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Still Here: Choreography, Temporality, AIDS

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Still Here

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Steven Bruhm

I have made dancing a partner to language. I have danced as a way of traveling backwards, forward, and beside the point of my life.

—Bill T. Jones

A solitary man, a dancer, stands on stage. He is naked. A voice, not his, recounts a dream. The dreamer—another solitary man—is sleeping in a tent. He dreams that he awakes and, looking out of the tent, sees a moving fireplace, burning logs, and a bulldozer. In response to the dreamer's narration, the dancer's body pulses, undulates, carves lines in the air, all to the rhythm of the spoken voice. Some motions are pantomimic, others entirely abstract; some are curvaceous and welcoming, others jagged and thrusting. The speaker, Arnie Zane, who died of AIDS complications one year before this performance, appears momentarily as a holograph. The dancer, Bill T. Jones, moves into Zane's spectral image. As he does so, it engulfs him and disappears. The soundtrack continues, only now it is the voice of the survivor, Jones himself, speaking live. He pummels Zane's ghost with questions, questions of memories: "Do you remember my mother? . . . Do you remember St. Mark's Baths? . . . Do you remember the ambulance drivers who wouldn't touch your body?" He intersperses these questions with the

chorus of an old Tommy James tune—"I think we're alone now, / There doesn't seem to be anyone around"—and the sounds of beating heart. His heart? Zane's? It's hard to tell. But punctuating all this is a text that chimes, in whole or in parts, like a death knell throughout the piece. Jones repeatedly intones: "You said, 'A system in collapse is a system moving forward.'" Here is the kernel of the survivor's mourning. It is bewildering—"how can you be dead," he seems to ask, "if you were moving forward?" It is intellectual challenge—"systems in collapse are *not* systems moving forward! You really misunderstood the earth's metaphysics, didn't you?" It is anger—"you lied. You're dead, not moving forward at all. You lied." None of these emotions is stated in words. Rather, they move across and within the dancer's body as choreographic reminiscence.

This is *Untitled*, a work performed for the first time in 1989. If this piece is a morass of conflicting emotions generated from mourning, it is just as much a depiction of temporal confusions, a crisis in linearity that AIDS has tragically engendered. As the dance moves forward, it collapses back into memories of sex, of dance, of dying, and even of being dead. "Do you remember?" Jones asks, as if a dead Zane were capable of any memory at all. Moving forward, according to the laws of mourning, should mean coming to accept the loss of the loved object, and incorporating this loss into the ego. Not so in this dance. It reverses the modernist narrative of stripping away layers to expose the core, the naked, vulnerable and visible ego, and instead depicts a mourner who is naked at the beginning of the dance and who wraps himself in layers of clothing, as if to bury or repress what he is always already too conscious of. This simultaneous burying and resurrecting, writes David Gere, "begins a steady *dénouement* as Jones, now fully wrapped in the protection of his own clothing, as if he were reentering the real world after floating in a universe of naked grief, begins to address Zane for the last time, coupling that address with the metaphoric pounding of his own angry, grieving, pained, suffering, melancholic heart" (135).¹ To begin a *dénouement*, to begin to address for the last time, seems in actuality to suspend temporal categories of beginning and end, to leave them inchoate. Not the work of mourning, then, but of melancholy: a suspended animation, a dance against dancing, where the movements of dance express a moving emotion that one cannot move past. In this dance, sex and death can work but cannot *work through*; they can only, in Eve Sedgwick's pregnant phrasing, fall "across the ontological crack between the living and the dead" (257).

The work of Sedgwick and others has shown us how the age of queer theory and the age of AIDS have aligned to produce "a plethora of phenom-

enologies organized around two axes: On the one hand, sexual, gendered, and racial deroutinizations, and, on the other, deroutinizations of a disorienting and unpredictably temporal kind," as Stephen Barber and David Clark have put it (4). I propose here to take literally Barber and Clark's "deroutinizations," stripping it to its root word *routine* in order to place it in the context of choreographic performances about AIDS and within AIDS. Consider the routine gestures the gay body performed in the late 1980s and early 1990s to orient itself toward HIV/AIDS and the dance routines coming out of those quotidian performances. These routinizations align beautifully with Sedgwick's own unpacking of the term "queer," which for her is "a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troubled*" (xii). If motivated movement has its moment, AIDS dance suggests, it's a moment that cannot easily be isolated or articulated. Rather it is that *plethora* of phenomenologies to which Barber and Clark allude, phenomenologies that are routinely rooted in the queer body and in its (kin)aesthetics of sex and death.

