

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in
Performance Research on 09/03/21, available online:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13528165.2020.1868843>

Diffractional temporalities: Trajal Harrell's other dance histories

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According to Svetlana Boym (2010), freedom is to be imagined as the space of 'what if', a liminal zone rife with potentialities, a way of thinking that engages both our cultural memory and our imagination and reveals the multiple synergies between the individual and the world. In a cross-cultural journey traversing epochs, from antiquity to the present day, as well as artistic fields, aesthetic paradigms and political landscapes, in Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea Boym reimagines freedom as 'cocreation', as 'adventure', as a space of desire, as the improbable 'possibility of a new ethics' (2010: 10) founded on the heterogeneity and 'interconnectedness' of the human condition – 'beyond the opposition between nature and culture, culture and civilization, or global and local' (2010: 12). It is Boym's contention that the paradoxes of freedom are best expressed in experimental art, the epitome of adventure, of strangeness and improbability – of the 'what if' that creates the conditions for the unprecedented to be entertained as possible.

This article engages with American choreographer Trajal Harrell's critical and creative reinvention of the relationship between performed histories, presents and futures in a series of works that unsettle the fixity of historical structures. It reflects on how Harrell's dances attend to the playful yet profoundly destabilizing question of the 'what ifs' of history, positing that, by engaging with the practice of experimentation, his works open up a vulnerable yet responsive space for rethinking the world – both inside and beyond performance. In this article, I engage with how his work could be said – borrowing Boym's words (2010: 11) – to be articulated through 'a realm of action and storytelling that speaks of fragility and finitude but also grants an extensive duration to the world beyond individual life-span or even the life-span of several generations'. I wish to consider what it might mean for contemporary choreography to think 'what if', to thread on border zones, to embrace improbable possibilities, to inhabit the space of the forgotten, of the written-out, and offer it through an aesthetico-political experience to the audience. Ultimately, I ask: what different and differing choreographies might emerge from a movement-based

practice that acknowledges the potentialities of uncertainty and understands plurality, alterity and otherness as constitutive of human experience? Can dance become 'a horizon from which the world can be reimagined' (Boym 2010: 4), possibilities re-envisioned, distinctions redrawn?

While invoking Boym (2010: 10) in my engagement with Harrell's reimagining of accepted temporalities as an 'ethics of worldliness', in this article I wish to work specifically with the new materialist concept of diffraction to interrogate how his performances expose questions of class-, race- and gender-related privilege by opening up to indeterminacy and allowing difference to emerge performatively in the encounter between memory and desire. I propose that, through the idea of diffraction, Harrell's imaginative and political project of using 'voguing as a theoretical lens' to complicate the accepted history of contemporary dance (Harrell in Velasco 2014) can be understood as a worlding practice: a way of questioning 'habitual temporalities and modes of being' (Palmer and Hunter 2018), where the world is 'the context or background against which particular things show up and take on significance' (Anderson and Harrison 2010: 8) – that is, not a static system of configurations, but rather a place-time where particular articulations occur that shape specific sets of relations of the many that are possible.

In the following paragraphs, I attend to the ways in which Harrell's work engages with the political and ethical possibilities of imagination; it is here that I highlight a convergence between his experimental performance practice and Donna Haraway's (1997) and Karen Barad's (2007) idea of diffraction as a method for recording and accounting for interferences, patterns of difference and entanglements of phenomena. Unlike reflection, which through mirroring creates doubles that replicate or distort an original, diffraction produces and responds to difference. It thus becomes both a 'metaphor' (Barad 2007: 71) and a methodological model for an ethico-onto-epistemology that conceives of, attends to and practises the world's differing mechanisms (Thiele 2014). As others have already written about Harrell, his 'choreography does not deal with the possibility or inability to control historical material, but instead questions established temporalities or even newly creates them' (Giersdorf 2018: 544). In this sense, in reimagining dance's past, Harrell's work

diffracts temporalities, affirming and practising the possibility of other histories and of thinking history differently.

