

## The Muse of Virtuosity: Desmond Richardson, Race, and Choreographic Falsetto

Ariel Osterweis

*In earlier epochs, technical virtuosity, at least, was demanded of singing stars, the castrati and prima donnas. Today, the material as such, destitute of any function, is celebrated.*

—Theodor Adorno (1991, 32)

*As in sport or athletics, the achievement by a virtuoso dancer raises the achievable standard for everybody else. And this is what Baryshnikov, more than any other dancer of our time, has done—not only by what he can do with his body (he has, among other feats, jumped higher than anyone else, and has landed lower), but what he can show, in the maturity and range of his expressiveness.*

—Susan Sontag (1987)

*What is it in the falsetto that thins and threatens to abolish the voice but the wear of so much reaching for heaven?*

—Nathaniel Mackey (1997, 62–3)

**D**esmond Richardson has been labeled “one of the great virtuoso dancers of his generation” (Dunning 1995, n.p.). Having danced in a range of performance contexts, from the companies of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ballett Frankfurt, and American Ballet Theater, to Hollywood films and Broadway musicals, to the tours of Michael Jackson and Madonna, Richardson holds a unique position as America’s most visible and admired African American concert dance artist. An expert in styles as seemingly disparate as break dancing and ballet, Richardson has honed his ability in a way that has allowed him to traverse a cultural landscape ranging from the popular to the avant-garde. It is rare for a concert dancer to achieve star status—one he shares with the likes of predecessors Mikhail Baryshnikov and Sylvie Guillem. Like Baryshnikov and Guillem, Richardson exerts a high degree of control of his own career, and is unafraid to venture into commercial settings from time to time. He has become a

---

**Ariel Osterweis** is assistant professor of dance at Wayne State University. She earned her Ph.D. in performance studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and her B.A. in anthropology at Columbia University. At work on her first book, which theorizes virtuosity, race, and sexuality in the dance career of Desmond Richardson, Osterweis also researches contemporary African dance and the disavowal of virtuosity in feminist and transgender live art and performance. Her publications appear in *Dance Research Journal*, *Women and Performance*, *e-misférica*, *Theatre Survey*, *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen*, and more. She danced professionally with Complexions Contemporary Ballet, Mia Michaels, and Heidi Latsky; choreographs; and is currently dramaturg for choreographer John Jasperse and performance artist Narcissister.

prototype for young conservatory dancers, as well as audiences of *So You Think You Can Dance*, which he frequents as a guest artist. Transcending boundaries of style, Richardson has become an exception, earning widespread acceptance in the face of the exclusion of other dancers of color. Richardson's popularity exemplifies a cultural practice of consumption demanding of the black male dancer the projection of charisma, athletic ability, and muscularity. Additionally, when viewing black masculine performance, audiences are more inclined to embrace virtuosity's inherent queerness when it is offset by such markers of virility.

Co-founders of Complexions Contemporary Ballet (1994–present), Richardson (b. 1969) and Dwight Rhoden (b. 1962), both danced with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) from 1987–1994.<sup>1</sup> With Richardson as his muse, choreographer Rhoden created an explicitly heterogeneous platform for contemporary dance that sought to diverge from the AAADT's dominant aesthetic of "Soul," which privileges hetero-normative black masculinity and narratives of triumph. Inquiring into Richardson's dual role as muse and co-director of Complexions brings greater understanding to the type of virtuosity he inaugurated in American dance in the 1990s. By proposing and developing the term *choreographic falsetto*, I liken Richardson's virtuosity to that of nineteenth-century virtuoso musicians and composers such as Franz Liszt, on the one hand, and black "Post-Soul" singers such as Prince, on the other, accounting for a historically and cross-

---

Photo 1. Desmond Richardson in Dwight Rhoden's *Moonlight*. Photo by Sharen Bradford.



culturally prevalent (if relatively forgotten) aspect of virtuosity, namely, its position at the meeting point of gender, religion, capitalism, and individualism. While Richardson initially attained stardom at AAADT, his contributions to Complexions worked to establish a queer, Post-Soul aesthetic that lingers in gender ambivalence. On the heels of Robert Joffrey and Gerald Arpino, and Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, Richardson and Rhoden continued the work of other gay male choreographer–muse partnerships that introduced heterogeneity into American concert dance. Certainly, the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company has been more vocal about confronting homosexuality in its work (which emerged in an experimental domain far from the confines of ballet), whereas Joffrey Ballet and Complexions—even while fostering queer aesthetics—have sustained traditional heterosexual *pas de deux* pairings carried over from classical ballet. Moreover, unlike Jones’s unmasked politics and use of theatrical and poetic text onstage, Complexions relies almost entirely on the dancing body. The company’s heterogeneity is one of technique, not media. Richardson began as a B-boy, immersed in popping and locking in his childhood neighborhood in Queens, New York. His classical ballet and modern dance training did not begin until high school at the School of Performing Arts (the setting for *Fame*) and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center.<sup>2</sup> While virtuosos throughout music history have also composed or directed, it was their performing that earned them the label of “virtuoso.” Liszt, Niccolò Paganini, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Michael Jackson, and Prince, are but a few wide-ranging examples. A commonly noted attribute of such virtuosos is their improvisatory prowess—their capacity for tactical invention. Improvisation within performance otherwise reliant on composition not only generates formal heterogeneity, but functions as an essential mode through which the virtuoso stands apart from the collective. Richardson refines his brand of virtuosity through a diverse practice of improvisation within otherwise formal confines of concert dance choreography. Richardson’s improvisational style—one that combines ballet and modern dance from the “high art” concert dance realm with black vernacular forms such as popping and voguing—has greatly influenced the movement style that defines Complexions’s choreography. Performing on concert dance’s proscenium, Richardson continually alludes to hip-hop’s cipher and voguing’s runway, sites that ever-summon the emergence of a soloist.

## Virtuosity

As dance cultures coalesce and intermingle, it becomes increasingly important to create discourse *around* virtuosity, highlighting the term’s own exclusions while paying heed to culturally specific contexts of production. Discourses of virtuosity are linked to connotations of excess, and an examination of the formal and sociocultural aspects of virtuosic performance reveals under-recognized heterogeneity in which we detect vernacular influences on high art. Class-based perspectives maintain virtuosity’s instability, as virtuosity is applauded when seen to further high art, but condemned when deployed in popular or lowbrow settings.<sup>3</sup> Whether applauded or criticized, the virtuoso makes known a great deal about cultural taste. The curious relationship between *disciplined* perceptions of virtuosity’s excess and the *disciplining* of the racialized body is such that audiences are often taught to be weary of abundant movement while simultaneously expecting it of black dancers. In increasingly heterogeneous societies, taste (and its omissions and repulsions) can evidence a lack of exposure to the same degree that it can demonstrate an audience’s familiarity with a particular art form. Virtuosity simultaneously defines and obscures the border between popular and high art. Any disdain for the virtuoso occurs in opposition to another beholder’s celebration. The virtuoso, ever idiosyncratic and often marginal, is never wholly abject. Because Richardson’s virtuosity is predicated on a gendered, heterogeneous combination of dance forms emerging from multiple historical and cultural contexts, from classical ballet to hip-hop, it deserves to be analyzed through scholarship deriving from—and commenting on—various eras of performance, especially nineteenth-century Europe and the contemporary United States.

From the beginning, popular and critical reception of Complexions has been defined by extremes: the remake of the film *Fame* (2009) cites Complexions as “the best dance company in the world”

(Burnett 2009), while *Time Out New York* places the company on its “Worst of 2009” list (Kourlas 2009–2010). Over the past decade and a half, *The New York Times* has repeatedly lambasted Complexions’s choreography while reserving just enough breath to hail Richardson as “the saving grace of this company” (Sulcas 2008, n.p.). What is it that lends Richardson the power to consistently redeem Complexions’s otherwise offensive aesthetic? And what kinds of choreographic practices have led Complexions from occupying a position of avant-garde experimentation in the 1990s to a space of mainstream appreciation after 2000? Richardson has been referred to by critics as “a welcome blessing” (Kourlas 2009) and as “a dancer of magnificent stature, power, and effortless charisma who makes Mr. Rhoden’s busy choreography look legible and even interesting” (Sulcas 2008, n.p.). The following passage is from a *New York Times* review of Complexions by Claudia La Rocco:

The extent to which Mr. Rhoden packs—and overpacks—phrases, cultivates warp-speed delivery, and hyperextends every possible hip jut and arabesque is, thank goodness, something special to Complexions. The eye is so overwhelmed that long before this overlong program concludes . . . all you can do is stare blearily at the stage, praying that each whiplash partnering sequence or gratuitous split will be the last. (2007, n.p.)