This "rootedness" directs our attention to the queer body's choreographic drives, drives that themselves elude the categories of historical emplotment. For if Jones's *Untitled* is anything to go by, dance's movement, like its moment, enacts that troubled sense of recurring and eddying. It amalgamates past, present, future, and perhaps even pluperfect or future anterior: the dances that were being performed *were to have been* the moment for mourning, they *were to have been* a prophylactic against melancholia. But that past (or is it future?) anterior has shown itself to be problematic. Given HIV's own stubborn refusal to die, the so-called "AIDS era" has eluded any clearly demarcated temporal span, a time in which we might have done our mourning and got it over with.² Moreover, if motivated movement had its moment in the midst of the AIDS emergency, that moment, paradoxically, is past, for AIDS dances, like AIDS theory, are no longer being made with anything like the urgency and semiotic clarity of two decades ago. So what might that suspension of AIDS articulation mean—where it might have come from and what it might produce? Ultimately, I'll suggest with Bill T. Jones that the movement of mourning, and of mourning into melancholia, is a movement we must perpetually begin, as if always for the first time.

Moment, Movement, Motive

As numerous critics and activists have pointed out, the world of professional stage dancing has been ravaged by AIDS to a degree arguably surpassing any other art form. Among the most famous names lost to AIDS are Alvin

Ailey, Rudolph Nureyev, Robert Joffrey, Edward Stierle, and René Highway, figures whose HIV status was often denied or lied about by dance companies hoping to protect their reputations. Given this devastating roll call and the politics surrounding it, it's remarkable that AIDS and queer theory wasn't theorizing dance prior to 1996, when the new protease inhibitor cocktail was cautiously being declared a success. David Román's 1998 *Acts of Intervention* has considered the role of performance art in addressing the epidemic, but it was David Gere's 2004 book, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* that first illuminated in any sustained way the open secret that is AIDS and contemporary dance. Gere catalogues not only the enormous number of dancers who have been lost to AIDS in the United States, but the enormous range of strategies for representing, mourning, and celebrating these lives, as well as the various political strategies that use choreography to call for government and medical action to fight the disease. Gere names as an "AIDS dance" anything from an organized "die-in" in front of a government building to a large-scale ballet built upon the theme of AIDS. Anything counts as an AIDS dance, he contends, as long as it depicts gay male eros—fulfilled, thwarted, abjected—in the context of the epidemic, incorporating "some form of mourning, ranging from the anticipation of loss to unabashed grieving" (12).

In the age of AIDS, this distinction between "anticipation of loss" and "unabashed grieving" for a loss already experienced has always been a difficult one to sustain. Eric Savoy, following on the work of Thomas Yin-gling, potentially delineates HIV's deconstruction of clear temporal categories: "Because the seropositive patient is culturally constructed as already ill, in some sense already dead, and as a profoundly toxic agent, his or her body becomes readable only as the (HIV) anti-body, the presence that signals absence" (Savoy 67). We might read this claim as one possible resonance for Arnie Zane's "a system in collapse is a system moving forward," if "moving forward" is understood to mean the inexorable premature death signified by HIV in a precocktail culture. In this light, Zane's assertion and Jones's bewildered response to it gesture toward the complex and paradoxical inhabiting of different time zones, where *to be* is also *to be dead*, and where *to be dying* is also to be remembered, resurrected, or regenerated in some way.³

This paradoxical temporality—we must, in this context, call it "queer"—is an *idée fixe* in Bill T. Jones's dance practice. Jones inscribes this tension between collapse and movement in his monumental *Still/Here*, the notorious dance built around a host of people who had received terminal

diagnoses or who had recently lost a loved one to disease.⁴ In preparation for this dance, Jones invited his participants to describe and perform their emotions and fantasies regarding death, including asking them to fictionalize the moment of their own future passing. What will it be? How will it have looked and felt? In the title of the piece that resulted, the word *still* does a great deal of grammatical and thematic work. It operates both as an adverb and as an adjective. Despite their affliction with a terminal illness, the people he interviews and around whom he builds his dance are *still* here in the adverbial and temporal sense; they exist in the present, their movements inspiring the gestures that Jones will transcribe onto his dancers. Yet the ravages upon their bodies, their very preparedness for death, telegraph the fact that by the time Jones's work is ready for performance many of them will have died. They will be "still" in the adjectival sense: collapsed, unmoving. Thus, *Still/Here*, like *Untitled* before it, foregrounds the fundamental problem of AIDS art—the future tense creation of a representation in which the subject of that representation is already in the past tense, or will be when the performance is staged. If these dances speak of AIDS and representation, then, they also speak of the unrepresentability of AIDS, or of representation as its own undoing. For more than simply turning on the clever double entendres of the spoken word, Jones's elegiac dances foreground the degree to which stillness and movement are complex ontologies: they both affirm *and* deny their drives toward expression and making in the world. Jones moves in dance, but that movement takes him still closer to death. Cast in other terms: Jones moves forward to avoid collapse, but is moving forward *toward* collapse.

