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Charles O. Anderson
“Dancing in *TAR*: A Dialogue About Embodied Identity”
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Setting

The dance stage provides an evocative medium to explore and critique the implicit abstraction of identity and the muted racial discourse within contemporary rhetoric around “global citizenship.” Charles’ current dance work, *TAR*, which re-envisioned the African/American folktale, “The Wonderful Tar Baby,” positions the black dancing body as the site of transnational connection and forced cultural hybridity. The dance, drawing from African-derived choreographic practices and presented on the Western concert stage, makes visible the incongruous origins of the folktale, namely between the appropriated (African) traditions from which it originates and the disembodied (American) culture through which it survives.

To best illustrate our collaborative relationship, we are presenting this “paper” as a staged dialogue: based on a solo excerpt from *TAR*, the two of us are having a conversation reflecting the benefits and anxieties of actively collaborating with each other as artists and scholars. Our dialectical approach makes explicit the real tensions between dance practitioner and cultural scholar, and, by extension, between black dancing body and “raceless” cosmopolitan, story-teller and meaning-maker, author and critic. In the liminal spaces between our respective identities and interpretations, we find our own Tar Baby: an unavoidable, uncomfortable, sticky, multi-layered, multi-cultural, obscure place where a cooperative culture is produced amidst an amalgam of histories, geographies, languages, and myths.

Introduction

Kilian: Charles and I are presenting a model for how artists and cultural scholars may work together in the inception and development of new creative work. We are interested in the task of making work, which is informed by specific cultural practices, politically and socially relevant to diverse and globalized audiences. In our case, both of us are dance practitioners as well as cultural scholars. We met in the dance studio and started dialoguing about the state of contemporary dance, based on our mutual interest in issues of cultural identity and globalization. That’s where our interests intersect. Our lived experiences, however, are quite different. To sum it up crudely, Charles grew up in the American South and has spent his adult life explaining and defending his African American heritage in elite Anglo-American institutions of higher learning and concert dance. Meanwhile, I grew up in a tri-national household in continental Europe and have spent my life border- and language-crossing, privileged and unsettled in my cosmopolitan existence. At the heart of our common vision is the urge to simultaneously become rooted in our complex cultural identities and to articulate an unbounded and meaningful global existence.

We find this kind of common vision and active collaboration to be timely and urgent in an age where a homogenous globalization seems to be threatening the cultural particularity and relevance of new artistic work. We also find ourselves forced to confront the institutionally pervasive racism within the realm of Dance Studies (which includes pedagogical practices, history, and criticism) and the neo-imperialistic rhetoric around Globalization. In the broader dialogue this weekend about the relevance of Cultural Studies, we believe in keeping the radical flame of cultural scholarship at a high temperature.

Charles: Before we begin – I'd like to say a few words about *TAR*, my new work which we are using as a case study here, and where I place this work in the landscape of contemporary dance. *TAR* is inspired by African, African American, and Indigenous (Native) American rabbit trickster tales, most notably Uncle Remus' "The Wonderful Tar Baby Story". (You may be familiar with this story from the Disney film *Song of the South*.) *TAR* is a non-linear dance narrative that embodies an Africanist aesthetic sensibility of moving in, thinking about, and creating culturally inclusive community. The goal is to produce a 'kinetic story' that ultimately uses the symbolism of tar as a substance with the ability to hold diasporas and cultures in conflict together. Stylistically I draw from traditional West African and African American storytelling techniques (Griot traditions), authentic movement, and kinetic awareness approaches.

In the popular American version of the Tar Baby, the antagonist Br'er Fox – who some argue is a representation of white slave masters – sets a trap for the protagonist, Br'er Rabbit, in the guise of a little girl who is made of tar. The rabbit greets the Tar Baby and receives no reply. After a few attempts he becomes indignant and goes to strike the baby for its 'uppityness' for not acknowledging 'respectable folks' like himself. He becomes stuck. In becoming stuck he becomes angrier and strikes again and then again until he is completely trapped in the Tar Baby...all the while the fox watches in glee for he has finally trapped the wily rabbit.

In my piece, *TAR*, my protagonist is not literally a rabbit, but rather a man who becomes trapped and in being trapped is submerged in his entrapment and in being so discovers that he is not 'stuck' at all. He moves through a representational embodiment of the Duboisian sense of African American double-consciousness to a kind of 'awakening' to a kind of extra-cultural consciousness.

Staged Dialogue: In Response to the Dance

The setting is a multi-media performance space during an academic conference; the audience is sitting on the floor around the stage area; Charles just finished his dance solo; and Kilian is about to interview him.

