

Chapter 4

Black Dancers Matter

Black Ballerinas, Robert E. Lee,
and the Politics of Resistance

SIMON STOW AND AMANDA MILLIS

It is one thing to dance as though nothing has happened; it is another to acknowledge that something singularly awful has happened . . . and then decide to dance.

—Jonathan Lear

[Blacks] put up the Lee Monument, and should the time come, will be there to take it down.

—John Mitchell, *Richmond Planet*, June 7, 1890

Amid the urban upheaval that followed the May 2020 murder of George Floyd, a forty-six-year-old Black man, by Derek Chauvin, a white City of Minneapolis police officer, many of the public monuments to the Confederacy on display in several Southern cities were defaced or destroyed. Nowhere, perhaps, was this assault on the symbols of white supremacy more prevalent than in Richmond, Virginia, the former Confederate capital; a city where, in the years since Reconstruction, the celebration of the “Lost Cause” had become something of a fetish (Blight 37). The city’s Monument Avenue—lined with statues of five Confederate grandees including

Jefferson Davis and Stonewall Jackson¹—was a target-rich environment, and all but one of the monuments were torn down. The fifth, a twelve-ton bronze statue of Robert E. Lee, perched atop a forty-foot-tall stone plinth at the center of a large traffic circle, proved more recalcitrant. In the face of this difficulty, Black citizens claimed the plinth and the traffic circle as their own. The former was covered in graffiti proclaiming BLACK LIVES MATTER, offering slogans of empowerment and profanity-laden assaults on racism, white supremacy, and the police. At night, Black artists employed the plinth as a screen upon which to project images of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other victims of police violence as well as key figures in the Black struggle including Malcolm X, John Lewis, and Angela Davis. The traffic circle upon which the Lee monument stood was renamed for Marcus-David Peters, a Black Richmonder who was shot and killed by the police. Thereafter, according to the *Washington Post*, the site became “an open-air civics forum, with gospel choirs, daily speeches, voter registration booths and a public vegetable garden” (Schneider). It was a space both created by, and made for, cultural expression, especially dance.

Dancing styles exhibited at the monument site included traditional African, hip-hop, jazz, modern—with a dancer costumed in white shirt and black pants paying homage to the great Black choreographer Alvin Ailey—and even Irish step dancing (Ritzel).² The dancers who drew the most attention were, however, two Black teenagers—Ava Holloway and Kennedy George—who performed classical ballet at the site. Images of their performance went viral, and the women were featured on both NBC’s *Today Show* and the syndicated news magazine *Inside Edition*. The TV coverage of their performance was, nevertheless, politically anodyne. While NBC did very briefly situate the dance in the context of the 2020 protests, more attention was paid to the difficulties faced by Black women in ballet, itself an important issue but not that which had precipitated Holloway and George’s performance. Beyond that, the soft-soaping of the story focused on the young women’s determination to do some good with their sudden fame. George Floyd was not mentioned. *Inside Edition*’s coverage was even worse. There was no mention of the protests that precipitated the dance performance. Rather, the focus was on the statue as a historical relic, paying attention to Lee’s role in the Civil War, with no contemporary political corollary. As with NBC’s coverage there was some acknowledgment of the problems faced by ballerinas of color, even as it was suggested that these problems had all but been solved. Most vexing,

however, was the show's description of ballet as a "sport." For although there is some discussion within dance circles about the extent to which dancers might be considered athletes, this categorization served to remove the dance's aesthetic, intellectual, and thus, its political, content (Guarino).

Working against the characterization of Holloway and George as plucky young teens employing their balletic skills to draw attention to Richmond's problematic Robert E. Lee monument without any broader political motives, this essay highlights the political dimensions of their performance, situating their work within recent debates about counterpublics and the politics of resistance. Holloway and George, it is suggested, demonstrate the important role that cultural politics play for subaltern populations who are marginalized in, or excluded from, the dominant public sphere. Their embrace of a white dance form in a historically white space served, it will be argued, to create, strengthen, and make visible, the microcosmic Black counterpublic that emerged in Marcus-David Peters Circle. Categorizing Holloway and George's performance as a form of resistance, the essay will then seek to demonstrate how it challenges a dominant contemporary understanding of the concept as an "essentially defensive" form of politics (Walzer 1960), one that, because it lacks a "politics of offense" aimed at the state, is only "half a politics" (Walzer 2017). Likewise, it will aim to show how the women's performance challenges Adolph Reed's categorization of cultural politics as a vacuous "don't-worry, be-angry politics of posture" that is, by definition, about "resignation and acquiescence" (168). The aim here is not to critique the work of Walzer and Reed, though that will obviously be part of the argument. Rather, it is to show how Holloway and George's performance embodies a complex politico-aesthetic form of resistance that surmounts such criticism. The approach is best understood not merely as a defensive "pushing back" against the white public sphere à la Walzer, but rather as what W. E. B. Du Bois characterized as a "pushing onwards" (1926). It is an understanding in which, according to Ella Myers, Du Bois "urges his audience to define their own collective aims and to work to build a society that realizes them, rather than accept the terms of the dominant social order" (112). For Du Bois, who famously observed that "all art is propaganda" (1926), culture was central to achieving this self-definition. The stakes here are suggested by Frantz Fanon's observation that "[b]y imparting new meaning and dynamism to artisanship, dance, music, literature, and the oral epic, the colonized subject restructures his own perception" (176). In their act

