

**1982**

Danspace Project  
presents *Parallels*  
with Blondell  
Cummings, Fred  
Holland, Rrata  
Christine Jones,  
Ishmael Houston-  
Jones, Ralph Lemon,  
Bebe Miller, Harry  
Sheppard and Gus  
Solomons jr.

**1987**

The American Center  
in Paris, Dance  
Umbrella in London  
and Salle Patino  
in Geneva present  
*Parallels in Black*  
with Blondell  
Cummings, Fred  
Holland, Ishmael  
Houston-Jones, Ralph  
Lemon, Bebe Miller  
and Jawole Willa Jo  
Zollar.

**2012**

Danspace Project  
presents PLATFORM  
2012: *Parallels* with  
Kyle Abraham, niv  
Acosta, Laylah Ali,  
Souleymane Badolo,  
Kevin Beasley,  
Hunter Carter,  
Nora Chipaumire,  
Blondell Cummings,  
Thomas F. DeFrantz,  
Marjani A. Forté,  
James Hannaham, Fred  
Holland, Ishmael  
Houston-Jones,  
Pedro Jiménez,  
Darrell Jones,  
Niall Noel Jones,  
Young Jean Lee,  
Nicholas Leichter,  
Ralph Lemon, Isabel  
Lewis, Gesel Mason,  
April Matthis, Bebe  
Miller, Dean Moss,  
Wangechi Mutu,  
Okwui Okpokwasili,  
Cynthia Oliver,  
Omagbitse Omagbemi,  
Will Rawls, Regina  
Rocke, Gus Solomons  
jr., Samantha Speis,  
Stacy Spence, David  
Thomson, Nari Ward,  
María Wethers,  
Reggie Wilson, Ann  
Liv Young and Jawole  
Willa Jo Zollar.

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Rrata Christine Jones  
Darrell Jones  
Niall Noel Jones  
Young Jean Lee  
Nicholas Leichter  
Ralph Lemon  
Isabel Lewis  
Gesel Mason



## DANSPACE PROJECT PLATFORM 2012

April Matthis  
Bebe Miller  
Dean Moss  
Wangechi Mutu  
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Stacy Spence  
David Thomson  
Nari Ward  
María Wethers  
Reggie Wilson  
Harry Sheppard  
Ann Liv Young  
Jawole Willa Jo Zollar



Pictured, left to right, top to bottom: (image one, 1982) Harry Sheppard, Rrata Christine Jones, Fred Holland, Ralph Lemon, Ishmael Houston-Jones (image two, 2012) Ishmael Houston-Jones, Ralph Lemon, Fred Holland, Rrata Christine Jones, Harry Sheppard (image three, 2012) Fred Holland, Dean Moss, Thomas F. DeFrantz, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Nora Chipaumire, Souleymane Badolo, Samantha Speis, Houston-Jones (image four, 2012) Regina Rocke, Stacy Spence, Blondell Cummings, Niall Noel Jones, Marjani Forté, David Thomson, Gus Solomons jr., Reggie Wilson (image five, 2012) Jones, Spence, Rocke (image six, 2012) Rocke, Spence, Cummings, Jones, Forté, Thomson, Solomons jr., Wilson

Not pictured: Kyle Abraham, niv Acosta, Laylah Ali, Kevin Beasley, Hunter Carter, James Hannaham, Pedro Jiménez, Darrell Jones, Young Jean Lee, Nicholas Leichter, Ralph Lemon, Isabel Lewis, Gesel Mason, April Matthis, Bebe Miller, Wangechi Mutu, Okwui Okpokwasili, Cynthia Oliver, Omagbitse Omagbemi, Will Rawls, Nari Ward, Marýa Wethers, Ann Liv Young

