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From Race Crisis to Race Celebration: Online Body Politics and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater[i]

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Abstract
Throughout the history of the United States, there have been many critical times associated with racism. When other forms of crisis overlap the existing ones – as the Covid-19 pandemic – even more challenges appear, calling for a more complex artistic response. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is well known across the United States and the world not only through their innovative ballet style (which builds on classical choreography and enriches it with creatively processed blues, jazz, and Afro-Caribbean tones), but also through what Thomas F. DeFrantz calls Alvin Ailey's "embodiment of African American culture" in the subtitle of his book (*Dancing Revelations*, 2004). This essay looks at Ailey Theater's politics of the dancing body, with a focus on recent productions included in the Ailey All Access online project, meant to replace a Fall 2021 United States tour that could not take place because of the pandemic. I will argue that the company's choreographic overcoming and even beautifying sorrow through dance expands Ailey's healing narrative about African American history to the Covid-19 pandemic. Their recent projects propose a desirable post-racist world, in which those who have been through much sorrow can support those who have been through less, and thus promote a politics of human togetherness, hope, and reconstruction.

Keywords: African American, ballet, body, celebration, crisis, modern dance, Covid-19 pandemic, performance, politics, spirituals

Introduction: Crisis, Performance, and Alvin Ailey's Contribution to American Dance

Reference dictionaries such as the *Merriam-Webster* online point out that semantic drifts may occur in the meaning of terms. One such example is the term *crisis*, which is subject to the following discussion: "Originally, *crisis* denoted 'the turning point for better or worse in an acute disease or fever.' Now it most commonly means 'a difficult or dangerous situation that needs serious attention,' yet few people insist that it should be used exclusively in its older meaning" ("Crisis"). It seems, however, that the newer sense is preferred when talking about "race crisis" or "racial crisis," as used for instance in an edited collection published by SUNY Press in 2002 titled *The Racial Crisis in American Higher Education: Continuing Challenges for the Twenty-First Century* (Smith et al.). This book, like many others, insists on the fact that it is precisely through the lack of that "serious attention," required by its very definition, that this particular crisis has been an ongoing phenomenon for centuries, despite the urgency of every acute turning point that has reminded people of the need to address it. Since, in such cases of repeated occurrence, crisis involves serious changes in people's everyday lives and mentalities, how is its sense of impending immediacy to be addressed?

Whereas politicians often seem to fail to address critical situations efficiently, crises seem to have always been fueling the arts, giving opportunities for valuable original content to be created. Performance arts have been particularly good at responding to crisis, especially in the postwar era, with its rise in individualism. In a 2012 book about the recent refugee crisis – which also seemed acute initially, but then turned into a chronic issue authorities failed to address – Alison Jeffers points out the value of the face-to-face encounter between the protagonists of refugee stories and their audience. She sees in this the great potential of performance arts to show, rather than just tell, "the increasing number of stories told by refugees about their experiences." Performance makes audiences empathize with the stories it shows and thus addresses the issues behind them more directly and persuasively (Jeffers 1-2). When represented on stage, crisis–whether short-term and intense or long-term

and persistent – becomes, through the make-believe value of theatrical art, part of the viewer's reality. Given their capacity to focus on individual cases and thus avoid sweeping generalizations, notable African American theatrical productions such as Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) were an intrinsic part of the cultural atmosphere surrounding the Civil Rights movement, following roads opened by the spectacular explosion of originality and innovation of the Harlem Renaissance.

Having gone through a very harsh history, African American performers fit this picture very well. Yet, seeing Alvin Ailey as merely a faithful representative of African American performance culture would do justice to his outstanding contribution only partially. While his choreography certainly turned African American performance traditions to good account, he would "deflect ethnic pigeonholing" for his ballet company, preferring to be described particularly in international tours as an innovator in modern dance techniques (DeFrantz 213). In her book *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange*, Clare Croft focuses on the American government's generous cultural policy with respect to ballet companies' international tours, which, despite the racial and homophobic prejudice of the time, strategically used a "universalizing rhetoric" (Croft 70) meant to emphasize American values rather than the interracial conflicts within American society. Croft relates this to an aesthetic search for what made dance "look American": "an approach to dance that spans both ballet and modern dance genres" (66), whose aesthetic abstraction overruled any kind of discrimination. Internationally, Ailey represented the United States, and Ailey himself refused to admit that their artistic endeavor had anything to do with race. As he said in an interview quoted by Croft, "There was no special attention paid to the interracial nature of the company or its predominantly black membership . . . it wasn't a black thing. The posters said we were an American dance company" (68). Thus, the aesthetic environment of dance provides an auspicious environment for racial emancipation, in such a powerful way that the issue of race is not even mentioned.

