

“Dance and Abstraction” Special Issue Introduction

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1. Abstraction's Historical Stakes

In his 2013 book *Hating Empire Properly*, historian Sunil Agnani helpfully reminds his audience that an emphasis on cultural difference—a perspective that we tend to think of as the postmodern antidote to Enlightenment-era universalizing rhetoric—can in fact be traced back to early modern European thought. Agnani carefully lays out “colonial reason’s” two “distinct forms of understanding difference,” which he calls “the moment of abstract universalism... and the emphasis on particularity” (Agnani 2013, pp. xxii–xxiii). The challenge posed to social relationships by human difference could be met on the one hand by seeking out and describing patterns or capacities that universally connected disparate individuals (such as the ability to reason or to feel); or, on the other, by an encyclopedic classification or parsing of each individual’s unique cultural or subcultural identity. Denis Diderot’s writings serve as one important example for Agnani because they “reveal a supple thinker who vacillates between an emphasis on the universalistic character of human behavior and one aware of the irreducible singularity of cultural practices” (Agnani 2013, p. 3).

Though seemingly contradictory, these were both options at that time, and both could be used to shore up colonial violence. In other words, modes of being understood as universal could serve to deny and offend cultural specificity, and a focus on cultural difference was as likely to be mobilized to perpetuate white supremacy or deny access to universal goods as it was to further understanding of diverse human perspectives and desires. Agnani’s unusual and admirable goal in *Hating Empire Properly* is not primarily to point out the racist interpretation by Europeans of differences observed in the people they colonized and enslaved, but rather “to reflect on the shortcomings of universalist discourses and to heed the creative appropriations of these discourses by figures such as Toussaint [Louverture] and [Jean-Baptiste] Belley,” two leaders of the Haitian revolution for whom, according to C.L.R. James, “liberty and equality, the slogans of the revolution, meant far more than to any Frenchman” (Agnani 2013, p. 190; C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* [1938], quoted in *ibid.*, p. 177).

The proposal that the Enlightenment notion of freedom did not find its fullest significance until it was claimed by people who had been enslaved has special resonance today. It encourages us as scholars living through this moment of renewed attention to racialized injustice to review the fact that from the eighteenth century up until the mid-twentieth, individuals with various skin colors and gender identities believed that universals (such as “freedom,” “justice,” and “humanity”) existed in a relationship of constant dialogue with and adjustment to the world’s particularity, and that a desire to participate in this relationship motivated many critical and artistic practices of that period. Indeed, it was commonly understood to be art’s responsibility to give such universals a shareable, but necessarily particular, form. We take this to be the thrust of a note in Pearl Primus’s travel journal made while in Africa circa 1949: “Dance as part of art is universal and must not only communicate but *must communicate to all*” (Pearl Primus, undated journal entry, quoted in Schwartz and Schwartz 2011, p. 80).

In the twentieth century, abstraction was the chief visual form of modernism's belief in Enlightenment universality, though abstraction in modern art and dance also had an inherent tie to what we could call the "bad abstractions" of modernity. In their turn to geometry, to the grid, to systems divorced from what Mark Franko has called "the corporeal necessity of the human body," various art forms, including dance, aligned themselves with the abstractions of money, technology, efficiency, and spectacle—structures within modernity that came to shape, color, and direct the paths of everyone's everyday life, and also to alienate them from it.¹ Over the past two decades, both dance- and art historians have critically addressed these problematic connotations of abstraction (and the critics who embraced them).² Fewer scholars have been inclined, however, to consider the extent to which artists, in their aspiration to communicate using formal principles at a remove from identity, illusion, and mythology, also evoked the old Enlightenment notions of universal humanity and freedom.³

Abstraction, not only in the arts but generally, implies the goal of access—a desire, as Primus's journal notes indicate, to communicate with everyone, regardless of their culture (however unlikely that may seem in practice). Often an abstract system needs only to be learned to be shared—written language, for example, or geometry. However, just as often, abstraction relies on the capacities and qualities of the body to be understood. How human beings respond to the qualities of the physical world—objects and shapes relating to each other in space and responding to gravity, light reflecting off surfaces to render colors and textures, hollowness, solidity, and so on—often serves as the basis for a painter's, sculptor's, or choreographer's strange new formal language, a set of givens she can count on. In other words, artistic abstraction often relies on an assumption that everyone who will look at it has something in common when it comes to the perception of form.

