

**Who Tells the Story?:  
Andy Blankenbuehler's Choreography and the Ensemble Body on Broadway**

by

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Scholarship in the field of musical theatre has primarily focused on historical contexts of productions as well as biographies of composers, lyricists, directors, choreographers, and performers. Although some choreographer biographies point to concepts of dance style, there is much left to be said on how dance functions within a musical, moreover how the chorus/ensemble functions within a musical. In my project, I investigate the work of choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler and how his methodology has arguably augmented the potential of the ensemble in a production. Following a historiographical analysis of the chorus's development in concert with the changes in dance aesthetics and musical theatre, my piece specifically looks at Blankenbuehler's work on the productions *In the Heights* (Off-Broadway, 2007; Broadway, 2008), *Bring it On: the Musical* (Broadway, 2012), and *Hamilton* (The Public, 2015; Broadway, 2016). I analyze Blankenbuehler's specific choreographic scores for numbers within these productions in order to assess how he uniquely positions the ensemble as the lens by which an audience is to understand a musical show. Additionally, I consider how his Blankenbuehlerized-dance style frames the individual bodies within the ensemble to reveal a principal character's psychology, tell a piece of the story, express an unspoken aspect of the libretto, transition to another scene, allow character's to express themselves, present ideas metaphorically or abstractly, perform spectacle, connect the audience to an identifiable human experience, and activate a show's sociological

metanarrative. Ultimately, I argue for a new methodology that identifies the individual ensemble body as being a vital component for an audience's comprehension of these productions.

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## Preface

In the early stages of this project, I cast a wide net amongst the Broadway industry to see what performers I could get in touch with that had worked with Andy Blankenbuehler. Little did I know my inquiries would make their way to Andy himself. Just four hours after defending my Prospectus I received an email, “hello, andy blankenbuehler here.” Andy, I cannot thank you enough for reaching out to me and transforming my project in a way I could have never imagined. Your invitation to observe the audition process of *Only Gold* in New York was personally life changing. Watching you create and jamming about your process opened fundamental doors for my exploration—not to mention, it was a complete dream come true.

To Stephanie Klemons and her executive assistant Brandon Schneider, thank you both for working so diligently to make time for phone calls with me during your hectic schedules. I will also be forever appreciative for the opportunity to observe you in rehearsals for the Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera’s production of *Rock of Ages*. To Morgan Marcell, Betsy Struxness, Shonica Gooden, Antwan Bethea, and all of the other incredible performers who generously took the time to answer my questions and shed light on the critical work of the ensemble bodies on Broadway, from the bottom of my heart, thank you.

I also owe a debt to Deborah Kaufman, founder of Words on Dance, for inviting me to attend the talk featuring Andy Blankenbuehler and Sarah L. Kaufman. Being able to witness Andy explain his philosophies while demonstrating choreography with performers—followed by more wonderful conversation—took my project to the next level. Without Words on Dance the notion of the ensemble as the lens of a piece may not have been nearly as clear.

Additionally, I would like to express my deepest and sincerest gratitude to Cynthia Croot, Kathleen George, and Cindy García for serving on my committee. This project would not have been possible without your patience, guidance, and support. Each of your unique perspectives on our field have helped foster and bolster my scholarship in profound ways.

Words cannot begin to express how indebted I am to my advisor, Michelle Granshaw. Your dedication, positive energy, and extraordinary capacity for knowledge is absolutely inspiring. Thank you for perpetually challenging me to consider different angles, possibilities, and philosophies. Furthermore, I am eternally grateful for your constant encouragement to trust and uplift my own voice in my work.

Finally, to my friends and family, I would not be where I am today without your unwavering compassion. From writing dates to movie nights, yoga to camp fires, spur of the moment trips to video chats, my friends have kept my joy burning bright, even in the darkest of times. There are not enough words in the world to properly thank you all. Writing this section may be more difficult than writing this entire project—something I never thought possible. Michael, thank you for being so incredibly patient and pushing me to keep going. To my family, Grandma Jane, Nona, Papa, Pap, Gram, Andrew, Mom, and Dad, you have each given me more than I will ever know, more than I can ever thank you. You are my rock. I'll love you forever and always.

## 1.0 Introduction

There are very few times when I really want the audience to look at dance...Dance is just meant to be a framing device that matches emotionally what I want the audience to feel.

—Blankenbuehler, *Hamilton: the Revolution*

The ensemble MUST be the lens of the piece. The ensemble MUST focus the principal storyline so that no matter where your eye goes in the show, you see refracted back what the principal is going through.

—Blankenbuehler, “Fresh Steps”

In 2016, Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter put together *Hamilton: the Revolution*, “the complete libretto of the Broadway musical with a true account of its creation, and concise remarks on hip-hop, the power of stories, and the new America.”<sup>1</sup> *Hamilton* is an entirely sung-through musical. Consequently, the musical is nearly danced-through. In the chapter “On ‘Non-Stop,’ both The Song and The Way of Life, as Manifest by Andy Blankenbuehler and the Public Theater’s Props Department,” Miranda and McCarter point out:

When *In the Heights* came around, [Andy] knew he had to choreograph the salsa-and-hip-hop show, even though—as he admitted to Tommy [Kail] and Jeffrey [Sellers]—he didn’t know anything about salsa or hip-hop. They thought he had a knack for telling stories, so they hired him anyway. To prepare for the show, he moved to Los Angeles, took four hip-hop classes a day, soaked up the rhythm of salsa, and devised a hybrid style of his own. It won him a Tony Award.

For *Hamilton*, he needed another new vocabulary. Beyond several varieties of hip-hop dance, you can see little traces of Gene Kelly and Justin Timberlake in the result. When Andy himself dances it, you see a lot of Jerome Robbins. But the movement of *Hamilton*, in its totality, reaches far beyond conventional dance steps, of any tradition. Andy devised a language of what he calls ‘stylized heightened

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<sup>1</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: the Revolution: Being the Complete Libretto of the Broadway Musical, with a True Account of Its Creation, and Concise Remarks on Hip-Hop, the Power of Stories, and the New America*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., ed. Lin-Manuel, Miranda, and Jeremy McCarter (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 119.

gesture.’ It includes everything from the way a chair is moved, to how a shoulder pops, to the bows at the curtain call.<sup>2</sup>

It is without doubt that Blankenbuehler’s utilization of a hybrid dance style, merging jazz, ballet, hip-hop, and stylized pedestrian gesture, has been pivotal to his success. However, it is how his choreography engages and actuates specific bodies on stage that is particularly noteworthy.

In musical theatre, dance is one of the acknowledged languages for expression. The audience enters the theatre, suspending their disbelief and accepting that the characters in a musical will use song, speech, and in many cases, dance to communicate dialogue, feelings, thoughts, and abstract ideas. Therefore, when these moments occur, it is as if the character is completing these movements for the first time in real-time. Still, creative and rehearsal processes for these performers occur before an audience sees a production. An audience is not ignorant to this concept causing it to operate alongside the character’s existence in the world of the show. How far does a *performer’s* body/mind give way to suspensions of disbelief to become their *character’s* body/mind? André Lepecki argues, “Choreography demands a yielding to commanding voices of masters (living and dead), it demands submitting body and desire to disciplining regimes (anatomical, dietary, gender, racial), all for the perfect fulfillment of a transcendental and preordained set of steps, postures, and gestures that nevertheless must appear ‘spontaneous.’”<sup>3</sup> When the performer yields to the instruction of their director or choreographer, do they relinquish any consciousness of personal identity to submit their body to the character or the choreography?

Susan Leigh Foster identifies two essential ideas when discussing the body in relation to dance: the notions of the body’s autonomy and interiority as well as the body’s virtuosity. The first

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>3</sup> André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9.

suggests the ability to produce feelings and reproduce those feelings for a viewer. The latter is the mastery of a technique, the capacity to exhibit the choreographer's vision. As scientific developments began to increase since the codification of ballet in the 1600s, dance practitioners tested the limits of the body's capabilities; thus, the importance of virtuosity began to triumph over autonomy and interiority. Foster points out that the dancing body became "detached from its social moorings and objectified through scientific investigation."<sup>4</sup> The operative word here is "detached." If the dancing body has indeed been detached from any previously cultivated sense of self in favor of virtuosity, the identifications associated with that body have arguably not disappeared. Social conscriptions on the body can be ignored, but they cannot be escaped.

