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Does Abstraction Belong to White People? by Miguel Gutierrez

Thinking the politics of race in contemporary dance.

Part of the [Theory + Practice](#) series.

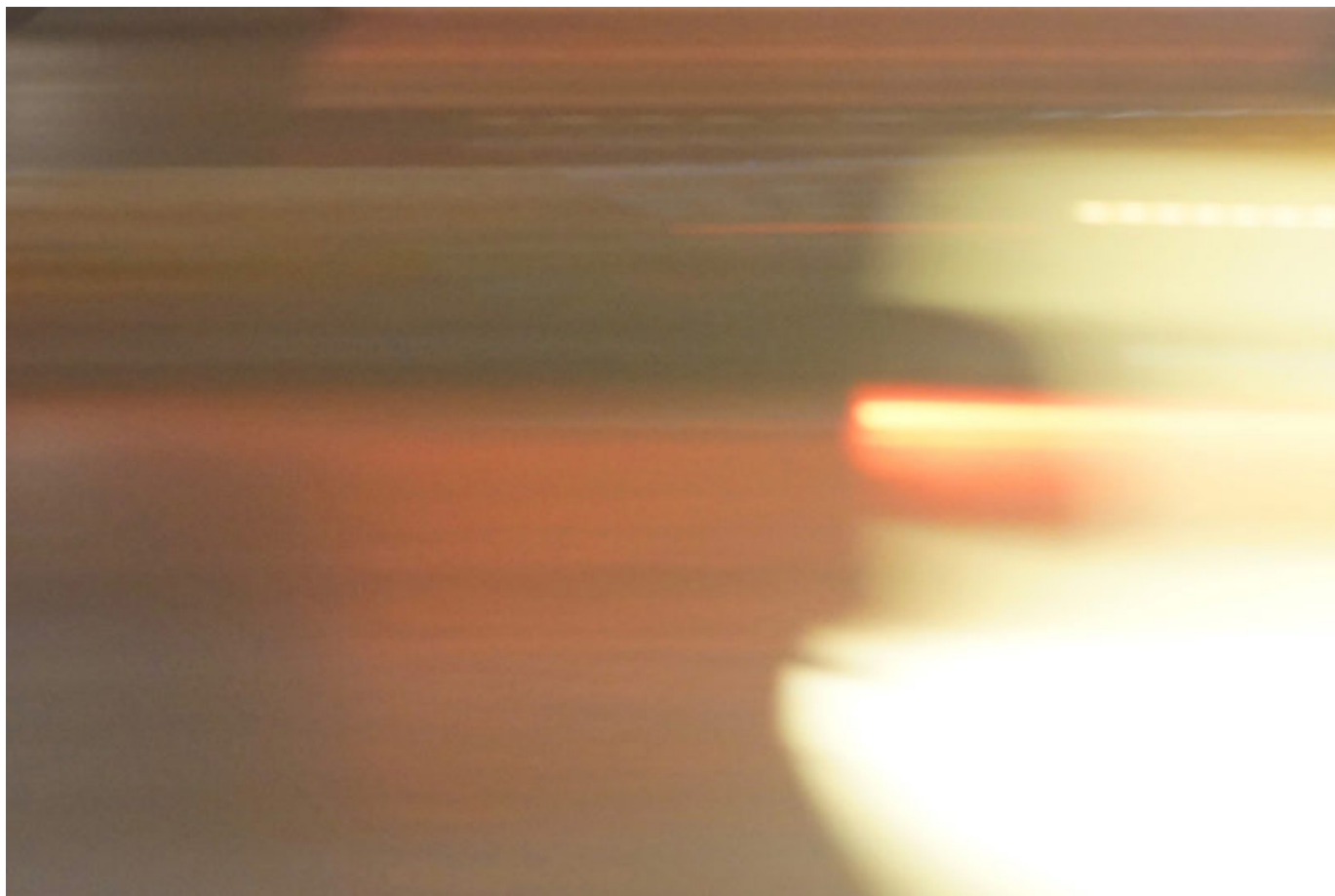


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I am a freshman in college, sitting in the student union café across from the hot, young, white professor I have a huge crush on. He teaches my Post-Structuralist Literary Theory—Gay and Lesbian Literature class, where I don't really understand anything I read. I'm just taking it because I saw the words "Gay and Lesbian" in the title. I tell him how my parents have not responded well to my coming out, how my dad has told me that he isn't going to pay for "that kind of education." The hot, young, white professor says, "Why don't you just divorce them?" betraying not a stitch of emotion in his face. I look at him, this anomaly of a human, who was a concert pianist as a child, finished undergrad at nineteen, law school at twenty-two, practiced corporate law for four years before returning to school to get a PhD in queer lit. I feel a chasm open up between us that I, of course, cannot predict will be a topographical rupture I stand at the edge of for the bulk of my adult life. "No," I say. "That is not an option. That is not an option for a kid in a Colombian family. You don't get it."

It's 1992, and I'm at American Dance Festival where black choreographer Donald McKayle is receiving the Scripps Award. Dr. Maya Angelou is presenting the award to him. She references a *New York Times* interview he did in 1973, where he says that he never just wanted to make forms. I don't really understand what this means at the time, but I feel like I do. Later I will understand more about the tension between white modern dance and black modern dance. Many years later I poke around on the internet and find the full quote:

I always begin a project with the knowledge that I am dealing with people—with individuals, with human beings. And my approach is always visceral. I give movements that are visceral. Everything must come from within. And everything must have meaning. When I choreograph, I never use people merely to create a design. I mean, abstraction is always present in an art form, and I use it, but I have never used human beings simply as a design element. My work has always been concerned with humanity, in one way or another. Basically, I feel the beauty in man is in his diversity, and in his deep inner feelings.



