

# Dancing on Violent Ground



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# Dancing on Violent Ground

*Utopia as Dispossession in  
Euro-American Theater Dance*



Arabella Stanger



NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS  
EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

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Northwestern University Press  
www.nupress.northwestern.edu

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Stanger, Arabella, author.

Title: Dancing on violent ground : utopia as dispossession in Euro-American theater dance / Arabella Stanger.

Other titles: Performance works.

Description: Evanston, Illinois : Northwestern University Press, 2021. | Series: Performance works | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021017048 | ISBN 9780810144088 (paperback) | ISBN 9780810144095 (cloth) | ISBN 9780810144101 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Dance—Social aspects—Europe. | Dance—Social aspects—United States. | Dance and race. | Dance and violence. | Choreography—Social aspects.

Classification: LCC GV1781 .S68 2021 | DDC 792.801—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021017048>

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For Jinny Hutchinson



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project has been a long time in the making and I owe a great many thanks to friends, colleagues, and students without whose contributions and support this book would not have been written. This research started at Goldsmiths, University of London, under the brilliant supervision of Maria Shevtsova. Maria's scholarship and belief in the social and political significance of dance has inspired my work. The insights of Anna Pakes and Giannandrea Poesio remain at the heart of this project and I am grateful to them both, feeling especially fortunate to have experienced the intellectual guidance of Giannandrea before he passed away in 2017.

Sustained, challenging, and joyous conversations with a group of people have fundamentally shaped the content and spirit of this book. My deepest thanks to Sheza Afzal, Nadya Ali, Sara Jane Bailes, Seb Franklin, Royona Mitra, Tamara Tomić-Vajagić, Samuel Solomon, and Camilla Stanger. In this group I also include my students, past and present.

My colleagues in Drama at the University of Sussex have made my work there so meaningful. Thank you, Sara Jane Bailes, Augusto Corrieri, Ben Fowler, William McEvoy, Lisa Peck, and Jason Price. My thinking has been nourished by an expanded Sussex and Brighton community: Michael Lawrence, John David Rhodes, Mimi Haddon, Sara Crangle, Natalia Cecire, Sue Currell, Martin Dines, Anna Fewster, Hannah Field, Bramble Kane, Daniel Kane, Sam Ladkin, Maria Lauret, Alisa Lebow, Jenny Lund, Rachel O'Connell, Kirsty Rolfe, Ace Ruby, Pam Thurschwell, Abi Toll, Helen Tyson, Francesco Ventrella, Carol Watts, Caroline Weeks, and Hope Wolf. Thank you to my University and College Union comrades for essential, ongoing political education.

I am grateful to all my colleagues in the Department of Dance at University of Roehampton, who gave me my first academic home, and especially to the following people for their contributions to this book's development: Theresa Buckland, Nicola Conibere, Ann David, Simon Ellis, Colm Gallagher, Stephanie Jordan, Lalitaraja, Avanthi Meduri, Ariadne Mikou, Anna Pakes, Stacey Pickett, Efrosini Protopapa, Cristina Fernandes Rosa, Erica Stanton, Tamara Tomić-Vajagić, and cherished ones Rowan McLelland, Hakan Redjep, and Debbie Williams. Gemma Donohue, Andrée Grau, and Andy Hardy remain in my heart. During my MA and PhD at Goldsmiths, I learnt so much from Philippa Burt, Ben Levitas, Shanu Sadhwani, Sarah Sigal, and Rachel Shapiro.

Thanks are due to numerous colleagues in dance, performance, and art history in the UK and US. Noam M. Elcott, Kéline Gotman, and Prarthana Purkayastha all read early drafts of chapters and gave generous, invaluable feedback. At the 2015 Mellon Summer School for Dance Studies in/and the Humanities at Northwestern University, Rebecca Chaleff, Susan Manning, Nyama McCarthy-Brown, Tara Willis, and Ying Zhu all showed me my topic in new ways. This book has also been enriched by exchanges with Anurima Banerji, Juliet Bellow, Renate Bräuninger, Tria Blu Wakpa, Gavin Butt, Broderick Chow, Clare Croft, Bojana Cvejić, Susan Leigh Foster, Johanna Gosse, Faisal Hamadah, Sue Jones, Marion Kant, Anusha Kedhar, SanSan Kwan, Fiona Macintosh (whom I thank for her mentorship), Caoimhe Mader McGuinness, Olive McKeon, Daniela Perazzo, Shanti Pillai, Colin Poole, Janet O'Shea, and Jacqueline Shea Murphy.

My sincere thanks to all at Northwestern University Press who have been so generous with their expertise and supportive of the project. Thank you in particular to Nicholas Ridout, Patrick Anderson, Trevor Perri, Patrick Samuel, Maia Rigas, Gianna Mosser, and the production team. I am indebted to two anonymous readers for their attentive and illuminating comments on my manuscript, which have improved this book immeasurably.

Enormous thanks to archivists and directors at the Bauhuas-Archiv; the Jerome Robbins Dance Division at the New York Public Library; the Merce Cunningham Trust; the National Resource Centre for Dance, UK; the New York City Ballet; Laban Archive (Trinity Laban); and, particularly for their wonderful assistance in securing images, the Trustee of the Rudolf Laban Estate, Alice Sebrell at the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, and Heather South at the Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

I was able to develop this work during talks at several institutions. My thanks to colleagues who hosted me and engaged with my work at the British Academy; Goldsmiths; Queen Mary, University of London; University of Nottingham; University of Sheffield; University College London; and University of California Los Angeles. My deepest thanks to the S'ALA family who hosted Tamara, Simon, and me for a dream writing residency in 2019: Moreno Solinas, Igor Urzelai, Carlo Solinas, and Luciana Solinas. My gratitude and appreciation to everyone who contributed to the collaborative research project *Contemporary Dance and Whiteness* (British Academy Small Grant, 2019). Many people contributed anonymously to this project and so I do not name anyone here, but I thank each of you for allowing Royona, Simon, and me to learn.

Earlier versions of some of the material in this book have been published in "Dancing on Violent Ground: George Balanchine and Urban Depopulation," "Decolonizing Dance Discourses," ed. Anurima Banerji and Royona Mitra, special issue, *Conversations across the Field of Dance Studies* 40 (2020): 39–42; "Unauthorized Performance at the Turbine Hall," *CAA*

*Reviews* (2016), <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/caa/unauthorized-performance-in-the-turbine-hall>; “The Choreography of Space: Towards a Socio-Aesthetics of Dance,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (February 2014): 72–90; and “Merce Cunningham’s Ensemble Space and the Black Mountain Principle of Community,” *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* 3 (2012), [www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/wp/?page\\_id=899](http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/wp/?page_id=899).

I want to thank Romilly Stillman and Max Hutchinson for bringing me joy. And, finally, thanks to my closest guides: my sisters Sheza Afzal, Hannah Connell, Olivia Nunn, Helen Philp, and Bonnie Rolfe, my twin and soulmate Camilla, my partner Seb, my parents Alina and Chris, and my grandmother Jinny to whom this book is dedicated.



# Dancing on Violent Ground



## Introduction



# Unearthing Choreographic Violence

Being a good geographer means going to look and see, and then to challenge oneself in one's description of what one has seen.

—Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Geographies of Racial Capitalism*

Like many white scholars in the field of dance studies, I grew up watching and dancing classical ballet. Much of my youth was spent with visions of ballet presented under the arch of theater stages or in the frame of the television, and more vitally with the sensations and regimes of embodiment learned over years of training inside ballet studios. These visions and sensations became habitual to me as I experienced ballet's movements as a life's practice of harmonic exhilaration. During my later training I encountered the modern dance technique of Merce Cunningham. His practice—to recall the words of Josef Albers at the advent of Black Mountain College, where Cunningham and John Cage accelerated their experimentalism in the mid-twentieth century—opened my eyes. With this form of movement, my ocular, aural, and kinetic attentions were rewired; I experienced Cunningham's work as a kind of bodily-intellectual undoing, releasing me from what I knew. *Dancing on Violent Ground* represents an attempt to challenge these descriptions of my love for ballet and Cunningham, the terms of which both feel deeply personal and are remarkably widespread. The sensations and visions I have experienced in Euro-American theater dance carry hidden forms of violence, not in the sense of the physical or psychological traumas arising in the practice of these demanding and disciplinary body-based arts, but in the sense of the histories of social domination that materially underwrite them. In what follows, I ask: what if dancers and dance scholars were to take up Ruth Wilson Gilmore's geographic imperative and commit to looking beneath the movement forms we cherish, forms that have promised, even delivered, danced embodiment as an exceptional site of exhilaration and release?<sup>1</sup>

This book is about the violent ground from which utopian choreographic projects emerge. It asks how the corporeal forms of harmony and freedom promised in Euro-American theater dance depend on and conceal material conditions of imperial, colonial, and racial subjection. By Euro-American

theater dance, I mean choreographic cultures shaped by the presentation of dances on the theater stages of Europe and North America and by histories of dance-as-art reaching back to the courts of Renaissance Europe. By utopian choreographic projects, I mean here the kinds of theater dance oeuvres and their institutional settings that are couched in the idealities of whiteness and engaged in intensive acts of imagination where perfected forms of social relationality are modeled in bodily practice. And with “violent ground,” I refer to the material conditions of struggle, conflict, and domination that make possible the utopianisms of these choreographic cultures but are dissimulated by them. Turning to the well-known work of seven European and North American choreographers during a period when classical ballet reached its zenith as a theatrical art and new forms of dance modernism were inaugurated through and in rupture with balletic classicism (1890–1957, with a coda in 2015), *Dancing on Violent Ground* develops a materialist theory of choreographic space for unearthing the histories of spatial and racial dispossession underwriting idealisms of the Euro-American theater dance canon. I ultimately conceptualize dance as an act that can set bodies in hopeful, transformative, or reparative motion, while simultaneously contributing to the social conditions through which groups of people are held in place, forcibly displaced, or experience the very impossibility of self-determination and material life.

My primary argument is that theater dance, understood as a nexus of corporeal, discursive, and institutional practices, can model harmonic or freeing experiences for dancers and audiences while masking and legitimizing imperial, colonial, and white supremacist practices of space. In this respect I respond to Anurima Banerji and Royona Mitra’s urgent call for dance scholarship to undo “imperialist epistemes.”<sup>2</sup> Drawing from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “epistemic violence,” Walter D. Mignolo’s “epistemic disobedience,” and a host of dance scholars committed to decolonial work in the field, Banerji and Mitra propose that dance studies should “unravel and unsettle” itself by identifying and defying its cultures of knowledge that authorize imperial, colonial, and white supremacist operations.<sup>3</sup> My interest here is in the unsettling work of asking how dance can provide substance and cover for such operations’ manifestations as modes of spatial control. If we dig into the material conditions in which Euro-American theater dance is made, we will find practices of space that are also practices of racialized dispossession: where some populations are displaced so that others can lay claim to territory; where land is enclosed and made into the property of an expanding territorial power; and where habitats, as well as the forms of life with which such spaces are bound, are forcibly taken from or denied to those to whom they are vital and transferred into the possession of the powerful few and the futures built for them. “Dispossession” is then given in this book’s subtitle as the conceptual twin to “utopia,” because when taken as a spatial operation for which hopeful dance cultures provide cover, it both complicates—and

describes the deleterious underneath that can make possible—dance’s promise to release bodies into space.

The conceptual unmasking of utopia as dispossession—where worldmaking is understood to be at one and the same time the unmaking of worlds—permits a particular theorization of dance’s work in the world. Through this lens it is possible to grasp how practices of dance—as joyful, healing, and politically transgressive as they may be for the individuals who experience them, and as valorized as they are for these reasons in works of dance scholarship—can contribute to processes of violence. Here I think specifically in relation to Gilmore’s definition of violence—“the cause of premature deaths”—as it signals not forms of individual physical or psychological harm but forms of structural supremacy, devastation, and attrition—including practices of spatial clearance, conquest, enclosure, expansion, acquisition, and dispossession—through which certain populations are over time denied the full conditions for life.<sup>4</sup> Gilmore’s definition of violence is in this respect tied into her much-quoted definition of racism: “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”<sup>5</sup> The usefulness of this definition for dance research is specifically its framing of racism as structural violence—that which persists beyond and beneath individual prejudice or denial of difference and provides the very ground on which cultural institutions are enacted. Embarking from the parameters drawn by Gilmore for thinking of racism as structural violence, *Dancing on Violent Ground* argues that the promises of social harmony and freedom extending from canonical works of Euro-American theater dance, while not necessarily doing physical or psychological harm to anyone, can contribute to, prosper from, and act as an alibi for the material conditions that produce or exploit group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.

### Promising Liberty, Enacting Violence

In “On Violence,” the opening chapter of his *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Frantz Fanon shares a warning about promises of liberty extending from the colonial state. “Let us admit it,” he writes, “the settler knows perfectly well that no phraseology can be a substitute for reality.”<sup>6</sup> While speaking of the institutional negotiations attached to franchise colonialism in the wake of his activist work in Algeria and of postwar African decolonization struggles more broadly, Fanon’s words here catch expressions of social harmony that both disguise the power interests and naturalize the sovereignty of imperial and colonial institutions. One of Fanon’s implications is that the benevolent phrases with which liberal states promise conciliatory social relations (e.g., “citizenship”) for those they continue to dispossess of their lands, resources, and energies, must be read against and back into the realities in which that

dispossession plays out.<sup>7</sup> I ask what the study of dance can learn from Fanon's statement about the perils of white liberal phraseology. Important and field-shaping approaches to this question have been modeled in postcolonial, decolonial, and antiracist research in dance studies, particularly in scholarship showing how dance can work as part of the insurrectionist collective struggles and cultural agitations through which racially devalued dancing populations survive, move against, elude, or strive to transform the realities produced through colonial and white supremacist violence.<sup>8</sup> My concern here is to contribute to this work in dance scholarship and to learn specifically from Fanon's statement by shifting the conversation away from *dance as insurrection* toward *dance as dispossession*. That shift is motivated by a need to see beyond and beneath the promises of harmonic human relationality promised in major, and majorly recognized, works of Euro-American theater dance. How does dance come to work not only against but also as part of what Fanon calls the "phraseology" of violent state apparatus, which is to say, specifically here: how does dance as theater art produced in the context of imperial but also democratic, white liberal social spaces do the work of concealing and legitimizing the violent realities on which those spaces depend? And relatedly: how might dance scholarship attend not only to a dance's embodied phraseology—what it looks like, feels like, who and which identities it represents, what forms of corporeal expression it takes—but also to the disjunctive relationship between that phraseology and its material conditions: those socioeconomic structures of production, reproduction, and dispossession that set the terrain for lived experience?

To bring these questions to the heart of its explorations, *Dancing on Violent Ground* works with a materialist attention to dance's social locatedness. Following Fanon, I understand materialist to mean a dialectical attention viewing cultural formations such as theater dance, and socially structuring phenomena such as racism, to be fully imbricated with—not separate from, nor reflective of, nor determined by—economic relations. As Fanon writes about the relationship of capitalist accumulation, colonial expansion, and racialization: "the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich."<sup>9</sup> Stretching—as Glen Sean Coulthard explains of this conceptual turn—a crude analytical Marxism away from the conjoined risks of economic determinism and cultural Eurocentrism, Fanon shows how Marxist analysis can and must work to uncover the mutually productive relationships of capitalism and colonialism, of whiteness and wealth, of economic exploitation and planetary racisms.<sup>10</sup> And this dialectical attention is one, too, that permits the unmasking of utopia as dispossession. The place of art forms like dance in the world-forming dialectics of dispossession can be uncovered analytically, I argue, with an exploration of the ways dance is spatially located and involved in processes of spatial organization. By attending to dance's very locatedness, as primed both by materialist theories of spatial

production and critical race and indigenous theories of spatial dispossession, it is possible to develop a critical approach that holds together dance's life-giving experiences with its capacity to sustain practices of social negation.