Furthermore, the *performativity* of a body can be ignored, but it cannot be escaped. According to Dennis Waskul and Phillip Vannini's conceptions of bodily impression, "From a dramaturgical perspective, bodies are *necessarily* performative—which is to say that bodies are always in motion and, hence, a perpetual site of action—the fundamental unit of dramaturgical analysis and the most essential element of any drama."<sup>5</sup> In order to understand the significance of how bodies can function or be analyzed dramaturgically, particularly when they are attached to social moorings, it is valuable to first apprehend a clear and concise meaning of "dramaturgy" as both a practice and a philosophy. *Merriam Webster* defines dramaturgy as "the art or technique of dramatic composition and theatrical representation."<sup>6</sup> Epistemologically, the concept has been split into two factions, doing and being. Dramaturgy, as a profession, dates back to Gotthold E. Lessing

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreography and Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Dennis Waskul and Phillip Vannini, "The Performative Body: Dramaturgy, the Body, and Embodiment," in *The Drama of Social Life: A Dramaturgical Handbook*, ed. Charles Edgley, Phillip Vannini, Simon Gottschalk, and Dennis Waskul (Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 200.

<sup>6</sup> "Dramaturgy," *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* s.v., accessed February 18, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dramaturgy>.

in Germany during the late-eighteenth century. The dramaturg was to function “as a critic attempting to enlighten artists and audiences alike about the mechanics of dramatic models.”<sup>7</sup> This role further transitioned into “a person mediating between the ideological perspective of an idealist and the needs and priorities of actors to stimulate reflection and action in the spectator.”<sup>8</sup> Through the twenty-first century, production dramaturgs have come to support directors on productions acting as an effectual repository of information and postulations related to the specific work at hand. The *being* of dramaturgy considers “the proprietary structure of a play or a body of work...the skeleton of the work.”<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Borrows’s *A Choreographer’s Handbook* similarly suggests that dramaturgy “describes the thread of meaning, philosophic intent, or logic, which allows the audience to accept and unite the disparate clues you give them into a coherent whole, connecting to other reference points and contexts in the larger world.”<sup>10</sup> It is the negotiation between dramaturgical *doing* and *being* on which I build my conversation of the dramaturgical body.

Often credited with coining the term “dramaturgical body,” Waskul and Vannini utilize Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* to argue that because the body is produced, manipulated, and presented in accordance with socially constructed situations, “people do not ‘have’ a body so much as people actively *do* a body,” thus it is a dramaturgical body.<sup>11</sup> Their defining of terms rests on the concept of *doing* dramaturgy. Although they do not explicitly

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<sup>7</sup> Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison, *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>9</sup> Katherine Profeta, *Dramaturgy in Motion: at Work on Dance and Movement Performance* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Burrows, *A Choreographer’s Handbook* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 46.

<sup>11</sup> Waskul and Vannini, 199.

make the connection, they are also defining the concept in terms of *being*. As a set up to their piece, Waskul and Vannini posit:

Everywhere, and at all times, bodies are actively inscribed with any one or more of the physical markers of powerful social institutions including age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion...the body is clearly the site of enormous expressive and impressive appearance management as well as a focal point for significant ritual activity—two dynamics that are, without question, foremost to dramaturgical analysis.<sup>12</sup>

A viewer can see and read this body, gathering clues to connect or drawn conclusions regarding said body to broader contexts outside of itself. This (dramaturgical) body is a corporality written with social inflections, cultural memory, and lived experiences. The dramaturgical body *does* and *is*. However, what happens when this dramaturgical body performs or becomes a character? What happens when this dramaturgical body is acknowledged rather than erased or detached from its social moorings due to the triumph of virtuosity over autonomy and interiority?

In many ways, choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler has reattached the dancing body to its interiority by exposing the dramaturgical body as a vital element of a musical production. To do so, followed a very traditional Broadway performer career path before landing an opportunity that would change his life. As a young child, Blankenbuehler studied ballet, jazz, and tap. He began his professional career performing in regional theatre productions such as *A Chorus Line* (1991) and *West Side Story* (1991) before debuting on Broadway in *Guys and Dolls* (1992). Additional highlights of his Broadway dance career include *Fosse* (1999), *Saturday Night Fever* (1999), and *Contact* (2000). Blankenbuehler began his entrance into the world of choreography in 2002 and eventually gained recognition for his work with Andrew Lipka's *A Little Princess* (2005), City

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<sup>12</sup> Waskul and Vannini, 197.

Center Encores! production of *The Apple Tree* (2005), and Frank Wildhorn's *Waiting for the Moon* (2006).

In 2007, Blankenbuehler was hired as the choreographer for *In the Heights*, marking a precise moment of transition for his choreographic practice. As noted above, the production challenged him to learn entirely new genres of dance to keep up and innovate alongside the changing landscape of Broadway. Through processes of collaboration with associates, assistants, and performers, he has developed a way to privilege the individual body of ensemble members within his choreography. Traditionally in musical theatre, the chorus member has been scripted and staged as an anonymous entity, supplemental to the milieu of a show. Relatively unmediated by specified characteristics regarding personality or biography, those in the chorus have been subject to generalized groups such as townsfolk repudiating any sense of individuality or uniqueness. By embracing the dramaturgical body of those in the chorus, Blankenbuehler has developed a complex, discernible ensemble that provides nuance and elucidation to a production. I argue it is through shaping, framing, and choreographing the body cast as a chorus member in a way that considers and wields its dramaturgical body, the ensemble body emerges. This manufactured ensemble body, then, functions within the world of a show while operating in dialogue with its unedited version.

At a talk for Words on Dance at Symphony Space in 2019, Blankenbuehler proclaimed, "The ensemble MUST be the lens of the piece. The ensemble MUST focus the principal storyline so that no matter where your eye goes in the show, you see refracted back what the principal is going through."<sup>13</sup> His prioritization of the ensemble as crucial to understanding the action within

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<sup>13</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler and Sarah L. Kaufman, "Fresh Steps," Symphony Space and Words on Dance, New York City, NY, October 21, 2019.



a show consequently positions the ensemble body as an indispensable element through which the audience gains vital (sub)text. As a result, his choreography has become distinctly different from his predecessors and peers. In *Hamilton: the Revolution* (2016), Blankenbuehler is quoted saying, ““There are very few times when I really want the audience to look at dance...Dance is just meant to be a framing device that matches emotionally what I want the audience to feel.””<sup>14</sup> By utilizing the ensemble body as a lens of a piece, his dance coordinates what information the audience receives and how.

As a way of understanding Blankenbuehler’s assertions regarding the ensemble as the lens and dance as a frame, I have curated a metaphor that helps to make a distinction between these ideas. To start, I wear corrective lenses. Most of the time, I wear contacts because when I wear my glasses, I can see the frame in my periphery. I am always aware of it; the frame in my line of vision is subtle, but it exists. It is the lenses that allow me to see. Blankenbuehler once told me, “It is easy to over choreograph and show off...I am not interested in spectacle.”<sup>15</sup> He emphatically contends that the choreography needs to serve the story and not one’s ability as a choreographer. There should only be dance when it is real and character motivated. Therefore, dance is his frame. Dance serves a variety of functions, which will be discussed at length in Chapter One, but for all intents and purposes, it is secondary. To see, in order for the dance to obtain any level of significance, he needs his lens, the ensemble. It is the ensemble, and thusly the ensemble bodies, doing the dancing that is fundamental in providing clarity for the audience. By prioritizing the ensemble as the lens by which an audience views a piece while unmasking the individual ensemble body, Blankenbuehler’s choreography has the ability to expose an unlimited number of layers to a story.

