



Fig. 1. taisha paggett, with Hunt, Zumpfe, & WXPT, *School for the Movement of the Technicolor People: Demonstration Score #16, Duet*, DiverseWorks, 2016. Left to right: taisha paggett, Eternal Lokumbe. Photo by Ashley Hunt.

Conversants: An Interview with taisha paggett

Kemi Adeyemi

taisha and I came together at Portland Institute of Contemporary Art's (PICA) Time Based Art festival in 2016, when we sat together on a panel titled, *Black Queer Feminist Performance Now*, and learned there was much more to say. Our practices begin to come together around dance. Through individual and collaborative endeavors, paggett works through dance pedagogy—as structured by institutions, but also as lived in everyday life—as a critical site for remaking the individual and collective body; producing new phenomenologies of being and being with, in the process. I think/write/teach on social dance as a quotidian site for theorizing and intervening upon the distribution of neoliberal urban governance across the landscape and the human

sensorium. We are both invested in thinking with and about movement as a method of doing, thinking, and being/becoming black queerness.

This conversation was staged over email, a vexing medium for us both, but it afforded us each slowness with our thoughts. What follows is the first in a series of jumping-off points, the continuations of which may very well remain between us, as the space of email—and the conceptual terrain, moving from the literal ground to the structuring influence of the dance studio on black queer subjects—has proven to be intimate, timely, rigorous.

Kemi Adeyemi: These are the things I've been thinking about lately: repetition, the ground, leaning. Maybe they should be in reverse order: the ground, leaning, and repetition. I mean the ground quite literally: the surface(s) that we are on top of. I'm interested in how one's supposed mastery over the ground (over in the sense that one can control the ground through agriculture, for example, but also in the sense that one's sheer ability to be over rather than intertwined with, hands dug into, or underneath the ground) articulates a kind of relation to the rational, Human.

taisha paggett: omg, preach this. At the risk of being dramatic, this is one of the fundamental ethos of our misdirection. In relation to the ground, we think of ourselves as gladiators...wtf?! We should be listeners, expert listeners, I think. This reminds me of a recent collaborative project that I organized and performed. We built a movement score-cum-aphorism that, for me, asks for a different strategy for living and being in the world, and is perhaps a modest improvement upon what you're astutely identifying: "to be with rather than on top of the mountain."¹

KA: So, to be vulgar about it, the better one is over the ground, the more rational, Enlightened, capable of citizenship, capable of subjecthood, etc. The most upstanding, upright citizen (that language is intentional) possesses a sharp 90-degree angle to the ground.

tp: I'm so into this thought about uprightness not being a panacea for knowing. From being shuffled in straight lines as kindergarteners to being told to sit up

¹ *Mountain, Fire, Holding Still*. Created with Gregory Barnett, Yann Novak, and Marbles Jumbo Radio at/for the Getty Villa in Los Angeles (2016).

straight (beyond the limits of the serpentine spine) to uniforming ourselves in phallus-y “business” suits as a rite of passage into professionalism and the real world, 90 degrees is forced into us as a symbol of success, no? If anything, 90 degrees is just a symbol for how folks struggle to survive.

“WE DON’T STAND UPRIGHT, THOSE TRULY LIVING, RATHER WE DANCE IN THE SPACES BETWEEN THE HORIZON AND THE VERTICAL.”

I mean, physiologically, 90 degrees is unsustainable; an illusion. Letting go of that illusion and accepting the dance is to step into deep agency, IMHO. I did a dance piece a few years back called “a right-angled who lost her faith in being upright.”² It was a “Fila Buster”-adjacent project in which I was looking at spiritual practices—specifically the Shakers (who were very much about lightly stepping on the earth) and Sojourner Truth’s vision questing as her site of power—and I got especially caught up in sigils, hidden symbols, and thus fell in love with parallelograms. Imaging one standing on its side, suspended between standing and collapsing, as this modest symbol of fugitivity. We don’t stand upright, those truly living, rather we dance in the spaces between the horizon and the vertical. This is the struggle, this is the living.