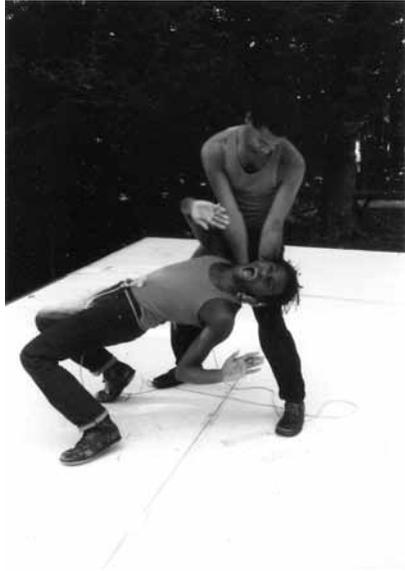
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\* Davis poem continues pages 27, 50, 60, 80, 88

<sup>1</sup> Working in new forms, stepping outside tradition is like taking a solo...





## Introduction

JUDY HUSSIE-TAYLOR

The Danspace Project PLATFORM 2012: *Parallels*, curated by Ishmael Houston-Jones, marks the 30th anniversary of the original *Parallels* curated by Ishmael at Danspace Project in 1982. It also marks the sixth chapter in Danspace Project's Choreographic Center Without Walls Platform series, made possible with lead support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

In his essay, Ishmael wonders whether there is currently a mainstream against which to position oneself. His is an increasingly complicated question artistically and politically as demonstrated by our current Occupy-everything moment. In her essay for the 2010 exhibition *Move. Choreographing You: Art and Dance Since the 1960s* Peggy Phelan indirectly addresses the issue in the following passage:

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

Ishmael's inclusion of a diverse range of African, Caribbean and African-American experimental artists, most of whom work and live in New York City today, represents an ethics driven by a need to move against a fixed center. His artistic and curatorial practices mirror one another; he embraces ambiguity and resists over-simplification and easy categorization. As a master improviser, his aesthetic is agency in action. To see him improvise is to watch his mind in motion; his unpredictability charges the space.

Ishmael has been rediscovered today by a younger generation of artists, and he is just as interested in their work as they are in his. He is committed to teaching them as well as seeing and showing their work. Last year's Performance Space 122 reprisal of his 1985 evening-length piece *THEM*, in collaboration with Chris Cochrane and Dennis Cooper, garnered a 2011 Bessie Dance & Performance Award. The work included a cast of some of the most remarkable young performers in dance today. A second thrilling discovery for me was the archival footage of Ishmael and Fred Holland's 1983 performance in which they set out to break all the rules of contact improvisation. The first rule broken was, according to Ishmael, "we were black." Both pieces are historical yet exude a remarkably contemporary urgency.

Ishmael's work—urgent, intelligent, sly and generous—also characterizes his curation of the present Platform. This intergenerational group of artists spanning five decades represents a 21st century kinesthetic force. It is

our hope that this publication will provide context and history but that the performances will provide a snapshot of this moment. These eight weeks of performance will be the latest contributions to the palimpsest that is Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church.

*Parallels* evolved and grew over two years. Some of the original artists joined the curatorial team and have organized evenings and events of their own. Some have contributed to the catalogue. But it was important to Ishmael that the Platform be forward-looking and for that reason he has included many emerging artists and designed weekends that allow for multiple voices rather than weeks devoted to the works of single choreographers.

The Platform's structure is rhizomic with simultaneous connections moving in many directions at once while being deeply connected underground. These connections extend to organizations as well as individual artists and move from Brooklyn and the East Village uptown to The Studio Museum in Harlem where we are co-presenting *The Artist's Voice*, a conversation about Ishmael's work moderated by visual artist Wangechi Mutu. *Parallels* also marks a major partnership between Danspace Project and Wesleyan University's new Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance (ICPP) with support from The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. Last year, *Parallels* was a case study in the ICPP curriculum with Ishmael, Ralph Lemon and Kyle Abraham participating as guest artists. We discussed the original *Parallels* program, Ishmael's curatorial process and the role of the artist as curator. ICPP students read a draft version of Ishmael's essay and viewed footage of Ishmael and Fred Holland performing at Danspace Project in the early 80s. In addition, ICPP student Lydia Bell is a Curatorial Fellow at Danspace Project and is the managing editor of this catalogue. Her contributions have been invaluable.