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<sup>14</sup> Miranda and McCarter, *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 134.

<sup>15</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler, interviewed by Amanda Olmstead, May 1, 2018.

By privileging character and story over virtuosity and spectacle, space has opened up for the ensemble body to connect with social meaning beyond an anatomical display of athleticism.

All of this is not to say that the dance is completely superfluous. The dance connects the ensemble bodies with one another and aggrandizes their potential. Additionally, the style of dance can provide the audience with information. Ballet, jazz, tap, social, and hip-hop dance suggest specific meaning based on sociohistorical connotations. The dance allows bodies to speak even when they have no “text” and helps create the ensemble body as doing and being within the world of a production.

My project locates choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler alongside a rich history of musical theatre choreographers: past, present, and future. Through analyzing Blankenbuehler’s use of the ensemble/the ensemble body as the lens for a production, I am arguing for a methodological process of analysis that can not only apply to his work but also future scholarship and practice. How can we look at the work of Susan Stroman, Sergio Trujillo, or Camile A. Brown and analyze how their use of the chorus/ensemble affects the understanding of a production? How can I, as a choreographer, structure my choreography and work with performers in a way that generates a lens for the audience to view the world of a production? I will look at *In the Heights* (Off-Broadway, 2007; Broadway, 2008), *Bring it On: the Musical* (Broadway, 2012), and *Hamilton* (The Public, 2015; Broadway, 2016) as case studies to argue how Blankenbuehler’s work not only illuminates the evolution of musical theatre dances aesthetics but amplifies the role of the ensemble. The ensemble moves beyond spectacle and functional additions (set movers, supporting characters, etc.) to a production and becomes individual pieces of the puzzle essential to how the narrative, nuances, and world of the show are communicated to and understood by an audience.

## 1.1 Literature Review

Although scholarship regarding musical theatre, dance, and corporeality studies are particularly robust individually, studies synthesizing these fields are few and far between. In their article, “Dance in Musical Theater,” Stacy Wolf and Liza Gennaro aim to address this gap in musical theatre choreography scholarship by exploring how dance operates within musical theatre productions. Their list of functions includes:

(1) dance to reveal a character’s psychology; (2) dance to tell a piece of the story; (3) dance to express an unspoken aspect of the libretto; (4) dance to transition to another scene; (5) dance to allow the characters to express themselves; and (6) dance to present an idea or feeling metaphorically or abstractly. In many cases, a specific dance functions in more than one way.<sup>16</sup>

My project seeks to build on their work and expand such analysis of the functions of dance in musical theatre also to consider the functions of the ensemble within musical theatre. In using Wolf and Gennaro as a stepping stone, I am able to move beyond dance alone, as Andy Blankenbuehler has, as the primary site of analysis and interrogate the ensemble as being fundamental to the productions on which he has worked.

Dominic Symonds and Millie Taylor’s collection *Gestures of Music Theatre: The Performativity of Song and Dance* is arguably the most thorough workup regarding dramaturgy, dance, and identity within musical theatre. Their seven-part anthology acknowledges the inherent complications regarding the form’s fundamental interdisciplinarity that has led to such gaps in scholarly analysis. Recognizing the performativity of the body, they seek to understand its role in connection with musical theatre as a cultural discourse. Mary Jo Lodge’s “Dance Breaks and

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<sup>16</sup> Stacy Wolf and Liza Gennaro, “Dance in Musical Theater,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theater*, vol. 1, ed. Nadine George-Graves (Oxford University Press, 2015), 151.

Dream Ballets: Transitional Moments in Musical Theatre,” Judith A. Sebesta’s “Angry Dance: Postmodern Innovation, Masculinities, and Gender Subversion,” Bethany Hughes’s “Singing the Community: The Musical Theatre Chorus as Character,” and Millie Taylor’s “Singing and Dancing Ourselves: The Politics of the Ensemble in *A Chorus Line*” highlight how scholarship has analyzed the functions of dance and the chorus throughout the history of musical theatre in the United States.

Lodge, Sebesta, and Hughes explore how dance and the chorus in musical theatre function as comprehension tools to support a production’s narrative. Lodge dissects the functions of typically lyric-less moments within musicals in regards to their liminality and transformational potential. She concludes, “Musicals are the sum of their disparate parts, to be sure, but effectively communicating through the language of dance in the musical can shape a truly unique experience, which, unlike any other art form, can allow a character to develop and even evolve through words, and music, and most visually and perhaps, most viscerally, through the action of dance.”<sup>17</sup> Lodge’s work examines the function of dance as diegesis or dance as aesthetic in musicals such as *Oklahoma!* (1943), *Damn Yankees* (1955) *West Side Story* (1957), *Spring Awakening* (2006), and *High School Musical* (2006). Sebesta similarly considers the possibility of dance in musical theatre but specifically analyzes its relationship to masculinity. She curates a genealogy of the male body in performance, emphasizing, “Dance offers the opportunity not only to *read* culture but to *write* it, and, more significantly, *perform* it. Dance, more than any other performing art, is action...dance offers the real potential for material change in our perception of, and constitution of, masculine

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<sup>17</sup> Mary Jo Lodge, “Dance Breaks and Dream Ballets: Transitional Moments in Musical Theatre,” in *Gestures of Music Theater: The Performativity of Song and Dance*, ed. Dominic Symonds and Millie Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 89.

identities.”<sup>18</sup> Lodge and Sebesta’s work contributes a vital narrative regarding the historical development and possible functions of dance within musical theatre.

Although Hughes does not specifically look at dance within a musical, she generates a similar conversation regarding the historical development and possible functions of the chorus within musical theatre. Hughes argues that the chorus is “a unique character, possessing specific qualities and functions that are impossible for other characters to exhibit. The chorus is a distinct character, a manifestation of community, a connecting force between audience and story.”<sup>19</sup> She conducts an investigation regarding the connections between the Greek chorus and conceptions of the musical theatre chorus. Specifically, she looks at how the chorus functions as a commentator, character, and community in the Rodgers and Hammerstein production *Allegro* (1947). Although Hughes’s narrow analysis maintains the notion of “the chorus” as a unified entity, she creates a firm jumping-off point for assessing how the chorus has evolved since the Golden Age of musical theatre. My project builds on the work of Lodge, Sebesta, and Hughes to integrate a conversation regarding how dance *and* the chorus/ensemble cooperatively operate in service of a production.

Millie Taylor and Scott McMillan provide a fundamental perspective concerning how the word “ensemble” has been used in musical theatre scholarship. They both employ “ensemble” to broadly mean a group of individual performers working together to tell a story. Taylor, in particular, uses ensemble to identify a group of principal characters in an ensemble musical. She defines an ensemble musical as:

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<sup>18</sup> Judith A. Sebesta, “Angry Dance: Postmodern Innovation, Masculinities, and Gender Subversion,” in *Gestures of Music Theater: The Performativity of Song and Dance*, ed. Dominic Symonds and Millie Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 158.

<sup>19</sup> Bethany Hughes, “Singing the Community: The Musical Theatre Chorus as Character,” in *Gestures of Music Theater: The Performativity of Song and Dance*, ed. Dominic Symonds and Millie Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 263.

...created by a group of performers who enact the narrative in its entirety; the narrative, plot, or concept is the sum of the interactions of the group of characters. There are no supernumeraries or chorus commenting on plot or enlisted simply to add vocal volume or choreographed action in support of the narrative being enacted by ‘principal’ characters....Each performer in the ensemble has his or her own role and relationships and often a through line in the narrative, though a performer might also play multiple roles...<sup>20</sup>

Taylor spends time evaluating the term and its ascent to popularity from the 1970s onward pointing out a vital perplexity regarding essential terminology in the field: chorus versus an ensemble versus an ensemble musical.