### Theories of Choreographic Space

The first steps of this dialectics of dance as a potentially live-giving and life-negating artistic practice, can be taken through an explanation of my mutually informing, working definitions of choreography, space, and society. Motivated by Henri Lefebvre's theorization of space, I define choreography as the production of space and time through the organization of movement;<sup>11</sup> society as the movement of relationships between people, nonhuman beings, things, and environments; and space as "not a thing but rather a set of relations between things."<sup>12</sup> Like Fanon, Lefebvre extrapolates a dialectics from Marx to get at the mutuality of substructure and superstructure.<sup>13</sup> In *The Production of Space* (1974), he writes: "The successful unmasking of *things* in order to reveal (social) relationships—such was Marx's greatest achievement, and, whatever political tendencies may call themselves Marxist, it remains the most durable accomplishment of Marxist thought."<sup>14</sup> Here Lefebvre refuses a hard distinction and determinative relation between economic base and social superstructure: the world is constituted of social relations that generate, are generated by, but also masked inside the production of things as commodities, so that the economic is social and vice versa. But he also hints at the central contribution of his theorization of space and society: to do for space what he claims Marx had done for things, namely, to reveal that space is produced by, productive of, and at the same time dissimulates social relationships. If Lefebvre is inspired by Marx's unmasking of things to reveal a dance of (social) relationships,<sup>15</sup> it is so that he can formulate a distinctively choreographic theory of space as an animated field of relations both engendered by and situating those relationships. The materialist critique of dance I develop here employs Lefebvre's dialectical concept of space—a set of relations not given and static but produced and dynamic—as a fulcrum for exposing the choreographic nature of society and the social nature of choreography, as well the forms of domination dissimulated inside moving arrangements of spatial form.

Lefebvre places his special emphasis on capitalist processes of spatial production and the relations of capital, labor, and state. This means that while being keenly tuned to processes of economic exploitation, state power, and class struggle shaping and shaped by spatial environments (and especially with respect to European urbanism), he insists on neither the racializing impetus nor the colonial manifestations of these socioeconomic relations. Unlike Fanon, Lefebvre does not make room for racial violence as a foundational part of capitalist accumulation and production, and this because he neglects

to theorize race, as Chris Chen defines it, “as a relation of domination inside and outside the wage relation.”<sup>16</sup> Any materialist theorization of space should, as Fanon shows, seek to understand not only how the economic cause *is* the social consequence but also how that cause-consequence dialectic is based in the organizing structures of racialization. For this reason, my theorization of dance’s place in the world finds an antiracist emphasis necessary to a proper materialist critique of spatial power relations by turning to concepts developed in works of critical race theory, critical geography, and indigenous studies. Katherine McKittrick, Saidiya V. Hartman, and Coulthard all reveal how processes of sociospatial production are constituted by an often concealed underneath—dispossession—and each in different ways reconfigures the Marxist revolutionary verve represented in Lefebvre’s work with a theorization of insurgent politics generated in black geographies and indigenous land struggles.<sup>17</sup>

In her *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006), McKittrick reads space with Fanon, unearthing through the revelations of black women’s spatial practices what it absented from official geographies, including Lefebvre’s own. As she writes, Fanon “identifies sites of subjugation and loss, dispossession, and violence as implicit, rather than marginal, to sociospatial order,” and in this way his work peoples “the three-dimensional, racialized world.”<sup>18</sup> McKittrick examines this same racialized world not only for its practices of spatial violence but also for its “unofficial or oppositional geographies—which are so often displaced, disguised, or relocated by practices of domination.”<sup>19</sup> Likewise for Coulthard’s *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (2014), Fanon’s anticolonial Marxism provides a paradigm. Following Fanon in reconfiguring the Marxian problematics of economic domination around questions of colonial violence, Coulthard formulates an indigenous anticapitalism around the issue of land itself, borrowing from Peter Kulchyski’s distinction between “the theft of time,” as the lynchpin of worker exploitation and class struggle, and the theft of space, “dispossession,” as the basis for both settler colonialism and indigenous resistance to it.<sup>20</sup> Theorizing space from the perspective of a geographies of “alterability,” both McKittrick and Coulthard show that space and the dynamic social relations of which it is made are not only produced but also erased, stolen, and fundamentally contested, especially in the context of imperial and colonial territorializations.<sup>21</sup> By theorizing choreographic space in these terms, it is possible too, I suggest, to unearth the histories of racialization, land theft, and erasure both forgotten inside Lefebvre’s idea of spatial production and masked inside the intensively hopeful social worlds modeled by dance spaces embedded in dominant cultures of whiteness.

As I have stated above, a central concern of this book is to unveil the practices of dispossession that can lay concealed inside danced formulations of hope. It is for this reason that I am indebted to Lefebvre’s theoretical

practice of *unmasking* space to reveal its dissimulation of “social relationships of exploitation and domination.”<sup>22</sup> But I am more specifically indebted in this respect to McKittrick’s and Coulthard’s placement of “dispossession” at the heart of materialist spatial thought, emphasizing as their work does the laying to waste that subtends white liberal practices of space. My interest in unveiling the deleterious underneath of white idealities, then, is made possible finally by Hartman’s theorization of the racial terror that secures possessive individualism, in her *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997). What Hartman’s project shares with McKittrick’s and Coulthard’s, across their varied fields and subjects, is a means for uncovering racial violence in scenes or practices that appear violence-free. McKittrick, for her part, describes “white masculine European mappings” as those operating not simply through overt practices of destruction but, more covertly, through “seemingly innocent” spatial organizations giving “a coherency and rationality to uneven geographic processes.”<sup>23</sup> Coulthard theorizes similarly “innocent” destructions in his critique of what he terms the politics of settler “state recognition and accommodation” in liberal-democratic contexts that, while extending relations of seeming reciprocity and reconciliation to indigenous populations, in fact replace “strictly repressive or violent features” of hegemonic control with a more insidious production of “*forms of life* that make settler-colonialism’s constitutive hierarchies seem natural.”<sup>24</sup> In her own historicization of black subjugation in the postemancipation US, Hartman argues not simply that white supremacy might be countered if “blacks [were] recognized as legitimate rights bearers” but that “emancipatory discourses of rights, liberty, and equality” themselves, even when extended to subjects racialized as “black,” “instigate, transmit and effect forms of racial domination.”<sup>25</sup> What all these ideas share, and what they offer a study of Euro-American theater dance, is a nexus of ideas explaining how white utopianisms might harbor white supremacies.<sup>26</sup>

The importance of the above theoretical works to the concerns of this book, then, is as follows. In Lefebvre I find a concept of space equipped for unmasking the social relations constituting dance’s involvement in the production of spatial environments. This in turn permits an understanding of the way theater dance is political—acting on and shaping the world—not by the subjects it deals with but by the very way it shapes and is situated in space. The work of McKittrick, Coulthard, and Hartman reveals how space, though, is never simply a matter of production but also one of dispossession. By theorizing space from the perspective of what McKittrick calls black geographies, a vantage point she describes through Sylvia Wynter’s idea of “the imperative of a perspective of struggle,”<sup>27</sup> and through Coulthard’s insurgent theory of settler hegemonies made to seem benevolent, and with Hartman’s critique of emancipatory discourses laden with mechanisms of racial control, it is possible to excavate the violent ground subtending choreographic practices of hope. Taken together, these theories of spatial and

social concealment imply that we should look beneath Euro-American theater dance's various promises of appealing, kinetic relationality—carried as they are in experiences of harmony, gestures of cultural recognition, or ideals of equality—to the forms of spatial control and racialized disposability that ground them.