Ailey's rejection of categorizations coming from the outside reminds one of the needs felt by the African American feminism of the Civil Rights era to distinguish itself from white feminism. The latter was

predominantly middle class and in search of emancipation from the private space into the public one, through basically securing women's right to work. Black women, in contrast, as they confronted themselves with economic issues, often as single-family providers, had to work. Their issues were of a different nature and sprang from complex intersectional oppressions, gender and race being concurring factors in their case. Thus, the term "feminism" was perceived as insufficiently charged with meaning, as it merely promoted fighting for women's rights. So, Alice Walker famously coined the term "womanism" to refer to the fight of a "black feminist or feminist of color" against gender and racial oppression alike (Walker xi). Likewise, the contribution of African American music (the unique source of originality for American classical music according to Czech composer Antonin Dvorák's famous statement at the end of the nineteenth century[ii]) to world music should not be judged lightly, nor in the absence of the four-century history of oppression whose mark is still felt today.

The belief that art could retell and even change history, as well as the impulse to create a dance company that transcended the racist discriminatory practices still acutely present in the first decades of the twentieth century, came from the company's founder, Alvin Ailey. The dance prodigy was born in the south of Texas in 1931, was the disciple of modernist ballet innovator Lester Horton, briefly led Horton's ballet company after his death, then moved to New York and founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1958 (DeFrantz 27-50). Ailey was by no means just an extraordinary African American. He certainly drew on the cultural legacy of African America. This inspired his signature choreographed piece, *Revelations*, premiered in 1960 and still performed today, a moving instance of narrative dance telling the story of the rise of African Americans from slavery to emancipation. Ailey was an important activist for African American culture and, through his work on stage, a progressive promoter of African American rights. As Robert Battle, the current artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, remembers in a *New Yorker on YouTube* clip about "Alvin Ailey and the Importance of the Arts," produced by Emily Rhyne, Ailey said that, through his art, seen as a "weapon for change," he wanted to "hold a

mirror to society so that people could see how beautiful they are." The very example of this beauty, expressed for the first time in *Revelations*, opens another chapter of Ailey's contribution, which, in the history of world ballet, is at least as important: that of modern technical innovation.

Music and the Body in African American Culture

The importance of music in African American culture is well known. In his contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* entitled "The Blues Novel," Steven C. Tracy talks about the novel borrowing from blues the "loosely fixed structures into which are poured the subject matter or an individual experience that reflects communal interests" (122). Tracy goes down to small details with respect to the actual techniques of looseness and deferral taken over from blues into the textual fabric of African American fiction. This organic incorporation of music into all cultural forms is described by music anthropologist John Szwed as going as far as transformative ritual in African American culture: "Blues, like religious behaviour, are highly ritualized, apparently with the intention of easing or blocking 'transformations of state in human beings or nature,' rather than merely 'entertaining'" (31). This is a very important observation: in a form of art perceived by the general public as merely designed for entertainment, African American artists see a dynamic process, through which they not only express their deepest concerns, but may also go through personal changes. To Szwed it seems an irony that, if race tends so often to be defined stereotypically as a mere "cluster of physical features," there is however some truth in the stereotype: African American culture is embodied, it relies on the various resources of the body more than any other (77-8).

This dynamic structural looseness, aiming to retrieve the rhythms of the body, can go much further, into theoretical discourse. In his monograph dedicated to Ailey's life and career, titled *Dancing Revelations*, Thomas DeFrantz describes the critical method employed in the writing of his own book in the following terms:

> In addition to historical analysis, the manuscript includes a series of short, self-contained essays that constitute a counternarrative to the main body of writing. I intend for these breaks to resonate with black musical practice, in which an insistent beat is interrupted by a flash of contradictory rhythmic ideas. For me, the break is the most significant gesture of African American performance, as it contains both the tie to a ubiquitous rhythmic flow and the potential for complete anarchy and disruption. The break creates a liminoid space that allows listeners a place to enter the musical dance. I hope that the manuscript's literary breaks will function similarly to periodically revive the interests of readers who become bored with the cataloguing of Ailey's life work. (viii)

DeFrantz reveals here not only a structural principle so strong in African American culture that it legitimately enters even the academic discourse dedicated to it, but also a principle of audience inclusion that is at least as important: it is through the breaks intrinsic in the rhythmic flow of African American performance (derived, Szwed would argue, from the irregular, improvisational patterns of blues) that a bond is formed between the performer and their audience. Thus, not only do all bodies become "bodies politic" in performance, responding to the political challenges of their time in a way that is always embodied, as Patrick Campbell argues (267). But, further, in African American culture, we are looking at a model of performance (which includes the performance of academic text!) that is structurally designed so as to be inclusive, to allow the receiver to become a participant in the improvisational negotiation of the artistic act and, thus, it goes without saying, to be touched by it much more deeply.