Such melding or blurring of temporal boundaries, then, structures Jones's staged piece, in which his dancers move to the images and voices—spectral as Arnie Zane's in *Untitled*—as they appear in the "cool immortality," as he calls it, of a video projected onstage (Jones, *Last* 252). That "cool immortality" is telling, because it reverses the conventional way we consider the immortal, as that which comes *after* earthly life. While the videos often re-present a person who is already dead (thus immortalizing him or her in standard ways), they also *precede* the temporal movements of the living dancer on stage. During the second section of *Still/Here*, a solitary male dancer performs under a video screen that depicts another solitary male (a survival workshop participant) dancing, the projected image overexposed to make the participant look like a negative. The white-clad dancer on the stage repeats these projected movements, but with a half-second time lag,

uniting the two dancers while putting them just slightly out of sync. Jones further exploits this temporal (dis)connection: the video jumps and freezes, starting and stopping the survival participant's projected movement and voice, repeating his choreographed movements and splicing his gestures, all of which are replicated in "real" time, a split second later, by the dancer below. This dance-which-is-not-one eventually splinters as the live dancer slips into his own choreography, leaving in the past the temporal montage above and behind him. The dead person, immortalized by video, precedes the living one, yet gives way to the primacy of performance in the present—a performance that itself is a momentary and ephemeral, disappearing once the dance is over.⁵

This moment in *Still/Here* exemplifies Jones's more thoroughgoing meditation on the timeliness/timelessness of AIDS, even though *Still/Here*, he says, is not "specifically about AIDS" (quoted in Gere 20). The slash between the timely and the timeless is, in many ways, the same slash that separates the *Still* from the *Here* in the work's larger architecture. Jones tells us that each of the sections has a particular focus—such as coming to terms with diagnosis, inventing strategies for survival, elements that Gere tells us are de rigueur in AIDS choreography—but note the strange temporal arrangement in Jones's description: "If *Still* is the interior world of one person or a group of individuals struggling with a troubling revelation, then *Here* parallels the sensation of leaving one's doctor's office with life-altering news, compelled to ride the New York City subway" (Jones, *Last* 261). From our seats in the theatre we are asked first to identify with the survivor, to embody his or her strategies for making personal, communal, and political alignments for a diagnosis that has not yet been uttered by the dance, at least not in real time. Only later in the performance do we get that diegetically earlier moment, the moment when still earlier questions, fears, knowings, and unknowings congeal into the medical diagnosis of "positive." The structure of *Still/Here*, then, renders Savoy's point with a vengeance, in that the already dead person supplants and determines the living. The first of the two sections, *Still* is really the second, since it dramatizes the strategies for carving out a future (solitary and communal) in light of a past revelation. *Here*, conversely, imagines no time for the future, indeed suggests that there can be no future, so swallowed up has it been by the force of the present. If the dance depicts its subjects "still" in the present, it is a present, a "here," of the future anterior; the dance is about what will have been necessary for the survivor to do in order to have created a meaningful life.

Corpse, Corpus, Corporeal

As *Still/Here* incorporates the plethora of temporal phenomenologies into its architecture, it alerts us to the *corporeal* in that incorporation, and in Jones's corpus generally. In his autobiographical *Last Night on Earth*,⁶ Jones describes the degree to which his dance proceeds from an exhausted body: "Sometimes I dance the dance that one does when one cannot get it up, when one scrapes about, looking for that fantasy, that kernel to set the blood pumping in the flaccid tissue. That dance is a life that is wasted. It is doubt, a set of arms that will never know what it's like to hold and to be held. That flaccid dance is weeping, complaining, alternately helpless and furious, like a bleeding bull gathering its strength to charge. I hate that dance as I dance it" (131–32). While this passage makes clear the primacy and immediacy of the physical body in dance as in HIV, it is difficult to know which impulse exerts more pressure: the waste and flaccidity that can imagine no future but helplessness and loneliness, or the furious and bleeding bull gathering its strength to charge into that future. Jones vacillates, at least for now. But then, near the end of the text, he seems to allow flaccidity the stronger position: "When I'm tired, depressed, or just afraid, I think about my death. I think it's one of HIV's luxuries, this fantasy about stopping. At my age I should be at the peak of my creative powers. How can I say I want to go to sleep now? Maybe it's beating death to the finish line, this desire to stop all fucking, this desire to stop all desiring? I'm humiliated and ashamed. I want to take the reins away from circumstance. I accept death" (267). Jones's configuration of his desire returns us to Sedgwick's configuration of the queer as "a continuing moment, movement, motive . . . recurrent, eddying, *troubant*." For Jones, the desire is to stop desiring; his dance is a movement toward not moving. This is the "motive," in Sedgwick's sense, that defines the liminal "moment" of Jones's sexual choreography in the context of HIV—the inscription in muscle and sinew of the body's desire *not to be* at the very moment that this body is also "beating death to the finish line." The fantasies to be *still* here (that is, to accept physical death quietly) and to be *still here* (to inhabit a strong and living frame) are one and the same. As choreographer Ellen Bromberg says, "death is yet a deep deep image we have of ourselves as being in the body" (n. pag.); the qualifier *yet* indicates the degree to which our future-oriented imaginings of death are still those of intense and active *being*.