of “restructuring perception,” it will be observed, Holloway and George’s performance moves beyond Walzer’s characterization of resistance as a purely defensive form of politics to capture its positive role in the creation of identity as/and a pushing onward.³ It will further be suggested that in their complexity Holloway and George’s resistive acts indicate, contra Reed, that even as it employs posture for political purposes, cultural politics is considerably more than a politics of posture. For, in their embrace of the balletic form, Holloway and George problematize many of the conceits of the very dance form they are enacting, most obviously its long-standing hostility to Black female bodies. Their approach, it will be argued, not only challenges the stereotypes that have hampered Black dancers, but, in its complex self-reflexiveness, also points to the possibility of a different future. For, as Zora Neale Hurston observed, Black “dancing is dynamic suggestion . . . every posture gives the impression that the dancer will do much more” (53).

The essay will begin with a brief account of the nature of, and the relationship between, publics and counterpublics. It will then rehearse the ways in which the Robert E. Lee monument served the interests of the dominant white public from May 29, 1880, until May 31, 2022. As a precursor to the discussion of their role in claiming of the monument through dance, the essay will then offer an account of the obstacles that have traditionally hampered Black women in the world of dance, and in ballet in particular. The aim of this seeming digression is to permit the delineation in the final part of the essay of a simultaneous double movement by which Holloway and George embrace and employ an aesthetic form which “likes to think of itself as beyond politics” (Gottschild 2003) to offer positive resistance to the politics of white supremacy. First, by helping to turn the site into the microcosmic counterpublic—theirs was among the first artistic performances at the site coming only eleven days after George Floyd’s murder—and second, by exposing as falsely pernicious the stereotypes that impede the progress of Black women in dance. While it is, perhaps, the former that has drawn most attention, it may be their engagement with the latter that most clearly demonstrates the power of positive resistance—of pushing onward—to “restructure perception,” both of the world in which this dance form is an artifact, and of the dominant white supremacist assumptions that structure dance itself. In this, the essay seeks to demonstrate the fecundity of the relationship between art and radical politics.

Publics, Counterpublics, and Resistance

“Publics,” writes Michael Warner, “have become an essential fact of the social landscape; yet it would tax our understanding to say exactly what they are” (65). Jürgen Habermas has no such concerns. For him, the public sphere is the space in which citizens debate and discuss their shared concerns through the medium of speech (1991). It is, he argues, an arena of rationality and consensus, one in which citizens come to an agreement on their values and policies. A number of theorists, including William Connolly (2005), Bonnie Honig (1993), and Chantal Mouffe (2005) have, however, taken issue with Habermas’s assumption that the endpoint of democratic deliberation is consensus. Rather, they suggest, democracy is necessarily antagonistic, filled with always-ongoing conflicts, and that as such, reaching consensus is—at best—highly unlikely. For this reason, they argue, democratic theory should focus on turning antagonism into a potentially politically productive agonism, a register in which opponents are seen as rivals rather than enemies. There are, they note, multiple possible publics and that, as such, any public’s claim to be *the* public sphere is inherently ideological: an expression of a desire for hegemonic cultural and/or political power. In such hegemonic spheres, notes Michael Dawson, social stratification is such that favorable outcomes are guaranteed to privileged groups, even in the absence of formal exclusions (2001, 24). Counterpublics are those publics that stand outside of, and/or in opposition to, the dominant public sphere. Noting the way in which such spheres are formed by those excluded and/or disadvantaged by the dominant public, Nancy Fraser labels them “subaltern counterpublics” (67). One of the ways in which such publics are *counterpublics*, Warner suggests, is that they “try to supply different ways of imagining,” offering the subaltern a space and ways in which to create their identities in the face of the hegemonic demands of the dominant public sphere (121, 57). Thus, he argues, they seek to offer “not only new shared worlds and critical languages but also new privacies, new individuals, new bodies, new intimacies, and new citizenships” (Warner 61). It is out of such publics—and especially out of what Frank Farmer calls *cultural publics*—that a mode of resistance beyond the merely defensive, a form of “pushing onwards,” emerges (31).

In his book *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, Robin Kelley offers a far more capacious understanding of politics than that embraced by Walzer and Reed. He rejects the idea that “the only

struggles that count take place through institutions” (4). Here he anticipates Chantal Mouffe’s distinction between “politics” and “the political.” “By the ‘political,’” she writes, “I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by ‘politics’ I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political” (9). Thus, in Mouffian terms, by paying attention to behavior in nonstate contexts, Kelley’s focus is on “the political.” By way of example, he identifies Malcolm Little’s—the putative Malcolm X’s—adoption of zoot suits and conked hair during his years as “Detroit Red.” While Malcolm’s stylings have been presented as assimilationist—not least by Malcolm himself—Kelley connects his attire to resistive traditions emerging out of parts of the Latinx community, traditions in which fashion conveyed opposition to a dominant white public sphere (165). While such sartorial choices can obviously be understood as a defensive posture—a “pushing back” against the respectability norms of the dominant public sphere—such a reading is necessarily incomplete, missing as it does fashion’s role in a positive construction of identity, and as a mode of communication for the subaltern in the dominant public sphere (Ford). Similarly, Kelley identifies the multiple roles that gangsta rap played in the lives of the Black underclass in the 1990s, including, but not limited to, creating identity, decrying living conditions, generating aesthetic pleasure, and detailing police abuse all the while cultivating a distinct sense of style (183–226). That none of these aspects was in any way *aimed* at the dominant white public sphere—though they were inevitably overheard and sometimes problematically embraced by whites—suggests the ways in which Black resistance is more than a strategy of defense. It is, to be sure, often a mode of survival in the face of a white hegemonic public, but Kelley’s work also indicates the ways in which it is a pushing onward, cultivating a consciousness, way of being, and a sense of identity that is a thing unto itself, not a reaction to something else. It is a pushing onward located in multiple locations and expressed in multiple voices; as Foucault observes, because “power is spread throughout society . . . the struggle against power must also be diffuse” (Pickett 458). It is an account of political activity that exposes the limitations of Walzer’s and Reed’s understandings of resistance.