Of all the arts, dance – the form of art that is intrinsically embodied and set to music – is best equipped to correspond to this description. Dance in general, but particularly classical ballet, which tells well-structured stories through bodies that interact in dance, is a wordless art, experienced and developed through the body. Ailey broke new ground through having his company dance to spirituals, whose prayer focus and irregular rhythm were not immediately conducive to dancing. This led to great innovation and to a highly original, avant-garde, limit-breaking choreography, which continued to develop. Ailey's achievement stands out in the history of modern dance as not only a celebration of the rich heritage of African American culture, but also as one of the earliest celebrations (to insist on this favorite word of his, which probably best

describes his approach to the artistic act) of what Julia Foulkes calls "modern bodies."

In her book titled precisely *Modern Bodies*, with the suggestive subtitle *Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey*, Foulkes goes back to the 1930s to trace the emergence of new American dance as a cultural movement that reflects directly on the socio-historical realities of America. It also capitalizes on the primacy of the body as the locus of modern(ist) innovation. Also, the idea that dance tells stories, going even further than a classical ballet's libretto, into the retelling of important episodes in American history, is derived from one of the most important aesthetic principles of modernism, the syncretism of the arts. It draws attention to the fact that the body is the primary witness of historical experience, as suggested from the very beginning by the epigraph that precedes the introduction, signed by the celebrated American dancer and choreographer Martha Graham: "You do not realize how the headlines that make daily history affect the muscles of the human body" (Foulkes 1).

In his book dedicated to Ailey, DeFrantz offers a detailed choreographic analysis of *Revelations*, which starts by paying tribute to what, to DeFrantz, is Ailey's own celebration of the beauty of the black body. This topic has had a complicated evolution in African American culture, being still an issue nowadays, with only few solutions to the crisis arising from the social pressure to assess black beauty by western white standards. The need to redefine female beauty has been an important focus in African American culture, the best known example being arguably Toni Morrison's last novel, *God Save the Child* (2015). The novel sets off as the story of a female misfit, who grows up thinking of herself as literally cast out of society because of the deep blackness of her body. Learning to love herself and reinvent her beauty on purely African American grounds, as she becomes a fashion designer – i.e., a professional of beauty – is a difficult quest, in which she is engaged throughout the novel, and which allows her to literally reinvent herself by new aesthetic standards.

In *Modern Bodies*, Foulkes tackles the same idea in relation to African American dancers, who "did not find an easy place within this new American art form, even though the theme of African Americans'

rise from oppression dominated many of the stories of white modern dancers' choreography, such as Tamiris's *Negro Spirituals*" (3). However, the dynamic medium of dance proves an auspicious environment for self-expression, which eventually turns to good account the exoticization of African and Caribbean spaces on the modern American stage. Paradoxically, in this ballet niche, racially different bodies, by virtue of their "exotic" appearance, are allowed to perform precisely because they are so attractively different. The classical example is Josephine Baker, who took Paris by storm in the twenties and eventually became emblematic of the French *variété* stage. In the United States, this "exotic" input, on the rise in the twenties and thirties against this domineering background of American heroism, becomes increasingly visible and raises some important questions that are not only about race, but also about gender and sexuality. Dancing is a dynamic continuum in which all boundaries that block inclusion and plurality in American society melt:

> But modern dancers enacted a more radical concept. Marginalized groups of gay men, Jewish women, and African American men and women flocked to a fledgling art form that was based on physical expression. Defined by external physical characteristics or so-called deviant sexual practices, the social identities of these dancers shaped the means by which they contributed to defining America. And their physical differences and exploration of body movement showed the limits of pluralism and assimilation in the 1930s and, particularly, the depth and endurance of racial fracture. Modern dance began and remains a place where people on the edges of society congregate and express themselves. (3-5)

Thus, if African Americans continued to be discriminated against in society, on the ballet stage a niche was created for them to express themselves freely and dissolve the rigid boundaries of racial segregation. It was in this context that Ailey trained on the West Coast and then founded his ballet theater in New York in 1958, only to perfect, in DeFrantz's view, black modernism in art.