I'm sitting in a Movement Research reading group where Thomas DeFrantz is facilitating on the topic *The Afterlives of Slavery: Experimental Performance and the Specters of Race*. For the evening we've been asked to read the introduction to Christina Sharpe's *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being*, a chapter from Fred Moten's *The Case of Blackness*, and Tommie's essay "I Am Black (you have to be willing to not know)." We are going around in a circle, which is mostly composed of women of color, and explaining what brings us here. People talk about a range of topics that are explicit to race and identity—the ownership of black performance, racial equity in the arts, how to understand the concept of black dance outside of the United States, and how the questions brought up in black critical theory apply to artists who are from France or from Mexico.

One of the people there is an older white artist who has been a mentor to me since the beginning of my choreographic career. She is legendary for being an iconoclast of sorts, a Brooklyn-born fiery-tongued critic of bullshit who has left students crying because of their mediocre decisions in composition class. When it is her turn to speak, she becomes animated and says, "I believe that it all starts with motion!" and goes on to talk about the power of kinetics. It jumps out as an uncomfortable moment. I experience her statement as a diversion, or an attempt to bypass the topic at hand. Later, after the talk, she pulls me aside and says, "I just don't understand how you *dance* these ideas. How are people

going to do this?" I'm not sure exactly what she is referring to. Afro-pessimism? Race? Ideas in general? I haltingly try to tell her, "Well, um, I sort of think some people are already doing this ... have been doing this ..." To explain this to her feels so awkward. Obvious. I feel suddenly thrust back to the edge of the chasm —how can she not understand that for some people it's not about a "choice" to make dances about this?

I hear a story, gossip really, about Trisha Brown and how apparently she told somebody once that she never knew what to do about Shelley Senter or David Thomson in her work because Shelley was short and David was black.