Much of Taylor’s exploration unpacks what she refers to as “the compromise between individuality and community” within *A Chorus Line* (1975).<sup>21</sup> She argues that the production maintains a balanced tension between individuality and conformity, and “despite the requirement for conformity to styles, techniques, and methods, performers rely on originality and individuality to express character and to achieve unique performances of song and dance.”<sup>22</sup> Taylor asserts that because each character in *A Chorus Line* has unique personalities revealed through their songs and dances, the production marks a significant shift in the ways in which ensemble in a musical functions.

In a way, her conversation regarding *A Chorus Line* actually speaks to my argument that the production did *not* make any major shifts regarding how an ensemble functions within a musical. The characters are, in fact, principal characters within the production; they are not chorus characters at all. *A Chorus Line* undoubtedly sparked a crucial conversation regarding the labor of the chorus body and the recognition of its uniqueness outside of “the line.” However, it did not

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>21</sup> Millie Taylor, “Singing and Dancing Ourselves: The Politics of the Ensemble in *A Chorus Line*” in *Gestures of Music Theater: The Performativity of Song and Dance*, ed. Dominic Symonds and Millie Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 277.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 277.

interrogate the ways in which the chorus actually functions within a show. She asserts that the ensemble in musical theatre “has transformed from solo with chorus to a dialogue between individuals and groups” and suggests that a new politics of diversity can be received through the ensemble.<sup>23</sup> But, Taylor’s ensemble is not the ensemble that developed from the chorus.

McMillin’s chapters “Character and the Voice of the Musical” and “The Ensemble Effect” in *The Musical as Drama* more broadly contends that a group is an ensemble when there is a sense of unity or community. McMillin’s ensemble often links the chorus with principal characters. For example, in an analysis of *Oklahoma!* he seemingly suggests that it is not until the male chorus joins Will Parker in “Everything’s Up to Date in Kansas City,” or the female chorus joins Laurey in “Many a New Day” that they are considered to be *ensembles*.<sup>24</sup> He maintains the label of “chorus” to mean the background singers and dancers, and ensemble remains linked to a named character within the script. McMillian and Taylor’s conclusions seem to suggest that the chorus on its own is not an ensemble due to the nature of its ambiguity. Not until it is associated with a sense of principal hierarchy does the chorus accrued the label of ensemble.

Still, in much of modern popular culture vocabulary, the words “chorus” and “ensemble” have become synonymous. “The chorus” in scholarship has sustained its position as a generalized, unified group used to support a production. “The ensemble” was implemented as a philosophy to discuss individual characters with biographical information and unique characteristics working together to communicate ideas and narrative. Additionally, “ensemble” has arguably become the more respectable term given to performers not cast as principal characters.<sup>25</sup> In part, Chapter One

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>24</sup> Scott McMillin, *The Musical as Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 74.

<sup>25</sup> Although recently, productions such as *Hadestown* (2019) and *Jagged Little Pill* (2019) returned to using “chorus” as the label for their supporting characters.

of my project seeks to determine when and if the chorus became the ensemble. Ultimately, I argue that using “the ensemble” as a label synonymous with “chorus” is misleading and potentially premature. The ensemble activates individualization within the group cast as a generalized supporting character(s). Furthermore, my project identifies an imperative element of the ensemble substantially absent from musical theatre scholarship, the ensemble body. The ensemble body is a type of dramaturgical body cast as a generalized supporting character but unique. Ensemble bodies can work together within a collective ensemble to communicate unified ideas, but they can also work independently to promote difference. Moreover, the ensemble (bodies), collective or individual, function as a crucial lens through which the audience can receive and comprehend information related to the piece, rather than merely functioning as background support.

## **1.2 Methodology: Ensemble Body and Functions of Ensemble**

This dissertation analyzes key choreography enhanced numbers within the productions *In the Heights*, *Bring it On: the Musical*, and *Hamilton*. In my investigation, I dictate Blankenhuebler’s choreographic score in conversation with the ensemble body(ies) doing the dancing. To interrogate and dissect each movement or phrase and how the corresponding ensemble body(ies) affect the audience’s understanding at that moment, I consider the following:

- 1) What does the ensemble (body) represent at this point in the story? Is it individual, or is it collective?
- 2) What is the ensemble body’s relationship to the narrative and milieu of the show?

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See Mo Brady, “Ensemble or Chorus? Can We Still Use the Word Chorus?” *TheatreArtLife*, The Ensemblist, December 26, 2019, [www.theatreartlife.com/staying-still/ensemble-or-chorus-can-we-still-use-the-word-chorus/](http://www.theatreartlife.com/staying-still/ensemble-or-chorus-can-we-still-use-the-word-chorus/).



- 3) What is the choreography's relationship to the narrative and milieu of the show?
- 4) How does the choreography shape X function? (Filling in Wolf and Gennaro's functions of dance in musical theatre)
- 5) How does the ensemble body shape X function?
- 6) How does the vocabulary of the choreography frame the ensemble body?

In short, I employ basic stage directing and dance vocabulary to describe how the dance and choreography look. A goal of mine was to make the dance as legible to as wide of an audience as possible. To do this, I activate footnotes whenever any technical dance term requires further explanation. Moreover, I rely on Jonathan Burrows's *A Choreographer's Handbook* to define choreographic principles. In his opening, he illuminates, "A principle is a way to make a map where no map exists. The landscape is there already, but a map might help you decide where to go."<sup>26</sup> As the ensemble body functions as communication, transition, metaphor, spectacle, and most importantly, lens, I use my questions above, Burrows's principles, ethnographic and archival information, alongside philosophical and theoretical scholarship to explore the unwritten potential of the ensemble (body).

There are a multitude of factors that come into play when writing, dancing, enjoying, and examining choreography. The very notion that audience members can and will interpret dance differently regardless of the choreographer's intent is important to acknowledge here. As I read, dictate, and translate Blankenbuehler's choreography throughout my investigation, I rely as much as I can on his words, words of the performers, and scholarship to provide the most conscientious analysis possible. Susan Leigh Foster emphasizes that "dancing and writing partner each other,

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<sup>26</sup> Burrows, 4.

following the historian's creative role in choreographing the historical performance, and imbuing the body of history with choreographic knowledge so that the writing of history may dance."<sup>27</sup> Through analyzing the (ensemble) body's relationship to choreography, writing can uplift and transpose the ephemeral as a representation for historical consideration.

Foster is foundational in the field of dance and its relationship to society. Her collection *Choreographing History* (1995) as well as monographs *Choreographing Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire* (1996), and *Valuing Dance: Commodities and Gifts in Motion* (2019) have been of particular value. *Choreographing History* questions how body-history, writing, and research work in tandem to create a methodology for reading dance. Foster argues:

A body, whether sitting writing or standing thinking or walking talking or running screaming, is a bodily writing. Its habits and stances, gestures and demonstrations, every action of its various regions, areas, and parts—all these emerge out of cultural practices, verbal or not, that construct corporeal meaning. Each of the body's moves, as with all writings, traces the physical fact of movement and also an array of references to conceptual entities and events.<sup>28</sup>

Her conception of "a bodily writing" correlates directly with the notion of the dramaturgical body. How can acknowledging the construction of corporeal meaning through sociocultural identifications in conjunction with the performing body affect the ways in which we read, write, and apprehend that body in a production? My project considers the multiple layers of corporeality within the ensemble and considers how choreography can influence the comprehension of the ensemble body by an audience. Foster's epistemology regarding choreography proves to be vital in developing an analysis of the body, ensemble, and dance.