### Theater Dance: Utopia as Dispossession

With the foregoing theoretical instigations I think about the ways Euro-American theater dance dissimulates racialized power struggles through its projection of idealized social worlds where people move in various forms of perfected relation—where, in other words, dispossession is concealed in utopia. In this vein, my discussion works both from Randy Martin's idea that dance "inscribe[s] visions of how we can move together" and Bojana Cvejić's definition of the dominant regime of theater dance, as it is "characterized by an emphasis on bodily movement, identification of the human body, and the theater's act of communication determining the reception of the audience."<sup>28</sup> The prominence of "the human" in Euro-American theater dance's inscription of moving relations is significant here, being itself a figuration fundamentally embedded in racial violence. Gilmore provides a succinct explication of this point when she writes that "particular kinds of bodies, one by one, are materially (if not always visibly) configured by racism into a hierarchy of human and inhuman persons that in sum form the category "human being."<sup>29</sup> And so, when Cvejić explains that theater dance is concerned with the "identification of the human body," she implies specifically how Euro-American theater dance is tied into European Enlightenment discourses mobilizing "the human," and "the body" with which it is bound, as that which Anthea Kraut compellingly terms a "racial project," a taxonomic product of racism and authorization for global colonial practices of conquering, commodification, extraction, and subjugation.<sup>30</sup> If theater dance is a practice where people show embodied environments to each other, then it might also present intensified forms of the ways human relations, and "the human" itself, are imagined, where social worlds are modeled as moving figures in space and time, and so where the foundational, material frictions and struggles subtending those worlds are made to disappear into a dreamworld of kinetic forms.

These preliminary ideas show the importance of theorizing the utopian-dispossession potential of Euro-American theater dance as a practice that can commonly conceal Wynter's "perspective of struggle" within an idealization of the human in motion. The project I embark on here, then, is to develop an idea about artistic utopianism suggested by Yutian Wong in her important troubling of theater dance as a vehicle for cultural reconciliation across difference. As she writes about the US State Department's co-option of the Alvin

Ailey Dance Theater into its international cultural diplomacy efforts during the Cold War:

The artist and particularly artists-of-color are cast in the role of “cultural social-workers,” in the expectation that their work will “uplift” “assuage” and “heal.” As a result, attempts to solve the problem of cultural difference become depoliticized and conflict is ignored in favor of displaying an idealized vision of resolution. The artistic space becomes romanticized as a safe harbor and the artistic product is envisioned as a sincere solution.<sup>31</sup>

Like Wong, I am interested in the idea that theater dance’s capacity to model idealized social relations and to promise social repair can be mobilized as a way of disappearing conflict and laundering structural violence in the context of supremacist institutions. Given these ideas, I offer the scope of my book: to show in development a way of thinking through choreography that un.masks the social relations and their histories of racial violence hidden not in the narratives, themes, or cultural identities created and contested in theater dance, but in the interplay between dance’s “seemingly innocent” spatial textures and its located conditions. In this respect my work takes up Martin’s crucial methodological attitude in dance politics, which he terms “overreading” to specify the mutuality of context and aesthetics in dance, a practice of “reading through and past the dance to . . . imagine the prospects for fundamental social change.”<sup>32</sup> Tracing Martin’s approach into the materialist theories of space that immediately shape my analytical method here, I follow McKittrick’s geographics of “alterability,” which identifies dispossessive spatial practices with a view only to their transformation.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, my objective of looking through and past dance’s idealisms to the violent ground beneath it practices a form of intentional critical reading—foregrounding dance’s potentials as a life-negating practice—attuned nevertheless to a horizon of political hopefulness where a deeper consciousness of the material situation might lead to its very transformation.

The remaining introductory discussion moves through four parts to unpack these theoretical catalysts in relation to Euro-American theater dance as my subject and field of research. First, I explain how my approach is made possible by and develops scholarship dedicated to the spatial and sociopolitical dimensions of dance. Second, I elucidate ideas about Euro-American theater dance’s imperial and white liberal phraseologies as they turn toward and away from the spatial idealisms of balletic classicism. Third, I set out the substance of the book’s method of spatial analysis, oriented as it is toward unearthing dance’s violent ground. And finally, I introduce the content of the chapters, all concerning choreographies saturated with forms of white idealism. My artistic examples, each treated monographically in their respective chapters, are found in the choreographies of Marius Petipa, Martha Graham,

George Balanchine, Rudolf von Laban, Oskar Schlemmer, Merce Cunningham, and, by way of a future-facing coda, Boris Charmatz. I show these examples to be in material dialogue with spatial practices including architecture, geometry, land legislation, urban regeneration, agriculture, domestic routine, segregation, and museology, all of which I understand to be choreographic practices in and of themselves, and in so doing take up Kéline Gotman's vital call for dance studies to "reconstitute its congresses and playhouses," to find its subjects "in the furthest reaches of the social sphere" and so to trouble "the boundaries of "dance" and the politico-aesthetic delineation this term inspires."<sup>34</sup> By tracing kinetic forms between dances and their social environments, my chapters present a critique of (respectively) imperial, settler-colonial, corporate, eugenicist, reactionary, liberal, and socially democratic utopian impulses in canonical modernist dance environments and their scholarly receptions, understanding these impulses to animate various structures of white domination.

My dance examples provide points of departure without fixing the relevance of my book's method to only those artists, and so I demonstrate an approach to unearthing the violent ground of choreography with which I hope others may think beyond the artistic fields in relation to which I develop it here. For readers in theater studies, performance studies, and art history—and those concerned with choreography in an expanded sense—the approach offers a theoretical and historical positioning of choreography as a practice deeply involved in practices of spatial utopianism, domination and struggle. For readers in dance studies, the approach develops a materialist, antiracist theory of choreographic space for critiquing ideas such as harmony, freedom, and democracy in dance and for excavating the regularly unspoken histories of racialized dispossession subtending white idealities in Euro-American theater dance. By locating dance's politics not in its practices of representation but in the interplay of its spatial forms and material conditions, *Dancing on Violent Ground* ultimately explores what is absented, suppressed, or evaporated from hopeful choreographies, showing how theater dance masks violence by animating idealisms.

### Dance's Politics of Location: Toward a Critical Negativity

Theoretical enquiries into space within dance studies have aptly asserted space's mobile and embodied nature, posed from the critical perspectives of phenomenology;<sup>35</sup> choreology and semiotics;<sup>36</sup> poststructuralist studies of identity politics;<sup>37</sup> critical, cultural, and postmodern geographies;<sup>38</sup> and more focused expository engagements with Lefebvre's writings.<sup>39</sup> Of particular importance here are those Lefebvre-inflected studies emphasizing spatial power relations. In her excellent *Kinesthetic City: Dance and Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces* (2013), SanSan Kwan adopts a Lefebvrian dialogic

to expose the “mutually productive interrelationships among moving bodies, cities, history and Chineseness.”<sup>40</sup> She shows what is possible for dance scholars by transporting and transforming Lefebvre’s ideas for her analysis of embodied flows of movement through Taipei, Hong Kong, and New York’s Chinatown, placing her “own physical experience of moving through city space (kinesthesia) . . . in dialogue with a reading of concert dance works, as a way to illuminate the operations of collective identity” in these contexts.<sup>41</sup>

The possibilities represented in Kwan’s work are then taken up commandingly by Ying Zhu who works with Lefebvre’s theoretical approach to explore “the reciprocal choreography of architecture with the body” in the case of Washington DC’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial, revealing this site’s very mobilization of and through the bodies of its visitors.<sup>42</sup> Valerie Briginshaw’s *Dance, Space and Subjectivity* (2001) also broke new ground in dance studies by bringing Lefebvre in dialogue with theorists including Elizabeth Grosz and Gilles Deleuze, showing how “visualization and perspective are deeply pervasive ideological constructs, which . . . structure the ways in which space, bodies and experience are perceived and understood” in dance.<sup>43</sup> And Sarah Rubidge reads Lefebvre for the motile nature of space as he conceptualizes it, which she describes as “dynamic, relational, in process rather than fixed.”<sup>44</sup> While I am indebted to Kwan’s and Zhu’s important readings of Lefebvre for moving bodies in and around spaces of spectacle, and while I take up Briginshaw’s and Rubidge’s Lefebvrian suggestions that all space is ideological and choreographic, my own dialogue with Lefebvre shifts the conversation toward a materialist sensibility. Here I read Lefebvre as a primarily Marxist, rather than a primarily phenomenological or poststructuralist, thinker, and so emphasize an understanding of theater dance’s spatial forms not only as they shape or are shaped by sensations of movement, experiences of cultural identity, or modes of theatrical perception, but also as those forms are involved in socioeconomic processes of production and dispossession.