Yet the vehicle of that universality, the body, is also ground zero for any human conception of particularity and difference. Me, not you; not that and not her. Psychoanalytic theory holds that the day an infant realizes her body has a boundary is the day existence transforms from an oceanic wholeness to being in a world of difference. Thus my body, with whose quirks and strengths no one is more intimate than I, is also this thing that I did not create, a thing that serves as the basis on which there is even a possibility of making the meanings that are the hardest to express shareable with strangers near and far.

In the tension between artistic abstraction's resemblance to (or rhyming with) the abstractions at the root of a market-driven system of production and value, on the one hand, and its assumption that universal human capacities exist, on the other, lies modernist abstraction's main insight—its honesty about its situation in history. There's no going back, modernist art says. Modern ideas about freedom emerged with the capitalist economy's regimentation and "scientific" systems of racial typology. Yet, along with their systems and new syntaxes, many abstract works are openly subject to the contingencies of their medium's physical materials, such that viewers can see the challenge those materials posed to the ordering plan in the finished work. Whether it is the fluidity of paint, the tactility of a musical instrument, or the weight of a dancer's body as she falls to the floor, the qualities of the materials in such works become part and parcel of the finished form. This fact makes the reach for the universal that this art stages that much more insightful, insofar as its effort to communicate across difference encompasses and acknowledges the particular that any conception of a universal must always struggle to accommodate and adapt to. In this way, it offers a dialectical version of the "contradiction" described by Agnani (2013, p. xxii).

Abstractions are invented by human beings to stand for and communicate structures, ideas, and feelings that are real without being empirically observable. In the modern era's break with

¹ (Franko 2013, p. 39). On alienation and dehumanization in modern art, see (Clark 2000, pp. 405–8).

² See, for example, (Harris 2012; Wolff 2003).

³ Here we are building upon the authoritative accounts of modernist formalism in dance offered by Mark Franko and Susan Manning, who beautifully elucidate the artistic ambition to produce new languages, but do not relate its universalizing abstractions to Enlightenment theory. See (Franko 1995; Manning 1988).

faith-based traditions and feudal hierarchy, such processes had to become a much more intentional component of contemporary practice. Modern abstract art insistently asks its audiences whether this old human project of collective abstraction formation and revision will continue, and if so, how? In the humanist-oriented modern art and dance that were produced world-wide until the late 1950s, and hung on into the 1960s, many artists affirmed this project's continuation in the strange laboratory space of nominally autonomous art. Would its viewers passively accept the uninspiring unity supplied by the ever-accessible market at tremendous cost to the majority? Or would they, emulating the artists, engage in the ongoing project of working up forms with unifying structures that are dynamically changed by the more material and concrete realities of bodies and their physical environments? In other words, would modern viewers be inspired to create in their own lives and in their world abstractions capable of unifying people around what they actually need and desire?

We think this is a valuable question. Yet, so many critics and scholars in the 2010s and 2020s seem to have stopped asking it—tending instead to treat the economy as a natural force to which everyone is passive rather than an invented abstraction subject to revision (as Siegfried Kracauer warned that modern consumers of popular culture were doing back in the 1930s, and as the late David Graeber has more recently urged us not to do).⁴ With these concerns in mind, this Special Issue offers a chance, first of all, to recover and interrogate the universalizing understandings that so many modern people in the early and mid-twentieth century took as given to any politics invested in increased access to economic security and the possibility of self-determination that comes with it. Secondly, we attend here to some of the new terms asserted in dance and scholarship since 1968 as tentative frameworks for conceptualizing communication and unity across difference.

