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I WANT TO BE READY

Improvised Dance as a
Practice of Freedom

Danielle Goldman

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To Ellis and Nick

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Introduction: The Land of the Free

In May of 2005, the choreographer David Dorfman was watching his Connecticut College seniors moving across the studio. “I just love the freedom of it, and if you don’t like what you’re doing, you can change it!” he exclaimed.¹ Dorfman’s belief in the “freedom” of improvised dance is precisely what makes him so appealing to both students and faculty at the college. As the Dance Department’s chairwoman explained, “We’re all so fierce about our training. David brings in the improvisation and freedom aspect that is very welcome and desired.”²

Such celebratory pairings of improvisation and freedom are common in the field of dance—not only in colleges but also among critics, scholars, and practicing artists across a range of genres. When attempting to define contact improvisation, Daniel Lepkoff, a central figure in the form’s development, declared, “All the work leads to free duet dancing: together with a partner one freely explores movement possibilities.”³ Daniel Nagrin, the founder of the improvisational dance company The Workgroup and the author of *Dance and the Specific Image*, notes that his early training allowed for a “double facility”: “I could improvise dance not only with freedom but with delight.”⁴ When discussing several well-known rhythm tap dancers, Jacqui Malone, an associate professor of drama, theater, and dance at Queens College and a former member of the Eleo Pomare Dance Company, wrote, “What these dancers value most is not the exactness of frozen choreography and set routines developed by others, but the joy that is inherent in improvisational flights of freedom.”⁵

Although dance is the focus of this book, the tendency to link improvisation and freedom is not unique to the province of dance scholarship. In September 2007, the Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University held an

event to inaugurate its Conversation Series, a collection of public discussions initiated to explore the role of improvisation in a wide variety of fields. Fundamental to the Conversation Series is the belief that the study of improvisation can offer fresh models for scholarly inquiry and political action. The opening conversation, entitled “Improvisation in Everyday Life,” featured a star-studded panel including the pianist Muhal Richard Abrams, the theater critic Margo Jefferson, the poet Yusef Komunyakaa, the composer and improviser George Lewis, and the law professor Patricia Williams. The panelists conflated jazz and improvisation throughout their conversation, treating the two as though they were equivalent, especially in their association with freedom. Komunyakaa’s opening address described how jazz has affected his poetry: “The music signaled a kind of freedom, and that is what I internalized.” Later he explained, “Jazz poetry demands trust in others, in the mode of freedom.” And yet again he said, “I like the implied freedom that jazz brings to my work.” Patricia Williams discussed jazz as a metaphor for inventive engagements with the law. Using jazz scores as a proxy for other kinds of life scripts, she remarked, “I associate jazz with a kind of freedom—a kind of breaking free.”⁶

“Freedom” is a persistent fixture in discussions of improvisation and the arts—and yet its precise meaning is rarely examined. In fact, in most cases it seems to function as little more than shorthand, pointing toward something good with vaguely political implications. This casual use of language has real-world causes and effects, even in the seemingly self-contained realm of dance. As George Orwell argues in “Politics and the English Language,” “[Language] becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.”⁷ Orwell drew specific attention to sloppy invocations of “freedom,” a term with a deep history in American politics—from the country’s founding, through President Harry Truman’s 1947 doctrine pledging America’s support for “free peoples” everywhere, through President George Bush’s twenty-two uses of the word at the 2004 Republican National Convention.⁸ “Our nation’s founding commitment is still our deepest commitment: In our world, and here at home, we will extend the frontiers of freedom,” Bush said.⁹ Although politicians almost always use the word ambiguously, they frequently imply that freedom is an ultimate destination or endpoint to which most of the world aspires.

I Want to Be Ready challenges this view, going against the grain of most

written accounts of improvised dance to suggest that improvisation does not reflect or exemplify the understanding of freedom as a desired endpoint devoid of constraint. On the contrary, it actively resists it. Describing a middle section of *We Insist! The Freedom Now Suite* (1961), a performance that I discuss in chapter 2, the drummer Max Roach noted that he relished “the feeling of relaxed exhaustion after you’ve done everything you can to assert yourself. You can rest now because you’ve worked to be free.”¹⁰ Undoubtedly, the weight of history, institutional oppression, and Roach’s desire for a more just world undergirds his claim. But the idea that one can achieve freedom once and for all, and that one can rest afterward, is problematic—not least because it elides the inevitably different ways in which different people imagine freedom. It seems likely, for example, that investment bankers, middle-class teenagers, factory workers, soccer moms, homeless people, and refugees harbor distinct pictures of freedom. Another problem with the idea of freedom-as-achievement is that it encourages and idealizes what is in effect a hardened stance to an inevitably changing world. It mistakenly suggests that if one could overcome a particular set of oppressions, all would be well, thereby eliding the fact that there are always multiple and diverse strictures in the world.

Deeply attuned to the force of shifting constraints, Fred Moten’s recent work informs this book’s discussion of improvised dance. In “Taste Flavor Dissonance Escape: Preface for a Solo by Miles Davis,” Moten analyzes choreography in confinement through a discussion of Harriet Jacobs. Born into slavery, Jacobs hid from her sexually abusive owner by living for seven years in a crawlspace in her grandmother’s attic before escaping to Philadelphia. Hers was perhaps the quintessential, and quite literal, *tight place* (a term I will use throughout the book to index various kinds of constraint): the garret in which she hid was a mere seven feet wide and nine feet long, with a sloping roof just three feet tall at its highest point. Although Jacobs could barely turn from one side to the other, her grandmother’s crawlspace was also the space in which a series of ongoing and necessarily *improvisational* gestures took place—the secret acts of watching and listening to the outside world from which her written story eventually unfolded. Discussing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the famous narrative that Jacobs published in 1861 under the pseudonym Linda Brent, Moten explains: “[Jacobs’s] is an amazing medley of shifts, a choreography in confinement . . . in a space [Nathaniel] Mackey would characterize as cramped *and* capacious, a spacing

Jacques Derrida would recognize as a scene of writing, that Hortense Spillers has called a *scrawl* space.”¹¹

What is particularly interesting about Moten’s discussion is the way in which it makes clear that Jacobs chose to live for seven years in a cramped attic, at grave risk to her health, rather than to accept life as a slave. Jacobs also mentions, toward the end of her narrative, that having her freedom bought for her tarnished the triumph of escape: “I felt grateful for the kindness that prompted this offer, but the idea was not so pleasant to me as might have been expected. The more my mind had become enlightened, the more difficult it was for me to consider myself an article of property; and to pay money to those who had so grievously oppressed me seemed like taking from sufferings the glory of triumph.”¹² Escape for Jacobs always meant flight from a regime of exchange. According to Moten, if Jacobs’s freedom could only come by way of exchange, she would need to escape from freedom too.¹³