Photo 2. *Complexions*, full company. Photo by Chris Rogers.



La Rocco's resistance to *Complexions* reflects a widespread ambivalence to the very concept of virtuosity in the latter half of the twentieth century. It also points to a certain discomfort generated for some in the face of such virtuosity's seemingly interminable climax. *Complexions* strings together continuous passages of movement composed of what might otherwise appear briefly within another's coda. The legs sensually hyperflex, emanating from the pelvis, and the climax of heightened (and maintained) momentum coalesces with images evoking sexual ecstasy and exaltation. Thus, the unabashed sexuality of *Complexions*'s dancing—not merely excess movement—makes such virtuosity especially vulnerable to accusations of vulgarity. As a concept more at home in the master-driven period of individual genius, the notion of virtuosity appears undesirable to many contemporary artists and critics. In its embrace of presentational hyperkineticism, has *Complexions* overstepped an unspoken line of acceptable activity? La Rocco's overwhelmed response to *Complexions*'s abundance of movement mirrors Bettina Brandl-Risi's assertion that virtuosic performances can "provoke skepticism towards a form of excellence that cannot be reliably objectified with the help of prevalent norms" (2010, n.p.). A member of the *Kulturen des Performativen* working group from the *Freie Universität Berlin*, Brandl-Risi offers the concept of "spectatorial virtuosity," a mode of reception that "oscillates between expertise and enthusiasm" (Brandl-Risi 2010, n.p.). Within Brandl-Risi's frame, La Rocco does not exhibit spectatorial virtuosity in the context of *Complexions*'s performance. Brandl-Risi goes on to explain, "Virtuosity demands and generates evaluative practices that are based on excessive reactions. In this respect, virtuosity stands in contrast to . . . aesthetics that refer to the solid quasi-concreteness of the artwork or creative process as evidence for achievement" (2010, n.p.). Because it inevitably insinuates affective excess, virtuosity cannot easily satisfy established critical vocabularies, especially those that privilege the integrity (the precise repeatability) of the composition.

Studies of virtuosity have yet to engage with African diasporic aspects of Western concert performance and the co-constitutive sociocultural paradigms of race, gender, and class. Two of the most important characteristics of the type of virtuosity epitomized by Richardson are versatility and velocity. A study of virtuosity in the context of *Complexions* makes evident the relationship between ability, hybridity, and perceptions of excess in contemporary performance, especially that which eschews the supposed boundary between art and entertainment. Richardson's dancing embodies a *virtuosity of versatility*—exceptional execution and stylistic hybridity, both of which bring about discursive challenges for critics who are less versed in African American culture. I propose culturally contextualized deployments of the term virtuosity in order to counter assumptions of its universality, and suggest an analytic approach that accounts for the term's entanglement with excess, ambivalence, and a history of the cult of the individual.

In order to distance virtuosity from its diluted colloquial uses, it is important to differentiate between ability, skill, and virtuosity, such that virtuosity signals not only inherent *ability* and technique (*skill*) honed over time, but also relies upon charisma, generates excess, and deserves to be analyzed over the course of an entire work and even across the span of a performer's career. Identifying virtuosity is a curious practice of critical assessment. The virtuosic artist refuses to be placed into the realm of the vulgar, the offensive, or the transgressive. The fine balancing act of remaining just slightly imbalanced—an excess that is not offensive, an affect that hardly transgresses—defines virtuosity's precariousness. While the notion of individualism is fundamental to virtuosity, the virtuoso's apartness exists in relation to the group, always indicating otherness. The *Kulturen des Performativen* (2010, n.p.) working group understands the *virtuoso* "as a new artist type who, since the seventeenth century, has influenced not only artistic concepts but also the very notion of performance in various cultural, social, and political domains," and it defines *virtuosity* "as the potentially excessive enhancement of artistic practice," suggesting a distinction between artistry and virtuosity that recalls anthropologist Anya Peterson Royce's cross-cultural study of virtuosity in dance and performance, *Anthropology of the Performing Arts: Artistry, Virtuosity, and Interpretation in a Cross-Cultural Perspective* (2004). Royce argues that the "aesthetic of dance . . . is composed of two parts: virtuosity and artistry" (2004, 21), with artistry referring to fulfillment

of the work at hand and virtuosity referring to a barely graspable excess that cannot be accounted for within the work alone.

Rather than propose an exhaustive definition of virtuosity, I would like to call attention to gendered and religious dimensions of the term that have been circulating in Western thought for centuries, then proceed with a consideration of race in virtuosity's inherently non-normative performances. The *Oxford English Dictionary* has charted virtuosity's expansive coverage of a range of masculinities, from the virile to the effeminate. Virtuosity's frequent associations with effeminacy since the seventeenth century tend to be linked to a "suspicious" or "falsifying" production of skill, an "excessive attention to technique."<sup>4</sup> The figure of the falsetto rests at the crux of virtuosity's connotations of excessive technique and transgressive gender performance. In contrast to the castrato's anatomical (surgical) alteration, the falsetto in contemporary American culture tends to represent a mature, sexually yearning man. The falsetto singer is posited as boyish, feminine, and inauthentic ("false") in European traditions, yet hailed as virile or spiritually closer to God in African American Soul and Post-Soul singing. Seemingly disparate, the gamut of these associations is reflected in various recurring definitions of virtuosity.

At no point does virtuosity signal restraint, unless applied externally to aesthetic systems that do not inherently invoke the term. While Royce suggests instances of virtuosity in non-Western performance and claims that it is a "necessary part of any aesthetic system" (2004, 21), I prefer to interrogate how the term itself has been cultivated in European and American arts journalism, as traced by musicologist Susan Bernstein:

The virtuoso is a sociohistorical figure that emerges within the confines of a specific history of music, of the economics and politics of entertainment and spectacle, and of journalism. . . . The virtuosi provide the cultural reporter with subject matter, while the virtuoso's success is a function of journalistic advertising and good press coverage. (1998, 12, 11)

Bernstein errs toward virtuosity's derogatory connotations of cheapness and vulgarity, observing how it (particularly nineteenth-century European virtuosity) rests at the ever-troubled distinction between art and entertainment. Having been thrown about in the media, the term itself has been rather evacuated of meaning, prey to the you-know-it-when-you-see-it variety of signification. For Bernstein, the performer-composer-conductor Liszt functions as the quintessential embodiment of virtuosity. Resonating with Brandl-Risi, Bernstein suggests, "Like the rhapsodic, the virtuoso is simultaneously the possibility and the impossibility of composition. Liszt holds the key both to its preservation and to its destruction, wielding the power of its success and failure, its existence and disappearance" (1998, 100). Richardson's multifaceted role as dancer and director distills what Bernstein suggests and what Theodor Adorno and Max Weber complicate more fully. Bernstein and Adorno use the term to describe both performance and conducting (and certain shifts between them), pointing to the virtuoso's power over performers and audiences.