2. Abstraction between Suspicion and Possibility

From the 1960s onward, the modernist belief in universality has come under ever greater scrutiny. Abstraction, which once embodied the ideals of radical equality or collective belonging, increasingly stood for monolithic forms of power: the militarized nation-state; neoliberal economics; patriarchy and white supremacy.⁵ In this context, as the choreographer Miguel Gutierrez memorably put it, abstraction can seem to “belong to white people” (Gutierrez 2018). In the microcosm of a dance company or the casting decisions for a given piece, Gutierrez points out, the bodies of white performers can serve as “signifiers for a universal experience that doesn’t need to look at whiteness as an active choice.” Whiteness, like a range of other conditions assigned normative status in our society, projects a seeming neutrality, a freedom from the condition of having an identity. The post-structuralist theorists who launched this type of critique during the 1960s called it the “unmarked term”—the purportedly generic concept or category that maintains its own invisibility by marking, or making visible, its supposed opposite (Blackness, queerness, femininity, disability, and so on).

Over the past half-century, many of the mechanisms designed to foster universal treatment, such as voting rights, public education, affordable health care, and other parts of the social safety net, have collapsed or been undermined, resulting in a global economy and a type of state that together benefit a small ruling class. For good reason, then, universality became a distrusted term: a tool used by the privileged elite to perpetuate its hegemonic power. The trauma inflicted on oppressed, dispossessed, and marginalized communities created a clear need to affirm denigrated identities and subject positions. One solution to this problem has been to recognize and to celebrate cultural diversity or multiculturalism, a response taken up in particular in left-liberal circles from the 1970s onward. While well intended, such efforts have not done enough to correct structural inequality in theory or

⁴ (Kracauer 1995). The following quote has been showing up frequently in tributes since Graeber’s death and deserves further amplification: “The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently.” See (Graeber 2015, p. 89).

⁵ See, for example, (Chave 1990).

in practice.⁶ Meanwhile, the left essentially ceded the terrain of universality to its ideological foes, rather than working to refigure this concept so that it might live up to its past deployment as a weapon against social, political, and economic inequities.

The question, then, is whether abstraction can foster a universality that does not function to exclude, stratify, or oppress. This is a question that dance is particularly well equipped to explore. Because it is an art that expresses itself through the concreteness of a body, or a group of bodies, dance is often seen as the least abstract of the arts.⁷ However, it is precisely this combination of the universal and the particular that has made the dancing body fertile ground for experiments with abstraction. Abstraction in dance can take many forms, among them: plotlessness; the distillation or simplification of codified gestures; stylized movements; repetition, standardization, and other means of de-personalizing the dancer; an exploration of the body's physical properties in and of themselves.

Gutierrez and others are right to demand that we acknowledge how these forms have operated in concert with, cemented, or intensified existing economic, racial, and gendered hierarchies.⁸ All too often in the history of dance, abstraction has enabled acts of cultural appropriation, such that its link to universality allowed members of privileged groups to speak for those traditionally oppressed. But abstraction can also make proposals about what more ethical relations between bodies, communities, and cultures might look like. In the hands of choreographers such as Akram Khan, danced abstractions can configure images of the body politic that accommodate the multiple lived experiences of its diasporic subjects.⁹ In the hands of Juliana May (*Folk Incest*, 2018) or Jamar Roberts (*Ode*, 2019), abstraction can figure—and possibly begin to repair—the individual and collective traumas inflicted by sexual and racialized violence (Vo 2019). The Dance Studies Association's recent "Statement on the Inviolability of Movement as a Right"¹⁰ takes the universality of movement as the starting-point of a call for justice in immigration and policing, arguing that "the possibility of shifting in space, and the altering of our physical and social conditions of being ... [constitute a] basic tenet of our political existence and a connective thread across species."

The contributions to this Special Issue of *Arts* on *Dance and Abstraction* place a sample set of the changing ideas and feelings about abstraction and its relation to universality over the course of the twentieth century lucidly on display. Our early-twentieth-century examples demonstrate the persistence of an Enlightenment commitment to resolving the struggle between universal and particular in an ongoing practice. In the mid-twentieth century, we see a heightening of the contradiction between universal ideas and cultural specificity as modernity's traumatic histories began to surface more prominently in public discourse. In the era since 1968, we see both a delight in anti-universalism and what might be seen as the quiet promotion of alternative abstractions capable of accounting for what contemporary dance expects its audiences to be able to feel and understand.