Reed’s narrowness of focus would seem to be called into further question by Richard Iton’s argument that it is necessary to study Black politics in and through Black culture “because of the exclusionary and often violent practices that have historically defined black citizenship and

public sphere participation as problematic and because of the recognition that the cultural realm is always in play and already politically significant terrain” (17). It is an argument that finds support from Waldo Martin. “Precisely because African Americans historically have had more control over their own culture than many other aspects of their world,” he writes, “culture has always been a critical battleground in their freedom struggle” (3). To look only to the state for evidence of Black agency and politics, or to prioritize that mode of politics over and above the cultural would, then, be to obscure important political activity in the Black counterpublic. Although such Black resistance is not necessarily defined in opposition to the dominant white public sphere, the form of resistance embodied by Holloway and George’s performance can best be understood against the history of the Lee monument and its role in an exclusionary white public.

Look Away, Look Away

On May 29, 1890, a giant equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee was unveiled in Richmond, Virginia. Attended by an estimated crowd of between 100,000 and 150,000 people, the event was marked by a parade of some 20,000 citizens with bands playing “Dixie,” and the waving of both Confederate and American flags (Blight 267–69). The intermingling of the flags was telling: the unveiling was seen as the embodiment of a reconciliation between the North and the South. Indeed, *The New York Times* declared Lee’s memory “a possession of the American people, and the monument that recalls it is itself a national possession” (Savage 152). It was a reconciliation that excluded Black Americans. By making Lee rather than Jefferson Davis the southern face of the Civil War, forces both North and South emptied the conflict of any political content. The war became one of valor: a tragedy in which brother fought brother, with the issue of slavery all but forgotten. The whitewashing of Lee’s reputation even extended to the claim that he had been opposed to slavery, a position not borne out by his actual statements about the nation’s original sin (Savage 131). Indeed, solidifying the white reconciliationist impulse, Lee was depicted as a proponent of gradual emancipation, a position that found great favor in the North where Black participation in public life was far from popular. Indeed, the design of the monument—depicting Lee astride his horse, Traveller—was itself an embodiment of white supremacist ideology. Building on a well-known racist folktale in which a “negro boy”

tried to ride Traveller but was thrown off because the horse would not permit himself to be ridden by an inferior being, the design, notes Kirk Savage, showed that “Lee did not have to spur or whip or strangle with the reins; his moral authority achieved what mere physical domination could accomplish only imperfectly” (134). In this, the monument offered a model of the benevolent master controlling the inferior races that had considerable appeal to postbellum whites both North and South.

There was, however, considerable opposition to the memorial from Richmond’s Black residents. John Mitchell, editor of the Black newspaper *The Richmond Planet*, and a member of the city council—which had not yet gone full Jim Crow—voted along with the two other Black council members to refrain from approving an appropriation to fund the monument’s dedication. Such was their marginality they were, nevertheless, relatively limited in what they could achieve, with silence on the issue being “their only feasible non-suicidal option” (Savage 152). Mitchell reported hearing an elderly Black man witnessing the monument’s inaugural parade and its multitude of Confederate flags declare: “The Southern white folks are on top—the Southern white folks is on top!” (Blight 270). It was a lament that captured the postwar predicament of Blacks both North and South. With typical sagacity, Frederick Douglass had long railed against the sort of historical forgetting embodied by the Lee monument. In his 1865 speech, “Our Martyred President,” he declared: “We were manifesting almost as much gratitude to General Lee for surrendering as to General Grant for compelling him to surrender” (Douglass 78). Nevertheless, even his fiery rhetoric and well-timed interrogative were insufficient to prevent the exclusionary reconciliationism and historical amnesia made manifest in the Lee monument. The monument was but one small part of a broader narrative that took shape after the war, but its history is suggestive of the ways in which that narrative took hold, for, as Savage notes, “A funny thing happened once the monument was built and it took over the landscape of people’s lives: it became a kind of natural fact, as if it had always been meant to be. The monument’s rhetorical claims of popular status became self-fulfilling prophecy” (7). The monument in effect erased its own history along with any tensions among whites that it might have embodied, cultivating a politics of consensus that excluded those who might have objected to its construction and/or the story it told about the world in which it was an artifact.