Adorno mourns an era in which performers' virtuosity fulfilled a musical function—one evaporated by the virtuosity of the conductor, a figure fetishized even in his absence:

Not for nothing does the rule of the established conductor remind one of that of the totalitarian Fuhrer. Like the latter, he reduces aura and organization to a common denominator. He is the real modern type of the virtuoso, as bandleader as well as in the Philharmonic. He has got to the point where he no longer has to do anything himself; he is even sometimes relieved of reading the score by the staff of musical advisers. At one stroke he provides norm and individualization: the norm is identified with his person, and the individual tricks which he perpetrates furnish the general rules. The fetish character of the conductor is the most obvious and the

most hidden. The standard works could probably be performed by the virtuosi of contemporary orchestras just as well without the conductor, and the public which cheers the conductor would be unable to tell that, in the concealment of the orchestra, the musical adviser was taking the place of the hero laid low by a cold. (1991, 39)

Adorno holds the performer's virtuosity (that of the musician) in higher regard than what he points to as the newfound "modern" virtuosity of the conductor—one structured upon fetish. The cult of the conductor signals the decline of individualism and nuance in the performance of orchestral music, bringing about undifferentiated performances and recordings as well as the passive listener ("radio ham") of mass music. Adorno points to Weber's (1948) writings on virtuosity and charisma. Weber's lament also privileges a more archaic type of virtuosity, asserting that "religious virtuosos," very much in keeping with the anthropological logic of magic, possess the individuality and charisma to incite a local, dedicated following that resists the adulteration and lack of "musicality" of institutionalized religion. In contrast to Bernstein's virtuoso, who is produced by mass-mediated journalistic discourse, Weber's virtuoso lies outside the mainstream and harbors a marginal form of power. Whether situated in religion and politics or in music and performance, questions of power, circulation, and fetishism permeate theorizations of virtuosity. Weber's application of performance terminology to religion is not merely metaphorical: charismatic (religious) virtuosos include "sacred dancers." For Weber, charisma and virtuosity signal an individual as distinct from the collective. Such individuals possess leadership qualities, but are not necessarily authoritarian or fascist, as in Adorno's "totalitarian Fuhrer." According to Weber:

The sacred values that have been most cherished, the ecstatic and visionary capacities of shamans, sorcerers, ascetics, and pneumatics of all sorts, could not be attained by everyone. The possession of such faculties is a "charisma," which, to be sure, might be awakened in some but not in all. It follows from this that all intensive religiosity has a tendency toward a sort of *status stratification*, in accordance with differences in the charismatic qualifications. "Heroic" or "virtuosic" religiosity is opposed to mass religiosity. By "mass" we understand those who are religiously "unmusical"; we do not, of course, mean those who occupy an inferior position in the secular status order. In this sense, the status carriers of a virtuoso religion have been the leagues of sorcerers and sacred dancers. (1948, 287)

Weber's "'virtuosic' religiosity" suggests that, just as virtuosity can be a necessary component of the structuring of religious status, religiosity is often inherent to performing arts virtuosity.

The type of adulation showered upon Richardson resembles the religious virtuoso's spiritual following. In his book, *It*, on the charisma of "abnormally interesting people," performance scholar Joseph Roach suggests that deity worship has been replaced by celebrity fandom (2007, 1). Because dancers rarely amount to full-fledged celebrities in the pop cultural sense (as in, despite his renown in the dance world, Richardson will never be as famous as Michael Jackson), Richardson's position as a dance virtuoso corresponds to Weber's religious virtuoso in terms of relative degree and status. Just as the religious virtuoso stands apart from the widely followed institutionalized religion of the masses, the dance virtuoso circulates less extensively through mass mediated outlets than a pop cultural icon. Furthermore, Richardson's virtuosity captures the convergence of the word's associations with the arts *and* religion. Richardson has continually danced in companies whose styles derive from the depiction and expression of black spirituality in American culture. At AAADT, in pieces such as Ailey's *Revelations* (based on black spirituals), he was called upon to depict personae in the midst of religious rapture or yearning. At Complexions, he and Rhoden often stage the conflict between religion and sexuality, the sacred and profane.

## Choreographic Falsetto

*In the falsetto tradition, there can be tremendous power, as well as vulnerability—a crack in the macho posture, the expression of need.*

—Francesca Royster (2013, 117–8)

*In order to do justice to their mission, the holders of charisma, the master as well as his disciples and followers, must stand outside the ties of this world, outside the routine occupations, as well as outside the routine obligations of family life* —Weber (1948, 248)<sup>5</sup>

At AAADT, Richardson was paired with Rhoden in Ulysses Dove's 1989 *Episodes* in a memorable sequence of masculine union and competition. With great urgency, Richardson runs onto an otherwise bare, darkened stage in a diagonal corridor of light; Rhoden follows him, halting their forward propulsion with a soaring jump (legs bent into a diamond shape, arms diagonally reaching upward), and they punctuate their duet with a whirlwind series of unison turns and cuts (contemporary pirouette sequences slashed by diagonal reaches and deep *grand-pliés à la seconde*). A charged, yet sparse, percussive electronic score by Robert Ruggieri drives their movement. An important influence on Rhoden's choreography, Dove's piece represents a rare instance of homosexual imagery in the AAADT repertoire. *New York Times* critic Anna Kisselgoff reflects the relatively closeted dynamic of the company, never one to parade its director's (Ailey's) gay identity. She avoids any word indicating homosexuality while eluding to its representation in a description of a later duet in *Episodes*: "A male duet for Wesley Johnson 3d and Dereque Whiturs fleetingly expresses a new relationship, but more so in pirouettes than in literal imagery. The heterosexual couples resume" (Kisselgoff 1989). Dove has described *Episodes* as a piece about choices at a crossroads in a time haunted by the specter of HIV and AIDS. The late 1980s and early 1990s were a period of sexual and racial ambivalence in American concert dance history. The loss of life due to AIDS was felt on a visceral level, as many dancers and directors died from the disease. Even today, concert dance remains a relatively closeted sphere, one in which explicit celebration or representation of homosexual and queer politics is avoided for fear of audience aversion and funding retraction. *Complexions* moves beyond AAADT's suppression of queer and homosexual identity, and it does so mainly in its showcasing of Richardson's versatility—his queering of concert and vernacular techniques: ballet queers popping while voguing queers ballet. Nevertheless, ambivalence (more than explicit homosexual politics) dominates their aesthetic. *Complexions*'s stylistic homages to voguing perform a recuperative function, celebrating a queer, masculine form built upon AIDS' losses. The word "complexions" in the company name demonstrates Richardson and Rhoden's emphasis on plurality and ambivalence, racially, sexually, and formally. Refusing to adhere to the label of a "black" or "African American" company (which AAADT still claims), Richardson and Rhoden allow for an entire range of racial representation while also nurturing dancers from multiple dance and sexual backgrounds. In his influential study "Black Masculinity and the Sexual Politics of Race," scholar of black diasporic aesthetics, Kobena Mercer, focuses on artists who linger in "the messy and murky realm of ambivalence, in which black male subjectivity becomes the site upon which a contest of competing psychic and social forces is played out" (1994, 164). Due to his ability to project both strength and vulnerability, Richardson is often called upon to embody such competing forces, which are further extended onto the ensemble in *Complexions*'s work.<sup>6</sup>

Applied to *Complexions*, American studies scholar Roderick Ferguson's concept of "queer of color analysis" uncovers queer histories of vernacular and concert dance forms and their coalescence at the level of composition. Taking his cue from Mikhail Bakhtin (1982), Ferguson resists canonizing heterogeneity, opting instead to discuss "material heterogeneity" in order to "expose the gender and sexual diversity within racial formations" (2004, 21). In other words, according to Ferguson, "Queer of color analysis has to debunk the idea that race, class, gender, and sexuality are discrete



formations insulated from one another” (2004, 4). Inquiries into arts practices such as those of *Complexions* satisfy what Ferguson calls “inquir[ies] into the nonnormative components of racial formations,” thus challenging “restrictions of normative epistemes” and moving “beyond identity politics” (Ferguson 2004, 29). Richardson and Rhoden live with a certain level of comfort in their sexuality in everyday life, but they do not deliberately announce a queer identity in their dance.<sup>7</sup> While their choreography is burdened by echoes of queer shame, Richardson and Rhoden’s project is better framed through a recognition of their active presentation of ambivalence. The queerness we find in the formal aspects of *Complexions*’s choreography (movement, stylistic influence, and execution) performs a kind of magic, transforming the trauma of racial memory into a genre of affirmation. Rhoden states, “I think I’m making a statement of ‘love is love is love’ through the *movement*” (2010, n.p.).<sup>8</sup> Poet, novelist, and literary scholar Nathaniel Mackey detects in Al Green’s falsetto a similar insistence on love, one that emerges from—and transforms—a history of racialized violence: “All his going on about love succeeds in alchemizing a legacy of lynchings” (1997, 62). Moreover, by dancing instead of singing, Richardson quite literally embodies Mackey’s suggestion that black falsetto simultaneously exceeds and reinvigorates discourse:

Like the moan or the shout, I’m suggesting, the falsetto explores a redemptive, unworded realm—a meta-word, if you will—where the implied critique or the momentary eclipse of the word curiously rescues, restores and renews it: new word, new world. . . . What is it in the falsetto that thins and threatens to abolish the voice but the wear of so much reaching for heaven? (Mackey 1997, 62–3)

In his extreme reaching and hyperflexible heights, Richardson’s dancing beyond the grasp of the “worded” incites utopic potentiality. Rhoden’s declaration of “love is love is love” is one of gender acceptance but also one of stylistic acceptance, encapsulating the extent of Richardson’s range.