In *Choreography and Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire*, Foster questions the repertoire of dance movements and their evolution through three different iterations of *Pygmalion*,

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<sup>27</sup> Foster, *Choreography and Narrative*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 3.

the ballet. Examining the work of Marie Sallé (1734), Louis Milon (1772), and Arthur Saint-Leon (1847) as represented in paintings, sculptures, and letters, she attempts to pinpoint the relationship between the choreographers, their work, and the reception of the work. It is in this exploration that she articulates philosophies of virtuosity, autonomy, and interiority. Additionally, Foster posits, “Objectivist dance focuses on the body’s movement, allowing any references to the world to accrue alongside the dance as a by-product of the body’s motion.”<sup>29</sup> Objectivist types of dance have a specific set of conventions that tells the body what to do rather than what to say. For example, in the *Nutcracker*, the Sugar Plum Fairy begins her number in *tendu devant* with an elegant *pas de bourée* moving into an *arabesque allongé*, *passé* back through the *arabesque*.<sup>30</sup> She then completes a series of *piqué battements*.<sup>31</sup> These movements are a specific set of codified conventions that articulate to the dancer how their body is supposed to move. These movements alone do not convey any form of narrative structure or emotional suggestion. When the dancer executes these movements, the movements suggest to the viewer: “look at this aesthetic,” rather than “interpret and read my story.” An objectivist choreography often tends to athletic ability and precision in training. The goal is to show off the mastery of a skill.

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<sup>29</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 188.

<sup>30</sup> **Tendu:** one leg stretches along the floor until just the pointed toe touches the floor.

**Devant:** in front

**Pas de Bourée:** a series of small steps where the legs come together before they reopen. Most commonly the feet move from fifth position (closed) to second position (open wide) to fifth position.

**Arabesque:** a body position where the weight is placed over one supporting leg, with the other leg extended behind the body.

**Allongé:** stretched or made longer

**Passé:** most often used to describe when one leg is bent to look like a triangle with the foot near the supporting leg’s knee.

<sup>31</sup> **Piqué:** pricking; often used to describe other movements.

**Battement:** one leg extends to the front, side, or back of the body.

Juxtaposed to objectivist choreography, Foster argues, is reflexive choreography. A reflexive choreography tends to the meaning of a piece, the mood, the frame, the mode of representation, style of delivery, or vocabulary of the piece.<sup>32</sup> An assumption made by the audience (and on behalf of the choreographer) that certain movements suggest meaning. For example; a dancer does the combination *balancé*, *balancé*, *balancé en tourant*, *balancé en tourant*, *balancé de côte*, *balancé de côte*, *chaînés*, *chaînés*, *grande ronde de jambe*, and *plié*, the light feet in the rocking steps of the *balancés*, small turns throughout, and a slow poised ending (executed in a  $\frac{3}{4}$  time signature—similar to that of a waltz) could provide the mood of love or delight.<sup>33</sup> The movements are not overly exerted regarding weight or intensity, suggesting exuberance or anger, and the slow ending promotes a softer tone. If the dancer places their hands on their heart throughout the turns, this further encourages the love narrative. However, if the arms were to reach out as if they were begging or yearning for something on one side and then the other, and the ending was more of a collapse than a slow, graceful descent, then perhaps the mood of desperation, longing, or loss could be imposed upon the combination. As will be discussed in this project, Blankenbuehler firmly advocates that his work tends to the meaning of a piece first—reflexive choreography—and the virtuosity of a piece second—objectivist choreography. My project draws on Foster’s delineation between reflexive/objectivist choreography in conversation with traditional musical theatre choreography practices and Blankenbuehler’s own methodology to consider how the (ensemble) body is framed or affected by such variances in philosophies.

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<sup>32</sup> Foster, *Reading Dancing*, 189.

<sup>33</sup> **Balancé**: a step that alternates balance between feet, typically in counts of three; the motion often activates a down, up, down pattern.

**En tourant**: while turning.

**De côte**: to the side.

**Chaîné**: a series of short turns that travel across space, typically in a straight line.

**Rond de jambe**: when the leg completes a semi-circular motion.

**Plié**: knee bend.

Foster also considers the relationship between the fleeting materiality of dance and its potential for commodification. She emphasizes, “Dancing happens and, in the very moment of its occurrence, vanishes. Its impermanence and ephemerality are its most striking defining attributes. Dancing literally dissolves as it is being performed and watched and, as such, operates outside or beyond the world of signification and logical comprehension.”<sup>34</sup> Dance’s unstable temporality has perplexed scholars and theorists as they have tried to capture its essence and analyze its affect. Foster specifically considers how dance can be replicated and transported from body to body through education, social interaction, and cultural engagement. What happens to dance when it becomes a commodity? How is dance reconstructed adapted to fit different environments? Her scholarship in *Valuing Dance* supports my investigation regarding cultural products, specifically Latinx social dance and hip-hop, as they are appropriated for the stage in order to perform community and identity.

To discuss the relationship between staging identity through dance, I bring in Ann Cooper Albright’s *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity In Contemporary Dance*, Jane Desmond’s anthology *Meaning in Motion*, and Helen Thomas’s *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory*. All three of these scholars activate cultural, embodiment, and dance studies to discuss historical associations and potential activations of the body, dance, and society. Albright suggests “dance, unlike other forms of cultural production such as books or paintings, makes the body visible within the representation of itself.”<sup>35</sup> Desmond contends, “Movement serves as a marker

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<sup>34</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Valuing Dance: Commodities and Gifts in Motion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 15.

<sup>35</sup> Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference: the Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 63.

for the production of gender, racial, ethnic, class, and national identities.”<sup>36</sup> And finally, Thomas considers the social body as being produced by acts of labor that “affect the way people learn how to present their bodies in everyday life through body techniques.”<sup>37</sup> When put in conversation with one another, these scholars provide invaluable information regarding how the dramaturgical body functions as doing and being within society and how those functions then play out in performance and through dance.

Assessing the dramaturgical body considers race, ethnicity, class, gender, sex, sexuality, and athleticism. The dramaturgical body is emotional, experienced, and authentic. To discuss conceptions of race, ethnicity, and class, I utilize scholars such as José Esteban Muñoz and Faedra Chatard Carpenter. Muñoz’s article “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position” considers sociohistorical contingencies that have defined and dictated identity politics and senses of belonging. Relying on philosophies of racial performativity, he argues:

Brownness is not white, and it is not black either, yet it does not simply sit midway between them. Brownness, like all forms of racialized attentiveness in North America, is enabled by practices of self-knowing formatted by the nation’s imaginary through the powerful spikes in the North American consciousness identified with public life of Blackness. At the same time, brownness is a mode of attentiveness to the self for others that is cognizant of the way in which it is not and can never be whiteness. Whiteness in my analysis is also very specific: I read it as a cultural logic that prescribes and regulates national feelings and comportment. White is thus an affective gauge that helps us understand some modes of emotional countenance and comportment as good or bad. It should go without saying that some modes of whiteness—for example, working-class whiteness—are stigmatized within the majoritarian public sphere. Modes of white womanhood or white ethnicities do not correspond with the affective ruler that measures and naturalizes white feelings as the norm.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Jane Desmond, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 31.

<sup>37</sup> Helen Thomas, *The Body, Dance, and Cultural Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 56-57.

<sup>38</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position,” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, no. 3 (2006), 680.

Muñoz’s assessment, defining the relationships between minoritarian and majoritarian groups, helps me discuss how bodies are read by a Broadway audience—specifically when I reach my chapter on *Bring it On: the Musical* where Whiteness versus non-Whiteness is a primary through-line of the narrative. How are racialized social bodies transposed onto the stage? What bodies are “allowed” to be emotional?

Similarly, Carpenter’s *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance* defines Whiteness as being understood as normative and paradigmatic. She asserts, “Accordingly, the identification of whiteness is often not racialized, but rather others are raced in relation to whiteness. This common, subliminal tendency equates whiteness with a standardized humanness (others are raced, but white people are just people). Subsequently, whiteness *is* by being white *is not*.”<sup>39</sup> Published in 2014, Carpenter points to a vital epistemological gap regarding how we look at and discuss race and racial performativity. Capitalizing White, Black, Brown, and Other throughout this project recognizes these identity markers and acknowledges them as such.<sup>40</sup> I am choosing to capitalize these terms as a sign that racial identities are, in fact, constructed. Dictating a capital W in Whiteness undermines the assumption that whiteness is a universal standard and not a race. Capitalizing Whiteness holds these bodies accountable and contemplates their affectiveness just as Black and Brown bodies exude affectiveness—particularly on the Broadway stage where whiteness has formulated a hegemonic landscape. However, it is doubly important to understand that while arguably all affective, as Muñoz argues, this affectiveness is different and culturally distinct.

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<sup>39</sup> Faedra Chatard Carpenter, *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2014), 9.

<sup>40</sup> “NABJ Statement on Capitalizing Black and Other Racial Identifiers,” *National Association of Black Journalists*, June 2020, <https://www.nabj.org/page/styleguide>.

Finally, in order to execute my thorough analysis and advocate for the individual ensemble bodies, I am indebted to the abundance of recorded film, photography, audio, and textual material curated through the New York Public Library, YouTube, podcasts, popular media publications, and personal interviews, not to mention the Disney+ release of *Hamilton* (2020). It is no secret that analyzing dance and embodied performance is a particular challenge due to its ephemerality. Being able to “rewind,” whether that be in the dark room of the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive at the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center or watching “Helpless/Satisfied” for the hundredth time on Disney+, the curation of these recorded performances has made this project possible.<sup>41</sup>

### 1.3 Chapter Breakdown

Chapter One of my project, titled “From Chorus to Ensemble: Historicizing the Body in Musical Theatre Choreography,” curates a genealogy of the chorus and ensemble throughout musical theatre history. Who have been the bodies in the chorus? How did the chorus function? The chapter briefly traces the chorus in Western theatre from Greek drama through opera-ballet. My investigation then takes off from *The Black Crook* in 1866 as a foundational turning point regarding the *who* and *how* of the chorus within the United States. I argue that *The Black Crook*

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<sup>41</sup> See *In the Heights*, (videorecording), Richard Rodgers Theatre, October 10, 2008, Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, NYPL Performing Arts Library, New York, New York.

See *Bring it On: the Musical*, (Videorecording), St. James Theatre, December 14, 2012, Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, NYPL Performing Arts Library, New York, New York.

See *Hamilton*, produced by Walt Disney Pictures, 5000 Broadway Productions, Nevis Productions, Old 320 Sycamore, Radical Media; directed by Thomas Kail written by Lin-Manuel Miranda; distributed by Disney+, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, July 3, 2020, New York, NY.

See “A Winter’s Ball/Helpless vs. Satisfied,” YouTube video, 5:32, July 24, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wD2LdRGyhwY>.



enabled dancers to move beyond virtuosic spectacle and become relevant characters within a chorus of a production. However, the spectacle of the female body still took precedence over their integrated function within the plot. I examine the femininity of the dancing chorus and complicate the inherent Whiteness implicated in the chorus bodies. From the Ziegfeld Follies (1907-1931) to *Shuffle Along* (1921) to *Show Boat* (1927), I assert that the move from flashy leg shows to a realist, narrative-driven production elevated the significance of the chorus characters. Perhaps more importantly, the chorus was slowly becoming racially integrated and thus contributed to a sociological milieu of a show. Building on this idea, I navigate through Golden Age to the 1960s and 70s, exploring the choreographic innovations of Katherine Dunham, Agnes De Mille, Jerome Robbins, and Bob Fosse. Each of these choreographers made fundamental developments regarding how the chorus functions within a musical production. However, although many exciting contemporary Broadway choreographers have created dazzling pieces or pushed forward unique dance styles, I contend that it is not until Andy Blankenbuehler that we truly see the entire chorus become an ensemble.

Blankenbuehler's use of individual choreographic scores to bolster the ensemble body as the lens by which an audience views a production has made the ensemble a necessary component of his shows. Chapter Two, "En Washington Heights: Staging Authenticity through the Individual Ensemble Body," begins with his work on *In the Heights* and investigates the praise and marketing regarding the production's exhilarating (staged) authenticity. Through a thorough analysis of the numbers "In the Heights," "The Club," and "Carnaval Del Barrio," I argue that his choreography positions the individual ensemble body in a way that allows the audience to gain access to a complex and more nuanced community of (staged) Washington Heights. Blankenbuehler prioritizes the communication of narrative, ideas, and subtext over virtuosity within the

choreography so that the individual dancing ensemble bodies can contribute lived experience and unique perspectives to further enhance the heterogeneous world of the show.

Building on the notion of developing a diversified world through the use of the ensemble, Chapter Three, “We Ain’t No Cheerleaders: Cheerleading Bodies, Hip-hopping Bodies, and the World of *Bring it On: the Musical*” unveils the sociohistorical complexities between cheerleading, hip-hop, and their respective relationship to racial identities within the United States. The plot of *Bring it On: the Musical* creates a particular dialogue that confronts the tensions between Whiteness and non-Whiteness in the U.S. Blankenbuehler, in accordance with the production, activates the form of cheerleading as a frame by which the ensemble bodies are read and subsequently inform the production. Cheerleading has historically elevated perceptions and conceptions of Whiteness. In the production, it is set up as being the dominant vocabulary by which the non-White, hip-hopping bodies are to be understood—at least, at first. To successfully pull off the cheerleading in this production, Blankenbuehler cast half of the ensemble from a pool of professional cheerleaders. In doing so, he developed a dialogue between virtuosity and the ensemble body to that illuminate and perform tensions of race, class, gender, sexuality, cheerleading, and dance. By the end of the production, he energizes a syncretic hip-hop/cheerleading group that challenges historical tensions inherent in these forms, promoting a more inclusive and reparative space.

My final chapter, “Who Tells the Story?: Dialectic Activations of the Ensemble Body,” explores the famed musical *Hamilton* as a culmination of Blankenbuehler’s techniques and practices. What is different with *Hamilton* is how the creative team developed the ensemble as a collective unit. Meaning, they are all wearing virtually the same costume, and they move more synchronically than *In the Heights* or *Bring it On: the Musical*. On the surface, their collective

nature could place them back under the umbrella of a chorus. How does this choice, then, affect the development and functions of ensemble? Moreover, can the individual ensemble body still be affective within a collective? Ultimately, I argue that Blankenbuehler establishes a dialectic relationship between the individual ensemble body and the collective ensemble body that creates an opportunity for the audience to connect sociological past/present metanarratives vital to understanding the intricate layers of the production.

Reminiscing about his time with *Hamilton*, Blankenbuehler divulged, “Maybe the greatest gift of *Hamilton* was being offered the opportunity to work on a project where I could employ everything I had ever learned.”<sup>42</sup> Following this production Blankenbuehler would go on to develop, direct, and choreograph productions such as *Bandstand* (2017), *Only Gold* (in workshop), and *Fly* (La Jolla Playhouse-2020). Notably, none of these productions involve Lin-Manuel Miranda or hip-hop music. My conclusion considers how Blankenbuehler’s methodology can function beyond Miranda and hip-hop by briefly analyzing key moments of *Bandstand*. Furthermore, I consider how Blankenbuehler’s work can and is transcending Blankenbuehler himself by providing a look into the work of his associate Stephanie Klemons. His distinct choreography and unique approach to the ensemble (body) are percolating through the industry by means of associates, assistants, students, and performers who have adopted his techniques and energize them within their own work.

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<sup>42</sup> Blankenbuehler, “Fresh Steps.”

## 2.0 From Chorus to Ensemble: Historicizing the Body in Musical Theatre Choreography

In a talk at Symphony Space in Upper West Side Manhattan, through an organization called Words on Dance, Andy Blankenbuehler spoke to a small crowd of dance, choreography, and musical theatre enthusiasts. Reflecting upon his development as a performer, he said, “Through imitation, you can meet and be mentored by icons.”<sup>43</sup> He asserts he had a sponge-like ability to learn the dances of Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, Jerome Robbins, Bob Fosse, and Michael Jackson, among others, which allowed him to be “taught” by some of the most renowned performers in the history of the industry. He explained how their impact influenced him to make later choices in his career, citing the notion that there is Astaire, Robbins, Fosse, and Jackson in *Hamilton*. Blankenbuehler discussed two key lessons that propelled his creative process—both lessons are notably learned from Jerome Robbins. Reflecting on *West Side Story* (1957), he explained how, in the “Prologue,” the character Riff has a moment of standing with both arms and legs in second position.<sup>44</sup> He notes that this second position is a stance for believing in something. Riff sees the world’s possibilities in front of him, but there is no action behind it. Immediately following, Riff turns upstage and decides to go and fight for the turf that “belongs” to the Jets. He then turns back around in fourth position and goes to make his next move.<sup>45</sup> The fourth position allows the character to take action, to progress forward. Blankenbuehler recalls choreographing in second position for nearly ten to fifteen years because it was presentational, showy, and frankly, what was

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<sup>43</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler and Sarah L. Kaufman, “Fresh Steps,” Symphony Space and Words on Dance, New York City, NY, October 21, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> **Second position:** the legs are in a parallel standing posture and are just beyond hip-width apart. In ballet the feet are turned out; in jazz the feet are also parallel.

<sup>45</sup> **Fourth position:** a standing posture variant where one leg is in front of the other, about a walking step distance apart. In ballet the feet are turned out; in jazz the feet are also parallel.

done most commonly in musicals before him. But changing his choreography to fourth position turned it into action, beyond believing and toward doing.

When Blankenbuehler saw *Jerome Robbins Broadway* in 1989, he learned the second lesson that he would carry with him through his career. While watching “New York, New York” from *On the Town*, he began to learn about the depths of storytelling through the body. He later named these depths the body’s “three engines:” intellect, heart, and gut. Knowing how the story affects us in these different places at different times informs where the movement emanates. At the top of “New York, New York,” the men dock in the city for twenty-four hours and anything is possible. Robbins gives us this information by having the dancers travel upstage left to downstage right diagonal using a series of grand sautés with their arms reaching over the top of their heads and their chests puffed outward.<sup>46</sup> Blankenbuehler observed that the heart leads the body down a long diagonal, informing the audience of the open-eyed belief that anything is possible.<sup>47</sup> He continues:

Raising the arms over the head must mean something. In real life, we don’t often reach our arms over our head. If in dancing you are going to do a huge sauté and reach for the sky, whatever you are reaching for, better be important—and for those men who are used to dying, now they have ultimate freedom even just for twenty-four hours.... Moments can be heighten-able if what you’re reaching for is actually valid; if it is not honest, then we are seeing musical theatre and dance that we have all seen before that we don’t believe in. It is just entertaining—definitely a world where that is valid, but that becomes a different type of dance.<sup>48</sup>

Blankenbuehler prioritizes the meaning and impetus behind each movement of his choreography over entertaining dance spectacle to make moments more honest and believable.

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<sup>46</sup> **Sauté:** a jump; both legs leave and return to the ground at the same time.

<sup>47</sup> As will be discussed later in this project, he also asserts that this up left to down right diagonal signifies a child-like perspective on life. This is equally true during the moment “New York, New York” he describes.

<sup>48</sup> Blankenbuehler, “Fresh Steps.”

Through his work, Blankenbuehler has theorized in and around the performers, directors, and choreographers that have preceded him to create his unique choreographic style and methodology. The above lessons led him to make an even more significant intervention that would change how audiences view, scholars analyze, and choreographers write the performing bodies in the ensemble. Blankenbuehler experimented with how the choreographed bodies in the ensemble created a lens for the production that informed the spectator of a show's subtext and nuance. His shifting of focus from the movement to the body performing the movement created an ensemble body with the possibility to transgress the world of a production and speak to a larger question regarding the individual body within society.

Historically in United States-based musical theatre, how the chorus/ensemble has been conceptualized alongside the narrative of a production as well as in relationship to the audience has paradoxically remained unchanged and evolved. For example, the dancing chorus and the singing chorus were once completely separate entities. In this chapter, I argue that it is with *The Black Crook* in 1866 that the line between the chorus/dancer/character became blurred. Dancers were no longer just seen as dancers in a section of an opera to add entertainment value or distract from a variety of situations; they were now relevant characters, and their bodies affected an audience's understanding of the world of a production. Moving through the beginning of the twentieth century, I examine a dramatic shift from choruses of exposed female bodies to a chorus of realistic characters. With this transition comes a conversation regarding the impact of race and the integration of Black and White chorus bodies on an audience's recognition of a show's sociological milieu.

From the beginning of the Golden Age of musical theatre (1943-1959) onward, the chorus continued to populate theatrical worlds as a collective group of villagers, townsfolk, sailors,

farmers, cowboys, seamstresses, and party guests. Their function was essentially to bolster the narrative of a production, and they were a connection between the audience and the show through song, dance, and transitions. Famed choreographers such as Katherine Dunham, Agnes de Mille, and Jerome Robbins have utilized the chorus as character in tandem with their choreography to further the narrative, highlight overarching themes or emotions, connect scenes, and create “wow” factor. In the 1960s and 70s, Bob Fosse challenged the aesthetics of dance in musical theatre to promote a more abstract, atmospheric, and often gender-neutral effect on a production through the chorus. I analyze these critical moments of evolution in regards to the function of the chorus along with the function of the dance/choreography to articulate further *how* this change affected the landscape of musical theatre.

In the final section of this chapter, I seek to bring my genealogical study to and through Andy Blankenbuehler’s work. Though he certainly embraces his predecessors’ dance technique and the very premise of using dance in musical theatre to serve a multitude of functions, Blankenbuehler’s development of a hybrid-style dance genre, prioritization of the text/bodily text over movement, and use of individual choreographic scores have altered the ways in which the chorus functions. Ultimately, I conclude that it is with Blankenbuehler that the chorus has truly shifted from a group of individuals representing one character or idea in order to serve a production to an ensemble of individuals portraying individual characters in order to serve a production. Furthermore, I argue that Blankenbuehler’s activation of these individual ensemble bodies has opened up a dialogue regarding the dramaturgical body that, when choreographed, can promote a deeper comprehension of the world of the production as well as the society in which the production has been developed. Although my analysis suggests that there had been a trend or desire to prioritize the notion of character/individual within the chorus/ensemble prior to Blankenbuehler,

he has certainly been a fundamental, if not foundational, part of this shift in twenty-first-century musical theatre.

## 2.1 Dance in Musical Theatre: Functions and Aesthetics

In their article “Dance in Musical Theater,” Stacy Wolf and Liza Gennaro argue that dance “is always created in relation to the musical’s story or its narrative, and since the 1940s, choreographers have used dance in a number of ways.”<sup>49</sup> They identify the following six possible functions of dance within musicals, all of which suggest that the purpose of dance within a musical is to bolster the narrative in some capacity:

(1) dance to reveal a character’s psychology; (2) dance to tell a piece of the story; (3) dance to express an unspoken aspect of the libretto; (4) dance to transition to another scene; (5) dance to allow the characters to express themselves; and (6) dance to present an idea or feeling metaphorically or abstractly. In many cases, a specific dance functions in more than one way.<sup>50</sup>

While this seems like a comprehensive list of functions, I would argue that dance is not, in fact, always created concerning the narrative or plot of a musical. As Blankenbuehler suggested during his talk at Symphony Space, the potential for dance to function purely for entertainment also has a valid place in the world of theatre. In particular, musical comedies of the late nineteenth century often incorporated dance as moments of spectacle and thrill. Although this may potentially fall under the category of presenting an idea or feeling abstractly, large, spectacular dance numbers are usually to help spark joy, which could *distract* from the narrative and function as a form of

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<sup>49</sup> Stacy Wolf and Liza Gennaro, “Dance in Musical Theater,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theater*, vol. 1, ed. Nadine George-Graves (Oxford University Press, 2015), 151.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.



compensation for any gaps or weaknesses in the plot. The utilization of dance as spectacle has also traditionally been a tool to attract higher audience numbers.

