celebrating a gay black choreographer's twenty years of continuous work. By 1989, many in the dance community had died, were dying, and would die within the coming decade. Benjamin's "inescapabl[y] sensual"⁹⁷⁹ movement was a site of racial and sexual otherness made fleshly. One of the excerpts from Benjamin's oeuvre performed that night was from *Ceremony*. Choreographed in 1974, it featured two men, one concealing, revealing, and manipulating the other. Virtuositic, playful, and disquieting, it was profoundly

⁹⁷⁶ Emery, 305.

⁹⁷⁷ Taylor in "The Fred Benjamin Dance Company's..."

⁹⁷⁸ Taylor in "The Fred Benjamin Dance Company's..."

⁹⁷⁹ Shange, 14.

homoerotic, and—I can imagine—poignant in a whole new way by 1989, framed by the epidemic. At the end of the concert, after the curtain call, one of the company dancers stepped forward to give Benjamin flowers. Marking the moment and echoing Taylor, he said, "When the dance history books correct their pages—and I sincerely mean that—when the dance history books correct their pages, Fred Benjamin will be there."⁹⁸⁰

When he died in 2013 at the age of 69, he had been living with the adverse impacts of a stroke for many years. He continued, however, to teach until near the end.⁹⁸¹ His important work warrants deeper study, historicization, and analysis. May this project be but an opening. The same should be said for so many other Clark Center figures in this project, named and unnamed.

Epilogue: Going Home

In January of 2023, I spent one month in the Clark Center Records at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Williams, who lives in New York City, graciously met me there a few times during my research trip. In the archives, she sat with me side by side, looking through photographs and documents together, regaling me until I was full of a mix of overwhelm and gratitude that is hard to describe. Williams was surprised to learn that I had never been to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, on the upper West Side of Manhattan. In addition to being a historic landmark, it was the site of Ailey's memorial service in 1990, which Williams had attended. She took me there for a visit one day. Trailing behind her, I marveled at its majestic, cavernous interior. Later that day when I returned to the library, I decided to see if it held a video of the memorial service. Sure enough it did.

⁹⁸⁰ Unidentified performer in "The Fred Benjamin Dance Company's..."

⁹⁸¹ Anna Kisselgoff, "Fred Benjamin, Exacting and Inventive Teacher of Jazz Dance, Dies at 69," *New York Times*, December 19, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/20/arts/dance/fred-benjamin-teacher-of-jazz-dance-dies-at-69.html>.

Ailey passed on December 1, 1989, just months after my own birth in July of that same year. This memorial service, which was titled, “Going Home: Alvin Ailey Remembered” was held a few days later. Opening shots of the service show a packed cathedral (the *New York Times* reported an audience of 4,500); a massive Christmas tree stands on one end; and on the other is a stage that has been lined with marley. The tributes include remarks by Mayor Dinkins, Judith Jamison, Maya Angelou; a musical selection by Ashford and Simpson; and excerpts of Ailey’s most iconic works are danced. While the whole service is quite moving, the somber weight of the occasion is palpable, visible. There is little applause, little rousing. But there was one performance that broke through this weight, transmuting it, inviting the audience into something fiery, joyous, rapturous. There I was, in my quiet little library cubicle, quivering and whooping in my chair, fully shook, fully taken to church.

It was Donna Wood dancing an excerpt of *Cry*. *Cry* is the iconic 3-part solo that Ailey choreographed as a birthday gift for his mother in 1971, originated by Jamison. For the service, Wood dances the 3rd section only, the most extroverted of the three, set to the song “Right On, Be Free.” In her long, flowing white skirt, Wood unfurls from a folded-over position to stand tall with her right arm outstretching overhead, her left hand in front of her left hip, both palms shining bright. She is radiating from some place deep. Her hips begin to circle vigorously in time with the funky beat. Her stance is wide and firmly rooted, allowing her upper body to ripple as each arm reaches up percussively. Her face is alive with feeling, part smile, part ferocity. As she moves through the technically-demanding series of movements—a high-extension *rond de jamb en l’air*, Horton lateral tilts, a supple spine moving sympathetically with the ease of her flowing skirt—she’s on fire.

How can one be burning so bright and yet like a geyser at the same time? So completely of the forms that they—and she—burst open, for Ailey, for the goddess in her, for the mourners huddled together. And, of course, for Ms. Lula Cooper, Ailey’s mother sitting in the front row, swathed in a black veil and dark glasses. A few times the camera cuts to her, and we see her clapping, waving affirmatively, saying “Beautiful.”

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