Just as Richardson and Rhoden welcome dancers of various backgrounds and appearances into their company, they embrace multiple dance styles in a way lends the African American practice of “versioning” a sense of postmodern citationality. By developing the concept of versioning, DeFrantz offers a theorization of heterogeneity that allows for a queer of color analysis that moves beyond over-determined identity categories. In his book, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture*, he extends dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s delineation of Africanist dance culture by introducing “versioning [as] the generational reworking of aesthetic ideals,” or a

. . . strategy of African American performance. At once postmodern and as ancient as the hills, versioning is a way to tell an old tale new or to launch a musty proverb into the contemporary moment. Born of transplanted modes of African orature, it has given rise to decades of popular music styles and dances, from ragtime to hip-hop, from the cakewalk, a nineteenth-century parody of European ballroom processions, to the running man, a subtle satire of celluloid superheroes. (DeFrantz 2004, 82)

That African American performance has always commented on its past is a concept that reveals *Complexions*’s multifaceted influences. *Complexions*’s versioning is postmodern in that its citational mode is abstract and non-narrative, as opposed to narrative or spoken. In *Complexions*, the concert dance forms of ballet and modern dance absorb and (re-) present glimpses of diasporic dance forms such as popping and voguing, typically encountered in subcultural or popular settings (club, ballrooms, music videos). Framed differently, the choreography can also be seen as an African diasporic reinterpretation of Europeanist forms. Because Rhoden’s emphasis is on dance techniques and not popular narratives, such reworking differs somewhat from what DeFrantz describes as the parody and satire of much versioning. As opposed to humor, Rhoden’s aesthetic is one of rigor and finesse, manifested by Richardson’s command of otherwise very difficult

movement. In rehearsal, the Complexions dancer is asked to mathematically insert, reorder, and distort movement while losing herself to a sensation of extreme physicality. Rhoden and Richardson's intricate versioning practice cultivates both precision and ecstasy, a kinesthetic alchemy of muscular exactitude and emotional intensity.

The founding of Complexions in the mid-1990s stages a shift in American concert dance from a Soul to a Post-Soul aesthetic (one that occurs alongside other developments in contemporary dance). Precipitated by Dove's *Episodes*, AAADT's dominant Soul aesthetic gives way to Complexions's Post-Soul experimentation, allowing for gender ambivalence and its formal corollaries. A scholar of race, gender, and performance, Francesca Royster astutely marks this transition in popular music, citing a departure from Soul's heterosexual masculinity and "unified blackness" (2013, 9). If Soul embraces Black Power, Post-Soul's post-Civil Rights aesthetic lingers in "blaxploration" and individual eccentricity. In *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era*, Royster writes:

How has Post-Soul eccentricity been forged from the fires of Soul? Soul is seen as the aesthetic and philosophical embodiment of Black Power—an ideal of a unified blackness and beauty. Soul feels like a recovery project that centers heretofore suppressed black physicality and sexuality: Isaac Hayes's gold chains and bare chest, James Brown's hard-earned sweat, Angela Davis's Afro, the righteously bold stance of Pam Grier bearing a machine gun. Soul feels like the crooning seductions of Teddy Pendergrass, Roberta's warmth and Aretha's gospel shout. Soul claims its roots in the shared cultural memory of black history. . . . Soul privileges and polices heterosexuality and masculinity, and it reflects a Christian influence at its base (i.e., Soul's link to gospel), along with the embrace of a both sensual and procreative sexuality. . . . Post-Soul eccentricity, on the other hand, asks, what happens after the basic needs of family and community are met? What if the clothing of unity is too tight? What if the rhythms of the black body are less distinctly steady or comfortable? Post-Soul eccentricity draws on the contemporaneous development of the aesthetic of punk, which takes castaways and garbage and refashions them in all of their dirt. (Royster 2013, 9–10)<sup>9</sup>

In voice, dress, and personality, the musician Prince typifies Post-Soul eccentricity. In keeping with Royster's observations, essayist Hilton Als writes:

Before Prince, black popular music had been limited by its blackness, which is to say its fundamentally Christian, blues-inflected, conservative attitude toward everything pushed in Prince's early shows with his backing band, the Revolution, and in his records: girl-on-girl action, genuine female empowerment based not on suffering but on a love of the body, a racially and thus sonically mixed world. . . . Prince's best songs, like those of a number of black artists before him (Aretha Franklin, James Brown, Stevie Wonder), have always been an admixture of the sacred (gospel) and the profane (sex). (2012, 63)

Prince's break from the Soul-inflected sounds and artistic choices of his early career to the more explicit presentation of the gendered tension between sex and religion in his later career (after breaking with his record company and gaining more agency over his own vision and career) greatly resembles Richardson's move from AAADT to his own company. The aesthetic correlation between Richardson's dancing and Prince's singing is rendered overtly in Rhoden's choreography at the end of the decade.

Choreographed by Rhoden in 1998, *Solo* is danced to an echoey a cappella Prince song of the same name. It encapsulates the crux of Complexions's work—its location at the intersection of sexuality



Photo 3. Desmond Richardson in Dwight Rhoden's Solo. *Complexions Contemporary Ballet*. Photo by Stefan Pleger.

and religion, race and identity, virtuosity and versatility, individual and collective. Richardson appears in a militaristic Roman flap skirt, evoking gender ambiguity, much like the choreography itself, in which Richardson is in muscular command of his grand movements while introducing emotional vulnerability through fluid sinew. Costuming aligns with choreography, and Richardson proceeds to un-discipline and re-discipline ballet's militaristic training; break and flow ensue. Calling to mind qualities of Prince's yearning falsetto singing, Richardson's dancing epitomizes choreographic falsetto: the deliberate use of otherwise feminine-identified movements in the service of a queer masculinist aesthetic. Brilliantly executing typically feminine hyper-extensions with a sense of masculinist athleticism and bravado, Richardson performs what has become a signature of Rhoden's choreography: deliberately distorted *penchés* (in which the leg extends to the back beyond a 180-degree *arabesque* line and the hip inverts in a deconstructive treatment of ballet), sinewy torso movements, and effortlessly produced turns punctuated by explosive jumps. Prince's song lyrics are a play on words, and "solo" alternately reads "so low" in the lyrics' text, just as "no one" alternately reads "no. 1," echoing notions of the virtuoso as simultaneously abject and championed. *Solo's* calculated lyrics were co-written by playwright David Henry Hwang, known for his interest in issues of queer of color identity (Hwang 1994).<sup>10</sup> In *Solo*, Richardson is at once confident and vulnerable, autonomous and subjected, visible and invisible. Paradoxically, the most vulnerable movements in the solo—rippling upper body undulations and the way Richardson's head reverberates between his hands—actually disclose the most normative of black masculinist vernacular influences in *Complexions's* work, popping and locking. The influence of Richardson's individual movement style permeates Rhoden's choreography. The pause-and-go interruption of inserting pops into ballet technique mirrors an articulation of subjectivity as that which is always already fragmented. "Liquid" transitions (championed in hip-hop) insinuate flow and mutability. In *Solo*, popping between soaring balletic leaps and powerful leg extensions transforms movements typical of hetero-normative masculine posturing in hip-hop dance into a subtle exploration of queer experience. "*Solo* is about anonymity," Rhoden says, "someone who



Photo 4. Desmond Richardson in Dwight Rhoden's Solo. *Complexions Contemporary Ballet*. Photo by Sharen Bradford.

is grappling with himself and acceptance of who and what he is" (Mendoza 2009). Mirroring the paradoxical nature of the concept of the virtuoso, here one of the least anonymous performers executes an abstract tale of anonymity. Emotional vulnerability is translated through a choreographic palette executed with tremendous skill. Moreover, *Solo* presents the tension between the identity of the performer and the content of the performance, which recalls the prevalent observation that virtuosity makes it difficult to distinguish between performer and performance. To stage Richardson in a solo is to stage the question of virtuosity itself—a concept most at home in the context of solo performance.