KA: But what are the other ranges of motion, the other angles, that make this entirely perpendicular relationship possible? I think in dance, in particular, we are accustomed to talking about horizontality (and that which precedes it: falling), but I’m more interested in the points of contact and the specific kinds of muscle contractions that come when you are hunched, swaying, leaning, woozing, hazing, etc.

tp: yes yes.

KA: There can really be no stillness when you’re at 66 degrees.

tp: Yup yup. And if we wanna get granular, there can’t even be stillness at 90 degrees. Steve Paxton’s (yt man) practice “The Stand” is interesting here as it points out the dance of standing, tuning in and yielding to the orchestra of muscle twitches and contractions involved in the body being held upright. I should insert here: I’m bent on

² Presented for/at Danspace Project at St Mark’s Church, NYC (2013).

“blackening”³ or otherwise politicizing and marking white dance practices (I’m certainly not alone in that endeavor) and “The Stand” was a practice that made up half of my first “Fila Buster”⁴ performance. Fila Buster stood at a microphone in this standing meditation, in silence, until the contraction of subtle movement gave rise to a nonstop speech/speaking that was the act of her naming herself, calling herself into being.

KA: Ultimately, I’ve been thinking about these degrees as a way to think about the spatial registers through which blackness becomes intelligible. I’ve been reading a lot of Tiffany King, Monique Allewaert, Hagar Kotef, Katherine McKittrick (always), Fanon, Merleau-Ponty; reading on Hobbes, Locke, and the other yt men who we can’t hardly escape from. What are black, queer, feminist interventions into the logic of 90 degrees? Looking for a history of blackness that is of course about the experience of having one’s body, movements, affect marked and delimited, but in what ways are these delimitations specifically spatial? In what ways does blackness, or do black bodies, make sense as in excess of 90 degrees? Bent over, sprawled, horizontal (of course), swaying, scrambling; proximities to the ground that the Enlightenment could only reckon with as substrata for 90 degrees.

tp: My brain is on fire with all of these thoughts. I’ve been possessed with a curiosity about verticality versus horizontality as signifiers of agency (or the absence of) as they come through (western modern, postmodern, and contemporary) dance aesthetics and somatic practices, but also the aesthetics of professionalism: what one does to appear ready, together. Again, I think about being disciplined as a kid to sit up straight, to a fault. The breath gets held, it is a growing away from the ground, away from roots, it is a stillness that can’t be maintained.

“I THINK ABOUT BEING DISCIPLINED AS A KID TO SIT UP STRAIGHT ... THE BREATH GETS HELD, IT IS A GROWING AWAY FROM THE GROUND, AWAY FROM ROOTS...”

³ I love this notion of blackening. It evolved from something I got from my white collaborator, Kim Zumpfe . . . From a conversation she had with Frank Wilderson, whom she studied with at UCI . . . Paraphrasing what she recalled: It was a comment about the “impossibly of allyship” and that, from the perspective of a non-black person, the only remaining option is “to be blackened.” All to say I think about blackening these days as an answer to many contemporary questions. (Standing inside, standing with, rather than championing. Marking and getting marked. “Being with rather than on top of . . .” An answer that doesn’t answer but rather offers a process, an invitation . . .)

⁴ Created as part of “This is What I Want” for the Queer Arts Festival at SomArts, San Francisco (2012).



Beyond a conversation of physical mechanics, we are in a culture that professes uprightness while simultaneously it systematically presses the people down. But we fucking float and rise and dance and trespass into new spaces and unforeseen possibilities. That, I believe, is how blackness “makes sense [...] of 90 degrees.” The vertical line is a location and so we trespass into other spaces. For better or worse. We bend our bodies as we bend the rules and the syllables and the gravity of our form and the text/iles that shield us. Bend, break, wreck everything. For better or worse. For survival. For getting by.

By which I mean, there could be another layer of questions here: What blackness? Which black bodies are we speaking of? And black queer, black feminist queer? From that perspective lies a whole other substrata of intervention, strategy.