My focus is Harrell's Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church series, which encompasses seven works, identified by size, from extra-small to extra-large, produced between 2009 and 2017, all of which explore the idea of an imaginary encounter between New York's post-Cunningham choreographers and the voguing tradition. Harrell's starting point for this series is the question: 'What would have happened in 1963 if someone from the voguing ball scene in Harlem had come downtown to perform alongside the early postmoderns at Judson Church?' (Harrell n.d.). Harrell's historical references are two contemporaneous yet socially, culturally and aesthetically separate practices: on the one hand is the predominantly white, avant-garde collective of dancers and artists known as Judson Dance Theater (from the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, Lower Manhattan, where they performed), who looked at minimalist art to rethink choreographic principles towards the democratization of dance movement; on the other hand is the underground ball culture of the queer African-American and Hispanic-American vogue Houses of Harlem, Upper Manhattan. Openly referencing the title of Jennie Livingston's 1990 film documentary Paris Is Burning about New York's black and Latino drag-ball culture, Harrell's series began as an attempt to deal with the question of 'why Judson was an accepted part of dance history and voguing wasn't' (Boynton 2012). As a queer artist of colour, Harrell engages with crucial questions surrounding the politics of identity and of the construction of history. His works are performative and imaginative enactments of an ethical responsibility to rethink dominant cultural and historical discourses.

The series as a whole also plays with and diffracts the direction of the historical reinvention, as in the case of Twenty Looks or Judson Church is Ringing in Harlem (M2M), where the proposition is inverted and the work asks: 'What would have happened if one of the early postmoderns from Judson Church had gone uptown to perform in the voguing ballroom scene in Harlem?' (Harrell n.d.). Furthermore, as a series, the work engages with the method of diffraction by practising a different idea of time: not only does it stretch and multiply time over the several years of its development, but it also, as DeFrantz (2016: 715) writes, 'confirms a furtive,

impossible to capture, fugitive nature of its own being, as a work that continues to arrive after ten years of development without ever restricting itself to a set, preferred iteration'. Travelling through and often returning to and revisiting its iterations (XS, S, M, Jr., L, Made-to-Measure and XL), the series both affirms and undermines possible beginnings and possible arrivals, constantly reshuffling and reassigning value to their relative positions – but also, more fundamentally, questioning the very ideas of a starting point and a conclusion. The works themselves often kick off with an address that undermines their own opening, with introductions that anticipate a forthcoming beginning, while the performances, already underway, unfold through iterative back-and-forths that sabotage conventional temporal parameters and expectations. In a letter to Harrell, André Lepecki (2017: 96) observes that Harrell's work destabilizes the traditional notion of a progressive, irreversible direction of time:

your work troubles for sure the one way street set by the temporal arrow that, as physics teaches us, points only unidirectionally. your work scrambles that arrow, and its universal law; your work instantiates a local autonomy for history's arrow, making possible to move across a field of time, rather than a timeline.

Hence Harrell's work acknowledges time as a 'field', rather than a line, 'redirect[ing] history', as Lepecki puts it, or rather diffracting it, as I suggest – that is, not simply embracing (a) new direction(s), but attending to interference patterns. I propose to read his approach to history as applying what Haraway (1997: 273) calls 'another kind of critical consciousness', a diffracting lens that changes what matters, how meanings are made.