Because of this sensibility, my book then also necessarily intervenes in discussions of theater dance’s participation in the social world. In this respect, I build on paradigms established in the sociology of dance and theater, notably Maria Shevtsova’s sociocultural performance analysis;<sup>45</sup> in theorizations of theater dance’s relationship to the political, including Martin’s “overreading”;<sup>46</sup> in studies of theater dance, race, and particularly of whiteness, which I shall expand on throughout my chapters;<sup>47</sup> and in the adoption of “social choreography” as a term unveiling choreography as a productive (rather than reflexive) process in various realms of social life. This concept is expressed in Andrew Hewitt’s decisive question: “How does choreography enact rather than simply reflect social order?”<sup>48</sup> To borrow from Imani Kai Johnson’s sharp reading of Hewitt, the latter’s concept is pertinent to my work as it is to Johnson’s, because Hewitt shows “how choreography both rehearses and performs social possibilities, capturing its performative capacity to ultimately constitute the very possibilities it performs.”<sup>49</sup> But, as Johnson draws

out with her extension of Hewitt's work away from "Eurocentric notions of modernity and bourgeois societal demands" and instead toward the "social choreography of South Bronx youth in the mid-1970s to the early 1980s," Hewitt's frame for understanding choreography as an enactment of social order requires new orientations when unearthing choreographic practices from a perspective of racialized struggle.<sup>50</sup> The approach I develop here then locates its primary theoretical impetus in materialist critical race theories and indigenous studies, revealing how Euro-American theater dance enacts social order by being always a matter of racialized placements and displacements. To this end I bring Lefebvre and other European theorists of social space such as Pierre Bourdieu and Mikhail Bakhtin into dialogue with thinkers including McKittrick, Coulthard, and Hartman, whose conceptions of geography, land, and liberty offer ideas vital to a materialist analysis of choreographic space: one finding in dance's spatial form a dissimulation of racialized relations of power.

From these perspectives, *Dancing on Violent Ground* makes two turns in prevailing discourses of dance studies. The first is a turn away from sociopolitical identity and cultural representation toward material location as a site in which to search for dance's capacity to "be political": to work in and on the world. This turn is based in the idea that theater dance's representations and identity formations are themselves grounded in specific material locations that need to be dug into—Fanon's "economic substructure" that "is also a superstructure"—and that might remain concealed beneath the ideas dance weaves about itself in its embodied, experiential, and institutional phraseologies. In this regard I work with a Marxian approach to dance analysis argued for persuasively by Olive McKeon, who writes: "in approaching questions of politics, dance scholarship often investigates the construction of identity within movement practices or finds within dance forms of collective resistance and resilience, while side-stepping the concrete material circumstances at play."<sup>51</sup> This book represents an attempt to reverse such a sidestep. To shift from a politics of identity to a politics of location, I argue following McKeon, permits a reading of dance that gets at its underneath: not what it says about the world and itself but the relation of those "sayings" to the conditions and effects of its material existence in the world.

The second turn, fundamentally related to the first, is a turn away from the idea that theater dance can "be political" commonly by generating and harboring practices of resistance, resilience, or repair, and toward the idea that theater dance is already political by the way it also contributes to practices of domination, exploitation, and violence. In this sense, I work in the spirit not only of McKeon's historical materialist method but also of an approach expressed in Jasmine Johnson's tentative yet essential question about the implications of "inaugurating a black dance history through a story ultimately about black resistance, but not about white supremacist violence."<sup>52</sup> Johnson's question should impel scholars and artists to complexify

the positive and hopeful associations commonly clinging to the practice of dance, and especially in the context of predominantly white theater dance histories, dealing as they do with practices of white ideality. As I have argued above, when Euro-American theater dances create onstage worlds (and studio practices) promising appealing forms of social organization—harmony, democracy, equality, and freedom—it remains acutely important that attention be paid to the histories of subjection, imperial and colonial domination, and white supremacist violence that materially subtend such idealisms.

Johnson continues by asserting that “raising questions about dance as potential violence forces us to take a more sobering look at our sometimes unquestioned terms.”<sup>53</sup> *Dancing on Violent Ground* asks such questions about dance forms whose promises of harmony, liberty, or democracy both have and have not been read critically in the field of dance studies. For this reason my intervention resonates also with Ana Isabel Keilson’s reading of Laban’s free-flow dance harmony through the lens of Hagar Kotef’s critique of a laudatory politics of mobility. I support the importance for dance studies of unearthing, as Keilson writes, “‘illiberal’ values (e.g., imperialism, racism, and ethnonationalism) contained within liberal theories” and liberal cultural articulations of freedom.<sup>54</sup> Following Johnson and Keilson, I propose a more sobering look at claims for the oppositional potential of identity affirmations in dance, because such claims in the context of social spaces organized around structural violence can mask ongoing material conditions of attrition inside danced declarations of cultural agency. How, by celebrating equality across difference, can dance truly resist practices of domination (as some of the dance practices I explore here claim to do) when those to whom that “difference” is ascribed and by whom it is taken up affirmatively *as* cultural identity, are in concrete terms still experiencing deleterious effects of the material structures propping up that dance and its institutions? It is through theater dance’s commonly understood character as an exceptional site for experiential release, cultural expression, or reparative relationality, I shall argue, that this art can come to launder structural violence. By shifting from a politics of identity to a politics of location, then, by getting at theater dance’s material underneath, it is possible to upend both historiographical-scholarly and artistic-industrial narratives that exceptionalize dance as a site for embodied experiences of spatiotemporal freedom and equality while neglecting the violent work that dance and, crucially, the ideas of freedom and equality, might do in the world.

### Harmony, Freedom, Democracy: White Idealities in Dance

Given my focus on choreographies couched in theatrical institutions of whiteness in Europe and North America,<sup>55</sup> I am concerned with a specific kind of historical violence where people and land are subordinated to the

interests of an expansionist socioeconomic power. If Euro-American theater dance tends to reproduce, transform, contest, abandon, or else strategically ignore the forms and repertoires of classical ballet that continue to dominate the stages of major European and North American dance houses, then it is also grounded in a specific history of racializing violence: one determined by forms of dominion enacted through territorial expansion.<sup>56</sup> This history has produced for theater dance (and for dance studies) what Naomi Bragin has termed a dominant *choreocentricity*: “a racializing logic” in scholarly discourse that “cannot be dissociated from a historical privileging of single author, proscenium, concert stage works that follow elite and avantgarde Eurocentric tradition” and under whose discursive regimes “black social life remains largely incomprehensible and ignorable.”<sup>57</sup> Motivated by Bragin’s critique, my interest here is to dig into the material conditions of racializing violence that have led to the formation of choreocentric cultures of authorship, spectatorship, and criticism in Euro-American theater dance, in both its classical-balletic (“elite”) and its modern and contemporary experimentalist (“avant-garde”) traditions of shaping space. I pursue this aim not to recenter these cultures but to unsettle them and their received terms of understanding in relation to McKittrick’s and Wynter’s “perspective of struggle.”