While Richardson's choreographic falsetto most resembles black Post-Soul falsetto singing, we find a historical precedent for associating the high male voice with virtuosity. In Europeanist thought, the dilemma of the virtuoso (as one who lends his interpretation a degree of excess) finds its historical foundation in the qualitative—and certainly gendered—ambivalence exhibited by the castrato. Similar to the castrato's embrace of the high end of the tonal spectrum (albeit via biological refashioning), the falsetto too lingers in high notes typically reserved for the female voice. "The ambivalence which characterizes judgment of the virtuoso," writes Gabriele Brandstetter, "is related to [the] inability to choose . . . between the ethos of the interpreter and

the artificiality of the ‘performance.’ This dilemma first finds expression in critiques of the castrato’s voice—the virtuoso voice” (2007, 181). Adorno also comments on castrati, bemoaning the decline of technical virtuosity: “In earlier epochs, technical virtuosity, at least, was demanded of singing stars, the castrati and prima donnas. Today, the material as such, destitute of any function, is celebrated” (1991, 32). Both the castrato and the falsetto singer complicate an easy division between the organic and the artificial, the “male” and the “female.” Like sung falsetto, Richardson’s dancing betrays a corporeal movement quality, on the one hand, and a sense of artifice, on the other. We are at once confronted with human and machine, as Rhoden’s choreography intentionally lays bare—and glorifies—glitches that occur during transitions from one extreme movement to another. When Richardson performs such demanding—and typically feminine—feats, his exploitation of the mechanics of technique functions in the service of spiritual, other-worldly yearning. As Brandstetter states, “The virtuoso is a *revenant* of a different notion of art and technology; he is a magician whose actions appear to contravene the boundaries of the physically possible while at the same time concealing from delighted audiences the nature of his transgression” (2007, 178). In this case, Richardson’s “transgressions,” the technically achieved yet affectively extraordinary qualities of his performance—those that exceed the call of the work—both conjure affective excess and conceal many of the mechanics supporting his movement.<sup>11</sup> “Transgression” here refers to technique and composition, and Brandstetter’s use of the term provides an opportunity to note that artistic virtuosity’s engagement with form merely indicates sociopolitical transgression. Like instances of contained transgression (as in the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, but different from, say, legal transgression), virtuosity can operate conservatively, maintaining the status quo.<sup>12</sup>

Virtuosity’s pejorative connotations reflect larger sociocultural anxieties about technology’s potential subsumption of the human. “Since the performances of the legendary nineteenth-century theatrical and musical virtuosi,” explains Brandstetter, “the majority of criticism . . . has been pejorative, so that the term ‘virtuoso’ became, to a certain extent, the polar opposite of the ‘true artist’” (2007, 179). Brandstetter explains that the pejorative notion of virtuosity is linked to assumptions that the virtuoso’s performance is “soullessly mechanical” (179). Easy associations between the “soulless” and the “mechanical” are undone by taking into consideration virtuosity that works in the service of Soul and Post-Soul aesthetics. In *The Black Dancing Body*, Gottschild writes:

Soul represents that attribute of the body/mind that mediates *between* flesh and spirit. It is manifested in the *feel* of a performance. It has a sensual, visceral connotation of connectedness with the earth (and the earth-centered religions that distinguish West and Central African cultures) and, concomitantly, a reaching for the spirit. (2003, 223)

In *Solo*, Richardson self-flagellates and stretches for something beyond himself, demonstrated by high-reaching arms and soaring leaps. He thus embodies Gottschild’s Soul, reaching for the spiritual while still situated within the realm of the earthly, but ventures into Complexions’s characteristic Post-Soul theme of the lone figure in tension with the exaltation of the group or in conflict with himself. Richardson and Rhoden avoid presenting a definitive stance toward sexuality in such pieces, opting instead to leave the tension between sexuality and religion unresolved. Although he claims not to follow any faith, Rhoden attended Catholic school and has always been interested in the concept of “devotion” (Rhoden 2010, n.p.). Important to Rhoden is the “contradiction of religion plus sensuality,” and he has “an appreciation for counterpoints, opposites, and contrast” (Rhoden 2010, n.p.).

## Speed and Stillness

In addition to a demanding hybrid movement style, speed is central to Complexions’s virtuosic aesthetic. Ever preoccupied with journalism’s role in engendering virtuosic performance, Bernstein



Photo 5. Terk Waters. *Complexions Contemporary Ballet*. Photo by Jae Man Joo.

makes an insightful observation about journalism's and virtuosity's shared embrace of acceleration and speed. Commenting on the effect of the printing press, she writes:

This escalation of print means an increase in the number of information sources as well as a generalized information *acceleration*—an ever-rising ratio between distance and velocity. This acceleration characterizes both journalistic production and its consumption. The overwhelming quality of this acceleration is, of course, one of the most prominent characteristics of the virtuoso, whose technique often aims more at speed than at quality, mistaking speed for skill, difficulty for expression. (Bernstein 1998, 15)<sup>13</sup>

While the speed of technology is often reflected in the aesthetics of dance, it does not hold that accelerated movement or sound necessarily lowers the quality of performance. In fact, the discourse

of analysis created by Gottschild accounts for diasporic influences of highly kinetic choreography. Centering on dance in the U.S.—more than on transnational circulations of movement style—Gotschild argues that Africanist aesthetics embrace the idea that “the universe is in a dynamic process-in-motion, not a static entity” (1996, 11). Somewhat opposed to Weber’s Protestant ethic of efficiency, Africanist aesthetics embrace movement, even if it does not contribute to—or represent—maximum capitalist productivity.<sup>14</sup> The politics behind Gottschild’s discussion of speed in Africanist aesthetics are such that, while historically, black performers’ sense of speed may have had much to do with “traditional West African [religion and sacred principles] . . . brought to the New World in the Middle Passage,” all Americans are inherently implicated in Africanist culture: it is, “not a choice,” states Gottschild, “but an imperative that comes to us through the culture” (1996, 5).

The impulse behind a privileging of stillness in much contemporary dance and its scholarship can be found in the 1960s Judson Dance Theater. While not commenting directly on speed, Yvonne Rainer famously proclaims in her “No Manifesto” (1965), “No to virtuosity!” Although it was written for a particular piece and represents a certain phase of Judson, many have latched onto the manifesto’s imperatives as representative of Judson’s aggregate aesthetic. Calling for a choreography that works against capitalism’s speed and motion, Lepecki writes, “Modernity creates its kinetic being based on a primary ‘accumulation of subjectivity’ . . . The intrusion of the still in choreography (the still-act) initiates a direct ontopolitical critique of modernity’s relentless *kinetic interpellation* of the subject” (2006, 58). Lepecki is informed by German scholar Peter Sloterdijk’s *La Mobilisation infinie*, which examines automobiles and traffic in a study of modern movement. In such contexts, regardless of the speed of the vehicle, the human body is virtually still. For Sloterdijk, speed functions as the dominant mode of late capitalism in the context of the body’s very stasis. To be clear, Lepecki does not equate stillness with stasis. If we follow Lepecki’s formulation that stillness is a choice to move very little or to focus on attention and intensity, we can assume that stasis is, rather, a condition born not of agency but of its very absence. Not necessarily a slowing or a stillness, stasis seems to indicate an inability to incite dynamic change, regardless of speed. Analysis of the contemporary dancer requires a different type of attention to motion and agency than that of the automobile. For the most part, the dancing body is a locus of self-dynamism; unlike the automobile, it is not a dynamism produced by a relation between agent and object. In this respect, the contemporary dancing body is not an automobile; it is *auto-mobility*.