Kilian: I sometimes find it hard to respond immediately after seeing a performance, but what I find striking about this piece is the exploration of identity that is both deeply rooted in very particular traditions and simultaneously struggles with leaving those

traditions behind. I mean, your movement is very much about acknowledging the ancestors, looking back at one's childhood, finding a path for oneself as an adult, but to me it looks like your dialogue with the past is somewhat intangible, as if you're not really sure it existed. To me it looks like you lose your footing as you're searching for an "original identity"; quite literally, in fact – your feet are so light, as they are, on the floor, as if the ground beneath you were made of water and not earth. In my view that speaks to the question of how do we (literally) locate or embody our selves when we have been separated from the places in which we originate? Does any of this ring true to you in the context of this dance?

Charles: To an extent. I can certainly understand how you could perceive the solo in this way. It was informed by Africanist aesthetics which include a sense of "epic memory," a term used by African Dance scholar Kariamu Welsh Asante (1998), or "ancestorism" as it is described by Robert Farris Thompson (1984). This is the belief that the closest harmony with ancient ways is the highest of experiences. It is the force that enables a man to rise to his destiny. However, I think what does not ring completely true to me is the notion that my dialogue with the past is vague or intangible, or rather that I am unsure of its existence. In an Africanist, oral cultural context, time – past, present, future – are not linear and need not be concretized. To some this may seem like an impediment to progress, but what I am trying to highlight in this solo is that the knowledge is in the body and the body informs the mind. Therefore knowledge cannot be static anymore than one's body can (at least while it's alive) and need not be articulated as it was at its time of creation, but rather as it is from moment to moment. This is why I try to move upon the floor as if it is made of liquid something not altogether solid, but able to morph and change beneath my very feet.

Kilian: In your solo, you also face many different directions, address several different pasts... To me, the constant changing of the points of reference is confusing and I have trouble reading your intentions. I'm assuming that my confusion may have to do with my own aesthetic privileging of clear lines and patterns as is customary in Western dance. Jane Desmond (1997) speaks to this kind of privileging of Western aesthetics as an inherent flaw in traditional dance scholarship. So in view of my confusion, I'm wondering how you see your choreographic relationship to Western forms. And I'm also wondering what you estimate needs to happen for someone as liberally educated as me to be in a more informed position to be able to critique this relationship without inherently privileging my own aesthetic values...

Charles: Yes, I think the confusion could stem from looking at dance that is consciously being informed by African aesthetics through a lens informed by Western aesthetic expectations. At the end of the day I think the confusion originates from the lack of overt discourse in Dance Studies about the layers of power relationships configured by white racism. I think it is indicative of the remnants of 'imposed Western ideologies' upon non-Western artistic forms (even when an artist is also challenging the traditions of these forms) especially when these art forms "originate" from Western soil... It's about privilege, about maintaining a certain power dynamic.

I don't view choreography as an exclusively Western idea which I suppose informs my choreographic relationship to Western forms. As dance historian and cultural scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild (2003) has discussed in a number of her articles and books dealing with the African American influence upon concert dance, any artist, any individual who was born in the U. S. is inevitably on some level also an "African American" as much as any other type of "American." This is due to the fact that African culture has been present on American soil as long as European culture really. The intertextual relationship between these two cultures has gone unrecognized, been invisibilized because of other uniquely Western processes such as institutional racism. I speak of this to illuminate the fact that a "liberal" education should recognize this fact.

Kilian: I'm particularly interested in the questions about rootedness and identity in your dance. Or should I say, about uprootedness and the obscuring of identity. I often think about how African American identity could be considered a prototype for present-day global identities – as someone who has moved a lot within the northern hemisphere, I strongly relate to the task of having to find one's home on quintessential foreign turf. That's one of the reasons why I've been fascinated by African American writers, such as W.E.B. DuBois, James Baldwin, or even Malcolm X, who speak from the perspective of people who have traveled a lot. James Darsey (1999) has written wonderfully about James Baldwin's life in Paris and what he calls "Baldwin's Cosmopolitan Loneliness." He says that "cosmopolitanism is ... a kind of exile. To be everywhere is to be nowhere..." (Darsey 1999, p. 188). From your perspective, Charles, do you see yourself as inherently disconnected from your origins – are you ever *somewhere* (as opposed to everywhere or nowhere)?

Charles: I don't think it is so much about separation and loss as much as it is about "rejoining." It's about the "homing instinct" first described by Harlem Renaissance writer, philosopher, and educator Alain Locke. This instinct acts as a symbolic balm for the psychic wounds inflicted by slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. The motif of longing and return is about articulating a desire for substantive change as well as a forceful critique of European/American cultural ideology. So I would say that I am not searching for an original identity as one might search for a lost puppy, but rather I am embracing my "two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Dubois 1996, p. 5). I am honoring the Africanist sense of embracing the whole, embracing the conflict. So all of this to say that we adapt to the environment to remain connected to our origins with the understanding that our identities are embodied and change from moment to moment, that they have always been fluid.