In keeping with recent work on the power of monuments to generate and/or to shape publics by thinkers as diverse as Karen Cox, Erika Doss, and Steven Johnston, Savage nevertheless offers some hope—albeit

perhaps Du Bois's "hope, not hopeless, but unhopeful" (1994, 93)—that such sites might be reworked in a manner that is politically productive for subaltern groups. "The public monument," he writes, "was, after all not just a rhetorical space where people debated image and symbol but was a real physical space where public could gather and define themselves at ceremonies and rallies" (7). In a world in which art—albeit, in the case of the Lee statue, a monumental form of poshlost—helped to shape dominant political understandings, it is possible that art might also serve to signify on, reconfigure, remix, or replace such prevailing values in ways that better serve the needs and/or the interests of the subaltern. Such was the impact of those who initially claimed the Lee monument in the days following George Floyd's murder. Among those acts of claiming was Ava Holloway and Kennedy George's dance performance, one which not only engaged with the monument but also the white supremacist history of ballet itself. Delineating that history sets the stage for understanding the complexity and political import of Holloway and George's double engagement with both the white supremacist American public sphere, and the similarly tainted balletic form.

Ballet and the Racial Aesthetic

In both NBC's and *Inside Edition's* coverage of the young women's performance, Kennedy George recounted an experience common to ballet dancers of color: that a prerequisite for her dancing with her ballet company was dyeing her pointe shoes—which usually only come in pink for women—to match her skin tone. This, she noted, required that she find foundation makeup that matched her complexion and apply to the shoes with a brush, a laborious process that, she said, took several coats (NBC). While deeply symbolic of the difficulties faced by ballerinas of color in the world of classical dance, this is but one such obstacle, many of which arise from the form's almost maniacal obsession with uniformity: a world in which a Black ballerina is seen to disrupt the desired aesthetic effect to the extent that they have sometimes been asked to color their skin (Sulcas 2020). This is one reason Black ballerinas have difficulty finding a company (Gottschild 78).⁴ Such exclusions have a knock-on effect, with Black children often not taking up ballet because they have no role models, with classes largely taught by white women (Klapper 130). If these obstacles to Black participation in the ballet world are only incidentally racist—and it is not clear that they deserve such a benign ascription—then there are

other more explicitly racist reasons why Black dancers are disadvantaged, most obviously in the mischaracterization of the Black body's aptitude for classical performance, and in the assumptions about the supposedly "natural" ability of Black dancers.

"On of the most prevalent and pernicious myths attached to the Black dancing body," observes Gottschild, "is that movement is not learned but inborn" (2003, 47). Connected to this is the assumption that "as 'natural movers,' Black dancers are 'attuned solely to rhythm and incapable of being trained'" (Das 22). Such primitivist understandings of Black dance stretch back to before the founding of the nation (Thompson 23). Under slavery, dancing was taken as evidence of Blacks' intellectual vacuity; indeed, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson pointed to Black dance as an indication of the primitive nature of the enslaved, a claim that served, he believed, to justify slavery itself (Jefferson 148). The "natural" Black dancer is a trope that, as Rachel Carrico points out, has had a shockingly long half-life, stretching from slavery to the present day (27). In addition to robbing Black dance of its intellectual content, the "natural" dancer trope also serves to rob the Black dancer of the recognition of the physical effort that both dance training and performance require. It is an aspect of the trope that serves to undermine the recruitment of Black dancers, especially in ballet. It does so in two ways. First, and most obviously, it continually inscribes and reinscribes upon the Black dancing body, the notion that it is unsuitable for choreography, such as ballet, that is strongly predicated upon technique; second, Black dancers often find themselves subject to stereotype threat: when faced with a widely held negative perception of group's abilities—such as a lack of technique—members of that group find themselves hampered by the stereotype in their performance of a task (Gottschild 2003, 80–81; Steele and Aronson). Most profoundly, however, the "natural" trope robs Black dancers of any agency, with their performances seen as a product of instinct, not technical acumen, creativity, and hard work. It is, furthermore, an understanding that empties Black dance of any political content. Dance, and Black dance in particular, is nevertheless inherently political. This is something that becomes evident when it is situated within a Black counterpublic: the sphere in which Black Americans both create and identify themselves as a people, that which stands outside of and/or in opposition to the dominant white public sphere, and through which they seek to cultivate productive responses to their marginalization (Dawson).