The suggestion that one could escape confinement only to enter into or become aware of another set of strictures (a state of affairs that exists well beyond the historical institution of slavery) is vital to understanding the political power of improvisation. As Michel Foucault suggests in his late writings and interviews, one must be careful when speaking of liberation. Foucault understood that liberation is often urgent and necessary. But he also insisted that it is never sufficient for creating full forms of existence. Instead he emphasized the need for “practices of freedom”:

I am not trying to say that liberation as such, or this or that form of liberation, does not exist: when a colonized people attempts to liberate itself from its colonizers, this is indeed a practice of liberation in the strict sense. But we know very well, and moreover in this specific case, that this practice of liberation is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed if this people, this society, and these individuals are to be able to define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society. This is why I emphasize practices of freedom over processes of liberation.¹⁴

Throughout *I Want to Be Ready*, but most explicitly in the final chapter, I posit improvised dance as a Foucauldian practice that resists the hardened stance (whether described as complacency, deserved relaxation, or celebration) that comes with the reification of freedom. To that end, the book pre-

sents a series of case studies that emphasize the shifting constraints that improvisers negotiate, arguing that one's social and historical positions in the world affect one's ability to move, both literally and figuratively. The case studies include mambo dancing at New York's Palladium Ballroom, collaborations between dancers and jazz musicians, relations between contact improvisation and techniques of nonviolent protest, and the role of improvisation in the performances of Bill T. Jones. Together they illustrate that to ignore the constraints that improvisers inevitably encounter is not only to deny the real conditions that shape daily life; it is also to deny improvisation's most significant power as a full-bodied critical engagement with the world, characterized by both flexibility and perpetual readiness.

After countless hours watching both live and recorded improvisations (and having been moved greatly in the process), I have come to believe that improvised dance involves literally giving shape to oneself by deciding how to move in relation to an unsteady landscape. To engage oneself in this manner, with a sense of confidence and possibility, is a powerful way to inhabit one's body and to interact with the world.

"Who Moves? Who Doesn't?"

Improvisation is generally described as a spontaneous mode of creation that takes place without the aid of a manuscript or score. According to this view, performance and composition occur simultaneously—on the spot—through a practice that values surprise, innovation, and the vicissitudes of process rather than the fixed glory of a finished product. This view may initially seem straightforward, but, as I hope this book makes clear, it becomes increasingly complicated the more instances of improvisation one considers. As the ethnomusicologist Paul Berliner states in *Thinking in Jazz*, composition and improvisation "overlap hopelessly at the margins."¹⁵ Many improvisers work with loose scores, call upon idiomatic tradition, or cultivate individual styles. And many compositions begin with improvisation.

A more serious problem with many discussions of improvisation is that their emphasis on spontaneity and intuition often implies a lack of preparation, thereby eliding the historical knowledge, the sense of tradition, and the enormous skill that the most eloquent improvisers are able to mobilize. As the musician Arthur Rhames explains, "Improvisation is an intuitive process for me now, but . . . I'm calling upon all the resources of all the years of my

playing at once: my academic understanding of the music, my historical understanding of the music, and my technical understanding of the instrument that I'm playing."¹⁶ Influenced by improvisers such as Rhames, this study highlights the ways in which dancers learn to improvise and hone their skills. In so doing, it also underscores the need to distinguish the speed and spontaneity of skilled improvisation from a simple lack of preparation.

Most important, as discussed earlier, this project analyzes the shifting social, historical, and material conditions in which dancing occurs. I refer to these constraints throughout *I Want to Be Ready* as "tight places," a phrase that comes from Houston Baker's book *Turning South Again*. In *Turning South Again*, Baker relates incarceration to African Americans' struggle to participate fully in modernism, a struggle that Baker argues is defined by citizenship and, also, mobility. From slave ships to the current prison system, incarceration has, according to Baker, significantly shaped black experience in the United States. But the phrase "tight places" nevertheless suggests something far subtler than literal lock-ups. One of Baker's most dynamic examples comes from Booker T. Washington, who was asked to speak in Georgia in front of an audience of both whites and blacks from the North and South in 1895. Feeling as though he was heading toward the gallows on the morning he was to present his speech, Washington was approached by a white farmer. The farmer pronounced, "Washington, you have spoken before the Northern white people, the Negroes in the South; but in Atlanta, tomorrow, you will have before you the Northern whites, the Southern whites, and the Negroes all together. I am afraid that you have got into a tight place."¹⁷

In adopting Baker's term, I do not by any means wish to equate all types of constraint. Some spaces are obviously "tighter" than others, and I am interested in a range of constraints that involve race but also class, gender, sexuality, time, and even artistic conventions. Nevertheless, Baker's term offers a useful starting place from which to analyze the ways in which one's shifting social and historical positions in the world affect one's mobility. Inevitably, people move differently in different contexts, and having to negotiate these various contexts at once can be extremely difficult or fraught. As illustrated by Baker's discussion of Booker T. Washington, the inevitable compromises or concessions that people make in one particular context become increasingly difficult when they occupy diverse settings, or must perform before diverse constituencies, at once. Baker defines tight places in various ways and gives multiple examples throughout his book, but he summarizes his defini-

tion by describing tight places as “the always ambivalent cultural compromises of occupancy and vacancy, differentially affected by contexts of situations.”¹⁸ He then poses a crucial question with tremendous importance for dance scholarship: that is, “Who moves? Who doesn’t?”¹⁹

Despite the weight of these questions, they are frequently absent in studies of social dance. To a certain extent, Cynthia Novack’s *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* recognizes the significance of context in its discussion of rock-and-roll dancing. Novack notes that although many people experienced their dancing as “free” during the 1960s, structural and stylistic norms still influenced their movement. She also states, “Depending on the circumstances and cultural backgrounds of the participants or observers, different aspects of the dancing would emerge as primary.”²⁰ Still, Novack’s discussion of social dance fails to pay adequate attention to the racial divisions that characterized the United States during the early 1960s. Far more than her title or brief discussion allows, the story of social dancing in the United States at midcentury involved complicated instances of appropriation and exclusion. It certainly was *not* a simple tale of integration and sharing. And when Novack states that “the movement qualities of rock dancing were also associated with contemporary social movements and practices such as the civil rights movement, youth culture, and drug-taking, and with values such as rebellion, expressiveness, and individualism within a loving community of peers,” one wonders how far this “loving community of peers” extended.²¹

In *Steppin’ on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance*, Jacqui Malone recognizes that vernacular dance, especially in African American traditions, requires both spontaneity and control.²² But in her discussion of slave dancing, which spawned many later forms of social dance, she describes slaves as enjoying an “improvisational flair” that separated their dancing from the plantation owners’ stagnant notions about dance.²³ The impression that improvised dance under slavery was a matter of aesthetic flourish is complicated by Saidiya Hartman’s analysis of forced entertainment under the institution of slavery. In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Hartman demonstrates the convergence of terror and enjoyment that occurred in many scenes of slave dancing and emphasizes that any “improvisational flair” that may have existed was entwined with systems of discipline and domination.

Anthony Shay’s *Choreophobia: Solo Improvised Dance in the Iranian*

World makes an important intervention in the field of dance studies not only by showing the risks and uncertainty of improvised dance but also by highlighting the importance of context when analyzing the political significance of any physical practice. Although the Islamic Republic banned all dancing after the 1979 revolution, solo improvisations remain widespread in private and, according to Shay, create an important “space for resistance to the regime.”²⁴ Perhaps most relevant to this study, though, is the way Shay demonstrates that the same dancing can mean different things for different people in different contexts. In other words, deciding whether an individual’s solo improvised dance is normative, transgressive, or what he calls “out-of-control” requires a look at several factors: individual personality, context, gender, age, social class, and religiosity.²⁵ In one of his vivid examples, Shay explains that in contemporary Iran it means something different for an older, well-respected woman to dance in a “sexy” manner at a party than for a scantily clad young woman to do so. Shay describes an instance where an elderly woman generally thought to be “prim” shocked partygoers by swiveling her head, moving her hips, and throwing imaginary breasts in the air. By dancing in this way, she exhibited a “sexiness” that was at odds with her normal mode of public behavior and, according to Shay, mildly transgressive. At the same party, a woman in her forties also danced with abandon in a way that differed from her typical demeanor. She made direct eye contact with men, moved her pelvis vigorously, and wore a thin summer dress with little underneath. According to Shay, whereas people found the older woman’s behavior to be unusual but amusing, they were shocked by the younger woman’s performance and described her as “out of control” and possibly on drugs.²⁶

Along with the social-historical and material conditions that affect how people move, physical technique constitutes another “tight place” that is crucial to my analysis. Technique enables eloquent articulation in dance. But it also shapes the body’s contours and enforces ways of moving. Steve Paxton, one of dance improvisation’s greatest champions, usefully describes how habits and learned techniques make it difficult to move in surprising or unfamiliar ways: “I spent many years studying dance and in that time, I became brainwashed. . . . I came out of the Cunningham Company and I couldn’t stop pointing my toe. That’s the problem. We are creatures of physical habit.”²⁷ In *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*, Randy Martin builds upon this observation by noting that all bodies house a multiplicity of techniques, which dancers mediate based on the demands of a given

situation or choreographer.²⁸ According to Martin, these techniques frequently interfere with each other. Elegant dancers in one idiom often struggle as they move to an unfamiliar form. For example, it is generally hard for a classically trained ballet dancer to collapse quickly to the ground (since ballet training emphasizes verticality and lift); likewise it is often difficult for a modern dancer to extend his or her leg in an exalted arabesque (since training often focuses on groundedness). Although dancers occasionally become frustrated when techniques interfere with one another, they are not always aware of a technique's hold, even when traces remain evident for outside observers.²⁹ This tension is precisely what drives the popular FOX TV show *So You Think You Can Dance*, where performers trained in forms ranging from clogging to crumping to ballet to ballroom alternate between idioms in the hopes that the public will deem them "America's Favorite Dancer."

By no means peculiar to professional dancers, physical techniques also are learned outside the studio, and this has implications that extend well beyond concert stages.³⁰ All too often, discussions of improvisation and freedom in dance literature assume that freedom from dance conventions entails freedom from social conventions or political norms in general, when in fact the relations between these spheres are dynamic and complex. As each chapter of this study attempts to make clear, one does not check one's "everyday body" at the door upon entering a studio or concert hall, and one's artistic choices are never entirely separate from the broader social world in which one lives. Consider, for example, the fact that many of the white dancers associated with the Judson Dance Theater in New York during the early 1960s considered pedestrian activities such as walking and standing to be respectable art and appropriate for downtown stages; meanwhile, many of the black dancers in New York found some sense of liberation in the formal techniques and virtuosity of modern dance, which opened up previously inaccessible high-art stages.

In 1934, the French sociologist Marcel Mauss wrote an essay entitled "Techniques of the Body," which analyzes how movement tendencies develop in daily life. Attempting to organize a set of observations about human movement that ethnographic studies had thus far reduced to mere "miscellanea," Mauss begins with the case of swimming: "I was well aware that walking or swimming, for example, and all sorts of things of the same type are specific to determinate societies; that the Polynesians do not swim as we do, that my generation did not swim as the present generation does."³¹

Moreover, he exclaims that despite realizing the stupidity of the outdated technique of swallowing water and spitting it back out, he still did it. “I cannot get rid of my technique,” he says.³² Throughout the essay, Mauss describes various ways of moving—walking, eating, running, climbing, resting, and even giving birth—arguing that people have habitual ways of moving that “vary especially between societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, and types of prestige.”³³

In the course of his discussion, Mauss challenges the notion that there are natural ways of moving, reminding readers that behavior is rewarded or punished in both subtle and extreme ways. He recalls an early teacher shouting at him: “Idiot! Why do you walk around the whole time with your hands flapping wide open?” Such pronouncements—dictating what is polite or appropriate, what is graceful, what is efficient—constitute our bodily education, and that education is extremely context-dependent. For example, as Mauss points out, the act of staring fixedly would be “a symbol of politeness in the army, and of rudeness in everyday life.”³⁴ The norms dictating appropriate bodily movement often relate to aspects of one’s identity, including race, gender, age, and sexuality. But a skilled improviser will be intimately familiar with her habitual ways of moving, as well as with the shifting social norms that give those movements meaning. Then, on a moment-to-moment basis, she figures out how to move.

An Art That Is “Hard to Catch”

In *At the Vanishing Point, A Critic Looks at Dance*, Marcia Siegel voices the widely held belief that dance constitutes the ephemeral art par excellence. “No other art is so hard to catch,” she writes, “so impossible to hold.”³⁵ This belief has played an important role in the historically low status of dance as an institution. As André Lepecki writes, “The whole project of dance theory can be summarized as follows: dance vanishes; it does not ‘stay around’ (for such is the unfortunate condition of its materiality); therefore, the dance scholar, theorist, critic, must work against dance’s materiality by fixating the dance.”³⁶ Given that not even Labanotation, one of the most sophisticated systems for analyzing and recording human movement, is part of a regular pedagogy or general cultural knowledge, the pervasive sentiment that systems of notation can never adequately capture the complexity of improvised performance is particularly acute for dance. So, if dance is low on the totem pole, improvised dance is even lower.

Nonetheless, some scholars have taken a different approach. In the final chapter of *Exhausting Dance*, Lepecki argues that the project of striving to fixate dance has been decidedly melancholic and paralyzing for dance scholarship. He then suggests that nonpsychoanalytic models of temporality (such as those offered by Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze) might offer a useful alternative for dance studies. Following Bergson, Lepecki asks: what if the past was not an ever-growing trove of passing instants, but rather “*that which acts no longer?*”³⁷ This view opens one up to the continuing effects of dance, even after its visual disappearance or what some might consider its end.

Lepecki is not alone in his attempt to embrace the ephemerality of dance. Mark Franko contends that one must not deny dance’s ephemerality; instead one should recuperate it as a powerful trope, a critical gesture that Franko attributes to deconstruction and, especially, Jacques Derrida’s understanding of “trace.”³⁸ Particularly relevant to the concerns of this book, Lepecki argues that the Derridean embrace of ephemerality constitutes an embrace of *improvisation* as well. Lepecki explains: “For Derrida, only when dance happens off the record, beyond registration, when it escapes from the trap of documentation, when it vanishes into time properly, when it steps outside history—only then does it generate a powerful disturbance within the field of signification. That is to say: for Derrida, dance must be improvised, must move before writing.”³⁹

Although the claim that improvised dance holds the potential to cause radical disturbance is compelling, it remains to be seen why, as Lepecki writes, improvisation must “escape the trap of documentation.”⁴⁰ For here, too, improvisation is tacitly defined in opposition to documentation and recorded history.⁴¹ So what then is at stake in this claim? Is it possible for dancers to “step outside history,” and to what end? As José Muñoz writes, “To be only in ‘the live’ means that one is denied history and futurity.”⁴² Recognizing that it is not always in one’s best interest to leave too many traces, he also argues that it is both a privilege and a pleasure to be a part of recorded history. I discuss these issues at length in chapter 2, when analyzing the political significance of improvised collaborations between the choreographer Judith Dunn and the trumpeter Bill Dixon, and between the choreographer Dianne McIntyre and various musicians including Cecil Taylor, Max Roach, and Abbey Lincoln. The improvisational practices that these artists developed challenged typical divisions between “high” and “low” forms of expression, gendered relations between postmodern dance and jazz, and the assumed whiteness of the avant-garde. Yet very few traces of these ventures

remain. When I asked Dixon why his work with Judith Dunn is largely absent from history books, he quipped, “The history that gets written is the history that’s permissible.”⁴³

Rather than romanticizing some realm “outside of history,” this project demonstrates that the value of being a historical subject is not something that one easily can dismiss. It also underscores the need to consider context when analyzing the politics of any physical practice. To echo Houston Baker’s fundamental question yet again, *who moves, and who doesn’t?* What expectations are placed on which kinds of bodies, and why? Throughout this study, I emphasize the materiality of dancing bodies and try to ground each example of improvisation in a variety of specific and complicated contexts. I also acknowledge the political significance of documentation and the frequent necessity and evidentiary potential of ephemera.⁴⁴ This study would be impossible without the aid of recording devices: each chapter depends upon photographs, sound recordings, and videos—all that remains after improvisation has taken place.

More than Whimsy: Cross-Cultural Contact and Collaboration

Although *I Want to Be Ready* focuses on a series of historically specific moments, it is not a traditional work of cultural history. Instead of presenting a linear and continuous narrative, the chapters juxtapose important explorations in improvised dance. Taken together, these explorations enable a sustained analysis of varied social, cultural, and historical constraints that will, I hope, make clear that the questions improvisation raises are central to both dance studies and to any attempt to relate dance to politics.

People frequently use the terms *modern* and *postmodern* when speaking about the arts, but the terms take on specific meanings and become notably more complicated when applied to dance. In *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, Sally Banes notes that when dancers such as Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, and Steve Paxton started using the term *postmodern* to describe their work at Judson Church in New York and other places in the early 1960s, they were primarily concerned with indicating a chronological rupture. Their generation followed, and wanted to break with, the group of individuals known as modern dancers. But, according to Banes, “historical modern dance was never really *modernist*.”⁴⁵ The modernist interest in abstraction and materiality actually emerged among the self-proclaimed postmodern dancers, many

of whom were inspired by, and viewed their work in relation to, minimalist sculpture.⁴⁶ Thus, according to Banes, the fact that dance was antimodern did not necessarily mean that it was antimodernist. Yet postmodern dancers did hold many postmodernist interests: the use of vernacular forms and an interest in other cultures, in challenging the boundaries between art and everyday life, and in process rather than product.⁴⁷ They also turned to improvisation as a provocative mode of dance making.

Despite these complexities, both scholars and dancers speak of modern and postmodern dance to loosely indicate distinct historical moments and as shorthand for particular individuals. John Martin, the *New York Times* dance critic from 1927 until 1962, played a major role in establishing this usage. In 1931–32, Martin gave a series of lectures at the New School for Social Research, which was later published as *The Modern Dance*. In his lectures, books, and writings for the *Times*, Martin gave a name to a theatrical brand of dance that was developing in Broadway and off-Broadway theaters, usually on Sunday afternoons when theaters were vacant.⁴⁸ At the time, people were apparently unsure what to make of this dancing. According to Martin, “The dance has only recently begun to be recognized as a major art and there is still considerable confusion about it, not only in the public mind, but in the minds of the dancers themselves as a class.”⁴⁹ He therefore tried to explain and advocate for the work being done by dancers such as Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Helen Tamiris, and Mary Wigman as well as the earlier work of Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis (even though they didn’t refer to their dance as “modern”).⁵⁰

Martin’s writings echoed the dancing he discussed by attempting to elevate the status of dance as an art form. Whether because of its ephemerality, its embodied character, its association with femininity, or a combination of all these things, U.S. cultural critics seldom took dance seriously. When considering the relation between dance and the other “major” arts (music, drama, poetry, painting, sculpture, and architecture), Martin explained that people tended to rank dance with “subsidiary” arts such as landscape gardening and basket weaving. Martin attributed this to the fact that dance was subsumed by and existed primarily within the boundaries of music. In an effort to correct this tendency to subsume dance to music, he tried to isolate the essence of dance, which he identified as movement. Interestingly, in so doing, Martin engaged in precisely the kind of modernist project that Banes claims was absent in dance from the 1930s and 1940s.⁵¹ Martin writes:

[The modern dance] has set itself positively against the artifice of the classic ballet, making its chief aim the expression of an inner compulsion; but it has also seen the necessity for vital forms for this expression, and indeed has realized the aesthetic value of form in and of itself as an adjunct to this expression. In carrying out this purpose it has thrown aside everything that has gone before and started all over again from the beginning. The beginning was the discovery of the actual substance of the dance, which it found to be movement.⁵²

In Martin's discussion, one sees a conflation of dance and movement, as well as the modernist trope of new beginnings, both of which have been challenged in recent studies.⁵³ As Randy Martin argues in *Critical Moves*, "modern dance develops as a very complex matrix of appropriations of different movement sources, not the least of which are dance expressions generated by those subject to [U.S.] colonization and enslavement."⁵⁴ The challenge now is to take our cues from scholars such as Randy Martin by thinking rigorously about appropriation while also analyzing productive, but often ignored, instances of cross-cultural contact and collaboration.

To a certain extent, this work has begun. Susan Manning, for example, urges scholars to acknowledge the many intercultural fusions that have shaped U.S. concert dance—not merely those that fall into a reductive black/white binary—and to ask why these performances and moments of contact have been elided in official histories.⁵⁵ Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright engage in a similar project in *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*. Rather than presenting modern dance as merely an American rejection of European ballet, Dils and Albright urge their readers to consider connections between modern dance and other forms of movement and to be international in scope. Perhaps most important, addressing an issue that is particularly salient in this book's discussion of mambo, Dils and Albright emphasize the ethical problems and faulty logic involved in framing some dance forms as historical and others as anthropological.⁵⁶ Reflecting on their own training as dance scholars, they explain: "Presenting some dance forms as history and others as anthropology created a sense that some dances were art, and perhaps of higher complexity or status, and some dances simply expressions of social behavior or religious belief."⁵⁷

Brenda Dixon Gottschild's *The Black Dancing Body*, published in 2003, furthers this project. Exploring conceptions of "black dance" and the "black dancing body," Gottschild argues that the only way out of habitual cultural

biases and racial stereotypes is to go through them—to air them out and analyze them. Early in her book, Gottschild exclaims: “Here we are, living in the twenty-first century, talking about black dance and black dancers! What are we really talking about?”⁵⁸ Through interviews with twenty-four contemporary dancers of various races and ethnicities, performance analysis, and reflections on her own experience as a black female dancer, Gottschild charts the “geography” of the black dancing body. She analyzes racial stereotypes surrounding feet, hair, lips, butt, and skin. In the end, she argues that, although there is no such thing as inherently “black dance” or “white dance,” the “habit of racism has rendered us unable to put the fusion of American cultural creations into words from the vocabulary at our disposal.”⁵⁹

I hope my work will contribute to the further “airing out” of cultural biases by highlighting some of the formal intersections and instances of cross-cultural contact overlooked in published dance history. Paying particular attention to questions of identity as well as the politics of form, this book analyzes significant instances in which dancers worked across difference, bringing to the fore issues of appropriation, cultural belonging, misunderstanding, and, at times, stunning collaborations. Such critical scholarship shifts standard narratives of improvisation’s significance in necessary ways. For one, it reveals that while many people have experienced improvisation as politically significant, it does not offer identical modes or degrees of resistance for everyone involved.⁶⁰ At the same time, simplistic origin myths begin to collapse in ways that make clear that the postmodernist interest in improvisation did not begin with the Judson Dance Theater, as is frequently implied.

Although this study in no way purports to be historically comprehensive, there is nevertheless a chronological dimension that warrants discussion. Each chapter explores dancing from the latter half of the twentieth century precisely because improvisation seldom appeared on stage before that time in the United States. Admittedly, early twentieth-century modern dancers improvised in the early stages of making a dance, or in order to investigate movement ideas and develop technical principals. But they seldom improvised *on stage*. Struggling to “elevate” dance from the realms of vaudeville or exercise or social dance to a so-called serious art, dancers often dismissed improvisation as a form of “amateur self-expression.”⁶¹ This dismissive attitude was a product of gender and racial biases. Susan Foster explains that while improvisation has been linked with femininity across artistic disciplines, this

link is especially acute in improvised dance, which is more obviously an art of the body than other forms. Foster writes:

Music's visible abundance of "structure," its close alliance with mathematics, and the viability of its notation system carried a masculine valence that contrasted with dance's feminine ephemerality and bodiliness. Theater likewise boasted the enduring and structurally complex text as the foundation of any performance, whereas dance's choreography defied the printed page. Enjoying the full range of stereotypic attributes associated with the feminine, dance was often viewed as ornamental or sensual, chaotic or emotional, fecund but insubstantial. To improvise within music or theater thus signaled a departure from structural integrity, but not a complete abandonment of structural principles. In dance, however, the act of improvising often connoted an even deeper immersion in the chaotic evanescence of physicality, one that was dismissed as insignificant by many.⁶²

Moreover, many improvisatory traditions have deep roots in non-Western traditions of dance and music. This history makes it hard to ignore the racism embedded in the claim that improvisation somehow lacks rigor or in the equation of improvisational skill with instinct as opposed to intellect, both prevalent notions in the early-to-mid-twentieth century. Even as postmodern dancers during the early 1960s began to incorporate improvisation into their performances, often noting the influence of Zen philosophy or Asian martial arts, they frequently failed to acknowledge the importance of jazz and black social dance traditions in their so-called innovations. Although it is unclear whether this cultural disavowal was self-consciously strategic, it was undoubtedly racially significant.

A similar elision occurs in a great deal of dance scholarship, especially those studies that recognize the complicated relationships that existed between improvised dance and the freedom struggles that were taking place in the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century. This is where Sally Banes's *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* is both suggestive and problematic. It attempts to place the appeal of improvisation within a specific historical moment and location and gives a culturally one-sided sense that the experience of "freedom" felt by a group of white avant-garde artists extended to America as a whole. Attempting to portray the spirit of 1963, Banes describes an overly buoyant hopefulness. She states: "In 1963 the American Dream of freedom, equality, and

abundance seemed as if it could come true. Not that it had—but that it was just about to. . . . There was a feeling—so unlike the early 1990s—that all things were possible . . . and permitted.”⁶³ It is difficult, however, to imagine a universal sense that in 1963 all things were possible and permitted. Yes, as Banes notes, 1963 was the year of the famous March on Washington. But it was also the year when Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed in Birmingham and when four young black girls were killed by a bombing at Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the location of many civil rights meetings. When Banes acknowledges the civil rights struggle, she exclaims, “Genuine freedom seemed around the corner for African Americans.”⁶⁴ Perhaps, but the struggle was messy, and difficult, and a long time coming. She claims that the civil rights movement “operated in an arena of hope” and that “it is in the context of that hopeful passion and sense of imminent liberation that blacks and with them, white liberals, intellectuals, and artists felt an entire culture buoyed in ways both direct and indirect.”⁶⁵ According to Banes, “Officially, it was a time of consensus. And the consensus was that life in the United States was good—and getting better.”⁶⁶

As this suggests, Banes uses black freedom struggles to establish an “American sensibility” that she claims pulsed through the avant-garde art world of 1963. But the artists discussed by Banes are overwhelmingly white, and there does not seem to be any attention paid to the black artists who so clearly viewed their art as propelled by a freedom drive. She mentions the Judson Dance Theater, Pop Art, the Living Theater, the pop movies of Andy Warhol, Kenneth Anger, and Jack Smith, Fluxus, and Charlotte Moorman. But for all her talk of an avant-garde movement buoyed by a hope for freedom, epitomized in the civil rights movement, there is scant mention of jazz or any of the black artists making radical work in the 1960s. When Banes does engage with this work, she focuses primarily on theater, and she relegates the discussion to “Black Art and Art about Blacks,” a thirteen-page section of a chapter entitled *Dreaming Freedoms*.

In this respect, Scott Saul’s *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* offers an important counterpoint to Banes. Saul’s book analyzes the craft and aesthetic choices made by jazz musicians between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s. Looking to music like Miles Davis’s *Birth of the Cool*, Max Roach’s *Freedom Now Suite*, Charles Mingus’s *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*, and John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*, Saul argues that these artists made formal choices regarding musical arrangement, genre,

and improvisation that opened new musical vistas and enabled artists to enact “new stances to the world.”⁶⁷ Saul describes the music in detail, determined throughout to link aesthetic choices to the social world that gave the music its “meaning, charge, and relevance.”⁶⁸ The picture offered by Saul differs significantly from the “buoyant hopefulness” that Banes argues characterized 1963. Nowhere in Saul’s text does one see a “time of consensus” where an “official mood” prevailed. Rather, he discusses the many ways in which the term *freedom* was employed during the 1950s and 1960s, from Cold War security documents such as NSC 68, to treatises by democratic theorists such as Isaiah Berlin, to celebrations of economic free enterprise, to artistic choices within the avant-garde, to the civil rights movement. According to Saul, *freedom* operated in this period as a beloved but also hotly contested term.

Perhaps the starkest contrast between Saul and Banes emerges in Saul’s introduction, as he analyzes Mingus’s scored poem “Freedom,” first performed in 1962 to the alternating rhythm of a chain gang. According to Saul, “jazz artists wanted to claim the banner of freedom, but they also wanted to distance themselves from the term’s association with individual license and whimsical choice. The pursuit of freedom, in Mingus’s poem, is hard work if nothing else.”⁶⁹ Saul notes that the poem, which ends with the line “But no freedom for me,” simultaneously “celebrates and chokes” on the promise of freedom.⁷⁰ In addition to the emphasis on work, the virtues of struggle, and a coexistent sense of celebration and choking, Saul notes that the conception of freedom present in hard bop and the civil rights movement was deeply social and rooted in collaborative action. According to Saul, “The dynamism of hard bop depended on the tension and interplay between the members of the group; jazz musicians presumed that their band mates would press upon their own sense of freedom. When one musician ‘infringed’ on the rhythm or harmonic space of another musician, it was usefully reconceived as a provocation, a license for bold counter-response.”⁷¹

The literature on jazz complicates understandings of improvised dance in the United States because, in general, it presents a more exacting look at race and the politics of performance during the 1960s and 1970s than typically appears in dance studies. Moreover, it is in the literature on jazz, and of course in the music itself, that one can find a vast and rigorous analysis of improvisation. Derek Bailey’s *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*; Paul Berliner’s *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*; LeRoi Jones’s

Blues People and *Black Music; The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, edited by Robert O'Meally; Scott Saul's *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties*; and writings by Bill Dixon have aided this study. One problem, however, is that jazz literature tends to discuss race and blackness primarily in relation to the straight African American male, creating a narrow, binary view of race that overlooks aspects of identity such as gender and sexuality, as well as the complexity of diasporic cultural production. Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*; Farah Jasmine Griffin's *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday*; Gayle Jones's *Corregidora*; Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*; Nathaniel Mackey's "Cante Moro"; and Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda Fuertes's *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution* suggest in different ways the limits of such a reduction and are vitally important in this book.

Directing One's Choreographic Critique

In *African-American Concert Dance*, John Perpener discusses the reasons why so many black choreographers in the United States adhered to modern dance aesthetics and modes of production during the 1960s and 1970s instead of embracing the projects of the Judson Dance Theater or contact improvisation:

Among these reasons is the likelihood that black artists were not enthralled with the idea of rejecting the traditions they had struggled so hard to become a part of just a few years earlier. They—unlike the coterie of white artists who were committed to aesthetic change—found little transgressive pleasure in dismantling the established practices of modern dance. . . . African-American artists could hardly relate to the notion that they needed to repudiate the hegemony of historical modern dance aesthetics because it restricted their creative freedom. Moreover, they were reminded, at every turn, of the tenuous nature of their involvement in the mainstream dance world that avant-garde white artists were rejecting.⁷²

Perpener suggests that if one is to consider dancers' choreographic choices, one also ought to consider the dancers' institutional position and broader social standing. In other words, which aesthetic choices and artistic means are available to whom and at what cost? What issues are most pressing when deciding how to move? Where is one's choreographic critique directed?

Throughout *I Want to Be Ready*, improvisers negotiate their relation to institutions of dance and social networks in a landscape akin to what Pierre Bourdieu has called an “artistic field.” Bourdieu describes literature as “a veritable social universe . . . of entirely specific struggles, notably concerning the question of knowing who is part of the universe, who is a real writer and who is not.”⁷³ Likening the constraints of an artistic field to a kind of imprisonment, Bourdieu suggests that artists’ creative projects, by no means mechanistically determined, depend upon an awareness of these strictures and one’s shifting, but historically produced, social standing.⁷⁴ I have tried to expose the exclusionary nature of such a field while also examining its fissures and fault lines. While examples abound, perhaps the most explicit point of tension exists in chapter 3, in a heated conversation between Steve Paxton and Bill T. Jones that took place after the two artists performed solos for a Movement Research Studies Project in 1983.⁷⁵ At times angry, insecure, and insulted, the two brilliant artists hashed out their relations to a particular tradition of modern and postmodern U.S. concert dance. Jones, feeling alienated from the contact improvisation scene that Paxton helped to found, suggested that because of pervasive prejudice some dancers were on the inside of the clique, while others were not. A bit later in the conversation, Paxton, an avid and well-known improviser, failed to recognize that the spoken text in Jones’s solo had been improvised, a misrecognition that raises significant questions about improvisation’s role in postmodern dance: What does improvised dance look like? And whose tradition is it? Of course, the suggestion that improvisation *looks* a certain way obscures its power as a mode rather than a product, hardened and made legible by distinctive aesthetic characteristics.

In addition to complicating those histories that unthinkingly isolate “black dance” as something separate from the aesthetic avant-garde, *I Want to Be Ready* also complicates simple divisions between dance and everyday life. In each chapter, the notion that pure form exists in dance, or the idea mentioned in the previous discussion of technique that one might step onto the stage and leave one’s daily body behind, begins to crumble. Many of the artists discussed in the book (Judith Dunn, Bill Dixon, Katherine Dunham, Dianne McIntyre, Bill T. Jones, Steve Paxton, and Esmeralda Santiago, among others) were affected and to varying degrees radicalized by the social and political events of their day, including the women’s liberation movement, the civil rights movement, immigration policy, poverty, and the Vietnam War.

In many cases, dancers' improvisational responses to worldly events were mediated by, and expressed to a great extent through, dance conventions. The performers used improvisation as a way to criticize the ways in which institutions supported certain kinds of dance, as well as notions about the autonomy of dance as an art form. In particular, their improvisations challenged the ways in which formalism in dance historically has effaced struggle (by privileging grace and verticality and by excluding the outside world). Scholars such as Bourdieu have noted that dominant aesthetic tastes often measure and evaluate works of art by their distance from necessity. But many of the artists discussed in this book improvised in an attempt to bring necessity into the picture, using it to challenge the conservatism of the dance world itself.⁷⁶

Whether this avant-gardism limited the general legibility of their danced interactions with the world remains a vexed question, and many of the dancers were explicitly aware of this tension. For example, in the discussion mentioned earlier between Bill T. Jones and Steve Paxton, Jones explained that he found many postmodern dance experiments to be “ungenerous.”⁷⁷ Rather than performing subtle improvised explorations for a handful of like-minded and similarly trained people, Jones wanted to perform in big theaters, for large audiences, making dances that lots of people would understand. But during the late 1990s, Jones began to grapple with an emerging desire for “pure” form or aesthetics, on the one hand, and the problematic nature of that desire, on the other. Here, his complaint was not simply with the conservative traditions of high modernism but with avant-gardism as well—which may have hardened into its own limiting tradition. So, with *Ghostcatching* (a 1999 digital video installation), Jones invoked formalism (via digital technology) but then contextualized it by moments of live improvisation as a guilty pleasure or privilege that he could not quite indulge or condone. Eddie Torres also grappled with the consequences of broad appeal. An acclaimed mambo dancer at the Palladium as a teenager, Torres decided later in life to formalize his technique and teach it to the general public by offering studio classes. Yet, in retrospect, he wondered whether this formalization and increased legibility hampered his ability to improvise, thus lessening the critical force of his dancing.

Although these tensions are important to recognize, the question of legibility is nevertheless in some ways peripheral to my discussion of politics. I am not claiming that improvisation's keenest power exists as a result of its

message or in the breadth of its effect. Instead, this book explores improvised dance as a vital technology of the self—an ongoing, critical, physical, and anticipatory readiness that, while grounded in the individual, is necessary for a vibrant sociality and vital civil society. My primary concern is with the experiences that improvised practice offers the dancer, even though I do also believe that the social landscape has the potential to shift as a result of dancers' improvised engagement with constraint. As I argue in my final chapter, in certain rare instances, improvisers create thrilling new spaces in which to dance.

Mambo's Open Shines: Causing Circles at the Palladium

The book's first chapter, "Mambo's Open Shines," looks at New York's Palladium ballroom during the mid-1950s, focusing on the dynamic breaks where couples split apart to dance solo improvisations, poetically known as "open shines." The Palladium's racial integration was unique for its time, and the dance hall provided a place where people left behind the disappointments of everyday life to dance and be glamorous, if only for a few hours. Still, the Palladium was not a "free" space where everything was equal and anything was possible. A variety of constraints, imposed by racism, sexism, and physical training, shaped how people moved within the Palladium on any given night. The chapter discusses these social constraints, as well as mambo's unique rhythmic and choreographic structures, which, I argue, constituted different but related kinds of tight places that dancers negotiated with particular brilliance. The chapter ultimately argues that the moments of resistance that occurred as dancers improvised at the Palladium, while meaningful in many ways, were neither shared by nor identical for the dance hall's many patrons.

Mambo frames my study of improvised dance precisely because it challenges the origin myths that dominate published dance histories. Much of the improvised work presented on New York concert stages during the 1960s and 1970s had its seeds in dance halls such as the Palladium, where dancers honed their skills at improvisational principles like breaking and investigated complex relationships with music. But to say that postmodern dance "has seeds" in improvised social dance is not to claim a clear beginning. When one looks to mambo's development in Cuba, it becomes clear that it emerged with influences from many places. My opening chapter sketches the various European and African traditions that contributed to the formation of mambo in

Cuba before going on to analyze how the circulation of movies and records, as well as the movement of actual people, enabled it to travel across borders. Having developed in multiple directions, with rich midcentury convergences among Cuban, Puerto Rican, and African American musicians and dancers, mambo demands a dynamic consideration of improvisation's relation to traditions of black expressive culture. Mambo immediately challenges the tendency to reduce blackness to the African American male, a point that remains important throughout the book.

My discussion of mambo also complicates divisions between “high” and “low” forms of dance and the tendency to reduce forms of social dance to easy entertainment, generally legible and immediately accessible. Many of the dancers at the Palladium ballroom during the 1950s were responding to societal tight places created by poverty, racism, and sexism that would have been recognizable to most onlookers regardless of their dance literacy. Moreover, as suggested by the term *social dance*, mambo was popular among the masses and attracted far more public interest than the other improvisational performances discussed in the book. People flocked to the Palladium to participate in the dancing, as well as to watch the greats who competed and showcased their tremendous skill on the dance floor. People moved between doing and watching at the Palladium. But to emphasize the social nature of mambo is not to suggest that it was ahistorical or any less experimental than, say, contact improvisation or the Judson Dance Theater. All too often scholars reduce social dance to a simple expression of lived experience, rather than a historically grounded aesthetic craft. In fact, many of the dancers at the Palladium were the very same dancers who appeared on concert stages and vice versa, an important example being Katherine Dunham, whose studio was a place where dancers came to train for work in a range of venues. Robert Farris Thompson explains:

What was happening on the dance floor was critical and revolutionary: demolition of the conviction that only in ballet do we have an art history. . . . In truth New York mambo comprised a complex interaction of known personalities [such as Dotty Adams, Millie Donay, Ernie Ensley, and Anibal Vázquez] out of which a classic style emerged. Palladium art history was *not* anonymous. It reflected conscious choices, by named creative women and named creative men, interacting with further conscious choices by other named creative people—dancers, musicians, and singers, all equal in the creative process.⁷⁸

Mambo at the Palladium was experimental. It was historical. It was relational. It was complex. And it required training. Why else would the dance hall have employed instructors to give lessons early in the evenings? As with any art, one can experience dance on many different levels. But to catch the references, the structure, or the rhythmic play of an improvisation on the Palladium dance floor (particularly by those dancers who would compete or gather in the ballroom's southwest corner, designated for the most avid improvisers), an observer required a sensitive eye and a well-developed sense of context.

We Insist! Seeing Music and Hearing Dance

The book's second chapter considers collaborations between postmodern dancers and free jazz musicians during the late 1960s and early 1970s, showing some of the explicit ways that dance hall innovations such as improvised "breaks" and communication across genres influenced experimentation within New York's avant-garde dance scene. The chapter begins with a discussion of collaborations between Judith Dunn and Bill Dixon. Dunn danced with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company for five years and was an instrumental member of the Judson Dance Theater. Bill Dixon is a trumpeter, visual artist, and founder of the Black Music Division at Bennington College. In addition to creating striking improvised works, their collaborations explored and openly acknowledged relations between what has been deemed a black, masculine tradition of improvised music and the rather white, feminine world of postmodern dance. Their visions of artistic freedom (which, I argue, were never separate from the social world in which they lived) often differed, yet Dunn and Dixon explored those differences through rigorous improvisational practice.

The chapter also discusses the work of Dianne McIntyre, a dancer who further challenged the racial and gender divisions within the worlds of improvised music and dance. In many ways, McIntyre received the same modernist training as Dunn. But as a black woman, she fit into the tradition differently. McIntyre worked with a number of musicians throughout her career, including Cecil Taylor, Olu Dara, Butch Morris, and Abbey Lincoln. She also studied with dancers from Harlem's Savoy ballroom, demonstrating yet again the deep relations between the midcentury dance hall and the concert stage. Influenced by the civil rights era and the Black Arts Movement, in

1972 McIntyre formed an ensemble of improvising musicians and dancers called Sounds in Motion. Through working with free jazz musicians, McIntyre realized that improvised music and dance are both deeply corporeal, a discovery with tremendous political implications. Once one recognizes the embodied nature of both art forms, it becomes difficult to elevate music as a masculine art of the mind over the bodily art of dance.

The work of Dunn, Dixon, and McIntyre emerged out of an urgent historical moment and demanded a new kind of engagement from its audience. For this reason, the end of the chapter moves to a discussion of ethical audience reception. How might one approach this body of improvised work, which involves movement but also sound, without reducing its complexity or silencing its politics? I argue that the complexity of Sounds in Motion's work demands that one move beyond isolated modes of viewing dance and hearing music. Instead, one must engage an "ensemble of the senses."⁷⁹ One also must consider the social and historical context in which these improvisational performances took place.

Bodies on the Line: Contact Improvisation and Techniques of Nonviolent Protest

Moving from *The Freedom Now Suite* to the 1961 Freedom Rides, the third chapter analyzes contact improvisation and its relation to the corporeality of protest. Contact improvisation was a partnered form of improvised dance that rejected traditional hierarchies in Western concert dance during the 1970s. Rather than focus on contact improvisation's democratic ideals, however, as many scholars have done, I analyze contact improvisation as an embodied practice of self-readiness. Unlike their modernist forbears, contact improvisers investigated stillness and sought ways to improvise in the midst of unfamiliar falls. By doing this, they widened the range of physical possibility within the realm of concert dance and found ways to make choices and maintain physical safety in moments of duress. In this way, the training that contact improvisers developed resembles techniques of nonviolent protest used in the civil rights movement by organizations such as the Congress On Racial Equality (CORE).

This, of course, is a fraught comparison since contact improvisation's development occurred in the safety of lofts and gymnasiums, and most of its practitioners were white. The stakes were significant in both instances, but of

nowhere near the same magnitude. And so this chapter tries to accomplish several things. On the one hand, I want to argue that contact improvisation offered a physical practice in which dancers readied themselves for a range of possible situations. This is where it seems to me the political potential of contact improvisation exists most strongly, and it is where the practice intersects with radical techniques of nonviolent protest. On the other hand, the chapter holds on to the important point that one must consider the conditions and contexts in which any physical practice occurs.

The Breathing Show: *Improvisation in the Work of Bill T. Jones*

The fourth chapter discusses the significance of improvisation across Bill T. Jones's career, from his rejection of contact improvisation, to his identity-driven works, to his controversial return to formalism. The importance of improvisation for Jones becomes particularly salient in *The Breathing Show*, an evening of solo performance made in the twilight of his performing career. Jones began to work on *The Breathing Show* in 1998, when, at the age of forty-six, he found himself both embroiled in controversy due to his renewed interest in form and concerned about his legacy. The more he worked on the evening-length performance, the more important improvisation became. According to Jones, "It's curious and unsettling, but I feel *The Breathing Show* only began to come alive when I decided to speak and to allow myself to improvise."⁸⁰

In order to discuss how exactly improvisation "enlivened" *The Breathing Show*, I will analyze the relationship between Jones's onstage presence and *Ghostcatching*, an installation that used motion-capture technology to present traces of Jones's prior improvisations. With *Ghostcatching*, the improvisations became virtual, moving in a sense *beyond* the body. How then, if at all, does the work hold onto its politics? Does *Ghostcatching* represent Jones's most radical formalist turn? Can politics transpire in a virtual dance that allows neither sweat nor skin, primary markers of labor and race, to appear on stage? Complicating current discussions of Jones's renewed interest in form, I will place *Ghostcatching* within a history of imaging technologies, tracing how the dancing body intersects with technology, labor, and race. Ultimately, I suggest that by juxtaposing *Ghostcatching* and live improvisations, Jones enabled politics and a critical perspective on issues of identity to emerge, even through the skinless medium of digital technology.

Exquisite Dancing: Altering the Terrain of Tight Places

The examples of improvised dance analyzed throughout the book enable a critical discussion of physical techniques; the effects of material, social, and historical conditions on one's dancing; and the increasingly complex relation between improvised dance and documentation. By analyzing each example as a series of unique interactions with constraint, the book challenges the facile way in which dance studies pairs improvised dance with freedom.

Of course, it may seem strange that a study so bent on analyzing improvisation's relation to various types of constraint can purport to be about freedom in any positive sense. In the conclusion, drawing from Michel Foucault's late interviews, I analyze the extent to which improvised dance can be considered a "practice of freedom."⁸¹ I also reflect upon the exquisite moments of dancing that erupt throughout the book. These striking moments demonstrate that tight places need not be equated with impermeable limits. As Foucault maintains in an interview conducted just months before his death, "One cannot impute to me the idea that power is a system of domination which controls everything and leaves no room for freedom."⁸² Likewise, a call for greater attention to "tight places" is in no way to deny improvisation's political potential. If anything, it is the sped-up, imaginative, expressive negotiation with *constraint* that defines improvisation. To imagine it any other way is not only to deny the real conditions in which we find ourselves but also to deny improvisation its keenest political power as a vital technology of the self.