Since the first international tour in 1962 (sponsored by the US State Department as part of a Cold War strategy to promote American artistic excellence as a product of a people-oriented society, DeFrantz 59; see also Croft above), much of the Ailey theater's activity has taken place on US and international tours. A short break in touring was imposed by the

Covid-19 pandemic, during which time the online medium was discovered and reclaimed for dancing as one more space to claim for vibrant bodies engaged in artistic creation. This is when the *Ailey All Access* project was founded, which is still ongoing and is meant to continue in the future, and which I will discuss in the next section.

Dancing through the Pandemic: From the Home Stage to *Ailey All Access*

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the period of complete lockdown around the world since March 2020 initially affected the performance sector maybe more than any other. If recorded versions of shows can be seen on film, mostly to document a certain production, it is a truth generally acknowledged in the world of performance that the immersive pact between an audience and a group of performers on stage depends on their encounter *in praesentia*. Theaters around the world were quick to start streaming recorded performances for free, often on social media platforms such as Facebook, where the illusion of *in praesentia* could be created (with audience members posting comments and clapping virtual hands in praise of the performers).

At a later point, when coming together in small groups was possible again, live performances were broadcast or streamed directly from stages in theaters with no audiences. Live audiences were replaced by a (much more numerous, but virtual) worldwide community of viewers, connected to the show through Facebook, Zoom, or direct TV, thus experiencing a paradoxical combination of extreme proximity in the virtual world, yet significant (and safe!) physical distance. As the virtual environment (already familiar to some professionals working from home, sometimes for geographically remote international companies) was redefined as a worldwide medium where live encounters between performers and their audiences could take place, famous shows such as Vienna Philharmonic's 2021 New Year Concert or Eurovision 2021 were broadcast in this format. While the presence of dance was impressive in the online environment throughout the pandemic, one could not help noticing the paradox at the heart of an artistic practice that is embodied *par excellence* being

performed in a virtual medium, where its embodiedness has to be imagined.

In an attempt to provide an all-encompassing view on an emerging body of analysis of the new online dance practices in 2020, Rebecca Weber links the various solutions found by performers to the difficulty of suggesting embodiment online to "our becoming posthuman" as we increasingly embrace technology, following a new definition of humanity as existing "within a wider ecology that blends species, technology, and the environments they occupy." While the posthuman condition presupposes a transcending of the body, it does not exclude a reinvented version of corporeality either. Weber reviews various recent theoretical positions on the negotiations between posthumanism and embodiment, concluding, with Rosi Braidotti, that "Art is . . . posthuman by structure, as it carries us to the limits of what our embodied selves can do or endure" (107). Braidotti's proposal that the posthuman transcends bodily limitations overcomes what she calls "imperial" understandings of the human that are too dependent on the body – hence on sex, race, or genome (15). But if the posthuman excels in overcoming the limitations associated with the body and has therefore the benefit of being postracial (and postracist), it is, in light of Braidotti's local, situated knowledges, still "embodied and embedded, firmly located somewhere" (51). This posthuman embodiedness, Weber further stresses, is of a particular kind, undergoing reconfigurations that imply "the possibility of a digitally-enhanced sense of embodiment" rather than the old palpable version of one's embodied self.

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater launched various live online projects as early as the onset of the pandemic, whose insistence on the importance of the body despite the virtual nature of their performances suggests precisely such a digitally enhanced understanding of embodiment. They started, like other theaters, by posting various past activities on their YouTube channel, ranging from formal shows to dancing in the streets of various American or foreign cities – an initiative that simulated physical presence in various recognizable places of the world and thus was particularly meaningful to the audience, especially at lockdown time, when physical travel had to be replaced by virtual

simulations. Videos such as "Ailey Dancers in the Streets of Paris" held a special value to lockdown viewers, given the generous message of celebrating art and life in this chain-reaction dancing dialogue with French ballet dancers and, in the end, with passers-by who engage in a performance dialogue with them. The event was described on the YouTube page as "A spectacular chain reaction of dance between Ailey company members and French dancers in Paris" ("Ailey Dancers in the Streets of Paris").[iii] The dancers transmitted a powerful message of unhindered togetherness across borders, despite the imposed isolation, which seemed to be meant to invite the viewers to continue the chain dance reaction beyond the separating interface of the screen on which they were viewing the performance and thus finally embody it in their own real world. There was also the dimension of imaginary travel mimicking in a sense another trend launched online during lockdown, that of armchair traveling (see *The Guardian Armchair Travel* series). With the Alvin Ailey Theater performers, music and dance supplement the surrounding cityscape and engage not only the minds, but also the bodies of the participating audience. Thus, as virtual reality is increasingly perceived as an extension of reality in the traditional sense, the aesthetic dimension of dance is felt more intimately, prompting a togetherness of the artistic act across the imaginary barrier between the stage and the audience. Similar experiments took place in New York streets and its suburbs, as well as in other American cities, taking the shape of spontaneous dancing to any music, even coming from a jukebox, following the principle that any music is fit for dancing and anybody can dance.