As a shifting field of dance aesthetics first formalized academically and theatrically under the auspices of court cultures conducting some of the earliest projects in European territorial expansion, classical ballet cannot be explored as a social phenomenon without considering the originating involvement of its technical-spatial aesthetic in the material cultures of imperialism, colonialism, and, by extension, racialization and racism.<sup>58</sup> If, as Chen puts it, “the genealogy of ‘race’ and its precursors can be traced back to the spatial expansion of European colonialism,” then any study of choreographic space dealing with historical contexts shaped through those vast, geopolitical choreographies of empire should also consider how balletic space is related to the production of race through colonial cartographies.<sup>59</sup> This means that the spatial idealisms enshrined in the early-modern academic codification of ballet—including centrality, all-over harmony, and classical perspective—should be taken as idealisms, too, woven deeply into the imaginaries of European spatial violence. As Lefebvre argues, “sovereignty implies ‘space’ . . . a space established and constituted by violence”; and when sovereign states take up space by means of force, they also produce cultures of state-sanctioned “metaphorization” through which “violence is cloaked in rationality and a rationality of unification is used to justify violence.”<sup>60</sup> As I shall argue in chapter 1 in relation to Petipa’s work, when classical ballet stakes out its spatial idealism of an all-over harmony secured around central axes of corporeal organization, it is cloaking under the veil of a “beautiful” universal geometry the principles of expansionist order with which European imperialism produced its structuring precepts of whiteness, civilization, and the human.

Deepening Lefebvre's field of enquiry, McKittrick theorizes the spatial order through which European imperialism moves as "transparent space": a governing perspective associated with white-heteropatriarchal cartographies that would give "a safe socioeconomic clarity" and "a coherency and rationality to uneven geographic processes and arrangements."<sup>61</sup> I argue that ballet's spatial idealisms operate as a kind of transparent space in this respect, since they do the work of displacing, disguising, or relocating "practices of domination" and the unruly, insurgent geographies with which those practices are met and resisted in imperial and colonial contexts.<sup>62</sup> This point suggests how it is even possible to refer to "ballet," an art form in possession of an expansive history with an expansive set of styles, traditions, and approaches. When I refer to ballet's spatial idealisms in this book, I suggest something that is at once contingent on its particular historical situation (meaning there is no singular "ballet") and still always operates as a fantasy of a geometrically abstract, transhistorical blueprint calling to principles of harmony, centrality, balance, and symmetry. The blueprint nature of ballet's spatial fantasies, I argue, is what aligns it with McKittrick's "transparent space" and so serves to conceal the historical struggles emerging from the expansionist territorial operations of the European courtly contexts (in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in particular) where classical ballet flourished as an academic and theatrical discipline. It is here that we may return to Wynter's "imperative of a perspective of struggle." In relation to the stabilizing tendencies of European cartography, McKittrick describes "geography's discursive attachment to stasis" as a "vessel of human violence" that "can hide" that very perspective.<sup>63</sup> The arguments developed here about Euro-American theater dance are based on the idea that McKittrick's words illuminate also the ideological work performed by ballet's blueprint spatiality. Ballet's fantastical geometries contain a social imaginary where the violence and struggles of that art's imperial past and present are evaporated into a vision of universal, timeless grace.

As the twentieth- and twenty-first century dance forms of interest here stage their departures from, reinventions, ruptures, and ameliorations of classical ballet, new forms of idealism emerge that transmute the white monumentalism of ballet into white fantasies of social freedom. Be it Graham's and Balanchine's respective conceptions of America as wide-open space, Laban's and Schlemmer's enlargement of dancing bodies' geometric scope, Cunningham's dream of individuals equally centered, or Charmatz's anti-institutional dancing commons, each of my examples refers to classical ballet in producing their own forms of transparent space. While differing in many ways, these choreographies all pursue dance experimentalisms through which two things happen: predominantly white dancing bodies are liberated into space, and more importantly, sociopolitical ideals are produced that themselves depend on and conceal material histories of racial violence. Given my proposal to shift from a politics of identity to a politics of location, it is the latter issue

(the interplay of formal ideals and material conditions) that is of primary interest here.

Hartman's indispensable critique of what she terms the liberal discourse of possessive individualism is foundational to my claim that progressive dance cultures can trade in hopeful ideas defined by structural subjections. As she writes:

If white independence, freedom, and equality were purchased with slave labor, then what possibilities or opportunities exist for the black captive vessel of white ideality? The slave is the object or the ground that makes possible the existence of the bourgeois subject and, by negation or contradistinction, defines liberty, citizenship, and the enclosures of the social body.<sup>64</sup>

With these words, Hartman describes both the dependence of white ideality on histories of exploitation and domination constitutive of antiblackness ("purchased with slave labor"), and the continuing "diffusion of terror and violence" inside the rhetoric of a decent, harmonic sociality put forth in the constitutional and economic formations of white liberalism.<sup>65</sup> While Hartman's project is about chattel slavery and its afterlives in the US, her argument that racialized subjection subtends the declarations of white freedom is crucial to conceptualizing Euro-American theater dance's white ideality. Through their kinetic visions of human relations defined by various kinds of freedom, equality, and independence, the artists of interest here create forms of transparent space ascribing a "safe socioeconomic clarity" to the various practices of racialized dispossession playing out, as McKittrick writes of black geographies, "right in the middle of [their] historically present landscape."<sup>66</sup> If the idealities of independence, freedom, and equality are founded in but also mask antiblackness, as both Hartman and McKittrick suggest, then it is not just their embodiment by predominantly white casts of dancers that insinuates Euro-American theater dance into practices of racism. As I will suggest over the following chapters, whenever we witness these ideals choreographically celebrated in the context of institutions grounded in structures of white domination, we witness not simply the privileging of white dancing bodies in social space but more deeply the ideological legacies (the very idea of individual freedom and civic equality) of racist material subjections (the capitalist-colonial projects through which those ideas were enshrined) reinforced through the seemingly innocent expressions of dance.

Taking my cue from Hartman's project, then, I search for histories of spatialized violence in "those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned."<sup>67</sup> In the appealing, scenic worlds of Euro-American theater dance I locate forms of transparent space that conceal dispossessive practices. In this respect, I ultimately offer a reading of Jasmine Johnson's incipient and compelling idea of dance as "white terror."<sup>68</sup> Addressing my conceptualization

of classical ballet's transparent space to experiments in modern and contemporary dance, I argue that, when Euro-American theater dance treasures forms of bodily and social freedom, it continues to trade in idealities (including "freedom" itself) that prop up and conceal imperial, settler-colonial, and white supremacist practices of spatial terror. To pick up Coulthard's argument about the apparently violent-free violence of settler colonialism in contemporary liberal states, I am interested especially in how white systems of spatial control in dance operate not simply through "strictly repressive" means but rather by their "ability to produce *forms of life* that make [their] constitutive hierarchies seem natural."<sup>69</sup> While at the heart of ballet lie forms of spatial idealism naturalizing imperial supremacy, at the heart of this later, often politically progressive, work in theater dance lie ideals of freedom naturalizing newer forms of white supremacy. And it is here vital to be clear that my intention is not see white spatiality's power as absolute by relegating black and indigenous geographies to experiences of dispossession in full. As McKittrick writes, "black geographic togetherness" represents "the sociocultural pull *away from* what bell hooks describes as terrifying and deathly representations of whiteness, or, the sociocultural pull *into* black spaces."<sup>70</sup> When I write about the transparent spaces of Euro-American theater dance, I refer to "terrifying and deathly representations of whiteness" that are always contested, undermined, and ruptured by the kinds of geographic togetherness to which McKittrick refers. But the dances and their institutional social spaces I analyze here are spaces, nevertheless, that *seek to displace* those contestations into the "seemingly innocent" abstractions (e.g., freedom, equality, and independence) of white ideality: a dreamworld of ideals that absent the perspective of struggle and naturalize that absence by making it seem sensate in dancing bodies.