Black Swans and the Claiming of Public Space

There is no video footage of the first occasion upon which Kennedy George and Ava Holloway danced on the Lee Monument at the Marcus-David Peters Circle. The performance was, however, captured by Marcus Ingram, a Richmond-based photographer, whose pictures went viral on Instagram and elsewhere.⁵ Evident in all the pictures is the way in which the monument's plinth has been tagged with graffiti. Slogans include "BLM," "Stop White Supremacy," "Fuck Pigs," "Hold Cops Accountable," and "Save Black Lives." What might be seen as defacements of the monument are, says Ella Myers, borrowing the vocabulary of Bruno Latour, better understood as "refacements" (127). It is an insight that captures the way in which the resistive force of claiming the site points both ways: it is to be sure a pushing back against the state—though not through its formal institutions in the manner championed by Walzer and Reed—but also a pushing onward. The tagging of the territory helps to make the monument site a space for Black lives to matter, a microcosmic counterpublic in which there is room for the flourishing of Black imagination and dialogue, and the cultivation of a critical Black consciousness. Renaming the site the Marcus-David Peters Circle enacts the same mechanism, a further refacement. In this, the actions of those who claimed the plinth and the traffic circle—Holloway and George among them—embodied a Black resistive tradition of claiming the streets, often those in white locales. The most obvious example of this is second lining street parades in New Orleans where participants "own" the street for the duration of their performances: a subaltern claiming of property by the propertyless, one that brings with it a sense of community and agency in the face of dispossession (Regis 2008, 756). Second lining is, as Helen Regis notes, a way for those who take temporary control of the streets to "take hold of the public imagination" (1999, 480), shaping a communal resistive ethos in the in the manner suggested, in different ways, by Du Bois and Kelley.⁶ Little wonder, perhaps, that Fanon should declare that, in the face of sterile negotiations with the colonial government, "[t]he time for dancing in the streets has arrived" (32). Such engagement serves to create a Black counterpublic, says Michael C. Dawson, a space where not just the Arendtian *vita activa* but also the *vita contemplative* is made possible, not just a world of action, but a world of action imbued with thought and imagination (53). As with any aesthetic form, the process by which this happens is far from linear. Observes Iton, "[i]t is extremely rare-though not

impossible-for actions undertaken by creative artists alone to bring about specific substantive public policy reorientations on the part of state authorities. Rather, the discursive disruptions artists instigate, and the meanings read into their actions and creations are most likely to have a more diffuse, symbolic impact, at least in the external domain” (28). Nevertheless, as Myers notes, characterizations of such actions as a purely symbolic politics—a characterization which would, no doubt, find favor with Reed—are mistaken (125). Rather, as Lisa Perhamus and Clarence Joldersama argue, the tearing down and the refacing of monuments “is not *symbolic* of a dismantling; it is a dismantling, bit by physical bit, of anti-Black racism and hierarchical racial ordering” (1322). What might be seen as a politics of symbolism by those in the dominant public sphere is, their work suggests, always more than that for those engaged in the aesthetic—and other forms of political action—in the subaltern counterpublic. Such was Holloway and Kennedy’s performance in the Marcus-David Peters circle.

“This is us enforcing that we are not putting up with this anymore,” observed Kennedy George about their performance, “we are not going to be discriminated against, this is unacceptable. This is us putting our foot down and making things happen . . . I knew I could use dance because it is always something I have done” (Turner). Taking their dance out of the concert hall and/or the classroom and into the streets, Holloway and George claimed both the dance form and the location for a rich form of resistance, inscribing upon both (and thus upon the audience(s) for their performance) the insistence that Black lives matter. Indeed, in a time when it has repeatedly been shown that Black bodies often do not matter—evidenced by the deaths of George Floyd, Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, and many others—the women were able to demonstrate the political importance of their own Black bodies through dance. In so doing, they drew attention to such losses and pushed back against the attitudes and conditions that make such deaths commonplace in the American republic. For if, as Warner suggests, counterpublics create the conditions for, and are created out of, a different imaginary than the dominant public, then dance proves its worth as a subaltern political form. Writes Randy Martin, “Dance . . . makes its own politics, crafts its own pathways and agency in the world, moves us toward what we imagine to be possible and desirable” (29). Its inherent duality as a form of resistance—as both a pushing back and as a pushing onward—is further suggested by Katrina Hazard-Gordon who suggests that “the African-American dance arena has demonstrated a cultural resilience and a recuperative creativity” (xi). The recuperative

creativity on show in Holloway and George's performance is suggested by how they employ their crafted bodies—disciplined through ballet's commitment to precise and proper technique—to seek to create a space where Black life not so precarious, where the threat of violence is, if not entirely diminished, at least potentially mitigated (Beausoleil 119).⁷ This productive duality is evident in the way Holloway and George both employ and signify on the balletic form in their response to the death of George Floyd.

Figure 4.1 shows Kennedy George (left) and Ava Holloway halfway up the base of the plinth of the Lee Monument, dressed in black tutus. Facing the camera (*en face*), Holloway in pink pointe shoes, George in black, the women are positioned in the classical ballet position *sous-sus*, *en pointe* (on their toes), one foot behind the other—in what dancers call fifth position—their legs fully stretched.

Figure 4.1. Digital Photo, 2020. *Source:* Photo by Marcus Ingram Jr. Used with permission.



While this position is a standard part of the ballet repertoire, its degree of difficulty is elevated here because the women are posing for the camera rather than being caught in mid-movement. In this, their form—their execution of the required position—demonstrates a resistance to the racist stereotypes about the technical ability and physical unsuitability of Black female bodies for ballet and other formal dance. This is also evident in figure 4.2, where the dancer is in a *penché*—a lean—which is a position that requires considerable strength, skill, and technique.