The connective web of these eight weeks of performances, residencies, installations, durational performances and film showings reflects Ishmael's choreographic mind. *Parallels* is a complex structured improvisation that allows for multiple voices, ideas and histories. As with any curatorial project there are unavoidable omissions, some due simply to the complicated, nomadic lives of busy artists. Ishmael presents no grand narrative here but his gestures are large.

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**JUDY HUSSIE-TAYLOR** is Executive Director of Danspace Project, where she has developed the Choreographic Center Without Walls (CW<sup>2</sup>) and its acclaimed PLATFORM series. She was formerly Director of the Colorado Dance Festival, Artistic Director for Performance Programs at the Boulder Museum for Contemporary Art and Deputy Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver. From 2000-2004, she taught in the Department of Art & Art History at the University of Colorado-Boulder and currently serves as an adviser and faculty for the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance at Wesleyan University.

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#### ENDNOTE

<sup>i</sup> Peggy Phelan in *Move. Choreographing You: Art and Dance Since the 1960s*, ed. Stephanie Rosenthal. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).







## CURATORIAL STATEMENT ISHMAEL HOUSTON-JONES

PLATFORM 2012: *Parallels* begins for me with a question—with a series of questions. In her groundbreaking book on the eponymous subject, *The Black Dancing Body*, Brenda Dixon Gottschild interviewed a wide range of people in the field including Bebe Miller, Bill T. Jones, Gus Solomons jr., Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Meredith Monk, Ralph Lemon, Ronald K. Brown, and Wendy Perron. Dixon Gottschild asked them to use “memory, fantasy, dreams, mythology..” to answer the question: “what images come to the mind’s eye when the term ‘black dance’ is said?”<sup>i</sup> This has been my conundrum while curating this platform. How would I have answered her question? For me does “Black Dance” even exist? And assuming it does, what defines it? Is the term “mainstream Black Dance” an oxymoron? What would it mean to push beyond its mainstream if it does exist?

In *Terminology of Difference: Making the Case for Black Dance in the 21st Century and Beyond*, Dr. Takiyah Nur Amin, Department of Dance, University of North Carolina at Charlotte references several designations:

- Katherine Dunham, in the foreword to Lynne Fauley Emery’s 1988 *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today* defines Black Dance as simply “the dance forms of people of African origin.”
- In the February 2008 issue of *Dance Magazine* Theresa Ruth Howard openly challenged and ultimately dismissed the significance of Black Dance as a useful term of any kind: “Black dance is a term that sets the doers apart as separate and unequal in artistic validity” and “the work created by African Americans is too diverse to be compartmentalized and uniformly labeled.”
- Zita Allen’s 1988 article, *What is Black Dance?* probed the various definitions of the term and exposed it as not only a haphazard label employed by critics but as a perfunctory funding mechanism utilized to secure grant dollars for Black choreographers as well.
- Choreographer Bill T. Jones provides a concise definition of Black Dance as “any dance that a person who is black happens to make.”<sup>ii</sup>

But there is an oblique lineage; there is an implied genealogy. In another section of her book Dixon Gottschild discusses the dances of William Henry Lane in the mid-1800s. Dance historian Marian Hannah Winter characterized Lane, whose stage name was Master Juba, as the “most influential single performer of nineteenth-century American dance.”<sup>iii</sup> Dixon Gottschild surmises that Lane’s contribution to the form “was forging an original, innovative merger of Africanist-based torso articulations, footwork, and rhythmic syncopation with Europeanist steps characteristic of the Irish jig... In merging these two streams Lane laid the groundwork for twentieth-century pop culture and its seamless

fusion of black and white forms that is so definitively American.”<sup>iv</sup> And he did this performing in blackface.