Jerome Bel evokes what Lepecki calls “choreography’s slower ontology” (2006, 45). In pieces such as *Jerome Bel* (1995), performers stand onstage in the nude for long periods of time; in *The Show Must Go On* (2001), Bel pairs mass-mediated pop songs and musical show tunes with self-consciously anti-choreographic non-dance, bringing attention to popular entertainment’s failed attempts to represent political movements. Lepecki writes, “Bel . . . deploys stillness and slowness to propose how movement is not only a question of kinetics but also one of intensities, of generating an intensive field of micropereceptions” (2006, 57). Lepecki’s concept of “micropereceptions” seems to resonate with Brandl-Risi’s discussion of the “spectatorial” and difficulties associated more with reception than performance. Furthermore, when paired with “intensities,” “micropereceptions” (by indicating the impression of minute, barely perceptible movements) point to the internal—the idea that movement could be occurring within the body, unavailable to audience perception. To think of Complexions’s hyperkinetic aesthetic in terms of what could be called “hyperperceptions” is to discover that, like stillness, kinetic abundance can also constitute “intensities” that skew audience perception. Requiring spectatorial virtuosity, hyperperception wholly externalizes the otherwise internal movements or energetics of the micropereceived. Ultimately, hyperkinetic choreography such as that of Complexions can also challenge the viewer in generative ways. Rhoden’s work brings to light the paradoxical invisibilizing effect of the black body’s hyper-visibility, echoing art historian Krista Thompson’s provocation, “How might the hyper-visibility of bling be another instance of the disappearance of the black subject, a new form of emblazoned invisibility?” (2009, n.p.). We might venture to think of Rhoden’s choreography as

an experimentation with bling's (otherwise visual) kinesthetic counterpoint, commoditized visual excess aestheticized in motion. Lepecki's "intensities," then, shift from the performer to the viewer's perception.

Furthermore, it is important to reassess Lepecki's argument through a consideration of modernity's simultaneous limiting of movement for those whose agency is most compromised. In other words, the legacy of slavery in the U.S. is such that choreographic qualities like restlessness and kineticism have their aesthetic foundations in diasporic dance traditions as well as in the trope of escape. For American dancers working in the African diaspora, highly kinetic choreography draws from traditions that aestheticize a resistance to stasis or capture. Thus, aesthetics of speed also have the potential to stage what Lepecki calls an "ontopolitical critique." Bel has called himself an artist whose "work is not danced but . . . is about dance" (2009b, n.p.). Thus, if current experimental and avant-garde dance following in the tradition of The Judson Dance Theater claims to be dance about dance, a piece such as *Solo* stages virtuosity about virtuosity. For his attention to the phenomenological aspect of dancing—how it feels to dance at the limits of one's technique and expression, Rhoden is often called "a dancer's choreographer." We detect an ontological difference between these two reflexive modes—Bel's dance about dance, and Rhoden's virtuosity about virtuosity. Essayist Susan Sontag's 1987 musing "Dancer and the Dance" discloses a certain ontological view of the dancer that continues to define the basis of Richardson's virtuosity and much concert dance that lies outside the influence of The Judson Dance Theater. Preoccupied with the meeting point of high and low art, Sontag addresses virtuosity and the figure of the soloist dancer, as follows:

Dance cannot exist without dance design: choreography. But dance *is* the dancer. The relation of dancer to choreographer is not just that of executant or performer to *auteur*—which, however creative, however inspired the performer, is still a subservient relation. Though a performer in this sense, too, the dancer is also more than a performer. There is a mystery of incarnation in dance that has no analogue in the other performing arts. A great dancer is not just performing (a role) but being (a dancer). Someone can be the greatest Odette/Odile, the greatest Albrecht one has ever seen—as a singer can be the best (in anyone's memory) Tosca or Boris or Carmen or Sieglinde or Don Giovanni; or an actor can be the finest Nora or Hamlet or Faust or Phaedra or Winnie. But beyond the already grandiose aim of giving the definitive performance of a work, a role, a score, there is a further, even higher standard which applies to dancers in a way I think does not apply to singers or actors or musicians. One can be not just the best performer of certain roles but the most complete exhibit of what it is to be a dancer. And this Baryshnikov is in our time. (Sontag 1987, n.p.)

With Baryshnikov as her example, Sontag distills the ontology that makes virtuosity possible in the first place: the dancer is not simply a person onstage (as Bel would have it) but only ever a *dancer*, before, during, and after performance. In this configuration, the dancer cannot shed her identity as a dancer, and is therefore inherently attached to her technique, her accumulation of—and continually performed practice of—discipline. Unlike Bel's everyday person who happens to find herself onstage, Sontag's dancer is steeped in rigor: she cannot be reduced to a person who knows no more than quotidian habitus, unadulterated by the refinements and flourishes of presentational technique. When Sontag writes, "There is a mystery of incarnation in dance that has no analogue in the other performing arts," she points to what is alternately referred to as liveness, presence, or *manna*. Roach has likened the contemporary charisma of celebrity to Durkheimian *manna* (or force), which is also evoked in Weber's religious virtuoso. The virtuoso who possesses the "it" quality often exists on the periphery of social acceptability. Roach claims there is "often a social apartness [of] those who possess ['it']" (2007, 11). Sontag's statement that "dance is the dancer" holds even more weight when applied to abstract non-narrative dance such as Richardson's that is



movement- (not character-) driven. Another important distinction between these two modes is that Rhoden's "claim" is implicit, not buttressed by the discursive outlets upon which Bel's aesthetic hinges. In interviews, Rhoden is more likely to express an appreciation for dance and a celebration of Richardson, as opposed to an analysis or rationale of his own work. The performance of reflexivity in and around Bel's work is rendered latent in Rhoden's work.

The title of Lepecki's book *Exhausting Dance* refers to the idea of stepping beyond dance's habitual compulsion to move—to look beyond what is typically thought of as "dance." However, for Complexions to linger in the type of movement that actually *exhausts* the performer is to extend and revise the Africanist embrace of motion found in AAADT's trope of overcoming adversity. We detect in Richardson's choreographic falsetto a refusal to submit to exhaustion, to non-dance. In terms of temporality, this compels us to ask, is exhaustion the point after virtuosity or does it precede virtuosity? In other words, would one have had to experience the pursuit of virtuosity before admitting exhaustion and embracing stillness? It would be impossible to propose such inquiries without keeping in mind Mackey's suggestion of falsetto's redemptive function in black performance. When Complexions stages movement so kinetic and technically demanding that it continually tests the limits of exhaustion, the work comments on the labor through which virtuosic concert dance is produced. Whereas Lepecki calls for the exhaustion of narrative, kinetic dance (epitomized by AAADT or ABT), Rhoden abstracts and exaggerates formal aspects of such choreography, adding to an already accumulative aesthetic. Bel's stillness represents a reaction in a minimalist vein; Rhoden's hyperkineticism represents a reaction in a maximalist extreme. Both are different ways of provoking the viewer to reflect *about* the structure and function of dance; both are conducting a meta-critique about the form that they are simultaneously enacting. Paradoxically, in a refusal to stage such challenging ensemble choreography, contemporary dance artists advocating for an aesthetics of stillness can end up capitulating to the very type of high capitalist obsession with the individual that it eschews. If, as dance critic Roslyn Sulcas (2008, n.p.) says, Complexions's works "are hyperkinetic, flashy exhibitions of physical prowess that mostly scream one thing: 'Look at me up here with my fabulous body doing fabulous things!'" then what of Bel's nude body, penis exposed, facing the audience? Bel, though by different (unaccompanied and unadorned) means, also screams, "Look at me!" By simply presenting the body as an object in the vein of Rainer's Judson aesthetics, Bel calls attention to the theatricality of the performing body's presence in relationship to the audience. If Sulcas suggests that Complexions dancers invite a relationship of attraction, Bel, after Rainer, invites the viewer to pay heed to her own habits of viewership. Comprised by an ensemble of performers all supposedly begging their audience to "Look at [my] fabulous body doing fabulous things," Complexions's group pieces place multiplied demands on the viewer. The viewer is unable to grasp the entirety of activity onstage, cutting back and forth between watching individual dancers and group passages. Thus, the work dictates an act of viewing that is both one of attraction (as in, "Look at me!") and one of ontology (as in, "Look at me in relationship to yourself, and take note of our coexisting subjectivities").