Kilian: What does the Tar Baby have to do with all of this?

Charles: Approaching dance as a kind of 'text', and similar to Toni Morrison's literary work *Tarbaby*, *TAR* 're-writes' the Uncle Remus tales—retelling, redefining, and remythologizing, so that the relationship between anger and silence, embodied by the Tar Baby metaphor, can be seen clearly. Like with Morrison, the aim of *TAR* does not simply revise the Joel Chandler Harris story to tell a rabbit trickster tale; instead,

the piece wants to call attention to the context of our tellings. *TAR* is about how we, as citizens of this 'global age' are not only flatly connected through media and technology but also deeply connected through our histories and cultural exchanges. However, we don't want to go near the sticky mess that comes from looking at our intertwining histories – the pagan religious views, the massacres, the genocides, the imperial conquests, the enslavement, the burnings, the lynchings – because if we do that we would have to acknowledge not only some of the atrocities that have been committed by the West on a global scale, but we would also have to recognize that there are numerous cultural views of the world that stand in contrast to the Western one... So for me I find myself asking the question of audience members like you, Kilian, can you sense the Tar Baby in the room? Can you honestly recognize how you 'practice' Western culture's invisibilization of the Tar Baby not by speaking from a Western cultural perspective, but by not speaking of a lack of awareness of other perspectives?

Kilian: I guess I can sense that this is, in fact, our very own Tar Baby... You are essentially asking me whether I recognize my own lack of awareness of other perspectives, even while I criticize the use of the Western lens as the privileged one? By attempting to become a "raceless cosmopolitan," if you will, I'm essentially denying that I continue to promote a normative cultural viewpoint? And by that I am pushing your work into a corner somehow, rather than helping you actually bring it to the global table...?

Tar Baby Exposed (Maybe)

Kilian: I'm assuming that your intention as a choreographer is for active cultural learning to take place for an audience that may just be pleasure-seeking. When you think about touring this work in front of global audiences that may have no knowledge of your particular cultural experience, how do you feel about the uninformed response you may receive and what do you anticipate your response to be? In other words, how do you see your role in preventing what are essentially lazy interpretations of your work?

Charles: My role is to be an artist. Lazy interpretations occur without discrimination in dance. What I offer, simply, is the black body – my self-acknowledged choice to be a black body in rhythmic motion...contrapuntal configurations and cervical bodily articulations. ...the cakewalk...the ring shout...deconstructed linearity...asymmetricality of movement as an aesthetic choice...the black body reconfigured within spaces of white imagination...a site of projected fear, abhorred yet desired...the black body as trope, strange fruit, postmodern, plural, open-ended bodily narrativity over bodily narrative resolution... My role is to facilitate the free and democratic space to engage the black body in rhythmic motion.

So let me ask this question of you then, Kilian: I think it is important that we uncover how even now we are performing this dynamic...I sit here in a costume while you are not... I perform a dance, but you don't... yet we have chosen to bring your voice forth to talk about the dance. We have decided to "legitimate" this dance with "talking" and

“analysis” rather than trusting that all was communicated in the dance... There are profound epistemological implications that result once we have isolated and identified who is doing the documenting, by whose criteria, and what is actually being recorded.

What do *you* think can be learned if we choose to let this dance by a black man, about black issues, informed by black cultural aesthetics take the primary voice and let this conversation recede to the background?

Fade to black.

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Biographical Notes

Kilian Kröll, a German/American dancer and cultural scholar residing in Vienna (Austria), holds a BA in English from Haverford College (Pennsylvania) and an MA in Cultural Studies from the University of East London. His scholarly research has focused on mapping diasporic racial and sexual identities, and his cultural management praxis is based on developing shared administrative resources in the dance field. In January 2008, he was named Choreographer in Residence at Caldera (Oregon).

A native of Richmond (Virginia), Philadelphia-based choreographer, Charles O. Anderson, is an assistant professor at Muhlenberg College (Pennsylvania) where he teaches African Dance and Culture, contemporary dance, and dance composition. He earned his BA from Cornell University (New York) and his MFA from Temple University (Pennsylvania). With a major grant from the Pew Charitable Trust, he is currently developing a body of work exploring issues of 21st century African American identity.

Together, Anderson and Kröll collaborated in the production of the dance piece, *TAR*, with Anderson's company, dance theatre X, which was premiered at the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival in September 2007.

www.dancetheatrex.com