In the 1920s, Josephine Baker was enthralling the Parisian public with her comic and erotic vaudeville routines such as *Danse sauvage*, in which she famously wore a costume consisting of a skirt made of a string of artificial bananas. Meanwhile back in the States the Theater Owners Booking Association, or T.O.B.A., was the vaudeville circuit for African-American performers such as dancers Walter Batie and Earl “Snakehips” Tucker. American audiences could see incredible tap performances by African-American professional tappers like Buster Brown, John Bubbles, Charles “Honi” Coles, James Cross and Harold Cromer (a.k.a. Stump and Stumpy), and the world-famous Bill “Bojangles” Robinson.

In her book *Modern Dance, Negro Dance* Susan Manning makes the case that there was much cross-pollination and “borrowing” between the two milieus in the early days of the twentieth century, but she does observe that “During the years when (White choreographers) Helen Tamiris and Ted Shawn performed their *Negro Spirituals* dozens of times in New York City, Negro dancers presented their danced spirituals no more than twenty times...”<sup>v</sup> Manning cites Edna Guy and Hemsley Winfield’s “First Negro Dance Recital in America” on April 29, 1931 as being at “the intersection of the little theater movement in Harlem, leftist culture and the white dance establishment.”<sup>vi</sup> She elaborates, “Guy and Winfield intended nothing less than to break with precedent and to start anew. Following their logic, the rich tradition of jazz dancing on the American stage did not count as ‘Negro Dance’ ... not Bill Robinson, not Josephine Baker.”<sup>vii</sup> So, in the 1930s there was already a debate as to what legitimately constituted “Black Dance” in America.

In the 1930s and 40s two dancer/anthropologists, Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, were to change the field of Black Dance and Black Dance scholarship in significant ways. While doing graduate work at the University of Chicago majoring in anthropology with emphasis on dance and its relation to cultures, Dunham researched popular Black dance forms like the Cake Walk, the Lindy Hop and the Black Bottom. This is echoed in the work of African-American choreographers today whose work is informed by contemporary Black social dances. Dunham received a 1935 Guggenheim Fellowship to study dances in the Caribbean, particularly Haiti. This would inform her performing and teaching for decades. In 1945 she opened the Dunham School of Dance and Theatre. The following year the school expanded becoming the Katherine Dunham School of Arts and Research (incorporating the Dunham School of Arts and Theatre, the Department of Cultural Studies, and the Institute for Caribbean Research). Pearl Primus, Dunham’s contemporary, whose first evening of dance was performed at the 92nd Street “Y” in 1943, was given a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1948 to spend 18 months studying the dances of West Africa. Her research there influenced her subsequent choreography, including “Fanga,” a dance of welcome that became her signature. The work of these two women did much to change the perception and study of Black dance in America. Several of the American participants of PLATFORM 2012: *Parallels* have chosen to study and do research in Africa and the Caribbean.

From the official Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater website we learn that:

Ailey was born on January 5, 1931 in Rogers, Texas... At age 12, he moved with his mother to Los Angeles, where he was introduced to dance by performances of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the Katherine Dunham Dance Company. His formal dance training began with an introduction to Lester Horton's classes... Horton, the founder of the first racially integrated dance company in the United States, became a mentor for Mr. Ailey... After Horton's death in 1953, Mr. Ailey became director of the Lester Horton Dance Theater and began to choreograph his own works.<sup>viii</sup>

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was founded in 1958, and the group presented its inaugural concert on March 30, of that year.

In his *Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey*, Ailey wrote of racial discrimination when he was a young dancer: "In the 1940s and 1950s the American dance world practiced a pervasive racism. For a variety of reasons: Our feet weren't shaped right, our butts were too big, our legs wouldn't turn out correctly... The people who ran the major and minor ballet and modern dance companies coldly rejected, and broke the hearts of, many aspiring young black dancers."<sup>x</sup> Thomas F. DeFrantz writes in his book *Dancing Revelations*:

Ailey created his company with three goals in mind: he wanted to employ the scores of excellent black dancers in New York who had no performing homes; he wanted to create a racially integrated repertory company that could perform both modern dance classics and new works by himself and other young choreographers; and he wanted to give artistic voice to African American experience in terms of concert dance. His most obvious success came in this last, as early performances of *Blues Suite* and *Revelations* established Ailey's company as the foremost dance interpreter of African American experience.