### Analyzing Choreographic Space

To explore theater dance cultures in such a way that might unearth the perspectives of struggle absented within them, I develop a materialist method for analyzing choreographic space. As would befit a study focused on space, this analysis grows around five interrelated spheres of differing scale, developed from languages of space offered by Lefebvre, Bourdieu, Laban, and Bakhtin: social space, field, performance environment, general space, and kinesphere. When the word *space* is used in the following chapters, it refers to any one or any combination of these environments, discussed in an order and with an emphasis most suited to the choreography being explored. Keeping in mind the troubling of idealisms I have established here through readings of McKittrick, Coulthard, and Hartman, a dialectical movement between these spatial spheres is what might enable us to see histories of spatialized violence in "those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned."<sup>71</sup>

Moving from the largest sphere to the smallest, the first environment is the social space in which a choreographic project occurs. In her illuminating reading of Lefebvre, Kwan explains the philosopher's insistent parenthetical positioning of the word "social" with respect to space. This orthographical motif is to be found most famously in what Lefebvre calls the "initial proposition" of *The Production of Space*: "that (social) space is a (social) product."<sup>72</sup> By "placing the word *social* in parentheses," writes Kwan, Lefebvre "indicates that the adjective is not essential, because space and production must be presumed to be social at the outset."<sup>73</sup> Indeed, the parentheses serve to avert a tautological phrasing for space is always already social. However, the term without parentheses—social space—serves a distinct purpose in Lefebvre's study and my own. Different from "(social) space," which asserts the already social nature of any kind of spatial presence, Lefebvre uses the term "social space" to describe the geohistorical context both produced by and grounding social practice. Within the scope of my book, social space might refer to a nationally delimited society under the aegis of a dominant political program (the social space of late nineteenth-century imperial Russia, for example) or a local culture aspiring toward a particular social order (the social space of Black Mountain College in rural North Carolina during the 1940s–50s, for instance). "Social space," maintains Lefebvre, is both "the outcome of a sequence and set of operations" and "subsumes things produced and encompasses their interrelationships."<sup>74</sup> By this logic of interrelation, practices such as theater dance can no longer be separated for analysis into an isolated territory of practice ("artistic" as opposed to "economic"). Instead, they are "traversed by myriad currents" of activity with which they share a broader social space, implying that artistic practices such as theater dance are also cultural practices, which are also economic practices, and so on.<sup>75</sup>

The second environment, tightening the scope of the first but emphasizing its historical emergence, is described in Bourdieu's concept of *champ* or field. Bourdieu's sociology of art guards against forms of criticism that proceed as if aesthetics stood apart from social life, and insists on understanding "works of art as a manifestation of the field as a whole, in which all the powers of the field, and all the determinisms inherent in its structure and functioning, are concentrated."<sup>76</sup> Theater dance, then, should be understood as taking place within one or more overlapping fields: an arena for a given practice shaped over time by its various cultures, which gives institutional contours to this practice (sets its typical possibilities and distributes its resources) and plots cultural coordinates according to which those who engage with it may take up relational positions.<sup>77</sup> An example in this book is the field of state-sponsored ballet in imperial Russia, contoured geographically around the imperial theaters of Saint Petersburg and Moscow and historically around the founding of the Imperial Ballet School in 1738 and the fall of the czarist regime in 1917. It is important to note that while this "field" calls attention to the material conditions of art, its associated concept of *habitus* carves a place

for the personal among them. Defined by Bourdieu as a “socialized subjectivity,” *habitus* makes it possible to understand a choreographer’s artistic decisions as neither “purely” aesthetic or personal ones nor as mechanistic responses to a set of objective conditions.<sup>78</sup> Artistic decisions are understood instead as creative and subjective interpretations of the restricted possibilities offered by the field, but oriented through both the intersecting social, economic, racialized, gendered positions occupied by the artist and their personal (but never asocial) dispositions. These contributing factors should be thought of together (they are, after all, not separate) as the energies and circumstances that shape and are shaped by the spatial aesthetics of any choreographic work.

The third spatial sphere involved in my analysis is the physical performance environment where dance takes place. Such spaces are represented in any built or nonbuilt environment with which choreography is made and performed, with examples here including the Mariinsky Theatre of Saint Petersburg, the slopes of a Swiss mountain, and the dining room at Black Mountain College. Any of such spaces may be examined for the way their physical configurations participate in choreographic processes. Helpful here is a definition of architecture offered by Lukasz Stanek in his reading of Lefebvre’s *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment* (1973). As Stanek explains, Lefebvre understands architecture “not just as a ‘projection’ of social relationships on the territory, but also as a medium by which the place of particular groups is defined, distinguished, and manifested within the social totality.”<sup>79</sup> Where architecture is not a built reflection of society but a means of organizing the moving relations through which society is made, choreography is the organization of that movement itself, meaning that theater dance is always in choreographic *coproduction* with its performance environments.<sup>80</sup> According to this approach, when a choreographer inhabits a building as their working environment, they do not work within an inert and neutral structure but with a work that has been conceived, constructed, and used, a history of use into which they now intervene. Any kind of space and not just those constructed physically can be viewed through the lens of this theory because, according to Lefebvre, any space traversed or even perceived by people (the space of the “natural” world, for instance) is in a sense modified by them, a problem complicated by indigenous epistemologies and their resistance to settler-colonial conceptions of land, as I discuss in chapters 2 and 4.<sup>81</sup>

The final two environments belong primarily to the spheres of dancing bodies and as such are entangled with racial projects of “the human.” The penultimate one is what Laban has termed “general space,” describing the space through which bodies move when they travel from place to place, and the final, smallest sphere is what he has termed the *kinesphere*.<sup>82</sup> The latter term describes “the sphere around the body whose periphery can be reached by easily extended limb,” transported with a performer as they travel through general space.<sup>83</sup> The shaping of the kinesphere may take place through

movements performed by limbs, chin, eyes, breath, and so on, or it may reside in the postural animations of a given movement technique. The arrival of bodies onto the scene of this spatial analysis not only opens the way for understanding how seemingly innocent space-forms are tied into the racial project of humanness, as I shall explore particularly in relation to Laban's theoretical work itself, but also emphasizes a crucial aspect of the Lefebvrian conception of space: that time is not expelled from the equation and neither is historical contingency nor political rupture.

Lefebvre explains that the study of space should not neglect life lived through the body because bodily phenomena “prefigure the layers of social space and their interconnections.”<sup>84</sup> Kwan takes up this idea for dance analysis, writing that “bodies choreograph space; space choreographs bodies.”<sup>85</sup> By placing bodies at the heart of the matter, both Lefebvre and Kwan insist that space is generated through practice and thus, as Stanek states, is “ephemeral, buoyant, temporary, mobile.”<sup>86</sup> While certain political cultures may pursue the stasis to which McKittrick refers when she writes about the transparent space of European cartographies, neither bodies nor spaces ossify but are constantly involved in the ongoing remaking of society. This is McKittrick's “alterability.” Likewise, Lefebvre's handling of space not only shows how “*the space of a (social) order is hidden in the order of space,*” an aphorism useful for unveiling the perspective of struggle hidden inside ideal spatial forms.<sup>87</sup> But also his claim that social space is prefigured by the action of bodies takes account of its aliveness, which in turn allows him to emphasize the “fissures, cracks, faults, and weaknesses, in other words, contradictions” investing historical periods, social orders, and the spaces through which they manifest.<sup>88</sup> By paying attention to bodily practice's exposure of the fissures and contradictions investing the spatial idealisms of Euro-American theater dance, we might unveil the processes through which the constitutive hierarchies of spatial terror are made to seem natural in the seemingly innocent moves of dancers.

Finally, my approach to moving dialectically across these five spheres finds a helpful navigating device in Bakhtin's term “chronotope.”<sup>89</sup> Working through the spaces in, of, and around literary texts, Bakhtin explains that environments imagined by artworks (chronotopes *in* a work), the artistic forms through which those imaginings take shape (their chronotopic texture), as well as social environments where works are located (the shifting chronotopes *of* a work), are all “indissolubly united in a single but complex event that we might call the work in the totality of all its events.”<sup>90</sup> Artworks are (entanglements of) timespaces transpiring in the actual world and not separately from it. Never segregating the aesthetic “inside” of an artwork from its social “outside,” Bakhtin's indissoluble chronotopes permit us to glimpse both the social nature of aesthetics and the aesthetic nature of the social. Social space, field, performance environment, general space, and kine-sphere are all types of chronotope existing indissolubly in any choreographic

work. This suggests why the study of space is especially important for a materialist study of choreography. It facilitates a conceptual movement between the social and the aesthetic, between geohistorical contexts and dancing bodies, and an understanding of how these scales of spatial production are both inseparable and full of fissures and contradictions through which material struggle can be glimpsed beneath them and, by extension for this project, danced white idealities located in their violent social ground. My analytical approach is finally made possible, then, by Shevtsova's pivotal development of Bakhtin's social semiotics for performance analysis, especially as she shows how "performances, while happening, are processes of performing contexts, since the latter are present in them not only in their subject matter . . . but in the very way they are done."<sup>91</sup> Inspired by Shevtsova's approach, my book's studies in choreographic ideality show how theater dance is political not simply in the subjects and identities it makes visible but also by the conflictive material realities concealed in "the very way" it shapes space.