It is a resistance that pushes two ways. First, *against* those would employ such stereotypes to justify their exclusion of Black bodies from

Figure 4.2. Digital Photo, 2020. *Source:* Photo by Marcus Ingram Jr. Used with permission.



concert dance; and second, it pushes *onward* by allowing the excluded to embrace the hitherto unseen possibilities that such a performance makes obvious. Most clearly these include the power of the aesthetic to refute, reframe, and reimagine in productive ways the supposed truisms of white supremacy. Dance thus plays its part in the Black counterpublic. In the first instance, dance pushes back against the constraints and values of the white public sphere such as, for example, by countering stereotype threat (whose pernicious effects are not, of course, confined to the world of dance). In the second, it serves to restructure the perceptions of its Black members in a productive fashion, promoting community, consciousness, and agency in ways that have little if anything to do with a response to white hegemony. It offers, that is to say, a nondefensive form of resistance. This aspect of the women's performance is made evident by their creation—along with two other Black dancers Sophia Chambliss and Shania Gordon—of the organization Brown Ballerinas for Change. In keeping with the double movement of their performance, that which focuses on injustice inside and outside of ballet, they describe their mission as “to help create advocacy, social justice, and to increase participation of underrepresented populations in ballet,” and their vision as “to use ballet to promote activism, social justice, and to increase diversity in the arts by providing annual scholarships, a mentor network, and community programs” (Brown Ballerinas for Change). Characterizing dance as being about joy and collaboration, Kennedy George—no doubt inadvertently but still tellingly—channeled Du Bois when she declared: “We’re moving forward” (Rendlemean). The organization suggests but one of the many possibilities enacted and enabled by the politics of their performance.

The richness of that performance is further evidenced in figure 4.1, where the dancers are positioned with one arm behind their backs, and the other in fifth position, *en haut* (stretched). Both arms in fifth position is extremely common in ballet; indeed, it is probably the position most often adopted by those trying to imitate a ballerina. Here, however, only one arm is raised, with the dancers creating a mirror effect by each holding up different arms. While arms *en haut* would normally be completed by an outstretched hand with a flat palm, here the women offer the clenched fist of the Black Power salute. It is a bold refacement of both the monument site and the dance tradition they embody: both are claimed and reworked, not only as a rebuke to white supremacy but also as an appeal to a Black radical tradition. Perhaps confused by the juxtaposition of the women's youth, the balletic form, the radicalism of the gesture, or simple willful blindness, many white observers chose to ignore or bend over backward

to empty their performance of its political content. Thus, a story in one of Richmond's free newspapers, *Style Weekly* referenced the photograph of the dancers "with their right [*sic*] fists raised *reminiscent* of the Black Power salute" (my emphasis). In addition to misdescribing the picture, the author seems unwilling to acknowledge that the raised fist *is* the Black Power salute, something made clear by the dancers echoing in their positioning a graffitied Black Power first salute below and between them on the plinth, and by figure 4.3. in which Holloway repeats the gesture combining, once again, *sous-sus* with a right arm in fifth position, again making the Black Power salute.

If the raised fist of the Black Power salute in figures 4.1 and 4.3 are a form of signification on the fifth position in classical ballet, then the same can be said for the dancers' gaze in both figures 4.3 and 4.4.

Figure 4.3. Digital Photo, 2020. *Source:* Photo by Marcus Ingram Jr. Used with permission.



Figure 4.4. Digital Photo, 2020. *Source:* Photo by Marcus Ingram Jr. Used with permission.



Traditionally, the direction of the head follows that of the fingers, except when the dancer is facing the audience, as in figures 4.1, 4.3, and 4.4. In those circumstances, the head and eyes are directed out toward the audience, but not in a way that looks directly at them. Rather, the gaze is one that looks of into the distance. As we see in all three of these images, the dancers are looking directly at the camera that serves as their audience in this performance. In this, in balletic terms, they are said to be “breaking” the movement.

The significance of this breaking becomes clear once it is observed that a recurring practice of Black Lives Matter has been the daring look back, or the unflinching staring into the eyes of law enforcement. One of the unwritten rules of the Jim Crow era was, notes Myers, that Black

people could not make eye contact with whites for fear insult, beating, or worse (122).

Thus, the direct stare as it is employed by BLM is a form of resistance to the white gaze, but also one which pushes the movement forward by raising the consciousness of, and empowering, its members. Its embrace by Holloway and George might be thought to do the same, capturing the political complexity of their performance in ways that suggest that, contrary to historical stereotypes, Black dance is action imbued with intellectual content, and is, thus, a powerful form of resistance that gives the lie to the inadequacy of Walzer's and Reed's account of the same.

Turning Mourning into Dancing

In closing, it should, perhaps, be noted that Holloway and George's is very much a dance of mourning and one that embodied a complex tradition of Black responses to loss. In *Souls of Black Folk*, for example, Du Bois's refers to an "awful gladness" arising from his son's passing: a combination of his sorrow at his loss and his simultaneous relief that his child was now free from racial oppression (1994, 95). It is a tradition that has long served as a resistive force in Black life, and one that pushes both ways—backward and forward—against the values of the dominant white public, and forward to the creation of identity and the cultivation of a Black consciousness (Stow 2017). Following Denmark Vesey's failed uprising in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1822, for example, slaves were prohibited from wearing any outward signs of mourning in the week following his execution. Many, nevertheless, chose to do so, both resisting the state, and cultivating, signaling, and sharing an identity which, will no doubt oppositional, was also directed at fellow Blacks (Robertson 98, 104). It is also a tradition of futurity and hope—in the Du Boisean sense—as is suggested by the Reverend Joseph Lowery's assertion that, at a Black funeral, "we celebrate the life of the dead, but then we challenge those who are living to pick up the mantle and carry on the work" (Stow 2010, 691). Holloway and Kennedy's dance embodied just such a sensibility, one that mourned loss but that also looked forward to, and sought to bring about, a world in which the state violence that killed George Floyd is a world of the past. For, as Elizabeth Alexander observes: "Our dancing is our pleasure, but perhaps it is also our sorrow song" (81). The duality of the sorrow songs—what Du Bois calls "the music of an unhappy people,