Each of the papers included in this Special Issue construes the relation of dance to abstraction differently, but several themes thread them together: the interplay of abstract geometries with the body's material presence; the tension between the generality of a role and the particularity of the dancer performing it; the ways that identitarian categories of race, gender, and sexuality have operated to exclude, but also provide sources for new forms that do some of the inclusive work we associate with the universalizing impulse. Flora Brandl's essay analyzes convergences between Sophie Taeuber-Arp's abstract paintings, reliefs, and cross stitch work and Rudolph von Laban's system of dance notation. The visual resemblances between their work in different media point to their shared belief that abstract forms can generate movement and, conversely, that kinesthetic sensation can motivate geometric figures.

⁶ For a historicizing account of this issue, see (Kymlicka 2018).

⁷ On this issue, see (Archias 2016; Bellow and Andrew 2015; Andrew 2019).

⁸ See, for example, (Foster 1998; Franko 2002).

⁹ Royona Mitra discusses, as an example, Khan's *Abide With Me*, choreographed and performed for the Opening Ceremony of the London Olympics: see (Mitra 2015, p. 6).

¹⁰ <https://dancestudiesassociation.org/news/2020/statement-on-the-inviolability-of-movement-as-a-right>.

Brandl discovers surprisingly common ground between Dadaist abstraction, whose idiosyncrasies were designed to resist totalizing languages, and Laban's Kinetography, which recorded ephemeral dances in a standardized system of signs. In Joanna Dee Das's essay, Josephine Baker's performances on stage and screen are reframed as modernist explorations of form for its own sake. The tendency to primitivize Baker and her dance because of her visibly Black skin, Das argues, has obscured her contribution to the historical lineage of abstract dance. Whereas many of her white contemporaries appropriated African Diasporic forms, Baker capitalized upon the musical and rhythmic possibilities of the body in movement as her route to abstraction.

The essays on examples from the 1940s and 50s interrogate the universalizing "Modern Man" discourse that pervaded postwar art and popular culture, especially in the United States (Leja 1993). Abbe Schriber's article shows the ways Thelma Johnson Streat worked between dance and painting in the 1940s as part of her quest to develop a new humanism to which she, as a Black woman, could lay claim. As Schriber shows, Streat believed that artistic form provided a universally shared source of meaning and experience. Yet, paradoxically, it was through an acknowledgment of cultural particularity—her meticulous study of indigenous cultures in Mexico, Hawai'i, and the Northwest coast—that Streat sought to transcend difference. For Tamara Tomic-Vajagic, George Balanchine's stripped-down leotard ballets, such as *Agon* (1957), offer an opportunity to rethink the concept of abstraction itself. In spite of Balanchine's professed ambivalence about the term, she argues that his ballets employ a form of "semantic abstraction" in which the suppression of detail focuses attention on the distilled elements that remain. Moreover, she argues that the perception of *Agon* as an exploration of "pure" form hinged upon its initial interracial cast. This choice initially seemed radically inclusive; but, with the details of Black life pared away, it ultimately reinforced whiteness as ballet's normative condition. Anthea Kraut analyzes the convention of the "dance-in," in which the technology of film enabled anonymous performers to augment Hollywood actors' star turns. Her essay focuses on Alex Romero, the Latino dancer/choreographer who served as Gene Kelly's virtual double in *On the Town* (1949) and *An American in Paris* (1951). Rather than simply lamenting this act of white appropriation, Kraut considers the fluid dynamic of the rehearsal studio, where Romero and Kelly danced between different sexed and racial positions.