As Ferguson (2004, 29) has suggested, a queer of color analysis interrogates the "nonnormative components of racial formations," and it is precisely by examining the nonnormative—queer and raced, and queerly raced—components of *choreographic* formations that I am able to propose an alternative to the argument that an "ontopolitical critique" of capitalism must rely on slowness and stillness. As essayist and African American studies scholar Robert Reid-Pharr has stated, "There is no normal blackness, no normal masculinity to which the black subject, American or otherwise, might refer" (2001, 103). As a term that inevitably points to that which exceeds the normal and the normative, virtuosity lingers in ambivalence. Even though the ambivalence surrounding virtuosity generates a kind of excess that is already affectively queer, to situate the term in the context of queer of color dance exposes culturally biased judgments of virtuosic performance while providing the opportunity to generate effective ways of distilling culturally specific formal elements of choreography and its execution. After all, as Royster describes, Post-Soul falsetto's "space of excess turns out to be not one of lack, but an embarrassment of riches" and "these performances recenter the effects

of racism and gender surveillance back to the body, yet a return to the body with a difference” (2013, 10). By defining and exceeding the demands of Rhoden’s choreography, Richardson is a virtuoso in every regard, and his Post-Soul choreographic falsetto disrupts the common assumption that “virtuosity” signals a victory of the mechanical over the spiritual. To recognize Richardson’s embodiment of choreographic falsetto in the context of Complexions’s practice of versioning is to shine a spotlight on the virtuoso’s excess—his refusal to land on any single domain of contemporary performance.

## Notes

This article represents a portion of a larger project, and I would like to thank the following scholars and artists for their insightful input at various stages of my research and writing: Shannon Jackson, Thomas DeFrantz, Linda Williams, Brandi Catanese, Desmond Richardson, Dwight Rhoden, Mark Franko, Kevin Wynter, Barbara Browning, Daphne Brooks, Douglas Jones, my anonymous peer reviewers, and the participants of the 2013 Mellon Dance Studies Summer Seminar at Brown University convened by Susan Manning, Rebecca Schneider, and Janice Ross. I take full responsibility for any omissions in the article.

1. From this point forward, I will refer to Complexions Contemporary Ballet as “Complexions.” The company’s name has changed several times, from DR2 to Complexions: A Concept in Dance to Complexions to Complexions Contemporary Ballet.

2. It is now called the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. Richardson’s embodiment of the endpoint of the potential, imagined success of Leroy from *Fame* inadvertently answers the question driving Mark Anthony Neal’s *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (2013).

On the other hand, Rhoden’s first dance style was hand dancing (also called the hustle), which has greatly influenced his partnering choreography.

3. To give you an idea of how Complexions’s audiences are painted (by *The New York Times*) as uneducated, consider the following excerpt from a performance review: the work “never adds up to anything much, but it’s pleasant enough to watch and, like everything else on this program, well danced. For Complexions’s cheering audience, that is apparently enough” (Sulcas 2008, n.p.).

4. Also of note is “virtuoso’s” connotations of (a) collection and accumulation (see 1700 example) and (b) suspicion (see 1921 example); “virtuosity” is often used in conjunction with the word “performance” to connote cunning or convincing of a suspicious/falsifying nature, and the connotation of collection and excess suggests that virtuosity usually refers to doing too much. “Virtuosity” has also been used to connote effeminacy (seventeenth century; *Oxford English Dictionary*).

5. Throughout his study, Weber emphasizes the virtuoso’s status as set apart from conventional family life: for Weber, the virtuoso is at once non-normative and in the realm of the spiritual and magical. For example, he also writes, “The rule of the status groups of religious virtuosos over the religious community readily shifts into a magical anthropolarity; the virtuoso is directly worshipped as a Saint, or at least laymen buy his blessing and his magical powers as a means of promoting mundane success or religious salvation” (Weber 1948, 289).

6. In this section, I inherently address Richardson’s flexibility. I prefer not to conflate multiple senses of the word “flexibility.” While it has become de rigueur to refer to contemporary dancing bodies as post-Fordist or “flexible” laboring bodies, I find it imperative to differentiate between chosen artistic professions and those of the decidedly nine-to-five (and/or “flexible”) sort. Today’s post-Fordist economy has harnessed concepts of “flexibility” and “specialization” for globalized, profit-driven ends. Even “virtuosity” from arts discourse has been used to characterize ideal post-Fordist operation. Artistic terminology is appropriated by explicitly economic domains (“performance” is a perfect example), but that does not mean that when the arts reappropriate such terms that they signify as they once did within their original arts contexts. We must keep in mind that a dancer such as Richardson is trained in a conservatory environment, ever willing to

partake in the rigor and discipline required to develop technique. He certainly had the option of attending university and choosing an alternate career. Nevertheless, despite agency and control over his own career, his is not a career born solely of the goals of financial gain. Significantly, Richardson represents a recurring impulse in African American dance traditions—one that evokes, but is not identical to, Weber’s “protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism”—namely, that of possessing the “gift” of talent and of being “chosen” to dance. Certainly, similarities between the labor of dance and the labor of the post-Fordist worker abound and, without question, dance reflects and speaks back to the globalized economy at large, but a study of American dance practice has more to gain by drawing out the religiously inflected, spiritual dimension of dance culture. A return to Weber illuminates the inherently, if commonly overlooked, religious (and also racialized and gendered) character of the virtuoso. Although Richardson is indeed flexible (in the sense of sinew and loose limbs, as well as versatility), moving beyond the temptation to indulge coincidence and graft one meaning of flexibility onto another provides us with the space to shift from an overemphasis on the secular dimensions of the economy to rediscover Weber’s solo figure of the religious virtuoso. Moreover, I find the term “mutability” [as elaborated upon by Anne Anlin Cheng (2008)] to be much more productive in terms of describing a widely trained dancer’s versatility, as “flexibility” already carries such specific anatomical and aesthetic meaning in the dance studio.

7. There are so many nuanced dimensions to a dancer/choreographer’s experiences or “identity”: while the dance world is very queer-friendly on many levels, one does not exist in a single community or social sphere (one can experience relative acceptance in one sphere while experiencing prejudice in another setting).

8. Rhoden, interview with author, 2010.

Dancing with Complexions was one of my first professional dance company jobs in New York. At the time, the company operated as a pick-up company, reassembling when other companies were off-season. I can recall the stir caused by the company’s first few performances, which gathered dancers from companies as diverse as AAADT, Ballett Frankfurt, Philadanco, Dance Theater of Harlem, and American Ballet Theater, and presented a community of virtuosos who rejected narrative in favor of an abundance of kinetically charged movement that felt futuristic and transgressive. Having initially trained at San Francisco Ballet, I found myself more suited to modern dance, continuing at Martha Graham and then as a scholarship student at Alvin Ailey. After two years, it became clear that the Ailey training company, in the words of one of my teachers there, “didn’t need another Asian girl.” Thus, I sought dance employment outside the Ailey establishment. Complexions was accepting of unconventional (dance) body types, more interested in movement style and creativity of approach. Reflecting on the company’s early years, Rhoden tells me, referring both to body type and race, “You’re a misfit. You had so much facility, but you might not have had the perfect body for a ballet company. We love the curves.” As a dancer, Complexions felt to me like the creative home I had never imagined, composed of a multiracial sensibility, a heterogeneous dance palette, and dictated by a demanding, idiosyncratic style that boldly disobeyed the ballet of my youth while simultaneously paying heed to its discipline, rigor, and lines.

9. In an important passage, Royster distills Michael Jackson’s falsetto singing: “Jackson’s voice takes us from familiar to unfamiliar spaces; he is at once nostalgic and future seeking, combining soul man falsetto and jazz scatting along with his refusal to fully occupy the space of meaning and familiarity. For example, we might link Jackson’s falsetto voice to the tradition of the male falsetto in Soul, blues, and gospel music. Singers like Frankie Lymon, Jackie Wilson, Smokey Robinson, Marvin Gaye, Al Green, Prince, and more recently D’Angelo all use a high masculine vocal range and yet are often connected to (sometimes) heterosexual masculine seductiveness. In the falsetto tradition, there can be tremendous power, as well as vulnerability—a crack in the macho posture, the expression of need. In Jackson’s voice, there were these aspects of the tradition, as well as something else—the suggestion of being on the verge of something we haven’t yet heard, a spirit of fugitivity, claiming what Nathaniel Mackey calls ‘the obliquity of an unbound reference’ both forged by and breaking away from histories of black struggle. Jackson’s vocal and often highly theatrical embodied performances capture the contrariness and resistance of the eccentric, pushing our expectations of gender and racial authenticity” (2013, 117–8).

