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POWER



**omni-
ni-
di-
rec-
tion-
al**

**(adjective):
receiving signals from or transmitting in all directions.**

¹ *Murphie, Andrew, ed., The Go-To How-To Book of Anarchiving, The SenseLab, Montréal, 2016.*

“The archive is not just about how we store the past, then. It is also about how we organise possible actions for the future. It is also about who or what can participate in those actions, or not, and in what way.”

“Social change—shifts in powers, hierarchies and capabilities—can be found in the changing forms of archives and in the subsequent forms of experience and expression that they provide.”

—Andrew Murphie, from “Where Are the Other Places? (Archives and Anarchives)”

“The anarchiver...a repertory of traces of collaborative research-creation events. The traces are not inert, but are carriers of potential. They are reactivatable, and their reactivation helps trigger a new event which continues the creative process from which they came, but in a new iteration.”

—Brian Massumi, from “Working Principles” in the Go-To How-To Book of Anarchiving¹

Orientation / Archive
by Meredith Bove

When I call to mind one of the early movement sequences in Reggie Wilson's POWER, which I saw at its premiere at Jacob's Pillow in July of 2019, I can picture three dancers in feminine silhouette, dressed in full, layered skirts; they are adjacent with different facings, their heads and chests and eyes are lifted upward as if reaching toward the sky or heavens. Simultaneously, the lower halves of their bodies are grounded, legs bent, pelvis's sinking downward into the



earth. This image that I hold in my mind reminds me of another dancing image, similarly etched in memory: the opening sequence in Alvin Ailey's Revelations, in which dancers huddle together in deep pli , dropping low into the ground, but with arms outstretched, chests lifted, and gazes skyward. Thomas F. DeFrantz refers to this movement motif in Revelations as "split focus"—a simultaneous reaching upwards and downwards. DeFrantz points toward "split focus" in Revelations as signifying long traditions of spiritual uplift in the face of bondage and oppression in southern black communi-

ties. While Ailey's Revelations used folk materials and black religious music to map rural southern spirituality onto a concert dance stage², Wilson's POWER looks into spiritual traditions with cultural vectors that would seem to diverge.



²DeFrantz, Thomas F., *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2004.



**ONE WAY TO READ
POWER MIGHT BE AS A
“REIMAGINING” OF WHAT
SHAKER WORSHIP MIGHT
LOOK LIKE WHEN IMBUED
WITH SPIRITUAL AND
MOVEMENT
PRACTICES OF THE
AFRICAN DIASPORA**

POWER stems from research into Shaker religion (usually historicized as a spiritual practice belonging to white New Englanders) conducted in part at Hancock Shaker Village in the Berkshires of Massachusetts. Somewhere in the midst of this research, Wilson encountered traces of the life of Mother Rebecca Cox Jackson, a black woman who established a largely black Shaker community in Philadelphia circa 1859³.

(Jackson’s community most certainly did blur movement and religious practices carried over from the African continent and adapted during slavery with movement and spiritual practices “belonging” to Shaker tradition) Yet POWER is not historical reconstruction—when Wilson walks the diagonal length of the stage the outset of POWER, singing a long-metered rendition of the Shaker hymn, “Simple Gifts⁴,” we

³Jackson, Rebecca, and Jean McMahon Humez, *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981.

⁴Simple Gifts (1848)

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free

'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,

And when we find ourselves in the place just right,

'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gained,

To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,

To turn, turn will be our delight,

Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.

might consider the particular knowledges and traditions that are uniquely housed in Wilson’s dancing body, activated through performance in the present moment.



The allusion to Ailey in the early moments of POWER doesn’t linger; as soon as I grant myself the satisfaction of clocking it, the image blurs into more precarious balancing on one leg, hops included, with a relaxed elevated foot. I read these movements as clues that point me away from the modernist viewpoint of Ailey’s Revelations and toward a postmodern aesthetic, with its bent toward ease and a pedestrian, everyday quality. And then later,

THERE'S MORE

CHANGE; THE

DANCERS

STAMP

RHYTHMICALLY

WHILE WAVING

AND

CIRCLING ARMS

OVERHEAD



Feet shuffle and circumambulate in a manner that might cite dances stemming from enslaved and maroon communities like the ring shout. When the dancers jut their elbows out to the sides and weave seamlessly in and out of each other, I'm dropped into a kinesthetic memory of mandatory square dance lessons as a child, part of the physical education curriculum where I grew up in Vermont.