But of the first dozen dances Ailey made, only these two dealt with African American cultural history. Still Ailey was consistently reviewed as a Negro dancer, and by extension, someone suited to make dances only on Negro themes.<sup>x</sup>

Another complexity of the Ailey Company was that in 1961 race relations in the United States were in a state of turmoil. In that year mob violence flared as Black students desegregated the University of Georgia and other colleges; student protesters were jailed for conducting sit-ins at southern lunch counters and other public accommodations; Black and White freedom riders were beaten while trying to integrate interstate public transportation; Blacks were prevented from voting in several states spawning the Voter Registration movement and the violent, and often deadly, resistance to it. But also, as DeFrantz writes, "The active relationship between government sponsorship and Ailey's choreographic creativity began in the fall of 1961 when the State Department invited Alvin Ailey Dance Theater to tour Southeast Asia and Australia."<sup>xi</sup> DeFrantz further writes, "The Ailey Company's unique status as the sole exponent of an emerging standard of African-American concert dance during this period complicates an assessment of racial politics and the delineation of "official" black culture. As the U.S. government sanctioned the Ailey



company, producing its tours, it took a covert hand in molding what became the signature style of Afro-American concert dance.”<sup>xii</sup>

By the early 1980s the Ailey Company had toured to Southeast Asia, Australia, Brazil, 10 countries in Africa, Mexico, and the USSR (where they received a 20 minute standing ovation in Moscow), as well as performing at the White House for Presidents Johnson and Carter. At a time when the fires for full equality for Blacks in the United States were burning the United States government was exporting this racially integrated, (but mostly Black), dance company headed by a Black man as an exemplar of American art.

This is all to say that there is an extensive and diverse and complicated legacy of dance artists of African ancestry making work here in the United States. But that lineage, like any cultural family tree, might have common roots but many branches spreading in a multitude of directions. And culture is not static. Styles, fashions, definitions, allegiances, commonalities, and inspirations shift over time.

So it was in 1982 when I was newly arrived in New York from Philadelphia where I'd performed with Group Motion Media Theater (a company led by two former members of the Mary Wigman ensemble in Berlin) and studied improvisation with Terry Fox, African at The Arthur Hall Afro American Dance Ensemble, modern (Horton) with Joan Kerr as well as contact improvisation and one semester of ballet. I asked Cynthia Hedstrom, the director of Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, if I could curate a series composed of a group of "Black" choreographers who were working outside the Mainstream of Modern Dance. All those definitions seemed so simple to me then. To me "Blacks" were the descendants of West Africans who were brought to the Americas as slaves in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. They may or may not have voluntarily intermarried with Native Americans or less voluntarily interbred with the majority population. They were all "freed" by the end of the 19th century but suffered discrimination in the form of Jim Crow laws, the inability to vote, or to use the same public facilities or acquire equal education as the majority population. They could not marry whomever they wanted, and they suffered real violence and death in the struggle to correct these inequities. They also invented Spirituals, Gospel, Blues, Jazz and Rap. That's who "Black" folk were to me then. I did not consider folks from other parts of the Diaspora: not the Caribbean and no, not Africa.

What was "beyond the mainstream" was somewhat trickier to define. The Judson Dance Theater (1962-64) is usually cited as the watershed moment in Dance History when traditional concert modern dance gave way to a period of more experimental post-modern dance with Merce Cunningham seen as the intermediary figure. However, most often in the history of the Judson era the contributions of Black experimentalists are either invisible or relegated to a footnote of the more "serious" post-modern choreographers. In her book *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, Danielle Goldman discusses two examples of this. Judith Dunn, a White dancer with the Cunningham Dance Company and the

Judson Dance Theater, formed an ongoing artistic collaboration with Black trumpeter, writer, visual artist Bill Dixon. Goldman writes, “In addition to creating striking improvised works, their collaborations explored and openly acknowledged relations between what has been deemed a black, masculine tradition of improvised music and the rather white, feminine world of post-modern dance.”<sup>xiii</sup> But these “striking” improvisations are rarely mentioned in the written histories of the Judson era. Goldman goes on to discuss the work of Dianne McIntyre. McIntyre, a contemporary of Judith Dunn, who in “many ways received the same modernist training as Dunn. But as a black woman, she fit into the tradition differently. McIntyre worked with a number of musicians throughout her career, including Cecil Taylor, Olin Dara, Butch Morris, and Abbey Lincoln. She also studied with dancers from Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom, “demonstrating ... the deep relations between the mid-century dance hall and the concert stage... in 1972 McIntyre formed an ensemble of improvising musicians and dancers called Sound in Motion.”<sup>xiv</sup> In Merrill Brockway’s 1980 Dance in America PBS special *Beyond the Mainstream* the only non-white person who appears in the hour is Kei Takei. Were there no African-Americans working beyond Brockway’s mainstream? Ditto for Michael Blackwood’s 1981 documentary, *Making Dances*, featuring the work of Trisha Brown, Meredith Monk, Lucinda Childs, David Gordon, et al. (Blondell Cummings is seen performing in a clip of Monk’s *Education of the Girlchild*.) This same cast of choreographers, with a few variations, shows up in Sally Banes’ 1982 book *Terpsichore in Sneakers*. Apparently, in a dance movement that began in the impassioned defiant days of the 1960s and proclaimed from the stage and in manifestos that dance was a democratic form for everyone, “everyone” was a rather limited concept.

What I think I meant when I approached Cynthia Hedstrom, was that as a Black dance maker, I didn’t feel the same spiritual connection with Alvin Ailey that I did with people doing contact improvisation or folks dancing at the Palladium and the Pyramid Clubs or b-boys and girls break dancing on cardboard in the streets, or those bizarre New Wave Drag performers or even many graffiti artists, or punk musicians. Of course seeing Judith Jamison performing Ailey’s *Cry* was one of the events that made me want to dance in the first place and I could come to my feet and clap along with the finale of his *Revelations*. But aesthetically what I wanted to make and perform was as far away from those classics as were *Giselle* or *Les Sylphide*. So I brought together two weekends of shared programming to declare, as I did in my program notes, “I chose the name *Parallels* for the series because while all the choreographers participating are Black and in some ways relate to the rich tradition of Afro-American dance, each has chosen a form outside of that tradition and even outside the tradition of mainstream modern dance... this new generation of black artists—who exist in the parallel worlds of Black America and of new dance—is producing work that is richly diverse.”

It’s been thirty years since Blondell Cummings, Fred Holland, Rrata Christine Jones, Ralph Lemon, Bebe Miller, the late Harry Sheppard, Gus Solomons jr. and I performed on the first *Parallels* series at Danspace Project. It’s been twenty-five since Jawole Willa Jo Zollar joined us on

the *Parallels in Black* tour to Paris, Geneva and London. Now Bebe, Gus, Jawole along with David Rousseve, Cynthia Oliver, myself and others are on the faculties of major university dance departments. In the first *Parallels* series I was making the case that to be a contemporary Black dance maker, one did not have to be a direct descendant of Ailey. We were coming from Cunningham, Nina Weiner, Monk, Contact Improvisation as well as African and American Black Dance traditions. Now many of those traditions are part of the Modern Dance canon; dance students have been exposed to those forms and to us as teachers.