The temporal friction between moving forward and collapsing as Jones describes it casts his choreography as a personal, corporeal state. That

state—where movement is produced out of the desire, even the drive, *not* to move—is also Freud's. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* locates the death drive in the choreography (unnamed as such) of the *fort-da* game, a repeated and stylized gesture of ejection and retrieval. For Freud, what lies "beyond" the pleasure principle, beyond the psychological rewards of retrieving the lost object, is itself temporally confused. *Beyond*, translated from the German *jenseits*, suggests a future orientation on the other or far side of pleasure, whereas Freud's argument places this beyond as "before," *prior* to the pleasure principle, preceding and structuring the search for pleasure. What is beyond/before, Freud suggests, is a fundamental instinct, a driving force whose purpose is "to restore an earlier state of things" (308). As the human organism begins to encounter the demands of the outside world—indeed, as organism begins to become *subject*—it seeks to reduce the stimulation it encounters in that world. Freud summarizes his position thus: because "*inanimate things existed before living ones*," our first instinct is "to return to the inanimate state" (311–12); thus, "*the aim of all life is death*" (311). This death instinct is not a late moralizing check on the pleasure principle, but rather that which initiates the pleasure principle, founds it before the fact. Freud suggests that the search for pleasure—through what he calls the life-serving or sexual instincts—is really a way of ensuring that the organism prolongs the search for death until it can die "in its own fashion" (312). "[T]he living organism," he says, "struggles most energetically against events (dangers, in fact) which might help it to attain its life's aim rapidly—by a kind of short-circuit" (312). Thus, Freud concludes, "[i]t is as though the life of the organism moved with a vacillating rhythm. One group of instincts [the death instincts] rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey" (313).

Freud's positing of a "vacillating rhythm" returns us to the world of dance and its relation to death; indeed, if the Lacanian unconscious is structured like a language, the Freudian unconscious may be structured more like a choreography. Drawing on axes of spatial orientation, Freud imagines bodily drives as operating forward and backward, downstage and upstage, where conflicting forces are always present simultaneously but where one always takes precedence over the other. Furthermore the movement of each drive is subject to a strict set of rules for its appearance and its subsiding. The drive rushes the organism forward only so that it can be jerked back; its movement seems to be autonomous and unfettered, but is actually

inscribed by a rhythmic binarism. This rhythm, of course, is temporal as well as spatial, uncannily resonant of the temporalities we've seen in Jones's AIDS dancing. Rushing forward and jerking back occur over time, marking their repetitions in a temporal plot: the unconscious, Freud suggests, is always oriented toward reaching its end point—its death—but that end point is also an earlier condition. The inanimate marks our lives as both beginning and end, an etiology and a telos. Physical life, that energetic struggle against dangerous events, both resists the organism's temporal plot development toward death and ultimately enables that development, so long as it assumes a particular form: "the organism wishes to die," Freud claims, "but only in its own fashion" (312). Like any relentless choreographer, then, the death drive submits the physical body to a highly regulated and rhythmic system of spatial movements over time, inscribing meaning in repetition and structure while ultimately depicting the body's subjection to those forces of space and time.

AIDS-era choreographers like Jones offer an exact conceptualization of this choreography: they call it "a danse macabre." Ribald dancing skeletons, vehement twitchings and bodily scratchings, paranoid fears of human touch—all these signifiers arise from the original dance macabre, the Black Death, and pervade much contemporary AIDS dance.⁷ While each of these dances has its own quality and choreography, its own ideology and political agenda, we can find in all of them the human body in a strange and uncanny *pas-de-deux* with itself. A recurring and troubling motif, then, the danse macabre wrenches itself out of the past in order to frame the present and future conditions of contemporary queer dance.