Not only is dance an embodied art, but so is African American culture as a whole, as I was showing above (see Szwed 77-8). In his description of African American dance practices, DeFrantz also insists on the special emphasis on bodily rhythms and on elements of physical movement, such as "the break as the most significant gesture of African American performance" (viii). Yet the kind of dependence on the body present in African American art reminds one of Braidotti's definition of posthuman embodiedness as transcending the traditional limitations of the body (51). In Braidotti's terms, by crossing over into the virtual space, the black body becomes posthuman (in that it transcends the racial limitations

of human societies) and therefore postracial. Thus, it seems to be precisely because of this need to overcome the embodiment of their art, denied at the time of lockdown, that the members of the Alvin Ailey theater embraced the challenge of the online environment so fully.

Given this crossing of borders (of which the historical interracial one certainly was the most challenging) during the spring of 2020 lockdown, the leap from dancing in the street to dancing at the end of a computer terminal, from one's home, somehow did not seem so big. The clip suggestively entitled "The Call to Unite," posted June 10, 2020, orchestrates a group choreography on Zoom, an experiment that quickly became very popular in the spring of 2020, as a means of bringing people together online and in their souls, despite physical isolation. This was the company's particular contribution to re-establishing togetherness in a difficult situation, on the basis of a shared background. The initially disparate instances of people clapping hands and tap-dancing rhythmically in their rooms, urging their audience to do so too and thus rediscover their bodies and find virtual alternatives to physical encounters, come together and turn into a recognizable spiritual from Ailey's signature show *Revelations* ("Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham," which, due to its significance with reference to African American history, transmits a powerful message about the human capacity to overcome difficulties in the pandemic as well). The clapping and rhythm gradually become empowering and take the participants out of their lockdown at-home spaces onto the (then) empty streets of New York, its parks and its suburbs, whose green grass and trees in blossom are not only spring temporal markers, but also symbols of a much more important call back to life. The last scene of the clip brings the company back on stage, which, away from the imposed Covid-19 lockdown at home, is the true home of the artists. The message that this clip promotes is that it is thus through sharing dancing that the normality of performance on stage will be conquered again.

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company has been very active in the online environment since the onset of the pandemic, targeting various audience groups. The company's Facebook page has also changed since March 2020 from being an active space for promoting various

activities and shows to an actual hosting space for performance and, more importantly, to a space for communicating with the audience. If this is precisely Facebook's primary function, to facilitate communication, it also became a space of interaction between performers and spectators. Like many other ballet companies in the world (famously, Ballet Étoile of the Opera Garnier in Paris), the Alvin Ailey theater was present on Facebook and YouTube through dance tutorials taught by individual dancers from home. One of the most memorable such tutorials was Hope Boykin's "Revelations Workshop" (posted March 30, 2020), in which the dancer explains and exemplifies the choreography of Ailey's signature show, but also, in doing so, contributes to its popularity.

The Alvin Ailey company was also actively part of other projects transitioning from physical spaces to online ones, such as the *Lincoln Center at Home* video series in the fall of 2020, a selection of notable performances that took place at the Center throughout time. Lincoln Center, which defines itself on its website as "the world's leading performing arts center," is one of the most important stages for dance of many kinds in New York City, as well as for inter-ethnic dialogues through dance. It was also one of those theaters that remained actively present in people's consciousness throughout the pandemic lockdowns. Their website (www.lincolncenter.org), constantly updated with announcements of ongoing performances (which have been many throughout the summer of 2022, as if to make up for the lost time), still maintains a "digital" tab, first activated under lockdown and kept as a valuable possibility to expand the stage into the wide virtual space.