The other four essays, which address case studies from the 1970s through the 1990s, complicate postmodernism's purported skepticism toward universals and grand narratives. Mariola Alvarez discusses *M3x3* (1973), a computer-generated dance for television by Brazilian artist Analivia Cordeiro. Her use of Fortran, a programming system created by the US military and further developed by Bell Laboratories, seems at first an optimistic embrace of technology's ability to restructure human beings and their interactions. However, Cordeiro's insistence on using real dancers in *M3x3* rather than animated substitutes created unsettling parallels between the geometric regimentation of their bodies and the repressive measures taken by Brazil's military dictatorship. Technology also plays a role in Lou Forster's analysis of Lucinda Childs's *Calico Mingling*, choreographed in the same year as Cordeiro's *M3x3*. Forster focuses on the score that Childs generated for the dance by tracing the floor pattern created by each of the four dancers in the work, which she reduced and combined using a Xerox photocopier. Made to be held and consulted by the dancers while rehearsing, this abstract guide helped make an ensemble of dancers learning four disconnected simultaneous solos. The Xerox also connects Childs's dance to the legacy of modern dancers such as her teacher Hanya Holm, who also used images as an important part of her pedagogy.

Rachel Haidu, in her analysis of Anna Teresa de Keersmaecker's 1983 dance *Rosas Danst Rosas*, positions the role as a form of abstraction that allows for individuality and multiplicity. She construes its storylessness as a feminist gesture, one that allowed each of the four women who originally danced the piece—including the choreographer herself—to put the conventional role of "woman" in suspension. In solo and unison dances, *Rosas Danst Rosas* positions the role as a social category, something that can be performed by many, in such a way that the singular self may approach unity. Susan Rosenberg offers an alternative reading of choreographer Trisha Brown's purportedly abstract compositions.

Close readings of Brown's notebooks reveal that dances of "pure movement" often originated in highly personal memories, over which she layered impersonal systems or structures. Her analysis culminates with a discussion of Brown's first opera, Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1998; original score, 1607), in which the representational gestures submerged in her previous works finally came out into the open.

We hope that this Special Issue not only revisits received ideas about, but also instigates further inquiry into, abstraction's uses and meanings during the twentieth century. Collectively, the essays published here model various new, inventive ways of studying abstraction, thus opening up pathways for future scholarship on this subject. Das, for example, points out that an over-emphasis on the reception of Baker's dances has obscured the dances themselves. By tempering discourse analysis with movement analysis, Das shows how Baker's performances participated in the making of danced abstraction. Like several other contributions to this Special Issue, Das's essay puts the modernist canon into stark relief, reminding us to examine how racial ideologies inform and perpetuate its underlying systems of value.

Rosenberg and Forster also complicate our understanding of "pure movement" by giving us new ways to analyze its constituent elements. They do so by mining Brown's and Childs's archives, which offer process documents that both authors read through their extensive knowledge of the choreographers' personal histories and working methods. In each case, the authors reveal surprising connections to modernist abstraction in works widely understood to reject the legacies of early twentieth century dance. Schriber and Brandl, meanwhile, find traces of performative movement in abstract artworks. Their essays treat still images as archives of ephemeral bodily practices, and weave kinesthetic perceptions into visual analysis. As Schriber notes, greater attention to the affective dimensions of abstraction can help us to recover an understanding of the human that is not premised upon white, Western male subjecthood, and to produce a de-spatialized cartography of modernism that foregrounds the participation of Black diasporic subjects.

Alvarez and Kraut also expand existing definitions of abstraction, in their analyses of films that feature legible human figures. Both authors consider links between the ways that cameras mediate perceptions of the dancing body and the ways that cultural and political structures can constrain real practice, whether by silencing dissent, or making queer and raced communities invisible. Haidu and Tomic-Vajagic offer new ways to theorize dance. Following in the footsteps of Gabriele Brandstetter, who brought Aby Warburg's *Toposformel* to bear on dance history, Tomic-Vajagic adapts art historian Harald Osborne's concept of "semantic abstraction" to think critically about Balanchine's "so-called" abstractions. Working from feminist interventions into the "marriage plot," Haidu constructs a theory for a dance convention that is often taken as an unconsidered given, "the role." Finally, we, the editors of this Special Issue, offer our perspective as scholars trained in the discipline of art history, in the conviction that the obliqueness of our entry into the ongoing conversation about danced abstraction can offer new insights into its past.

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