The danse macabre provides a timely model for AIDS choreography, if only for its apparent timelessness across history. A primarily medieval phenomenon, the danse macabre takes its name from the Arabic *kabr* (grave) and *mākbara* (churchyard). In its earliest (twelfth-century) forms, the dance was performed in churchyards by dancers who would swoon to the ground as if in a trance, then leap up in frenzy, pointing at others to accuse them of the sins they had committed. In the fourteenth century, this dance, which came to be known as St. Vitus's Dance (and which we now know as Sydenham's Chorea, a condition of uncontrollable muscular shaking seen primarily in children) transmogrified into visual art, beginning with the image (now lost) over the gates of the Cemetery of the Innocents outside Paris. Here the dancers became skeletons, figures of living death who escort the living to their graves as a means of reminding the rest of us that our vain existences could terminate at any time. But while these

skeletons bespeak unavoidable death, the danse macabre itself refuses to die: it compulsively reappears in the nineteenth century in Robert Browning and Charles Baudelaire, Camille Saint-Saëns and August Strindberg, and in the twentieth century in Disney's *Silly Symphonies* (1929), Kurt Jooss's *The Green Table* (1932), and Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957).

As dance historian Curt Sachs has observed, the original medieval danse presents us with "the eerie contrast between the youthful vigor of dancing and the awful and eternal stillness of Death" (quoted in Spencer 33), a comment that should remind us of Sedgwick's remark that queer art in the age of AIDS can only "fall . . . across the ontological crack between the living and the dead." This eerie contrast inscribes in the dancers of the danse macabre that same tension of movement I have been reading in Jones and Freud. In the danse macabre, only the dead body is the animated body; skeletons—the dead, the de-subjectified, the dis-spirited—are joyous, playful, and limber. They "live" in order to "jerk back" the animate mortal to death, yet death seems to be the state these mortals already inhabit. It is their earlier condition. The living bodies of Death's victims are already dead in spirit, and often their corporeal selves are lumpen and stolid; any energy they emit is solely for the purpose of warding off death. Death is life here and life is a curious state of Un-death. With a temporal confusion that Freud understood, Life in the danse macabre is a kind of Death-before-the-fact, the movement toward a site (the grave) that one seems already to inhabit. To be dead, conversely, is to be most alive; only the dead can dance.⁸

The temporal and motile paradoxes of the danse macabre are sites of meaning that Bill T. Jones knows well. Indeed, one section of *Still/Here* is entitled "Dance Macabre," so named as Jones's percussive footwork creates an effect of the death rattle. Similarly *Absence*, the first piece Jones built for Zane after his death in 1988, draws on danse macabre iconography where Jones dances the figure of Death who has come to interrupt a wedding ceremony. Like medieval Death itself, Jones circles a naked and abandoned bridegroom who mourns his loss downstage right. Jones-as-Death is surrounded by other dancers of the dead, wrapped in the bed sheets he had stolen from the hospital room where Zane had been treated during his illness. Those figures quietly and slowly move across the stage with the solemnity of mourners or the ineffable weightlessness of ghosts, leaving the naked bridegroom to grieve by himself. In one way, Jones metaphorizes Mortality as an abstract concept. Circling around the bereft and naked bridegroom, he dances "a sort of invitation to the place of sorrow. I am sorrow and sorrow's apology for having visited such a scene upon two lovers" (Jones, *Last* 188). In another

way, though, Jones is that naked bridegroom, displaced or condensed into the Death figure of the medieval danse macabre. The shrouded, ghostly dancers who drift past the bridegroom "with the inevitability of glaciers" tell Jones: "Ignore the naked man whom we are leaving here. Look ahead of us. It's the only place you'll find courage not to sink to the floor as he must. We must keep moving. We loved him. He was one of us, but these inhuman sheets separate us from him. Let go of him. Look at that expanse ahead of us" (188–89). The injunction to "keep moving" is crucial not only to the life of a dancer and not only to the continued survival of the lover who has projected himself here into an abject bridegroom. Rather, the imperative to movement queerly renegotiates movement and stasis, systems going forward with systems in collapse, the stillness of being here and the "hereness" of being still. If Freud's speculations beyond the pleasure principle suggested to us that a drive toward death underwrites all our sexual endeavors (a suggestion particularly toxic for queers, and all the more so in the age of AIDS), then those speculations also remind us of the degree to which we move—dance, fuck, act—as a way of defying death, or as a circumvention of death. In the glacial slowness of Jones's *Absence*, queer movement is both an anxious, compulsory injunction not to be swallowed up by death, and a more salubrious nonce testament to the ability to move, to remain alive, and to resist a teleology of stillness-as-eradication. The dancing dead of medical allegory have changed their tune from a taunting reminder of death's omnipotence to something more suspended, inchoate, yet more temporally "here": "This is no a longer theater," they seem to tell the grieving Jones. "This is all we're promised" (189).