The following fall, the Alvin Ailey theater launched their own online project, called *Ailey All Access*, which went even further than *Lincoln Center at Home* in that it did not only post past performances, but it renewed them every fortnight, following a schedule that did give the online audience the impression of an ongoing tour. This strategy was common to many theaters whose shows were streaming online. The way in which the Alvin Ailey theater did it observed an alternation between new productions and revived versions of older, consecrated ones, giving the impression of historical continuity of which the company is so fond. The *Ailey All Access* series was meant to replace a US tour they were

supposed to go on in the fall and winter of 2021. An important dimension of the *All Access* series was maintaining continuity with the company's history of performances, which implied reinterpretations of celebrated shows such as Ailey's one-woman classic *Cry* (originally performed by Judith Jamison, now revived by Jacqueline Green) and *Testament*, a (necessary and, as expected, uplifting) tribute to Ailey's signature show *Revelations*.

Testament is a group ballet, with two women of different generations interacting outside the group, as if in a dialogue between the past and the present. It is a new production, choreographed by Matthew Rushing, Clifton Brown, and Yusha-Marie Sorzano, featuring some recognizable company dancers, among whom we notice, in the group foreground, Jacqueline Green, the performer of *Cry* in the *Ailey All Access* series. *Testament*, of which a few fragments are still available on YouTube, but which was streamed in its entirety for two weeks in November 2021, is set to an alternation of spiritual-inspired, but highly liberating modern music and rhythmical African beats. The alternation, as well as the bold choreography, allowing a full unfolding of energies in the good Ailey choreographic tradition, contains clear allusions to *Revelations*, through recognizable gestures such as the dancers' bending to the ground and then rising, to remain for a moment in what Hope Boykin, in her Facebook "Revelations Workshop," calls Ailey's signature winged arms position.

Like *Revelations*, *Testament* is a danced story of rising from slavery and building up a present and future of joy and celebration. It preserves the tribute to individual female figures of consequence, with the older woman and the younger one who stand out from the group, with their individual stories that branch out from the one big group story. It is to *one* such individual woman (in whom, however, many other heroic black female figures live) that *Cry* was dedicated. It was originally gifted by Ailey to his mother on her birthday, but choreographed specifically for Judith Jamison (Ailey's friend, dance partner, and immediate successor as company artistic director). As such, *Cry* does imply a certain overlap between the two female figures of great importance in his life, but is,

ultimately, a tribute to all powerful black women who have risen from the burden of the past and have achieved something.

The history of *Cry*'s revival also goes back to the lockdown period in spring 2020, when female company members would dance to its music and choreography from their homes. The piece was meant, as Ailey reportedly said, "to say something about the huge influence that black women have had in my life" (DeFrantz 182). In a clip posted in May 2020, entitled "Current and Former Ailey Women Dance *Cry*," several female dancers dressed in white (with variations on the original white leotard and long ruffled white skirt originally worn by Jamison) recompose a group version of the one-woman show from their various indoor and outdoor locations in New York City, where the company is based. A few months later, in the *Ailey All Access* fall 2021 version, current company member Jacqueline Green revives the show, wearing the very same attire as Jamison and thus, implicitly, paying tribute to her as well.

Jamison speaks about the creation of *Cry*:

> . . . it was a birthday present for Alvin's mother. You see, she was coming from Texas to see her son's company and Alvin knew she'd be celebrating a birthday in New York. In those days, none of us could shop at Tiffany or Bloomingdales, so Alvin decided the nicest present he could give his mother was a ballet. We went into the studio . . . and began moving to the music . . . and in a few days . . . Alvin made an enduring work of art. . . . Cheering audiences still have Alvin's birthday present to his mother. ("Celebrating")

The gesture of gifting a ballet to one's mother, in which the female figure becomes a priestess who elicits deep meanings from her original struggle and sorrow, is also suggestive of Ailey's own understanding and approach to African American empowerment, which should be a creative, dynamic, unstoppable journey of achievement. The figure of the mother, on the other hand, suggests an important connection with the past, with an African American history of not bending to difficulties, whose message became impactful once again during the pandemic.