I am in Switzerland, touring in a French choreographer's work. An American director is presenting a show of his at the same festival. I have a friend, a white dancer, who is in that artist's work, and we see each other at a music show one night. Even though I rarely see her, we always have super in-depth conversations whenever we run into each other. I like her. I love her. We talk about the differences between being a performing artist in the United States versus Europe. She says that it is just so obviously better in Europe because there's money and there's a market. These are all questions and frustrations that have dogged me for years. I'm almost jealous of her for being able to name it all so clearly, without hesitation. I agree with her for the most part, but something holds me back. We get to talking about our frustrations with the dance scene in New York. I say how my current frustration is the lack of people of color in downtown dance artists' work. "Well, that's just who's in the community," she answers, unquestioningly, as if the white choreographers' casting choices have nothing to do with subjectivity or representational politics. That somehow their bodies can be signifiers for a universal experience that doesn't need to look at whiteness as an active choice or as the default mechanism of a lazy, non-existent critique.

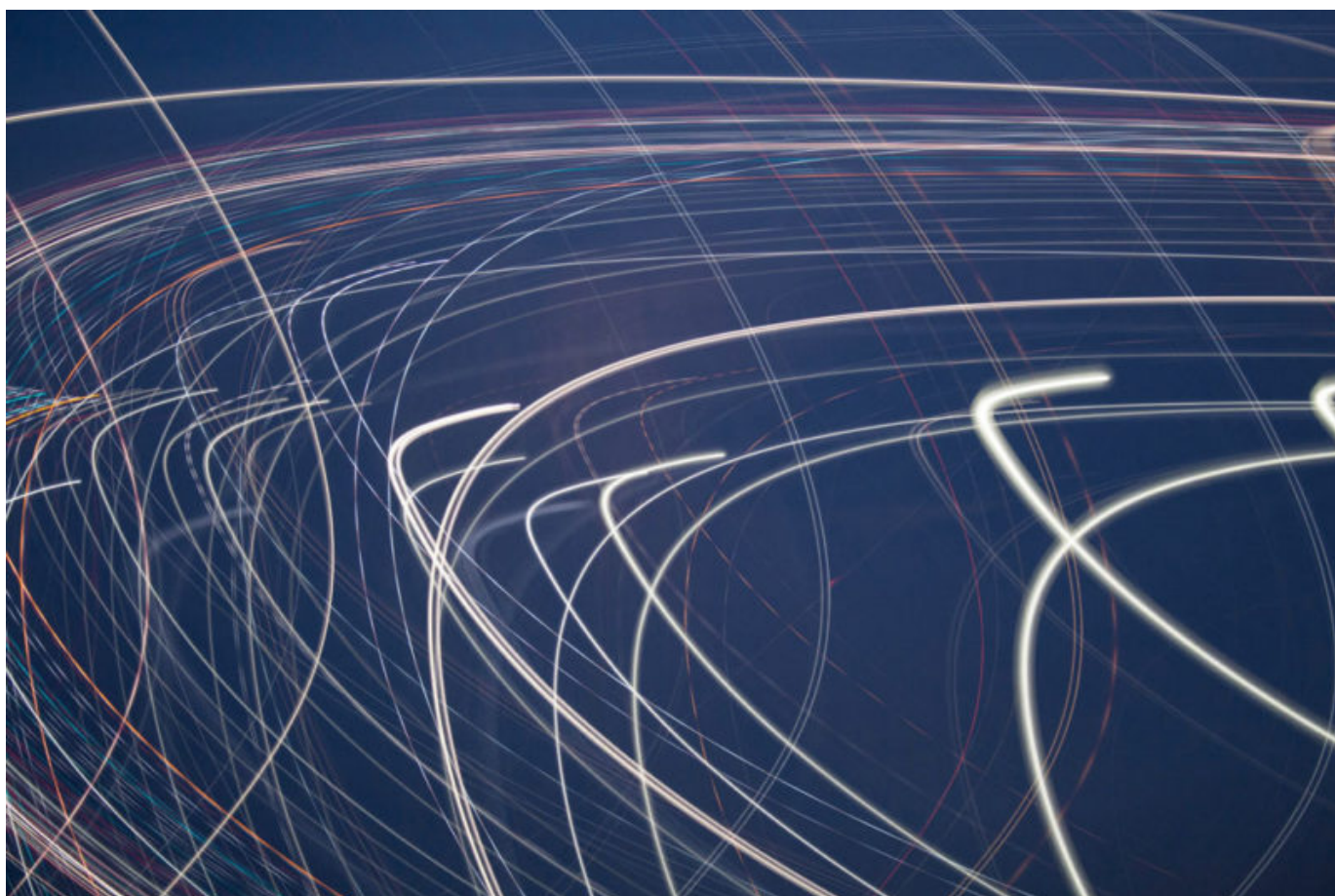


It is summer, and I'm leading a workshop for twenty dancers of the Ballet de Lorraine, a contemporary ballet company situated in Nancy, a small city in the eastern part of France. I lead the group through an exercise I ripped off from my friends in the performance collective My Barbarian, which they in turn borrowed from Brazilian theater artist Augusto Boal. In this exercise you identify various categories that the participants have to measure themselves with or against. For example, first we do something called "Spectrum," and I say: "Okay, let's make a line from the shortest person to the tallest person." I continue with some objective metrics, then move into social and conceptual ones like: rebel to conformist, virgin to whore, and so on. This progresses into the part of the exercise called "Binary," where you have to pick a side according to the metric. Again, it's a combination of types of metrics. I like ones such as: I vote/I don't vote, queer/straight, I paid for my education/my education was free. Unsurprisingly, though, the transition from Spectrum to Binary really agonizes some people who don't want to pick a side.

I say: "People of Color/White." This has particular provocative power in France because of a number of factors. The company is majority white, though of course this isn't something that seems to trouble most of the artists or administration. Conversations about racial equity are virtually non-existent in the social and artistic settings I find myself in there. To my understanding,