In rearranging what matters, the work also rethinks how things matter by reimagining forms of presence and visibility. Intervening in the dichotomy between presence and absence, Harrell's works inhabit a space that unsettles the hierarchy between transparency and opacity (Glissant 1997) and between visibility and invisibility (Moten 2003). There is little or no publicly available video documentation of the performances and this lack of lasting records adds to the 'fugitive' nature of the works DeFrantz has remarked on, with reference to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's (2013) political thought and their notions of the 'undercommons', of 'fugitive planning' and of black social life. This includes cases in which performances are

explicitly presented as avoiding capture. For instance, the promotional material for the (XS) solo states:

The work is performed primarily in the dark. No documentation of the work exists and thus this work has been created to travel by word of mouth. If you would like the contact of another programmer or professional who has seen it, we would be glad to provide this information. (ArtHappens 2020)

The choice of darkness, of slippery in-betweenness, is a form of withholding, of subversion, of mobilizing the undercommons: in Moten's words, it 'achieve[s] a kind of dislocation and a kind of dispersion – and, therefore, it claims a certain mobility' (Harney and Moten 2013: 149). The work may or may not exist. Its ontology is uncertain, present/absent, visible/invisible – down to its last iteration, the (XL) version of it, which does exist, but might have ended up not happening. Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church (XL) is a publication dressed up as an issue of Vogue. It is Vogue but it is not Vogue. It features articles, images (of performances, underground voguing, installations, fashion), biographies of contributors, interviews, scanned pages from sources, essays in English, French or Bulgarian. In Harrell's (2017: 18) words, it is 'transformation', 'a performance', 'an art object', 'a work of art'. In the 'letter from the editor' which, as in a magazine issue, opens the publication, Harrell (2017: 18) writes: 'I had convinced myself that (XL) did not really have to happen'. On one level, the work marks the 'closure' of the series; on another level, its completion is negated by the 'unfinished touches', as Harrell calls them, it is inscribed with – which are also unfinishing touches, diffracting narratives, differing mechanisms: for example, the list of contributors is entitled 'not all contributors' (Harrell 2017: 26--34), a label that unlabels it as a list, and one of the essays (Schürmann and Le Coutour 2017) is marked by visible edits and annotations. In the interviews, memories intersect and blur, answers become questions, interference being the mode through which the past is invoked:

ELI: did u know about the vogue scene? u knew somebody who knew about it?

TRAJAL: i remembered asking him and him telling me about you. i thought you were the one who knew. I thought i had contacted you

E: so how did we get to learn where it was happening?

T: i thought you found out about these kiki balls uptown in harlem

E: hahahahah i guess we both forgot how it happened... but maybe u have better memory than me – mine is bad.

T: mine is awful

E: damn i thought u knew! (Sudbrack and Harrell 2017: 53)

[[figure1]]

Memories appear and disappear, interventions are made public and withheld, works exist and don't exist. This gesturing towards invisibility (and its entanglement with its alternatives) is not only a political critique of traditional notions of the work of art, but also specifically a drawing attention to racial politics – invisibility being a 'racial mark', the condition of being 'recognized as the unrecognizable' (Moten 2003: 68). As an artist who, in DeFrantz's (2016: 714) words, 'often explores a failure of performance to stabilize presence, and especially black modes of being', Harrell complicates accepted categories of presence, engaging with in/visibility and with forms of opacity – which, as Édouard Glissant (1997: 191) argues, is not 'obscurity ... accompanied by exclusion', but rather allows for difference and requires a movement 'toward entanglement'.

While traditional epistemologies fail to grasp how such opposites might coexist, the diffractive approach of Barad's (2007) agential realism offers a model for the understanding of the material-discursive entanglement of seemingly opposing conditions. Through the lens of the new materialist notion of diffraction, which troubles the idea of the absolute separation of entities and illuminates patterns of difference and relationality across phenomena, the concept of ethico-political im/possibilities^{[note]1} can be entertained, as matter and discourse are seen as entangled and produced by shifting relations – of power, of bodies, of identities. This in turn supports a rethinking of how connections are configured, in terms of both agential possibilities and responsibilities, with consequences for how politics and ethics are conceptualized.

The small (S) version in the series is a solo performed by Harrell that deals with the socio-historical impossibility of this encounter by overlapping seemingly opposing semantic and aesthetic frameworks.^{[note]2} The Judson Church choreographers' focus on everyday gesture, task-like activity, self-referentiality and self-proclaimed neutrality is put in dialogue with the exaggerated moves and virtuosic theatricality of

the black and Latino dance halls' competitive balls, satirically imitative of the glamour of the fashion world and of the extravagance of pop culture. By merging two contemporary yet opposed social contexts and performance paradigms, Harrell's work interrogates the possibilities that such concurrence creates. Through subtle shifts in body language and repeated, yet minimal, changes of costume, all done discreetly whilst in plain sight, in the (S) solo Harrell walks up and down a runway in the centre of the stage presenting twenty different 'looks' as listed in the evening's programme. Twisting traditional ball categories by intersecting the subversive performativity of drag walks with the everydayness and minimalism of early postmodern choreography, he performs the West Coast Preppy School Boy, followed by the East Coast Preppy School Boy, the Old School Post-Modern, the American Casual Sport, the Sporty Contemporary, the Legendary or the Legendary with a Twist, among others. Shirts and ties alternate with t-shirts and aprons, sport jackets with blazers, shorts with chinos, trainers with flip flops. The unfolding of these different looks and personas, whose physicalities are both distinctive and easily blurred into each other, becomes a process of suffusing relations and producing indeterminacy – a process of diffracting images from two contemporaneous historical contexts and the audience's perceptions of their boundaries and alternative possibilities. The predominantly white, middle-class, educated and 'apolitical' (DeFrantz 2016: 715) project of the Judson Church artists is entangled with the poorer, African-American and Latino-American rival houses of voguing and drag culture. The encounter between Downtown and Uptown Manhattan is staged both as a historical impossibility and as an ethical imperative to reimagine history.

[{figure2}]

Harrell's solo inhabits the plane of imagination to open a space of possibilities that questions the acceptance of rehearsed socio-historical categories, namely the notions of democracy and neutrality and unambiguous understandings of class, race and gender. On one level, this destabilization is articulated through a corporeal rethinking of the two performance paradigms that are made to intersect. Harrell 'de-drags and re-drags' voguing, tones down its commanding performance quality, 'distill[s it...] through deceleration' (Osterweis 2017: 104, 100). The fast-paced walks and fierce gestures of competitive voguing are here rendered through a slower pace

and subtler looks by intersecting these modalities with the task-like movement and the use of stillness of the Judson Church performances. On another level, the diffraction of these categories operates through the framing of the work. The premise of the work is an 'imagined possibility', as Harrell explains in his customary live introduction to shows in the series:³ it 'constitutes a space of possibilities that have been real as possibilities' (Schürmann and Le Coutour 2017: 179) and actualizes them through performance – through theatre, through play, through imagination: 'the opened space is a space of desire, a space where a possibility becomes real with great strength, an option missing from the (other) reality of daily life' (Schürmann and Le Coutour 2017: 183). Tavia Nyong'o (2017: 257) calls it 'afrofabulation in motion', a choreographic proposition for a revised history that attempts to repair what cannot be repaired. Saidiya Hartman's (2007: 100) words come to mind:

Every generation confronts the task of choosing its past. Inheritances are chosen as much as they are passed on. The past depends less on 'what happened then' than on the desires and discontents of the present. Strivings and failures shape the stories we tell. What we recall has as much to do with the terrible things we hope to avoid as with the good life for which we yearn. But when does one decide to stop looking to the past and instead conceive of a new order? When is it time to dream of another country or to embrace other strangers as allies or to make an opening, an overture, where there is none?

Harrell's interrogation of the relationship between histories, presents and futures, extends to the performance's relationship with its audience, in the sense that it presupposes the acknowledgment that an audience is always both real and imagined at the same time. Harrell (n.d.) asks: 'in the distance between who we imagine a work is being performed for and its actual performance for those present, what kind of new relations can be created, adapted, and reassigned between performer(s) and audience?'. As DeFrantz (2016: 715) observes, the 'imagined' audience is 'a white audience willing to contend with black presence within structures of memory typically devoid of racialized consideration'. Nyong'o (2017: 255) compellingly points to the aesthetico-political implications of Harrell's 're-inscription of racial meanings' in a space-time that has traditionally excluded them, confronting contentious questions of social boundaries and cultural appropriation.

I suggest that Harrell's contribution to this practice-discourse is both aesthetico-political and ethico-epistemological. His creative reinvention goes beyond reinserting previously excluded content in an old container. Imagining encounters with possible audiences and defying the parameters that circumscribe them within specific boundaries signals a move away from an understanding of time as a dimension that can hold specific phenomena. In Barad's agential realism, time is not a container or a measure of the duration of events, it does not 'march along as an external parameter' (Barad 2007: 179). Rather, time is 'produced in the making of phenomena. [...T]he "past" and the "future" are iteratively reconfigured and enfolded through one another' (Barad 2007: 383). A similarly diffractive understanding of time is at play in Harrell's works, where, through an imaginative leap, new temporalities are produced that multiply the range of possibilities. Harrell's performances don't simply imagine a new version of history; they imagine a new way of imagining history.

Alongside the composure and contained theatricality of Harrell's performance in (S), there is a distinctive playfulness that points towards a rethinking of the separation between real and imagined. In this space of adventure and imagination, Harrell's solo both acknowledges and defies the boundaries of its performance framework and gestures towards the possibility of understanding and embodying history differently. Of his work, it could be said, with Boym (2010: 16), that 'only through serious play can one experience freedom both as a means and as an end of human existence because freedom is not merely an abstract goal but also an educational experience in shared humanity'.

Semantic and perceptive frameworks intersect in Harrell's work, uncovering the entangled nature of presentation and/as representation, of theatre and/as play, of the past as never simply archive but always (re)lived in a dilated, multiple now. Through a diffractive process that does not distinguish between past and present, real and imagined, but rather acknowledges their intra-activity, Harrell's work functions as an 'agential cut' – what Barad (2003: 815) explains as a 'local resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy' – in that it provides a glimpse, a momentary legibility, of the stratified, porous and changeable narratives of the physical and symbolic looks and social personas we are and wear. A way of

knowing diffractively, agential cuts are explorations of phenomena that, without undoing their entanglements, make their values and relations visible. Differently from Cartesian cuts, which assume discourse and matter, subject and object as inherently distinct, agential cuts only temporarily separate the features and specificities of a phenomenon while contextually revealing their interrelations. Like Barad's agential cut, which, 'because of the "local" determinacy it enacts, ... enables a description in terms of mixtures, without destroying the entanglement' (Barad 2007: 348), Harrell's Twenty Looks series exposes the interrelatedness of historical proximity and social separatedness of two distinct yet entangled dance phenomena, making visible their otherwise invisible relations and mobilizing the possibility of other dance histories. His performances engage with differences by both blurring them and reaffirming them; in doing so, they interrogate the material-discursive conditions that shape historical readings of the past, current understandings of the present and ethical imaginings of the future.

Notes

1 Elsewhere (Perazzo Domm 2019), working with Barad's notions of intra-action and diffraction, I have written about choreographies that attend to the ethical and political im/possibilities of the present and envision alternative understandings of the world.

2 I first saw the piece when it was presented in London in June 2016 at Sadler's Wells Lilian Baylis studio. In the summer of 2017, a large retrospective was organized by Barbican Art Gallery as part of the performance exhibition 'Hoochie Koochie', 20 July – 13 August 2017 (Barbican Centre 2017).

3 This was mentioned, for instance, in Harrell's introduction to Judson Church is Ringing in Harlem (M2M), Barbican Art Gallery, London, 29 July 2017.

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Captions

Figure 1. Front cover of *Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church (XL) / The Publication*. Courtesy of Trajal Harrell.

Figure 2. Trajal Harrell in *Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church (S)*. Photo Karl Rabe, courtesy of Trajal Harrell.