of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and an unvoiced longing towards a truer world” (1994, 103)—is evident in Holloway and George’s performance, not least in their choice of black tutus for their dance. While obviously the traditional color of mourning, in ballet the black tutu necessarily invokes Odile, the Black Swan in Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*. There the blackness of the costuming is meant to indicate evil and in this sense Holloway and George claim the color for good, signifying upon the balletic tradition in a way that reconfigures both it and the world in which it is an artifact. As with all their efforts, there is no guarantee that they will succeed, but the complexity of their resistive mode demands that this is not a reason to try. It is a form of resistance that seeks to move beyond the present, embodying all the while the recognition that to push back is insufficient, that such art must help its audience and protagonists push onward, embodying always the duality at the heart of Black life. Clad in black tutus of mourning, Ava Holloway and Kennedy George did just that, cultivating in the process a space for their fellow Black citizens to imagine and to create a new future.

Notes

1. The first monument, to Robert E. Lee was dedicated in 1890, and the four other Confederate statues between 1907 and 1929. A sixth monument, added in 1996, commemorates tennis player and Richmond native Arthur Ashe. A statue of Christopher Columbus not located on Monument Avenue was also torn down during the post-George Floyd unrest.

2. The step dancing was formed by a young Black Woman, Morgan Bullock, who combines traditional Irish dancing with the sounds of hip-hop (Bullock).

3. It is for this reason that Holloway and George and the Black citizens who helped to claim the site of the Lee monument as their own are not here characterized as “protestors,” a nomenclature that suggests an objection to government actions or policy rather than to the foundation of that government in white supremacy. Given the broad coalition of groups organized under the headings of Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives, it is, of course, impossible to say that *none* of the participants in the post-George Floyd unrest saw themselves as lobbying the state, but it is more than clear that for many of those engaged in this resistance, their opposition was to white supremacy in all its forms.

4. Black men face some of these same difficulties, but overall dance companies are said to be more hospitable to Black male bodies than those of Black women (Klapper 130).

5. Julia Rendleman, a photojournalist, also took photographs of the dancers. She sold one of her pictures to Reuters which also helped the story go viral. It did, however, cause some confusion with Mr. Ingram and Ms. Rendleman often being credited for the other's work online and in print. This analysis draws on Mr. Ingram's work.

6. The strength of the tradition is suggested by its resistance to white attempts at appropriation (Stow 2008).

7. The women noted that they were sometimes subject to abuse by passing motorists. An aspect of their performance which suggests the women's bravery.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Elizabeth. 2022. *The Trayvon Generation*. New York: Grand Central Publishing.
- Beausoleil, Emily. 2014. "'Only They Breathe': Identity, Agency and the Dancing Body Politic." *Constellations*, 21, no. 1: 111–33.
- Blight, David. 2002. *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Bollock, Morgan. 2020. "Experience: I'm an Irish dancing TikTok star." *The Guardian*, July 17. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/jul/17/experience-im-an-irish-dancing-TikTok-star>. Accessed November 12, 2022.
- Brown Ballerinas for Change. n.d. <https://www.brownballerinasforchange.com>. Accessed December 15, 2022.
- Carrico, Rachel. 2016. "Un/Natural disaster and Dancing. Hurricane Katrina and Second Lining in New Orleans." *The Black Scholar*. 46, no. 1, 2016, 27–36.
- Connolly, William. 2005. *Pluralism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cox, Karen L. 2021. *No Common Ground. Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Das, Joanna D. 2017. *Katherine Dunham. Dance and the African Diaspora*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dawson, Michael C. 2001. *Black Visions. The Roots of Contemporary African-American Ideologies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dawson, Michael C. 1995. "A Black Counterpublic? Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics." *Public Culture*. 7, no. 1: 195–223.
- Doss, Erika. 2010. *Memorial Mania. Public Feeling in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Douglass, Frederick. 1999. *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* edited by Philip S. Foner. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1926. "Criteria of Negro Art." [webdubois.org](http://www.webdubois.org/dbCriteriaNArt.html). <http://www.webdubois.org/dbCriteriaNArt.html>. Accessed September 30, 2022.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1994. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Mineola, NY: Dover Press.