When I name Jones's slow, even glacial movement as a "nonce testament" to the ability to move, I mean *nonce* in Sedgwick's sense of the term: appropriate to the moment, claiming no responsibility of the weight of history and offering no promises for applicability and utility in the future. Rather, Jones's danse macabre of AIDS ultimately engages the queer temporality—and the queer *spatiality*—that he suggests in my opening epigraph: "I have made dancing a partner to language. I have danced as a way of traveling backwards, forward, and beside the point of my life" (Jones, *Last* 108). *Absence* presents us with a Jones who must both remain behind to be forgotten and move forward into the future, a future that guarantees no healing but merely remains "all we're promised." *Absence* presents us with a Jones who is both dancing the point of his life and dancing beside the point of his life. To dance beside the point here is both to be and to be other, to be still in grief and to be forward in motion. It is neither to succumb to

the stasis, the self-eradication of mourning a lost object whose reality is in the past, nor to embrace specious promises of futurity, its alleged promise to heal all wounds. As a mourning survivor, Jones is and will have been a melancholic one. He is both the griever of *Untitled*, wrapping himself in the protective clothing of time's behavioral repetitions, and the naked bridegroom of *Absence*, stripped bare of his protective clothing: still, here, and frozen. For this ultimately is—or was—grief in the age of AIDS: to move forward is to carry the past, to have one's present and future continually inflected by the past, and to have the past continually inflected by the present and the future—at least until a cure for HIV could be found, until gay men and others stopped dying from the syndrome. To be is to be beside the point, not merely in a heteronormative culture that would rather gay men and HIV-positive persons not be at all, but in a queer temporality that never allows “being” to heal a past or promise a future. That being-beside-the-point is, for Jones, the best the queer dancer could do in order to die in his own fashion.

Turns Returning, Few Returns

I said earlier that if motivated movement has its moment, at least as far as AIDS is concerned, that moment is past. AIDS has simply ceased to be the subject matter of much contemporary choreography, just as it has ceased to be the subject matter of much new queer theory or, for that matter, of motivated movements in the *political* realm. (As many cultural critics have pointed out, we seem to be more concerned about assuring our rights of access to the military or the wedding ceremony than we are in continuing to mobilize against discrimination based on HIV-positive status.) Rather than decay or celebrate the absence of AIDS-related discourse at the contemporary moment, I want to ask what it can tell us, especially as part of the corporealities described here. For ultimately, this moment of choreographic and critical silence raises questions about the relationship between mourning and melancholia in a “post-AIDS” context. The first answer to the question, “Why have we stopped making AIDS art and AIDS theory?” comes to us from the logics of mourning: it is, quite simply, that “There’s nothing left to work through.” As the rate of HIV-related death slows, and as we continue to adjust our lives to a protease-inhibited culture, we have come to understand enough about how HIV has re-choreographed our bodies, our relationships, and our selves. HIV is here for queers but we’re used to it. So clear is the impact of antiretroviral drugs on HIV that Andrew Sullivan could

join with the scientists in 1996 in declaring the “end of AIDS” (Román, “Not-about-AIDS” 1). But for me, at least, this clarity is not convincing. I wonder whether AIDS silence suggests not the product of a successful mourning but that melancholia has done its work *all too effectively*, in that it has so remarkably silenced the object of loss, the object of mourning, the gay AIDS body. If so, this loss of loss is incomplete, as flickers of attention continue to be paid to Africans and inner-city African American gay men, the constituency for whom costs are greatest, infection rates highest, resources most paltry (see for example chapter 5 of Román’s *Acts of Intervention* and most of Patton’s *Globalizing AIDS*). In *Absence*, Jones may have argued to leave behind the failing body, but such a gesture only entrenches absence’s *presence* in the melancholic psyche. It’s little wonder, then, that Jones should transgress his earlier practice with Zane *not* to do repertory, *not* to dance dances that had outlived their usefulness, and to stage *Still/Here: Looking On* as part of 2004’s *The Phantom Project*. Or to remount for the 2005–2007 season *D-Man in the Waters*, a piece built in 1988 around the wasting body of dancer Damian Aquavella. For Jones, AIDS choreography acts as the persistent symptom of a loss insufficiently mourned, an animation not entirely suspended, a compulsive return to/of articulation.