**IN POWER, CULTURAL
AND AESTHETIC
BELONGING IS NOT
SIMPLE, SINGULAR, OR
ASSUMED—
REFERENCES, LINEAGES,
AND INFLUENCES SLIP
OVER ONE ANOTHER,
AVOIDING SETTLING
WITHIN ANY ONE
FAMILIAR IDIOM**

Reggie Wilson/Fist and Heel Performance Group (5) is a Brooklyn-based company whose body of work connects with spiritual and movement practices (often inextricably intertwined) of the African diaspora. The company's name derives from enslaved Africans' use of

⁵<http://www.fistandheelperformancegroup.org/#/whoisfistandheel/>

fists and heels as percussion instruments in spiritual and movement practice in the face of bans on drumming by slave owners. The intersections between Wilson's research into Shaker tradition, Mother Rebecca Cox Jackson, and ongoing research into African diasporic movement and spiritual practices create connections in POWER between worlds that might oth-

erwise be conceived of as independent and distinct. When I spoke with Wilson in November of 2019, we touched on notions of cultural ownership and authorship. Wilson adamantly asserted that cultural production was not an individual or siloed effort, and that cultural practice doesn't stem from one body only. Wilson likened the process of creating POWER to

being in a multiverse, where influence and authorship might come from many sources and directions—up and down, yes, as in DeFrantz's split focus, and also sideways, diagonal—wholly omnidirectional. Wilson spoke about choreographic process as a means to "crack open possibility." Might there be a way to create more possibilities with choreography, rather than fewer? The answer seems embedded throughout POWER, in the many costume changes and iterations of clothing with Shaker-esque silhouettes and Batik-print fabric, in the dancers' oscillations between movement that is loose-limbed, grounded, stoic, flowing, ecstatic, virtuosic, balletic, repetitive, and rhythmic, and in the layering of sound from avant-garde vocalist Meredith Monk that is eclipsed by

African diasporic vocal traditions, sung live by Fist and Heel performers—more possibilities, indeed.



The neat separation of culture along geographic, racial, and religious lines is increasingly (especially with the rise of globalization and the internet) fictional. This kind of separation is convenient in perpetuating historical narratives that aim to erase traces of slavery and settler colonialism in the U.S. Only when we ignore the ways these traces haunt nearly all aspects of American history, politics, and identity is it possible to consider some cultural forms as truly independent from others. Wilson's performance craft tends toward postmodern practice, which can be marked in part by a deliberate mixing and layering of elements from varied aesthetics and traditions. Even as many early postmodern dance artists of the '60s and '70s also borrowed heavily from East Asian and African cultures, mixing and integrating elements from these cultures with western aesthetics, often the resulting move-

ment practices and aesthetics became contextualized as "neutral" and consolidated into an individual, usually white body. In *POWER*, we are given the opportunity to consider otherwise, to complicate our understandings of cultural belonging, and invited to view the production of culture as relational practice. Though our individual experiences always matter in our research and art-making, the production of culture is collective.

Our positioning to archival materials and cultural practice also truly matters—Wilson's omnidirectional approach to the making of *POWER* leaves room for glimpsing varied orientations to the content at hand. In *POWER*, tight unison movement is replaced with a different kind of unity, where distinct approaches to form and movement material can work in conjunction to create a cohesive world onstage. Instead of mandatory sameness,

THE DANCING IN POWER

LEAVES SPACE FOR

MULTIPLICITY—"CRACKING

OPEN POSSIBILITIES"

FOR COLLECTIVITY WITHOUT

ERASING THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE

PROCESS OF GETTING THERE.

*It is by way of this omnidirectional approach that I sense the gap between spiritual practice and performance closing in *POWER*—the cumulation of the dancers' nuanced gestures and particular, individual approaches to form expose personal presence while simultaneously conjuring beyond "the self." In *POWER*, collectivity is predicated on the individu-*



al's agency for expression—similar terms might apply in utopian spiritual communities. From Lauren Bakst it in her writing about Wilson's work: "See, sometimes I go to church to see dance, and sometimes dance takes me to church⁶."

⁶Bakst, Lauren, "Going to Church," in *Dancing Platform Praying Grounds: Blackness, Churches, and Downtown Dance*, Danspace Project, New York, NY, 2018.

There are likely many differences between conducting historical research, participating in spiritual practice, and experiencing live performance—but perhaps one similarity lies in the ways each of these realms requires engaging with what is uncertain or unknown. In each case, there is a requirement for filling in gaps and absences with our own imaginative, interminable means. When we spoke in November, Wilson joked (partially) about a “mythical equation” to be applied when considering meaning in his work: 30-40% of authorship is generated from Wilson, the choreographer, through his research, his experience, and his training. Another 30-40% of meaning in choreographic work is generated from the

performers working with Wilson—movement material from their past experiences might be incorporated, and their histories, identities, experiences, relationships, and positioning to subject matter may all show up in content. That leaves another 30-40% in this equation to the audience. The possibilities for how we create meaning in POWER are dependent on our own experiences and our individual orientations in relation to the content at hand. In this way, POWER gives us agency—what will we make with it?