Cry is a celebrated tribute to African American women, and highlights the uniqueness of (each and every) individual performer who

tackles it that comes close to the significance held by *Revelations* for group performance. It is described by DeFrantz in his Ailey monograph as follows:

> The dance achieves an evocative tone through an economy of gestures in its opening moments. The curtain rises to reveal a dancer swathed in a white leotard and voluminous white skirt, bearing a long white scarf upward as a totem to the gods. She sways easily to Alice Coltrane's electronic score "Something about John Coltrane," then opens the cloth to bear it forward ceremonially, at arm's length, in a series of weighty, serpentine lunges. She kneels and throws the scarf outward to the sides, recoiling from each sideward toss with a mighty, percussive lurch of her torso. Rising, she begins a series of incantatory gestures toward the fabric, including a low-to-the-ground pulsating isolation of the torso borrowed from neo-African dance forms.
>
> The dancer's attitude toward the prop transforms it from a scarf to an infant's swaddling cloth to an object of potent ritual consequence. At times, she seems to react to the fabric, moving away from it almost fearfully before falling to her knees to return to it, grudgingly. Grabbing the scarf, she runs through the space, trailing it majestically, then falls to her knees again to use the cloth as cleaning rag, desperately scrubbing the floor. She rises again to wear the cloth as a shawl, then steps on its ends as if bound by it to the ground. Finally, she wraps it around her head to run in a circle, becoming a priestess in royal costume. Repeating the opening phrases of the dance, she bears the cloth forward to the ground, again spreading it out along the front edge of the stage. She backs away from the cloth to dance as the score shifts subtly into an extended saxophone solo. (182-83)

The dialogue between the dancer and the scarf, the object that holds so many meanings in women's history, traces a trajectory of the black female self (and of her body, gracefully singled out by the whiteness of her attire) from powerlessness to empowerment and beauty. In the section dedicated to *Cry* on the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's website, Jamison's testimony about the creation of this show is quoted extensively:

> In her autobiography *Dancing Spirit*, Ms. Jamison wrote: "Exactly where the woman is going through the ballet's three sections was never explained to me by Alvin. In my interpretation, she represented those women before her who came from the hardships of slavery, through the pain of losing loved ones, through overcoming extraordinary depressions and tribulations. Coming out of a world of pain and trouble, she has found her way – and triumphed." ("Cry")

"Dance is for everybody": A World of Dancing

Faithful to their founder's creed about the universality of dance and its multiple therapeutic and community-building uses, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has diversified its activities significantly since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The mission they assume is by no means only directed at African Americans, but is, by Ailey's own wish (as a gay black man who became a world-famous ballet dancer, choreographer, and founder of an outstanding ballet company), dedicated to supporting communication and collaboration across all social boundaries. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has long been involved in community and educational outreach, but has intensified its activities, in a dynamic alternation of online and offline formats, since the onset of the pandemic. In this sense, they have been bringing an important contribution to the growing fields of applied theater or using theater in education and community building (see Brenner et al. and Etheridge Woodson). As the context of their recent action upon society has been pandemic and immediately post-pandemic, the Alvin Ailey company also assumes an important social healing role as they re-enable their audiences to return to pre-pandemic social interaction, while also maintaining the online environment as a gain, as a useful extension of real space that involves reaching further into the world.

The company's outreach activities are of many kinds, but include two main directions. One of them is the artistic, performative outreach, through the company's live shows and their extension online through *Ailey All Access*, but also through *Ailey II* (the company's younger offshoot, which also encourages more ethnic diversity, even though a black-only composition of the troupe was never Ailey's goal) and the *Ailey Extension* (which offers dance classes of a variety of kinds, tackling both classical ballet and various modern dances for all levels and ages, in online and face-to-face format). The second direction is more directly connected to the general education of young children (with an emphasis on those who do not normally have access to art), continuing arts-in-education and performance community programs, which are increasingly

widespread in the United States but have not always been as equitable in terms of minority inclusion as Alvin Ailey. Alvin Ailey has been involved in such activities for a long time, but has intensified them recently, as the toll of the pandemic on society has been deepening certain already existing social divisions. As stated by current company artistic director Robert Battle in the promotional video on the *AileyCamp* webpage, Ailey strongly believed that "everyone should have the opportunity to be exposed to dance because it was transformative" ("AileyCamp"). With the help of the online environment, but also taking advantage of the relaxation of restrictions in the summer of 2022, and with a renewed empathy for the problems of the world coming from the trauma of forced isolation, the company diversified its outreach activities to serve the various communities.

Dance is thus used to make children more confident, an extension of already growing arts-in-education programs such as those described in Stephani Etheridge Woodson's 2015 book on the educational importance of theater in young people's education, through creating spaces where these young people can work together and project themselves in various challenging roles and thus overcome obstacles in community building (7). As the return to functional live communities after the pandemic was a social priority and children and young people were a target group, the company created both various opportunities for remote learning and face-to-face structures such as *AileyCamp* (a free day camp with various activities revolving around dance, meant primarily to give children confidence for life); *AileyDance Kids* (meant to teach children how to dance and to select from among them potential future dancers); *National Outreach* (meant to expand all these initiatives across the United States); *AileyDance for Active Aging* (meant for senior citizens, based on the idea that not only should one never stop dancing, but it is never too late to take it up) ("Arts in Education").