KA: I was really moved by Arthur Jafa’s newest piece, *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*, for a lot of reasons. But one of the themes within it that struck me most of all were the scenes of black people dancing with one another—line dancing, partner dancing, dancing solo but with and for friends and family. Can you talk a bit about how you learned to move, around whom you learned to move, and how movement itself became a way for you to think with and about your own body, and your body as part of larger collectives?

tp: I appreciate you asking how I learned to move rather than “dance.” It’s relieving and gives permission to avoid my typical dance training narrative, which I’ll probably still end up boring you with, indirectly. Since this is an origin question/story, I first must say that I cannot separate being black from being queer (While still knowing, of course, that the two *are* separable and very much *need* to be parsed out at times, and that they stem from tremendously different conditions and histories of power and access and pain that cannot be fused or put on the same level without wreaking havoc. Yes.) I guess what I mean—a better way of putting it—is that, for me, black is inherently queer, was queer before queer was queer, has always walked/danced the margins and built worlds and possibility where there otherwise were none. And despite this, there is too a normative inside of blackness.

Fig. 2 (p. 92-93). taisha paggett, Research trip to the Sojourner Truth Memorial in Florence, MA, for “a right-angled object who lost her faith in being upright,” 2013. Photo by Ashley Hunt.

Fig. 3 (right page). taisha paggett, with Hunt, Zumpfe, & WXPT, *School for the Movement of the Technicolor People: Demonstration Score #17, Duet*, DiverseWorks, 2016. Left to right: Norola Morgan, Brittani Broussard. Photo by Ashley Hunt.



All to say, and getting back to your question, when I came to dancing as a queer black young adult in a city where there weren't many people like me, black social spaces were not spaces of comfort. (If we go back deeper I can tell you also about the internalized racism of my social upbringing, in which my legibility, my success—my course toward uprightness—relied upon certain strategic disavowals of as much of my deep blackness as I could muster, without completely disappearing myself.) So when I came into dancing, into movement, it was not through rhythm, getting lost in the beat of social dance, the club. Or steps learned at home and family reunions. The setting in which I learned to move was the institution; college dance class after college dance class and then one downtown NYC dance studio class after another and then back into academia, on repeat. Modern dance technique, postmodern dance aesthetic, somatic practice, contact improvisation were my jam. Certainly there were Hip Hop and African dance classes and Jazz that I had access to, but to stand in those forms made me too conspicuous. Be it the internalized racism or my queerness or a cocktail of the two.

At the same time, I was genuinely transfixed by the story of postmodern dance: Of people making dances composed of walking and doing socially weird things to

music. Dancing against the music; dancing without music. This shit genuinely turned me on. I think it gave me permission to dance/move and resist the limiting beliefs that I was fighting around me of what a black body is supposed to be, do. And of course, that world eventually revealed itself to be a

false refuge and I started to build a critical lens as to the absence of blackness and the insidious racism embedded within those white practices and formal conventions. This is what fueled me into wanting to not just dance but create my own work.

Amongst so many other things that I was up against, being a fly in the buttermilk of a predominantly white/Western/European dance world in which the black body and black expressivity was perceived, re-produced, and thus expected to *be* excessively muscular, athletic, robust, to produce bigness, have legible intent, convincible emotional registers, and high virtuosity through the body was a hard screw to avoid. I wanted to be the opposite. To, yes, invert virtuosity and slow down time and not be the hero. It's worth noting that these ideas were hallmarks, in certain ways, of my somatic dance

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training, where we studied skeletal models and talked about the voluptuousness of small gestures, etc. etc. But those white spaces also sought these through the notion of a neutral body, which I eventually came to dispute as a highly privileged perspective and, from my perpetual conspicuousness, an impossibility.

As I reflect back now I feel that my work as a mover is about eliding limiting notions of how black bodies move and are perceived, represented. And as much as I support how black dance practices are finally taking a more center stage in and outside of academia, I feel my project is about staying standing inside of these white forms so to blacken them—that dance of necessary trespassing, necessary reclamation.