That symptomatology, as we might expect, does as much to disfigure a discourse of AIDS as it does to represent it. Reading how Bill T. Jones has made dance “a partner to language” through an alignment of AIDS mourning and the danse macabre, evokes and contrasts with Lee Edelman’s queer configuration of the death drive. For Edelman, death’s symptom, its pulsions on the body, have no truck with language whatsoever; in fact, the death drive destroys language by destroying or disfiguring the logic offiguration itself.⁹ Such disfiguration may help us to understand the first major piece Jones produced after that infamous 1996 inauguration of “the end of AIDS.” It is a piece entitled *We Set Out Early . . . Visibility Was Poor*, and it is an abstract study in pure dance. Unlike *Still/Here*, it contains no text or photographic images to hold it together, it provides no salvational narrative to take us forward into a future.¹⁰ For that very reason we may read it as what Edelman calls a “*sinthomosexual*” performance. *We Set Out Early* may be, to quote Edelman in another context, “embodying the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic”; it may be that “violent passage . . . toward which the pulsion of the drives continually impels us” (25). *We Set Out Early* is a queer dance of death, then, not because it presents mourning subjects in the face of HIV but because it inscribes on queer bodies the refusal of temporal and symbolic fixity, the cultural imperatives to mean and to be.

If Jones's choreography of the late 1990s leaves behind it representations of mourning, that may be because Jones has acceded to what queer melancholy is telling him—that the temporalities of HIV allow no narrative because they disallow the futurity upon which narrative always depends.

Jones's motive in movement *may* be this dismantling of narrative futurity, as Edelman would have it, or it may be something even less anchored and entrenched. *Pace* the work of Yingling and Savoy, the HIV body is no longer the presence signaling absence, it is no longer the living body already dead. Antiretroviral cocktails have simply deroutinized what we could expect of the seroconverted subject in the first decade of the epidemic. But if the HIV body is no longer a figure for the living dead, it's not *not* that figuration either; it's not *not* the presence signaling absence. It is too early to say what the *pas-de-deux* between HIV and the pharmacopia will produce in the virus's corporeal performance. Right now the cocktail, like the danse macabre of the 1980s and 1990s, has reinvented the infected body as one of suspended animation; it encourages the HIV subject to move forward with narrative futurity, but also with the consciousness of potential collapse. Whatever else AIDS choreography may have been, then, it was an uncanny rehearsal of the contemporary moment; for, through the figurations of the danse macabre, this choreography imagined an HIV body whose health could be managed—temporally (if only temporarily), momentarily. As we saw in the structure of *Still/Here*, earlier moments follow later ones, in that dance's mourning practices can now begin to frame themselves around melancholia's retroactivity. One thing these dances can't do, though, is make good on Freud's speculations regarding the death drive's "plot." Freud seductively suggests that we might deploy our choreographies to allow us to die in our own fashion. For the HIV subject in the contemporary moment, it's not at all clear what that fashion might be.

Notes

1. Gere finishes the description thus: "Arriving at the end of *Untitled*, Jones opens up the space between the heartbeats as if to leave his audience suspended in time, floating in a space of inchoate desire and melancholy, where the two categories are virtually indistinguishable" (135–37).
2. Eric Rofes remarks on the difference between "post-AIDS" and the "end of AIDS": "Post-AIDS" refers to our being past the moment of emergency, of the epidemic burgeoning out of control; this moment is over. "End of AIDS" refers to the obliteration of the disease, an obliteration predicated, among other things,

upon the untrammelled dissemination of safe-sex information to all constituencies, regardless of race, class, or location. This moment is *not* over, and it was Andrew Sullivan's specious declaration of the end of AIDS that forments the language of political urgency here (Rofes 75; see also Román, "Not-About-AIDS").

3. This temporal paradox would certainly accord with Gere's more wide-ranging, sociological observations about gay mourning in the age of AIDS: Gere catalogues the almost ubiquitous phenomenon of gay haunting in response to AIDS, where the ghosts of dead partners, friends, or relatives return to offer consolation to the bereaved. "The ghost's primary function," he suggests, "is to open, however briefly, a window between the temporal and post-temporal worlds. There is a place where our dead friends go. Death is not the last word" (198). Placing Savoy's argument next to Gere's, then, we can detect in the phenomenon of the AIDS crisis a macabre temporality that, like dance itself, is based upon *movement*—systems moving forward and falling back, turns returning.

4. I call the work "notorious" because of the brouhaha generated when dance critic Arlene Croce, who had refused to see the piece, wrote an article in the *New Yorker*, condemning it as "victim art" and calling it unreviewable because of the emotional immediacy of its subject matter.

5. Susan Leigh Foster has written eloquently of the ephemerality of dance, noting that in the early nineteenth century, ballet moved toward a fascination with the dance of dead figures—such as Giselle or la Sylphide—as a way of dramatizing how dance, like any performance art, only really exists at the precise moment of its enactment. Román extends that insight specifically to the arena of AIDS: "Performances always and only end, and once enacted they vanish, leaving their trace in the official memory of performance we call theatre history. AIDS performance foregrounds this vanishing act. So many of the performers, playwrights, spectators, critics, tech people, and others participating in the collective production of AIDS performance have already vanished along with their performances" (Acts xiii).