### Studies in Choreographic Ideality

Catalyzing my analytical method in what follows, each of my chapters begins with a zoomed-in spatial study of scenes from the dance productions at the chapter's heart. The small-scale spatial textures of those scenes, which might involve their kinespheric or general-spatial configurations, are then viewed in relation to spatial practices or ideas belonging to those spheres of a larger scale. In each case, principles of spatial organization shared across the dance scenes and their dialoguing nondance choreographies are nominated as sites for the materialization of spatial idealisms, which I argue do the work of naturalizing the absence of Wynter's perspective of struggle. The latter perspective in turn can be invoked via the dialectical spatial analysis I describe above which situates dance works in their conflictive material conditions. By moving between analyses of theater dances, nondance choreographies, and the broader material cultures of space into which they interlace, each chapter shows how choreographic form (the "very way" dance spaces are organized) is always doing the work of bringing contexts into being which means also, in the case of white dance utopianisms, absencing the dispossessive realities through which those contexts are materially configured.

Chapter 1 places Petipa's *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890) in dialogue with imperial Saint Petersburg practices of material urban imagination (e.g., architecture, cartography, and city portraiture) to explore fantasies of spatial monument with which the imperial court naturalized its territorial supremacy and assuaged anxieties about the mortality of its political power. Chapter 2 reads Martha Graham's *Frontier* (1935) in the light of the possessive spatial imaginaries of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, a liberal legislation concerning indigenous land claims, and Balanchine's *Agon* (1957) in relation

to corporate rhetorics of urban regeneration authorizing the depopulation of Lincoln Square (1955–66), exploring both dances for their idealizations of acquisition, dispossession, and racialized population management. Chapter 3 explores Laban’s work at Monte Verità, a utopian colony in southern Switzerland, excavating from his theorization of bodies and crystals (1913–26) a systematic “naturalness” commensurate with reactionary, central European discourses of corporeality. The chapter then examines Schlemmer’s dance writings, Bauhaus murals (1923), and *The Triadic Ballet* (1916/1922) as cyborg geometries unacceptable to growing fascist views of the human. Chapter 4 focuses on Cunningham’s early residencies (1948–53) at Black Mountain College, understanding his dance there to be part of the college’s utopian cultures of residency and arguing that these choreographies figured spatial democracy as the guarantor of a white-settler conception of the land of the free.

While each chapter deals with practices of continental European and North American theater dance modernism, the coda picks up a thread of Cunningham’s legacy and transports the final thoughts of the book to twenty-first-century London in a short study of Charmatz’s creation of a disco dancefloor in Tate Modern as part of his *If Tate Modern was Musée de la danse?* (2015). Gesturing to the broader range of the book’s spatial analytic, this final analysis takes the contemporary disco as a site in which to weigh optimistic claims about the emancipatory potential of Charmatz’s experimentalism against the problems it yields in a context of imperial amnesia and institutional unaccountability. This final study in choreographic ideality then gives way to the book’s conclusion, which resolves the preceding arguments with some notes toward the potential hopefulness of a critical negativity in dance research: the analytical attitude I have framed in this introduction, attuned not to how dance improves experiences of living but to how dance’s exuberant modeling of certain forms of life might provide cover for life-negating practices.

I choose these artistic examples to form the spine of my book for two reasons. First, each are majorly recognized forms of theater dance, all grounded in white utopianisms declaring hopeful forms of social relation—be it harmonic, liberatory, democratic, authentic, individuated, or anarchic. Each offers, then, the kinds of “seemingly innocent” and widely recognized spatial gestures with which so many dancers, dance audiences, and dance critics (myself included) have found dance to be a site of potential revelation or repair—discoveries I hope to unsettle with this book’s explorations. Second, all are examples where dance steps away from, complicates, or minimizes its potential for involvement with narrative or mimesis, Petipa’s case being the major exception.<sup>92</sup> Such dances are illuminating for my theoretical project because they make explicit the value of locating the political nature of choreography in spatial form. Hewitt suggests that “abstract or nonfigurative art” makes impossible the serviceability of a crude analytical Marxism—that

which sees in art a superstructural reflection of society—because such art bears no clear thematic engagement with the social world, consisting “only” in form.<sup>93</sup> *Dancing on Violent Ground* then turns repeatedly to this kind of dance to show that in and through something eminently formal—space—social situations are manifested and, more importantly for the specific examples considered here, that spatial ideas concerning harmonic, liberatory, democratic, authentic, individuated, or anarchic forms of social relation can come to conceal the racialized violence that grounds them.

With these studies in choreographic ideality, I hope to bring to conversations about Euro-American theater dance—a broad field with which my examples have become foundationally synonymous—a critical negativity for understanding how harmonic and progressive dance modernisms are involved in histories of spatial dominion and dispossession. This analytical attitude is not intended to censure the choreographers whose work has inspired it nor does it dismiss the substance or daring of the choreographic imaginings created by each. As I have stated above, this book is about the perspectives of struggle absented from hopeful choreographies and so invites those involved in fields of dance and performance to challenge ourselves, as Gilmore asks of geographers, in our description of what we have seen. The people who compose dance, the people who dance, and the people who are shown dance across the book’s examples are all engaged in acts of spatial imagination that negate the fissures, conflicts, and ruptures of their social chronotope and produce dance as projection, aspiration, and simulation of that world perfected in some way. This is why, crucially, when the artists considered here create works dissimulating their choreographic culture’s violent ground, it is not because they embark on a deliberate act of subterfuge or neglect but because they act in the broader fields of imperial, settler-colonial, or white liberal utopianisms-supremacies where the exposure of such conflict is impermissible. This book, then, is based in the understanding that the “ideal” is a register bound always with conflict and so it shows how utopian acts of choreographic imagination depend on yet invisibilize forms of struggle over space.

Taking these utopian acts in the order they are explored in what follows, such is the case in Russian imperial classicism’s occlusion—via the art of the monument—of the laboring and subjugated populations with which the construction of Saint Petersburg’s landscapes and Russia’s imperial expansion were underwritten; Graham’s erasure of indigenous pasts and futures from her staging of frontier space as a settler-colonial fantasy of white feminine agency; Balanchine’s choreography of a resplendent urban expanse in a site from which economically and racially precarious New Yorkers have had to be cleared (and that clearance rhetorically erased); Laban’s protoeugenicist evacuation from his crystalline human of any kinetically pollutant element; the destruction of Schlemmer’s murals by a regime that could not make room for his plastic, combinatory conception of the human; the way

Cunningham's images of communal autonomy obfuscate the histories of racial violence threaded into liberal celebrations of the individual; and the expungement of colonial histories from Charmatz's anti-institutional interventions into metropolitan institutions of display. I gesture in this book toward these impermissible elements; indeed, it is those elements I hope to center. Following McKittrick's characterization of Fanon's spatial thought, *Dancing on Violent Ground* ultimately stakes two proposals. First, I contend that "sites of subjugation and loss, dispossession, and violence [are] implicit, rather than marginal, to [the] sociospatial order" of even the most hopeful choreographies so long as these are built on the material past and present of imperial, colonial, and white liberal regimes of power. And second, it is the work of dance scholarship not only to show how dance can and does contest such regimes but also to dig into the material beneath of choreographies proclaiming better forms of relationality, to disclose "the violence of the human landscape" so often concealed under exuberant acts of dance.<sup>94</sup>