So I play with dance conventions as a site of knowledge but also as a way to talk through the failures and possibilities of the world around us. A gentle exploitation and conceptual bending of the form of the dance company

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model, for example, gave way to me creating WXPT (we are the paper, we are the trees), a dance company-cum-intentional community project brought together to identify new strategies for standing inside the fire of racial injustice and trauma through actual rehearsals, and the eventual creation of collaborative project *School for the Movement of the Technicolor People*, a free school and installation in which our conversations evolved into physical practices for the public.⁵ That company was my cypher. Philosophically, I feel most of my conversation these days and formal plays with movement come from a conversation with contact improvisation, an excessively white practice of which I have a complete love-hate, push-pull relationship. It's where this conversation about the virtuosity of verticality as a marginal body is rooted. And through other somatic forms and contemplative practices I've found ground in thinking about stillness itself as a dynamic world.

⁵ *School for the Movement of the Technicolor People* was created with WXPT in collaboration with (visual artists) Ashley Hunt and Kim Zumpfe, first for Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (2015) and later for DiverseWorks in Houston (2016). LA WXPT has included: Joy Anderson, Charmaine Bee, Heyward Bracey, Rebecca Bruno, Erin Christovale, Loren Fenton, Maria Garcia, Kloii Hollis, Meena Murugesan, Sebastian Peters-Lazaro, Kristianne Salcines, Turay, Jas Wade, Devika Wickremesinghe, and Suné Woods. Houston WXPT: Adam Castaneda, Celestina Billington, Caleb Fields, Rosine Kouamen, Eternal Lokumbe, Norola Morgan and Kenneth Owens.



Fig. 4. *a right-angled object who lost her faith in being upright*, Danspace Projects, NYC, 2013. Left to right: Willy Souly, taisha paggett, Rebecca Bruno, Anna Martine Whitehead. Costumes by James KIDD, sound by Yann Novak. Photo by Ian Douglas.

KA: One thing that compels me most about your work is the way you challenge assumptions, or push against common-sense notions, of what a black dancing body does. I remain struck by what you said on our TBA:15 Festival panel: “I got really interested in what it means to invert the virtuosic bodies and *do less*, do what I want... dance is not a contract for actions but a container of time in which a body can occupy space and design and decide how people share that time and space.” This is one of the most generative statements I’ve heard in a very long time, in part because you are not necessarily talking about the *refusal* of movement, but of a deep dive into other ranges of movement that are (dis)allowed to black subjects. Can you take some time to elaborate on what *doing less* looks and feels like in your practice?

tp: Right now I think the *doing less* has just been not listening to what I’m supposed to pay attention to as a dancer/“choreographer” and instead about looking at and working from the conceptual framework of dance-making and building from/onto that frame rather than decorating within it; shifting where and how my labor goes.

Hmm, not sure that makes sense so an example might help: In 2012 I created a work, *A Composite Field* (in collaboration with sound artist Yann Novak) which to me was about not-dancing-so-to-dance and about taking up a dance performance’s most elemental registers—sound, light, motion, stage—and simply letting them live, letting them be. We could have a longer conversation about the research of the work (about how photosynthesis relates to blackness and about morphing and masculine femininity and becoming and and and) but, in short, the *doing less* in that work was about moving slow enough—expanding time—so that everything could be felt and *doing less* so that my body as it is/was could stand alone as evidence. Letting the sound and light turn slowly, illuminating both my body and the audience’s so that there was no mistake that *all* of us are/were part of this performance.

Indeed, for me, dance is a container, a container of relations, marked by time. When you strip away all the aesthetics and vocabulary, this to me is what dance yields, produces, offers. Recognizing and working from this for me is a “*doing less*” because it frees me from the neuroses of all that I’ve been taught and allowed to do or not do in the studio and in the world. (Though of course the rub is that I most often end up doing more. Like, performances turn into 4- to 10-hour long immersions, or year-long social relations such as the company projects. But such is the work of unleashing, unlearning...)