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

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

For PLATFORM 2012: *Parallels*, I want to keep looking forward, while remaining cognizant of our shared pasts (plural). Of course, it goes without saying, that all platforms, no matter how comprehensive a curator tries to be, will always exclude more than it includes. Some of those choices were determined by factors as banal as time and money—never enough of either in the arts, particularly with dance. Having lived and worked in Lower Manhattan for most of the last 30 years, I admit to a New York bias in what I've seen and thus chosen. And again (lack of) funds for travel determined some choices. But I forced myself to make some challenging decisions that reflect back on what my dance interests are and what I see as work that is advancing the form onward.

I met Will Rawls through his curation of Movement Research's Spring

Festival in 2009. I know he's a young man of ideas and concepts. He has an interest in many things, among them dance and film. After his work curating video screenings for Movement Research and producing a documentary for that organization, I was eager to have him curate two film programs for this Platform. Our ideas meshed around using both archival and current video forms and that all the works screened did not have to be "dance" films per se. Will is also a intriguing dance maker and a gifted mover. His pieces work both on a deeply visceral and intellectual level. I am excited to see what he makes for *Parallels*.

For the first week of the Platform I have paired Will with current American ex-pat Isabel Lewis. I missed Isabel's fractured family drama *Lewis Forever* when it was presented at Performance Space 122, but I have seen other works of hers. Often she treads a line between dance and theater. She often disarms her audiences with casual throwaway delivery followed by fierce hotness in her dance and body. I am thinking of specific moments in her collaborations in the work of provocateur Ann Liv Young where Isabel's clarity of focus while performing the most transgressive material was staggering. And in her own work, I've seen her start calmly delivering a lecture on the history of head banging that suddenly develops into a full out demonstration that feels riveting and dangerous.

In the second weekend of the Platform I've solicited the expertise of three influential dance makers of my generation. I've asked them to curate three distinct evenings to give a variety of views of what they see as innovative works being made by Black choreographers today. Both Bebe Miller and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar were important participants with *Parallels* in the 1980s. Bebe Miller, the artistic director of Bebe Miller Company and professor at Ohio State University was on the original 1982 *Parallels* series; Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, the founder of Urban Bush Women and professor at Florida State University joined Bebe and me and others for the *Parallels in Black* European tour in 1987; Dean Moss, founder of Gametophyte Inc., in his long-time role as Curator of Dance at the Kitchen brought many ground-breaking artists to that venue. I let them shape their evenings with few restrictions. Jawole's focus is on the many ways in which improvisation is a part of the Black Dance vernacular and Bebe has chosen to look at the lineage of Black Dance through the work of three female dance makers. Meanwhile, Dean has chosen to trouble the very meaning of "Black" and is using it in a more metaphoric signification that is sure to provoke thoughts and comments.

For the weekend *From the streets, From the clubs, From the houses: Work inspired by Urban Dance Forms* I chose artists whose work is deeply informed by Hip-Hop, Vogueing, and other forms of Black-instigated popular dance. I have seen Niall Noel Jones, Regina Rocke, Nicholas Leichter and Darrell Jones all do work that recalls club and social dancing and at times I've seen them do work that is formal and almost classical. I am interested in how they negotiate, (or don't negotiate), those two parallel lines of investigation. We will present pre-show screenings of an excerpt from Sally Sommer's film *Check your Body at the Door*, the most thorough history of voguing and club dancing to date.

I've already written of Dean Moss as a curator; he is a gifted and ingenious choreographer as well. I am often struck by his collaborations with visual artists such as Laylah Ali. He has used audience participation, language and tropes of cultural difference to amplify the impact of the work. Reggie Wilson is a 21st century dance anthropologist. He has traveled the Caribbean, the American South and Africa to find inspiration and material for what he calls "post-African/Neo-HooDoo Modern dances." In this work he will be working in collaboration with Souleymane Badolo who is a contemporary dancer and dance-maker from Burkina Faso who last appeared at Danspace Project in his work *Yaado on the Platform i get lost*.