10. Lyrics:

So low, the curb looks like a skyscraper  
So high, the stars are under me  
So quiet, I can hear the blood rushing through my veins  
So low, I feel like I'm going insane  
The angels, they watch in wonder  
When U made love 2 me  
Through the rain and the thunder  
U cried in ecstasy  
And U were so kind  
I felt sorry 4 all creation  
Because at the time, no 1 was lucky  
no 1 was lucky, no 1 was lucky as me  
And now U're gone and I just wanna be still  
So silent, I'll just let my senses sleep  
It's gonna be so hard 2 hear my voice  
If I ever learn once more 2 speak  
I'm so lost, no 1 can find me  
And I've been looking 4 so long  
But now I'm done  
I'm so low, solo, my name is No 1

11. Reflecting on the falsetto singing of Michael Jackson, an example of a Post-Soul eccentric, Royster invokes Roland Barthes's embodied concept of the "grain of the voice." As a dancer, Richardson would seem to lay bare his body and its muscular workings, to offer us a glimpse into the "grain," the otherwise obscured "body" of the singing voice. Nevertheless, I would suggest that corporeal performance (the dance of the choreographic falsetto dancer) does not necessarily reveal more of Barthes' "grain" than the falsetto singer. Royster writes: "Barthes talks about the 'grain' of the voice—the aspect of authenticity that speaks of a combination of body (the 'muscles, membranes, cartilage,' the rasping of the throat, the state of the vocal cords) and its relationship to the symbolic: 'The "grain" is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs.' While Jackson's voice conveys the embodied nature suggested by Barthes' notion of 'grain,' it does so in a way that reconstructs our notion of a stable or 'authentic' physical self, particularly in terms of age and gender. In this way, Jackson forces us to think about the ways that the grain of the voice can be counterintuitive, and never fully describable or known" (2013, 120).

12. Paolo Virno (1996) co-opts "virtuosity" from artistic discourse, using it to refer to politics, but in his work the performer/dancer functions as a mere metaphor. An engagement with Virno is perhaps better suited to scholarship that takes up performance and/or artists whose project it is to measure the efficacy of their work through sociopolitical change.

13. Furthermore, we can make a poignant link between the "falsetto" and what Bernstein calls "falsification" or plagiarism in journalism: "Sensationalism, plagiarism, manipulation, and falsification are standard stylistic traits of the expanding competitive market for printed matter" (Bernstein 1998, 15).

14. An argument could be made for an aesthetic corollary to economist Joseph Schumpeter's (2003) concept of "creative destruction" (and a compulsion toward the new in hyper-kinetic choreography). How might diasporic choreography not associated with the experimental or avant-garde represent a preoccupation with the new that differs from that of the (experimental or) avant-garde?

## Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor. 1991. "On the Fetish Character of Music." In *The Culture Industry*, edited by J.M. Bernstein, 29–60. London: Routledge.
- Als, Hilton. 2012. "I Am Your Consciousness, I Am Love: A Paean 2 Prince." *Harpers Magazine* December, 60–67.

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1982. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bel, Jerome. 2009a. "Jerome Bel and Myself." Interview by Jess Curtis. In *Dance March*.
- . 2009b. Talk in the Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies, University of California, Berkeley, March 4.
- Bernstein, Susan. 1998. *Virtuosity of the Nineteenth Century: Performing Music and Language in Heine, Liszt, and Baudelaire*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Brandl-Risi, Bettina. 2010. Kulturen des Performativen Web site. [http://www.sfb-performativ.de/seiten/b12\\_vorhaben\\_engl.html](http://www.sfb-performativ.de/seiten/b12_vorhaben_engl.html) (accessed December 1, 2010).
- Brandstetter, Gabriele. 2007. "The Virtuoso's Stage." *Theatre Research International* 32(2): 178–95.
- Burnett, Allison. 2009. *Fame. Film*. Directed by Kevin Tancharoen. Beverly Hills, CA: Lakeshore Entertainment.
- Cheng, Anne Anlin. 2008. "Skin Deep: Josephine Baker and the Colonial Fetish." *Camera Obscura* 23(3/69):35–79.
- Defrantz, Thomas. 2004. *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dunning, Jennifer. 1995. "DANCE REVIEW: The Many Aspects of Complexions." *The New York Times*. August 1. <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/08/01/arts/dance-review-the-many-aspects-of-complexions.html> (accessed December 1, 2010).
- Ferguson, Roderick A. 2004. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gottschild, Brenda Dixon. 1996. *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- . 2003. *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hwang, David Henry, and Prince. 1994. "Solo." *Come*.
- Kisselgoff, Anna. 1989. "Ailey Premiere of Sexually Charged 'Episodes.'" *The New York Times*. December 14. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/14/arts/review-dance-ailey-premiere-of-sexually-charged-episodes.html> (accessed December 1, 2010).
- Kourlas, Gia. 2009–2010. "Best (and worst) dance." *Time Out New York* (Issue 744–745, December 31–January 13).
- Kourlas, Gia. 2009. "Supple Limbs in a Sea of Energy." *The New York Times*. November 22. [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/23/arts/dance/23complexions.html?\\_r=0&adxnln=1&adxnlnx=1382498929-JjKubTIXxeuwlHrd0RvwmA](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/23/arts/dance/23complexions.html?_r=0&adxnln=1&adxnlnx=1382498929-JjKubTIXxeuwlHrd0RvwmA) (accessed December 1, 2010).
- Kulturen des Performativen. 2010. "The Virtuoso's Stage: Performance at the Limit." Kulturen des Performativen Web site. [http://www.sfbperformativ.de/seiten/b12\\_vorhaben\\_engl.html](http://www.sfbperformativ.de/seiten/b12_vorhaben_engl.html) (accessed December 1, 2010).
- La Rocco, Claudia. 2007. "Ballet and African Steps, Delivered at Warp Speed." *The New York Times*. November 23. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/23/arts/dance/23comp.html> (accessed December 1, 2010).
- Lepceki, André. 2006. *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*. New York: Routledge.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. 1997. *Bedouin Hornbook*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press.
- Mendoza, Manuel. 2009. "Complexions Contemporary Ballet, which opens TITAS' annual dance series, is devoted to multiculturalism." *Dallas Morning News*. October 29. <http://www.dallasnews.com/entertainment/arts/headlines/20110510-complexions-ballet-closes-titas-season-with-spirituals-driven-testament.ece> (accessed December 1, 2010).
- Mercer, Kobena. 1994. "Black Masculinity and the Sexual Politics of Race." In *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, 131–170. London: Routledge.
- Neal, Mark Anthony. 2013. *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities*. New York: New York University Press.
- Rainer, Yvonne. 1965. "No Manifesto." In *Feelings are Facts: A Life*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.
- Reid-Pharr, Robert. 2001. *Black Gay Man: Essays*. New York: New York University Press.

- Rhoden, Dwight. 2009–2011. Interviews with the author. New York.
- Richardson, Desmond. 2009–2011. Interviews with the author. New York.
- Roach, Joseph. 2007. *It*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Royce, Anya Peterson. 2004. *Anthropology of the Performing Arts: Artistry, Virtuosity, and Interpretation in a Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New York: Altamira Press.
- Royster, Francesca. 2013. *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Schumpeter, Joseph. 2003 [1976]. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. London: Routledge.
- Sontag, Susan. 1987. “Dancer and the Dance.” *London Review of Books*. February 5, 9–10. <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v09/n03/susan-sontag/dancer-and-the-dance> (accessed February 16, 2013).
- Sulcas, Roslyn. 2008. “A Program of Muscular Charm Guaranteed to Energize the Crowd.” *The New York Times*. November 19. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/20/arts/dance/20comp.html> (accessed December 1, 2010).
- Thompson, Krista. 2009. Guest lecture in “Haunted Visuality.” Columbia University seminar taught by Saidiya Hartman (co-taught with Tina Campt at Duke University), November.
- Virno, Paolo. 1996. “Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus.” In *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, edited by Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno, 13–37. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota..
- Weber, Max. 1948. Manheim, Karl, Ed. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. “Part II: Power.” New York: Routledge.