France doesn't even have race as a category on their census. The country abides by its mythological unity as one "race-blind" Republic, which of course becomes the foundational argument for virulent anti-immigration sentiment.

One of the white dancers joins the POC side. Not one to make assumptions about people's racial or ethnic backgrounds, I ask him, "Why are you on this side?" "Because I am no different than him," he says, gesturing to his best friend in the company who is black. I appreciate for a moment his sentiment of solidarity. It almost seems sweet. But I am too steeped in the politics of American racial injustice to let it lie there. "Okay. But if you two were driving in the U.S. and you got stopped by the police, I bet he would be treated very differently than you." I am almost shaking as I say this. Am I filled with anger because of injustices past or because of the present moment and his decision? I'm not sure. Is state violence the only metric I have to turn to in order to justify my argument?



I go see Netta Yerushalmy's work in a summer festival here in New York. She is making a series of pieces that function as present-day conversations with iconic dance pieces of the twentieth century. The basic form of the work is that she and other dancers reconstruct parts of these pieces from video to produce a new choreography while a theorist reads a text they wrote about the original

piece. On the day that I go she presents two pieces in the series—one addressing Martha Graham's *Night Journey* (1947), and the other dealing with Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* (1960). In the post-performance discussion a well-known, local, white choreographer starts to speak about the piece "I think you should just think of this piece as text. You shouldn't try to interpret it at all." It's unclear exactly what this means, although my familiarity with him and his ideological approach suggests some kind of dealing with the original choreography as if it is merely movements and forms to cut up and rearrange. Isn't the point of Netta's project precisely the opposite? To acknowledge the undeniable reality of subjectivity, gender, race, and sexuality that we contend with now and that was present, even in its invisibility, in the works with which she is dealing? That there is no such thing as a piece just being "text." But my confusion takes on another layer. He is talking about "this piece." One piece. It appears he is only talking about the Graham work. He isn't even acknowledging the piece Netta made about Ailey's *Revelations*, which to my perspective was the thornier and more provocative exploration. I'm actually sort of shocked—is he really not going to talk about the Ailey piece? As with so many experiences of erasure in real time, I am thrown off balance, into the incongruence of two perspectives that cannot meet. I shuttle through a lifetime of situations where this erasure is practiced—a lifetime of going to dance classes and concerts, looking around the room or the audience, seeing that the majority of folks are white, and thinking, "Who is not here? Who is not here?"

I'm sitting at New York Live Arts watching Bebe Miller's *The Making Room*, and she references the Whitney Biennial Dana Schutz/Hannah Black controversy. Bebe talks about how easy it is for her to recall the moment she saw the Emmett Till photograph in *Jet Magazine* and goes on to describe a load of sensory details about that moment—where she was, how the image echoes for her in her memory in ways that are inextricably tethered to her life. She describes details that are specific, but the way she names them is associative. Abstract, you could say. But inexorably personal. She's not talking about the painting; she is only talking about the original picture. She takes time between her sentences, walks slowly backward on stage. We see her in the beautiful, understated glory of her age. It's impossible not to think of the time and distance from when she saw that picture and the world now. Everything in between.



I am at the Metropolitan Museum of Art with my new boyfriend. We've come to see the William Eggleston show. As we walk through the museum, I think about what sort of picture we make. He is young, skinny, black. I am older, thick, ethnically ambiguous. I think about what people, my friends, or even I myself think about our age difference, about our differences in general. We walk into the exhibition, and I tell him that I want to split company in order to take in the photos on my own time. In between some of the pictures are cryptic, out-of-context quotes by Eggleston. I stand in front of one:

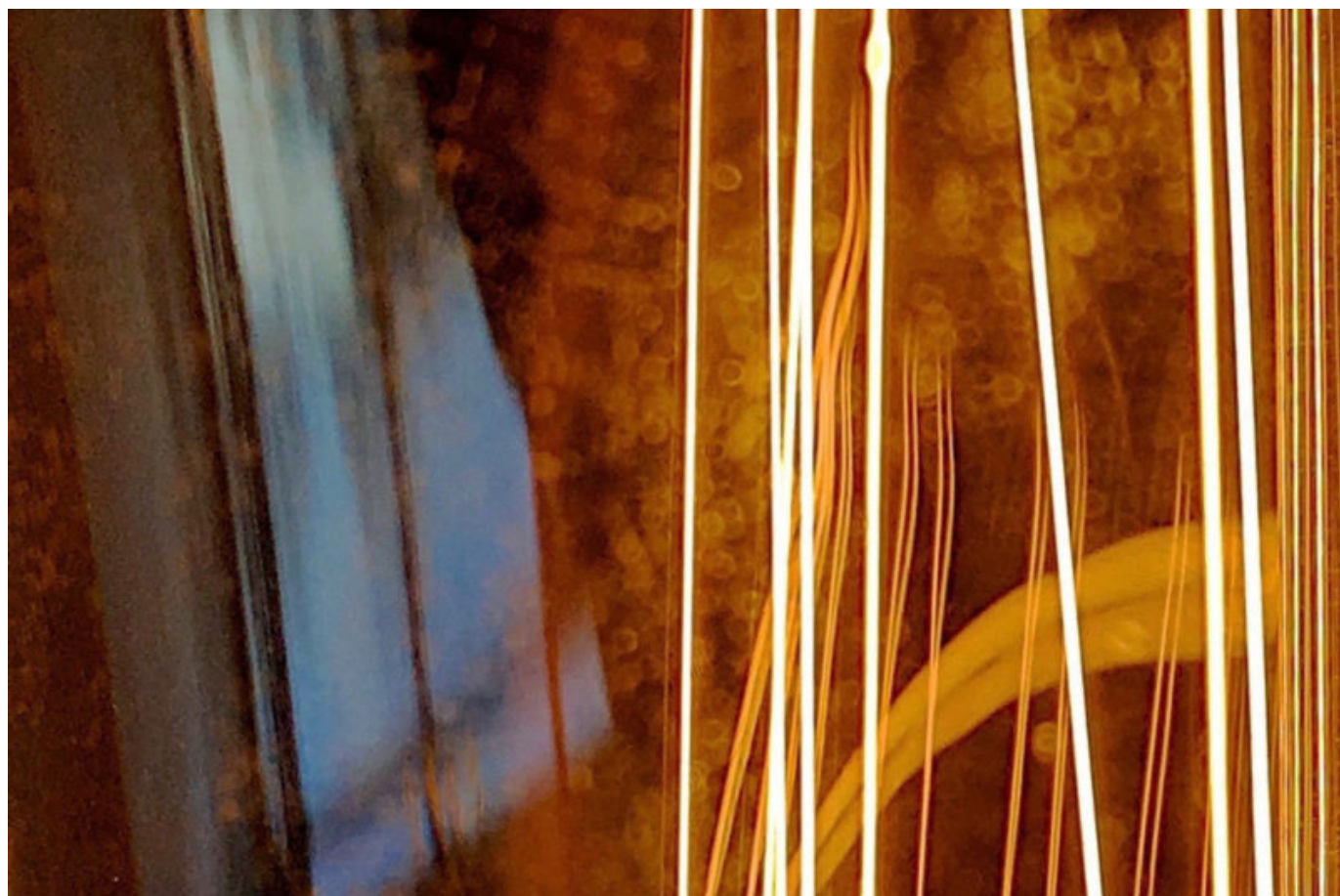
A picture is what it is, and I've never noticed that it helps to talk about them, or answer specific questions about them, much less volunteer information in words. It wouldn't make any sense to explain them. Kind of diminishes them. People always want to know when something was taken, where it was taken, and, God knows, why it was taken. It gets really ridiculous. I mean, they're right there, whatever they are.

Who has the right not to explain themselves? The people who don't have to. The ones whose subjectivities have been naturalized. It enrages me. No, it

confuses me. I'm all for being confused, for searching, for having to do a bit of work. But the absence of explanation is somehow ... somehow ... somehow what?

And yet if you refuse to explain as Eggleston says he doesn't like to, what's left is feeling, including the sense that his refusal has just reaffirmed his subject position. But there is also another realm of feeling, which I like. I imagine the photographs emitting a magic cloud that hovers vertically, in front of the picture, beyond the size of the frame but still small and ever-shifting. I feel the space between me and the photograph. We are drawn into each other, like the tractor beam of a spaceship.

I sit on a bench in the middle of the exhibition surrounded by the evidence, however frozen, of so much life. Life that moved beyond the frames of these pictures, though maybe not so much farther than that. People whose bodies were in relation to each other and to the places they lived in ways I can't see in these pictures. The ways that power, access, possibility, and the ability to dream into the future were constricted by the happenstance of economic or racial contingencies that defy reduction into shape and color. These lives haunt me across time, enter into a fantastical space that I conjure now. What is the stage space of a dream, and where do the characters go when they're not in frame? Dissolve, appear, dissolve.



What are my materials for this current crisis of identity? How did I come to be colonized? And how did I find out that I had been colonized? Have I found out? How did I come to equate family and origin as violent and threatening? How did whiteness become, I shudder even to write this, safety—a lack of feeling, a lack of allegiances. It made space, or at least I thought it did, for me. For a me that had no history.

Another Eggleston quote: “I had this notion of what I called a democratic way of looking around, that nothing was more or less important.”

I stand in my kitchen, dumbstruck, specific, as I listen to the news on the radio. I become enraged reading the stupid comments on the *New York Times* website on articles about gender, race, or anything having the slightest bit to do with difference. The swarm of rage and sadness frames my vision, butts up against my belief in possibility and change. Is the quantity of this belief measurable—distinct? What amount of my cellular makeup is caught up in this feeling, or in the matrix of melancholy, as I mull over a litter of injustices, personal or systemic, that occupy my awareness? Am I a subject or a vessel, an agent or a channel?

The wailing grief of a black mother whose son has been beaten to death is no more or less important than any grieving mother’s wailing, but for the knowledge that it was inevitable, that despite striving and protecting, fate came predetermined and precut, like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle that melts as soon as it is completed, then reformulates into different shapes, only to make the same picture.

Miguel Gutierrez is a choreographer, musician, singer, and writer living in Brooklyn, NY. His new work, This Bridge Called My Ass, premieres in January 2019 at The Chocolate Factory as part of American Realness Festival.

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