6. The title presents us with another temporal problem: does this "last night" belong to yesterday evening, now, or some point in the future?

7. This archive includes Paul Diaz in *Mark II (Life Folling Death)* (1994), where Diaz dresses as a skeleton to impersonate through medieval allusion death's ravages; Joe Goode, whose *Disaster Series* (1989) and *Remembering the Pool at the Best Western* (1991) repeatedly, compulsively, deploy postures reminiscent of Holbein and medieval woodcuts; Meredith Monk's *Book of Days* (1988), which transmogrifies the map of a small medieval town into a disease-infected blood cell; American dancers Douglas Wright and Phillis Lamut, who scratch, shake, and convulse their bodies as if they were infected with a plague; or David Bintley, whose *The Dance House* (1995), the first full-length ballet to deal with the AIDS crisis explicitly, takes as its central text a medieval poem about the Black Death. In this ballet Bintley uses the plague's conventions to personify Death/HIV as a cryptic "blue man," that is, Patient Zero, "the real-life flight-attendant suspected of infecting many early AIDS

victims" (Ben-Itzak). Commenting specifically on sexual excess and its regulations, it appears in works as diverse as Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*, Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz* (1979), and Michael Jackson's *Ghosts* (1997) (to supplement the list of AIDS dances I provided above).

8. David Bintley is among the most explicit choreographers to use the traditional danse macabre in figuring AIDS. *The Dance House* is built upon a medieval text:

Come along, come along, ye masters and men,
Haste ye hither, whate're ye ben,
Or young or old, or high or low,
Ye all must to the dance house go. (quoted in Ben-Itzak)

The Christian moralizing in this poem makes *The Dance House* high-risk behavior: Bintley hazards the condemnatory agendas of Larry Kramer, Randy Shilts, or Andrew Holleran, whose pre-AIDS novel, *Dancer from the Dance* (1978), lectured us on the inexorable death drive that saturated Fire Island dance bars in the 1970s. Bintley avoids this puritanical cant, however, by capitalizing upon a particular—and particularly queer—possibility of temporal manipulation: speed. One reviewer reports on the San Francisco premiere: "*The Dance House* ends in a frenzy. A man tears through a series of fifteen turns; the entire cast of nineteen collapses three times; and the blue man slashes through them and hurtles over the barre. 'It gets so hysterical, it gets so fast, it gets so kind of jolly, that it's fake,' says Bintley of the final movement. 'It's like telling jokes at a funeral: 'If I move fast enough nobody will think about it.' This is what I call the dance of death'" (Ben-Itzak). In an almost Freudian repetition compulsion of fifteen turns and three collapses, a seemingly endless frenzy of rushing and jerking, slashing and hurtling, injects the ballet with a camp hysteria whose purpose is to disinfect it of maudlin helplessness or overt moralizing. Frenzied movement depose the staid metrics of rhythm, allowing Bintley to combine fake jollity with the solemnity of infection and death. In other words, speed functions in Bintley's ballet to figure the kind of movement and stasis that I have been considering throughout this essay, but with the overtly political agenda of AIDS activism. Indeed, Bintley's use of speed symptomizes the double movement that David Gere says characterizes all "mourning practices that express both the full depth of loss as well as erotic attachment to the lost object. Gay mourning," he writes, "is not chaste or churchly but ribald and sensuous. It is not pious, but it is devoted. Choreography in the age of AIDS . . . is necessarily imbued with both qualities, with the depths of mourning and despair as well as the heights of charged libidinal energy. Put bluntly, gay mourning bears the telltale traces of one last good fuck" (98-99). If Bintley's dancers are moving so fast that "nobody will think about it," that's because Bintley-as-choreographer and we-as-audience are thinking about nothing else but "it." But that thinking has its own kin/aesthetic pleasure: the joke of the funeral, libidinal, erotic, the last good fuck.

9. This disfiguration comes from de Man; see his "The Rhetoric of Temporality."

10. Here is David Román's pointed analysis of the piece: "Unlike Jones's earlier work, *We Set Out Early* contains no text, image, or narrative to organize its meaning. . . . Much has been said about *We Set Out Early*'s abstractness; given Jones's emphatic addressing of social issues previously, his reluctance to provide a 'message' here strikes many critics as noteworthy. Indeed, the new work is said to be not only abstract but 'non-linear, with little narrative structure'; it 'luxuriates in the freedom of pure movement'; Jones, it seems, is 'tired of talking'" ("Not-About-AIDS," 18-19).

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