Faithful to Ailey's creed that dance is a way to unite people, that it came from the people and it should be delivered back to them (as repeatedly quoted on alvinailey.org), all these activities are ultimately meant to unite people by engaging their bodies in an empathic form of non-verbal communication that could bring about improvements in verbal

communication too. Last but not least, dancing in the streets – a favorite activity for the company, whether the music came from a jukebox that shuffled the tunes randomly and thus challenged the dancers, and their sometimes-interactive audience, to be creative – was enthusiastically resumed in the summer of 2022 through the project titled *Ailey Moves NYC: A Free Summer Dance Celebration for All*, July 23-August 1, 2022. For a bit over a week, the five boroughs of New York City were engaged in interactive dancing, this time specifically meant to challenge the community and bring dance into real life. This series of events provided vibrant opportunities to celebrate the loosening of restrictions and (hopefully) the end of the pandemic, through lively, mixed rhythms and other forms of physical activity in the open. Performers and participants, who could hardly be distinguished from one another, would agree in adopting the liberating rhythms of dance as an important tool for repairing the wrongs of the remote and recent past and for creating inter-human bonds founded on joy and sharing.

Through their various programs of what we could call applied dancing – which, like the more general applied theater approached collectively by Lisa S. Brenner, Chris Ceraso, and Evelyn Diaz Cruz in their 2022 edited volume, is a very important community builder and community healer – the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company has been very active in overcoming pandemic isolation. They have done so both through reinstating the celebratory physical presence of dancing *in praesentia* and through continually adapting the definitions of embodiment in dancing to the technical and expressive possibilities of the online environment.

Conclusion

This article has aimed to address one particular positive approach to two overlapping instances of historical crisis–that of the long-term racial discrimination of African Americans in the United States and the one suddenly created by the Covid-19 pandemic – through the regenerative power of dance. I hope I have managed to show that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company turned both racial prejudice in the

United States and the Covid-19 pandemic into opportunities for empowerment and successful community building through dancing. They did so through their embodied rewriting of African American history in signature shows such as *Revelations*, *Cry* or *Testament*, as well as their online recasting of these shows and their use in tutorials. This created a new, enhanced kind of present-moment bodily awareness in their audiences during the 2020 lockdown period and affirmed dance as a powerful act of renewal.

Like Alice Walker's womanism, coined in the seventies as a necessary concept to theorize a kind of feminism forged out of a more demanding life experience than white feminists had ever had, Ailey's dancers are all the more American in their spectacular celebrations of African Americanness. With their many outreach projects, they have a lot to share with other people and other (potential) dancers in the world, especially with those who face situations of crisis. Their message is not one intended tragically, to foreground a history of oppression which arguably surpasses almost any other. On the contrary, it is highly encouraging to everybody who wants to be engaged, as they are, in a complex artistic act of celebrating the beauty of dancing bodies transcending social boundaries and, indeed, the beauty of life. Their vast repertoire of empowering messages could be summed up in a highly motivational statement that accompanies a promotional photograph of artistic director Robert Battle, which has acquired many likes on Facebook: "You already have everything you need. Just start where you are" ("#AileyInspirations").

Notes:

[i] This article was researched and elaborated during a sabbatical year granted by the University of Bucharest (2021/22). Many thanks to Diana Benea for her very useful editorial suggestions, great conversations about theater and friendly support.

[ii] In an NPR article entitled "How The 'New World' Symphony Introduced American Music to Itself," Tom Huizenga quotes Antonin Dvorák's statement made to *The New York Herald* before the opening night of his Symphony No. 9, "From the New World": "'The future of this country must be founded upon what are called the Negro melodies,' he declared. 'This must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United

States.'" Huizenga goes on to comment on the apparent paradox of this statement, while actually celebrating it: "Essentially, this was Dvorák telling white Americans that the future of their music resided in the people they had subjugated and killed" (Huizenga).

[iii] The video features, according to the same YouTube page, "Ailey company members Solomon Dumas, Jacquelin Harris, Ashley Mayeux, Michael Francis McBride, Samuel Lee Roberts, and Constance Stamatiou, [who] are joined by the Krumper Noscript, B-Boy Reemcat, rhythmic gymnast Natalie Fauquette, and Claudette, a seasoned amateur and longtime Ailey admirer."

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