- Fanon, Frantz. 2004. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Farmer, Frank. 2013. *After the Public Turn. Composition, Counterpublics, and the Citizen Bricoleur*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.
- Ford, Tanisha C. 2015. *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1990. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text*. 25/26: 56–80.
- Gottschild, Brenda Dixon. 2003. *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gregory, Stephen. 1994. "Race, Identity and Political Activism: The Shifting Contours of the African American Public Sphere." *Public Culture*. no. 7: 147–164.
- Guarino, Lindsay. 2015. "Is Dance a Sport? A Twenty-First-Century Debate." *Journal of Dance Education*, 15, no. 2: 77–80.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1991. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hazard-Gordon, Katrina. 1990. *Jookin'. The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Literature*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Honig, Bonnie. 1993. *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. 2022. *You Don't Know Us Negroes and Other Essays*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Inside Edition. 2020. "Black Teen Ballerinas Reclaim Robert E. Lee Statue's Space." *Inside Edition*, July 17. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AT-59bLtHrVg&t=228s>. Accessed October 13, 2022.
- Iton, Richard. 2008. *In Search of the Black Fantastic. Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jefferson, Thomas. 2006. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/jefferson/jefferson.html>. Accessed September 30, 2022.
- Johnston, Steven. 2007. *The Truth About Patriotism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kelley, Robin. 1994. *Race Rebels. Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: The Free Press.
- Klapper, Melissa R. 2020. *Ballet Class: An American History*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Martin, Randy. 2011. "Between Intervention and Utopia: Dance Politics." In *Emerging Bodies: The Performance of World Making in Dance and Choreography*, edited by Gabrielle Klein and Sandra Noeth, 29–45. New Rockford, MD: Transcript Publishing.
- Martin, Waldo. 2005. *No Coward Soldiers. Black Cultural Politics in Post-War America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Meyers, Ella. 2022. *The Gratifications of Whiteness: W. E. B. Dubois and the Enduring Rewards of Anti-Blackness*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Mouffe, Chantal. 2005. *On the Political*. New York: Routledge.
- NBC. 2020. "Black Ballet Dancers Talk about Their Powerful Protest Shoot." *Today*, July 15. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fgI8ONfsGQ&t=152s. Accessed October 13, 2022.
- Perhamus, Lisa M. and Clarence W. Joldersama. 2020. "What Might Sustain the Activism of This Moment? Dismantling White Supremacy, One Monument at a Time." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 54, no. 5: 1314–1332.
- Pickett, Brent L. 1996. "Foucault and the Politics of Resistance." *Polity* 28, no. 4: 445–466.
- Reed, Adolph. 2000. *Class Notes: Posing as Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene*. New York: The New Press.
- Regis, Helen. 1999. "Second Lines, Minstrelsy, and the Contested Landscapes of New Orleans Afro-Creole Festivals." *Cultural Anthropology*, 14, no. 4: 472–504.
- Regis, Helen. 2001. "Blackness and the Politics of Memory in the New Orleans Second Line." *American Ethnologist*, 28, no. 4: 752–77.
- Rendleman, Julia (@juliarendleman). 2020. "Ballerinas Kennedy George, 14, left, and Ava Holloway, 14, pose in front of a monument of Confederate general Robert E. Lee." *Instagram*, June 5. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBD40VCl8ju/?hl=en>. Accessed November 11, 2022.
- Ritzel, Rebecca J. 2020. "In Richmond, Black Dance Claims a Space Near Robert E. Lee." *The New York Times*, August 6. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/arts/dance/richmond-virginia-lee-monument.html>. Accessed October 13, 2022.
- Robertson, David. 2000. *Denmark Vesey: The Buried Story of America's Largest Slave Rebellion and the Man Who Led It*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Savage, Kirk. 1997. *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves. Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Schneider, Gregory S. 2020. "Northam Proposes Major Effort to Reimagine Public Space Around Robert E. Lee Statue in Richmond." *The Washington Post*, December 11. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/northam-proposal-lee-statue-richmond/2020/12/10/10018a1c-3a3a-11eb-98c4-25dc9f4987e8_story.html. Accessed October 13, 2022.
- Sehra, Rohina Katoch. 2020. "How Ballerinas of Color Are Changing the Palette of Dance." *Huffpost.com*, February 10. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ballet-dancers-of-color_1_5e14b343c5b66361cb5b6b5f. Accessed October 17, 2022.
- Steele, Claude M., and Joshua Aronson. 1995. "Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69, no. 5: 797–811.
- Stow, Simon. 2008. "'Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?' George W. Bush, the Jazz Funeral, and the Politics of Memory." *Theory & Event*. 11, no. 1.

- Stow, Simon. 2010. "Agonistic Homegoing: Frederick Douglass, Joseph Lowery, and the Democratic Value of African American Public Mourning." *American Political Science Review*. 104, no. 4: 681–97.
- Stow, Simon. 2017. *American Mourning. Tragedy. Democracy. Resilience*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Style Weekly. 2022. "Kennedy George, 16, and Ava Holloway, 15. Co-founders and CEOs of Brown Ballerinas for Change." March 26. *styleweekly.com*. <https://m.styleweekly.com/richmond/kennedy-george-16-and-ava-holloway-15/Content?oid=18592599>. Accessed November 23, 2022.
- Sulcas, Roslyn. 2020. "Black Ballerina, Playing a Swan, Says She Was Asked to Color Her Skin." *The New York Times*, December 11. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/11/arts/dance/Chloe-Lopes-Gomes-Ballet.html>. Accessed October 17, 2022.
- Thompson, Katrina Dyonne. 2014. *Ring Shout, Wheel About. The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Turner, Jasmine. 2021. "'Brown Ballerinas for Change' Working to Diversify the Arts." *12 On Your Side*. March 13. <https://www.nbc12.com/2021/02/19/brown-ballerinas-change-working-diversify-arts/>. Accessed December 12, 2022.
- Walzer, Michael. 2017. "The Politics of Resistance." *Dissent*. March 1. www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-politics-of-resistance-michael-walzer. Accessed September 22, 2022.
- Warner, Michael. 2005. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone.