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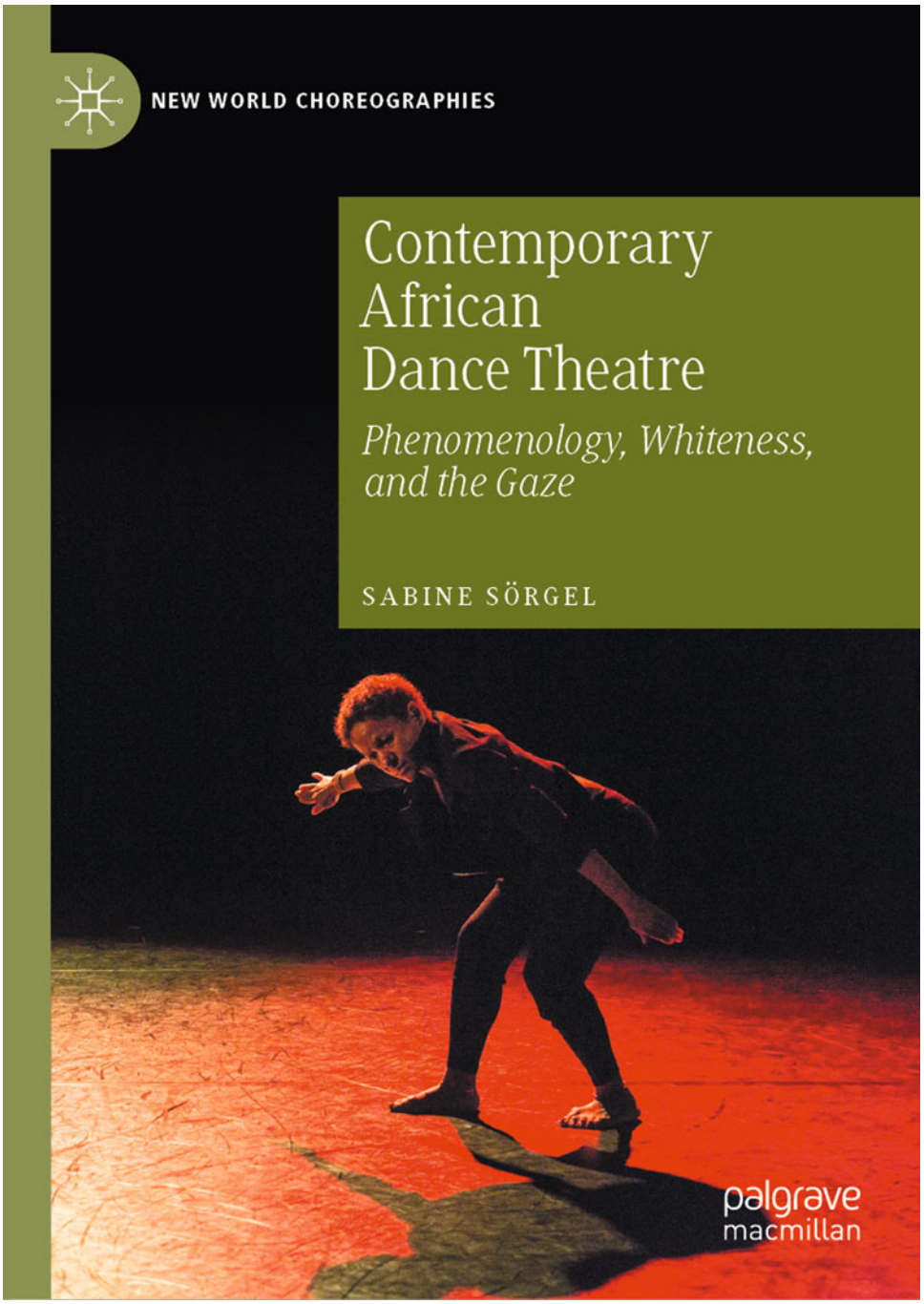

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CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN DANCE THEATRE: PHENOMENOLOGY, WHITENESS, AND THE GAZE

by Sabine Sörgel. 2020. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 173 pp., 12 photographs. 72.79 € hardcover. ISBN: 9783030415006. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-41501-3
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In the aftermath of the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd and the unparalleled scale of protests across the United States and the globe, the urgency of confronting the politics of white supremacy has become impossible to ignore. Although we may not initially think of the theater as a primary site in which to confront our whiteness, Sabine Sörgel suggests as much. For her own white body, watching performances by African contemporary dance theater artists in European venues has caused her to interrogate her whiteness again and again, to question her own "socialization and embodiment of whiteness and its often unquestioned premises" (2–3). This, the "un-suturing of whiteness," is the topic of her new book, *Contemporary African Dance Theatre: Phenomenology, Whiteness, and the Gaze* (2020). As the necropolitics of white supremacy rears its deathly head yet again, Sörgel positions contemporary African choreographers as leading voices that force white audiences into confrontation with their racial privilege, even as their performances are fraught with structural inequities and colonialist trappings on Western stages.

Contemporary African Dance Theatre analyzes works by twelve choreographers spanning the African continent and diaspora, including Senegal, Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, and Canada, but all performing for primarily white audiences in festivals programmed by white curators. This is the predicament that the majority of contemporary African choreographers find themselves in as they take part in the international touring circuit, funded by European and North American entities. Although it is easy to imagine the range of regulations this may impose, from white aesthetics to European political agendas, Sörgel testifies to the artists' deftness in using the Western stage as a platform to deconstruct Africa and how this results in audience members' un-suturing whiteness. For Sörgel, un-suturing whiteness entails questioning our white certainties, "defamiliarize[ing] ourselves in the encounter with racism and question[ing] what else we must do and who we might become as an alternative" (154). Rather than attempting to define African dance, Sörgel asserts that the artists use the label purposefully to both reiterate its inherent colonialist assumptions while undermining them. Her approach is phenomenological, based almost entirely on her own intellectual and affective response to the performances that she had access to view on UK and German stages. Upfront about the limitations of her research method, she does not assume that her experience is representative of all audience members but asks how her "highly subjective case study" might "question wider racial and societal problems" (12).

Sörgel begins by discussing the influential work of Alphonse Tiérou, Zab Maboungou, and Germaine Acogny, each of whom developed specific African dance philosophies, whether embodied, written, or both. These pioneers elaborate the movement principals, use of time and rhythm, sociality, and spirituality that undergird dances across the continent. Sörgel illustrates how their philosophies come to life in solo performances by Maboungou (*De/Liberate Gestures*, 2009) and Acogny (*Somewhere At the Beginning*, 2015, and *My Black Chosen One*, 2016). In her performance analyses, she also describes how the artists un-suture the politics of the white gaze through Maboungou's staging of rhythmic variations and Acogny's framing of her dancing body against the backdrop of white European intermediality.

Having outlined the "sources and vocabularies of contemporary African dance theatre aesthetics," the remainder of Sörgel's text analyzes a number of performances according to three axes of negotiation with the white gaze: necropolitics and anti-capitalist dance, white beauty and gender politics, and the ethics of intercontinental collaboration. Taking up Achille Mbembe's conceptualization of necropolitics, she follows his assertion that popular dance and everyday cultural idioms are acts of self-stylization that counter the long-term

psychological consequences of colonialism, slavery, and apartheid. Because African popular dances embody resistance to white capitalist necropolitics, Faustin Linyekula and Frank Edmond Yao critically recycle dances popular to their respective localities in their works *More, more, more … future!* (Linyekula, 2009) and *Logobi* #03 and #04 (Yao, in collaboration Gintersdorfer/Klassen, 2009). Sörgel argues that not only do their performances heighten the critiques already embedded in African popular culture, but they also defy objectification through their aesthetics of alienation. In a different way, Gregory Maqoma's *Exit/Exist* (2011/2012) also confronts the logic of colonial necropolitics. Maqoma's invocation of his grandfather's ancestral memory in his combined mediated and embodied oral history forced Sörgel into contemplation of the ways in which her own history is embedded and interwoven with Maqoma's. All three artists attest to the impacts of Western necropolitics on the African continent and invite audiences to consider their complicity in ongoing racism.

Chapter four turns to the work of female choreographers Robyn Orlin, Nora Chipaumire, and Alesandra Seutin to describe how they "deconstruct the hegemony of white aesthetics in order to critically reassess beauty, race and gender in the twenty-first century" (92). In different ways, the choreographers redefine beauty from their own epistemological standpoints with an acute awareness of the entanglement of discourses of blackness with white beauty standards. Sörgel shows how Orlin does this in her *beauty remained for just a moment then returned gently to her starting position …* (2013) through the risky and "only partially successful" approach of presenting images of early twentieth century primitivism alongside discarded objects of Western modernity, including plastic bottles and empty bags. In Chipaumire's *Miriam* (2012) and *portrait of myself as my father* (2016), a sense of magic realism and the inversion of "colonialist timelines and narrative structures" (109) operate to disorient the audience. Although the earlier work draws upon the South African singer icon Miriam Makeba and the biblical Virgin Mary in its interrogation of "finding a voice as a woman and as an artist" (104), the more recent piece investigates Black masculinity through an imagined construction of her dead father as a superhero figure. Seutin also investigates family ancestry and the trappings of racial stereotypes in *This Is Not Black* (2013) and *Across the Souvenir* (2017), works that insist on audience response in real time. Viewing these performances, Sörgel notes that the process of un-suturing whiteness is not necessarily painless. Self-reflective throughout the book, Sörgel here questions if silence is a more ethical choice, for her whiteness carries the persistent fear that her writing might only continue the discursive practices she wishes to work against.

A particular strength of Sörgel's is her willingness to complicate the political possibilities that these performances present by attending to the fraught conditions within which they are created and produced. In her final chapter, Sörgel turns to international funding in German and French coproductions with African artists to examine how whiteness underpins the structure and framing of African contemporary dance theater. She considers the marketable label of contemporary dance for white curators and audiences who are catered to more so than African publics. She discusses this phenomenon with its roots in early collaborative projects: French choreographer Mathilde Monnier's *Pour Antigone* (1993) with Burkinabé dancers including Salia Sanou and Seydou Boro, and German choreographer Susanne Linke's *Le Coq Est Mort* (1999) with the Senegalese company Jant-bi. In both projects, the choreographers' superficial understanding of African culture and dance aesthetics, and the biases of the white critics who reviewed performances in the United States and Europe, rub up against the ways in which these early works catapulted the growth of contemporary African dance. From the outset, contemporary African dance theater has been mutually informed by the foreign financial monopoly that promotes and circulates the work as much as by African artists' innovativeness and agency, an antinomy that Sörgel does not shy away from.

Contemporary African Dance Theatre attests to the powerful artistic voices from Africa and the diaspora that invite white audiences into confrontation with the politics of their white gaze, even as white people hold significant financial and curatorial power in the circulation of works by African artists. Sörgel's broad approach allows her to flesh out a number of the aesthetics that characterize contemporary African dance theater without reductively landing on a single quality or look that encompasses

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this disperse artistic form. At the same time, the scope of her project risks enabling the assumption that African artists create only with white audiences in mind, as if their lives are overdetermined by the colonial encounter, when in fact contemporary dance workshops and creative processes for and by Africans take place regularly throughout the continent. Although European domination of the international contemporary dance circuit is a reality that the artists continually negotiate, their lives and the themes they choose to address in their work are far more complex than attending to whiteness alone. Still, the white gaze is an overbearing, oftentimes violent, construct that African choreographers encounter regularly, and Sörgel's monograph devoted to unpacking it is overdue. Her work is testimony to the urgent need for consumers of dance to deepen their literacy of African and diasporic dance cultures and aesthetics. Importantly, she does not allow readers to imagine that the critical work of dismantling white supremacy stops within the theater. As she states, "even as un-suturing took place, we may still exit into the same reality for change is not as swift as a theatrical costume" (119).

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UNFINISHED BUSINESS: MICHAEL JACKSON, DETROIT, AND THE FIGURAL ECONOMY OF AMERICAN DEINDUSTRIALIZATION

by Judith Hamera. 2017. New York: Oxford University Press. 286 pp., 15 illustrations. $30.10 paper. ISBN: 9780199348589.
doi:10.1017/S0149767720000212

Unfinished Business: Michael Jackson, Detroit, and the Figural Economy of American Deindustrialization, is an absorbing and multifaceted work that explores the intersections between American deindustrialization, racialized global capital, and the relationship between race and place through the figural and material entities of Michael Jackson and the US city of Detroit, Michigan. Judith Hamera argues that American deindustrialization can be read as a racialized period of structural economic change and can be witnessed within "figural economies" (4) presented as material conditions, figures, individuals, and/or places. In the case of *Unfinished Business*, these figural signifiers include the multiple manifestations of the singer Michael Jackson, theatrical plays based on (or not based on) the city of Detroit, and Detroit's large-scale public art projects. While performed against the backdrop of sweeping economic change and racial injustice in the United States, Hamera's work speaks globally to the lessons that can be derived from political economic history, to how structural changes impact public and cultural lives, and to the continuous interplay between racism and capitalism.

Hamera's interdisciplinary approach draws upon economic theory and performance studies—two areas that have often remained separate but, as this book demonstrates, are vital in revealing the lived experiences of racialized labor and deindustrial decline, commencing with the Regan era and continuing through until 2016. The dense archival research carried out on the ambitious number of material and conceptual examples covered within the text speaks to the richness and complexity of the topics at hand, yet Hamera's careful weaving of performance analysis, historical events, and theoretical underpinnings allows the content to remains accessible and robust.

Unfinished Business is split into two parts; the first tackling the spectacular deindustriality of Michael Jackson, and the second focusing on the deindustrial homeplaces of Detroit. Rather than a book of two halves, Hamera enables the reader to draw the threads between the parts in her analysis of their relationship to structural economic change, capital, memory and nostalgia, spatio-racial environments, and capitalism, with the coda starkly linking these ideas to the current Trump administration. Part 1 focuses on the figural potential of Michael Jackson and his three-decade career that traces the economic shifts of industrialization, deindustrialization, and financialization in the United States. After correcting Jackson's invisibility as a figure of American deindustrialization, Hamera's close analysis of his iconic 1980s performances, interspersed with historical accounts surrounding the dwindling U.S. Steel industry, reveals the conditions and effects of