KA: I see your movements conversing with other movers who are thinking with isolation and repetition as methods of inquiry—and as sites that might subvert the valorization of the so-called virtuosic body, which is often framed as that person who can execute the biggest, grandest movements. Of course, breaking movement vocabularies down to their component parts is not new in contemporary dance, but I have been wondering whether working through isolation and repetition—operationalizing *doing less*, to some extent—becomes useful for intervening upon the ways in which black people become The Black Body (a concept which itself depends on a skewed notion of virtuosity: that no matter what, your presence is so all-consuming so as to be singularly capable of inciting response). The identification and codification of black people as The Black Body—as a dangerous figure, in particular—has as much to do with the racialization of particular body comportments; “acceptable” ranges of movement and chains of movement vocabularies. So much so

that a black person simply standing upright becomes so threatening that a police officer so fears for his life that he “must” shoot to kill in order to survive, right?

tp: Yes and yes and yes.

KA: I’m wondering how your work allows viewers to identify and experience black dancers executing a more diverse range of movement typically not allowed to black subjects, or assumed that black subjects do not execute—especially in work like *A Composite Field*. So, you are not only insisting on the complexity, nuance, and personality unique to yourself and your dancers, but are potentially opening a larger question about what kinds of movement vocabularies are even *allowed* to black people.

tp: I guess what I can say is that I fear sometimes that my work comes off as white or as putting black bodies in white spaces in ways that diminishes blackness. What a heavy heart that gives me. As said before, pulling from Wilderson, it is a blackening of

white spaces and practices that I hope, at least, to put out in the world. All to say, black/the black/blackness is everywhere and in everything, and perpetually threatening, regardless of how white it is (momentarily) perceived . . .

“ALL TO SAY, BLACK/THE BLACK/BLACKNESS IS EVERYWHERE AND IN EVERYTHING, AND PERPETUALLY THREATENING, REGARDLESS OF HOW WHITE IT IS (MOMENTARILY) PERCEIVED...”

KA: The previous comments can also be more specifically directed at the place of black people in dance history—framed as what kinds of black bodies are seen to be capable of executing what kinds of dance movements (i.e. racist discourses that black people’s bodies render them incapable of executing the technical and conceptual ranges of movement that characterize ballet). So, a constellation of questions: Who/what genres do you see yourself in conversation with?

tp: I really fight to remain inside of dance, to say that all of these things I do are dance/dance-making/in the dance tradition. In other words, I don’t call myself a visual artist or other hyphenations, though I’d of course be remiss to overlook my relationship with

visual art practices. I studied Art History as I was coming up as a dancer, so there’s always some dovetailing in my practice. Right now I’m specifically turned on by the work of Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger, what they do and have done. They are both black women in the visual artist realm who employ the body and embodiment in their practice.

Otherwise I always have a hard time answering questions like these because most of my mentors growing up have been white and I’m struggling right now to persist in holding up that torch. I have come to calling my work “interdisciplinary dance,” which sometimes feels redundant but does a lot of explaining, nevertheless. I’ve always had deep admiration for Bebe Miller and Ralph Lemon and Ishmael Houston Jones, specifically their positionality as black dance artists, though I’ve never been moved to fashion my work after them. #expandtheframe

#EXPANDTHEFRAME

KA: What are the multiple and at times diverging genealogies of black dance you situate yourself within?

tp: Definitely the folks mentioned above, specifically because there was a time when they weren’t identified as black choreographers because their projects never matched the identifiable template. I also think about Eleo Pomare and Blondell Cummings, both deceased, who invented their own ways of traversing white dance spaces.

KA: What conversations within and beyond “black dance” do you hope to extend and to initiate?

tp: I really just want to expand the frame, expand the conversation of who we point to when we name black dance artists and expand the conversation about what we expect and allow of dance. I want dancers to see themselves as artists more holistically and less laborers to a specific silo or container of actions; and for “choreographers” to see themselves as more than just directors of bodies but rather activators of space and time. And if I could go even further, to open up a convo about abolishing the distinction and hierarchy between dancers and choreographers altogether and that of “audience” versus public because it is really a shared stew of labor and magic and healing.