I am very pleased that the goddess of schedules allowed the following week to happen. Two strong, powerful, and stunningly beautiful daughters of Africa will be performing separately and together in collaboration. I first saw Zimbabwe-born Nora Chipaumire in her tour de force solo, *Chimurenga*. I then saw her in *Les écailles de la mémoire (The scales of memory)*, a collaboration with the dancers of Compagnie Jant-Bi and Urban Bush Women, where she stood out among all the very fine dancers of both troupes. I feel very fortunate she can be a part of this Platform. Okwui Okpokwasili is a native New Yorker, born in the Bronx to parents from Nigeria. Okwui had been a highlight in the downtown theater scene, performing in the works of Richard Foreman, Young Jean Lee and others. But it is in the dance work of Ralph Lemon that I really began to be captivated by her presence as a mover onstage. Then I saw her own *Pent-Up: A Revenge Dance* and I became a permanent fan. What these women will produce has left me filled with anticipation.

The following week brings compelling work from three younger choreographers. I had never seen Marjani Forté before her solo, *Ego*, on a shared program. The power of her presence in her confrontation with the audience and herself made me eager to see more. I have been following Samantha Speis' work since she was a student at the American Dance Festival. Upon her arrival in New York I programmed her in both a DraftWork and a Food for Thought at Danspace Project. I was glad when I heard that she had joined Urban Bush Women and was overjoyed at her performances with that company. She is definitely one to watch. Kyle Abraham's lightning quick moves reference crumping and other forms of Urban Dance battles. On video sometimes he dances so rapidly that viewers are convinced that the images have been sped up. He then contrasts these high-speed solo works with elegant group dances as he challenges himself to fashion his movements onto other bodies.

The final week of the Platform brings another evening of films curated by Will Rawls, a performed lecture by Dr. Thomas F. DeFrantz, a three hour long durational performance by Stacy Spence, a panel discussion with Blondell Cummings, Henry Pillsbury and Barbara Watson, the producers of the *Parallels in Black* European tour and a performance installation designed by Ralph Lemon with Jamaican-born artist Nari Ward. I became aware of Nari's work when he made the stage design for Ralph's first installment of *The Geography Trilogy*, a wall of bare bedsprings that confined the space floor to ceiling. Ralph has asked him to make a simple construction for

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which Ralph will choose a series of people to interact with over the course of a day. This fits well with Ralph's aesthetic and conceptual concerns that were evident even in 1982 when, during the first *Parallels*, he covered the floor of St. Mark's sanctuary with about 100 red apples, each of which had one bite taken out, and he danced in a green linen skirt as two saxophonists (Chris Hyams-Hart and Carla Brownlee) played live and moved around the space.

So is there such a thing as Black Dance in America? Is there "mainstream" Black Dance? And if it does exist, who is pushing the boundaries of that mainstream now? PLATFORM 2012: *Parallels* was my attempt to answer these questions.

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**ISHMAEL HOUSTON-JONES'** first performance in New York as a New Yorker was a duet with Daniel Lepkoff in the Parish Hall of Saint Mark's Church, presented by Danspace Project. Since then he has performed numerous times at Danspace Project and has served on the board of directors, curated for Dive-In and Food for Thought and is currently curator for the DraftWork Series. He lives and makes work in New York.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography From Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2003), 47.

<sup>ii</sup> Excerpts from Takiyah Nur Amin, "A Terminology of Difference: Making the Case for Black Dance in the 21st Century and Beyond." *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 4, no. 6, (Sept. 2011).

<sup>iii</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography From Coon to Cool*, 110.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Susan Manning, *Modern Dance Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 30.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> "Biography," accessed October 12, 2011, <http://www.alvinailey.org/about/people>.

<sup>ix</sup> Alvin Ailey with A. Peter Bailey, *Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey*. (Secaucus, New Jersey: Carol Pub Group, 1995), 51.

<sup>x</sup> Thomas F. DeFrantz. *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid., 59

<sup>xiii</sup> Danielle Goldman, *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 24.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid., 25.