Additionally, dance in a musical could potentially function as an apparatus to connect the audience to the production through the use of identifiable movement practices. Dance scholar Marianne McDonald posits the idea that dance “was the earliest vehicle to try to influence those unknown forces that have power over man: nature and the gods. It was also one of the earliest ways for human beings to express joy and sorrow and all the other emotions.”<sup>51</sup> For example, the incorporation of the “hand jive” into the script and choreography of the 1971 musical *Grease* in the song “Born to Hand Jive” is an identifiable cultural product of the 1950s that connects the production to the time in which it was set. Audience members of the original production would have been familiar with the dance and song made famous by Johnny Otis, “Willie and the Hand Jive” (1958).

Historically, until the 1990s, dance had been undervalued and undertheorized in terms of bodily discourse. In 1997 Jane Desmond suggested, “By enlarging our studies of bodily ‘texts’ to include dance in all its forms...we can further our understandings of how social identities are signaled, formed, and negotiated through bodily movement. We can analyze how social identities are codified in performance styles and how the use of the body in dance is related to, duplicates, contests, amplifies, or exceeds norms of nondancer bodily expression within specific historical contexts.”<sup>52</sup> While scholarship in the last twenty or so years regarding dance and the body has grown exponentially, there is still a disconnect regarding the body and musical theatre.

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<sup>51</sup> Marianne McDonald, “Dancing Drama: Ancient Greek Theatre in Modern Shoes and Shows,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theater*, vol. 1, ed. Nadine George-Graves (Oxford University Press, 2015), 279.

<sup>52</sup> Jane Desmond, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 29.

Furthermore, a conversation relating the chorus/ensemble to the functions of dance has yet to occur. The performer's body affects how the dance is perceived. Without the body, there would be no dance. Mark Franko asserts, "The necessary relation of the fleshy body to its markers of identity and subjectivity lends feeling its structure from experience, through performance, to interpretation. This feeling is practically unmediated in that its passage from life to the stage entails no studied adaptation. By the same token, it is already theatrical when we first encounter it."<sup>53</sup> The body has been ignored in much of the analysis regarding dance in musical theatre. If bodily presence assumes lived experience, how does that experience then affect how the dance is seen, read, or comprehended?

I propose the ensemble/ensemble body also has the potential to function in the ways outlined by Wolf and Gennaro: the ensemble body to help reveal a character's psychology; the ensemble body to tell a piece of the story; the ensemble body to express an unspoken aspect of the libretto; the ensemble body to transition to another scene; the ensemble body to allow the characters to express themselves; the ensemble body to present an idea or feeling metaphorically or abstractly. The functions Blankenbuehler and McDonald suggest are also important to include in this list: the ensemble body to perform spectacle and the ensemble body to connect the audience to an identifiable human experience. Discursively analyzing the ensemble body connects theories of corporeality to musical theatre. Historically, the performing body has encountered wavering processes of erasure, suppression, exploitation, and celebration. In the following section, I will explore such processes as they relate to the development and evolution of the chorus within musical theatre practices.

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<sup>53</sup> Mark Franko, *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 41.

## 2.2 Beauties of Nature: Developing the (Female) Chorus Body

Tracing the development of the chorus in conversation with shifting perceptions of the (dancing) body involves navigating through a convoluted web of centuries of performance forms and geographically situated social conceptions. In order to arrive at the musical extravaganza *The Black Crook* (1866), it is imperative first to understand the correlation between historical theories of corporeality and ballet. Although the female body had been a scandalized site for looking until the late eighteenth century, it would begin to become accepted and anticipated as the primary figure featured in the chorus. For a short time, the virtuosity of the male or female dancing body triumphed over any sense of sexualization; social moorings were virtually stripped from the body in favor of the display of technique and ability. However, as Karen Henson accurately points out, ballet would become “so concerned with the display of female bodies that the male characters became almost an impossibility.”<sup>54</sup> Her point similarly translates into the concept of the chorus within musical productions; of course, there were male bodies in the chorus, but those male bodies were suppressed and used as supplementary tools as opposed to a paramount element. For nearly a century following *The Black Crook*, the dancing chorus would lean primarily on the exploitation and celebration of the bodies of (White) female performers. A more integrated chorus, in terms of gender, race, and even function, would not begin to take place until the early twentieth century.

To begin a genealogical narrative regarding the chorus and the body, it is beneficial to remember that the chorus stems from Western theatrical traditions, specifically Greek theatre. It was not uncommon for the chorus, historically defined as a group of twelve or more performers

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<sup>54</sup> Karen Henson, “Introduction: Divo Worship,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007): 5.

who sing, speak, or dance in unison, to help in narrating the story.<sup>55</sup> They represented a collective group that often shared one voice, one thought that would contribute to furthering the plot, reveal a character's psychology, transition between scenes, and add spectacle.<sup>56</sup> The chorus would continue to exist in a similar vein in York mystery plays, passion plays, and Shakespeare, to name a few.<sup>57</sup>

During the advancement of opera following the Renaissance, such ideas of group storytelling collided with the desire to produce an elaborate spectacle. In the late seventeenth century, opera-ballet became a prominent subgenre that incorporated an entirely new section into operas, the *divertissement*. *Divertissement* is almost always translated into English as "entertainment." However, it is also important to note that it equally translates into "diversion" or "distraction." The *divertissements* were extravagant, standalone scenes unrelated to the main plot of an opera-ballet and typically located at the end of an act. Contrary to monodies or arias of the first operas, the *divertissement* was performed by multiple people and often involved dance, thus aiding in the call for larger choruses and often for skilled dancers.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See T.B.L Webster, *The Greek Chorus* (London: Methuen, 1970).

See Athena Kavoulaki, "Choral Self-Awareness: On the Introductory Anapaests of Aeschylus' *Suppliants*," *Archaic and Classical Choral Song*, 10 (Berlin, Bodstom: De Gruyter, 2011), 365-390.

<sup>56</sup> See John J. Winkler, "The Ephebes' Song: *Tragōidia* and *Polis*," in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context*, ed. Froma I. Zeitlin and John J. Winkler (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 20-62.

<sup>57</sup> Each of these forms employs obvious distinctions regarding what choral functions are emphasized or implemented. However, because they do not necessarily shift or alter *how* the chorus functions, I have chosen to not expand upon these specific genres and rather simply acknowledge that they too benefited from the chorus as a tool.

<sup>58</sup> Susan Leigh Foster's analysis of codified Western dance in the late eighteenth century into the nineteenth suggests that characters began to dance with the skilled dancers; however, this was typically "at moments of celebration, during festivities, or during courtship, [and] the dancing served more to mark the joy or exoticism of a given occasion." She continues, "Thus the performance projected a greater narrative coherence, although movement told less of the story. Even the narrative, however, often served as a pretext for a series of eye-catching displays."

See Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreography and Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 97-98.

Opera-ballets were fundamental in opening up space in a production for dance numbers by large groups of generalized characters, even if their primary function was spectacle. In her book *Choreography and Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire*, Susan Leigh Foster examines eighteenth-century notions of dance and choreography. When speaking about opera-ballet, she reports:

Dancers in these productions most frequently formed the entourage of a principal singing character, or they populated the landscape where the action occurred—fauns, satyrs, and nymphs in the mythological forest; shepherds and shepherdesses in the rural countryside; Turks, Indians, or Africans from ‘the nations of the globe;’ [Noverre, *Letters on Dancing and Ballets*, p. 16] demons and furies from hell. Regardless of characters’ land of origin, cultural difference was signaled only through tiny modifications to standardly cut garments and through modest augmentation in the form of adding stereotypic gestures or stances to the standard vocabulary of steps.<sup>59</sup>

Her argument here is that cultural difference, let alone embodied difference, was minimally articulated through the use of costume or a few predetermined gestures that signaled Other. Foster’s point speaks to a larger sociological phenomenon that, at this time, bodies were not privileged to individual or social identity. By scripting the chorus as a unified entity and generalizing their character accordingly, the individual body was virtually stripped of its power to signal difference or avail its embodied rhetorical abilities.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, sociocultural gender representations became directly linked to changes in perception of ballet versus social dance. Foster’s discussion of governing the body politic connects the dancing body to scientific conversations about virtuosity, which, in turn, relates directly to a shift in gender roles within stage dance, society, and consequently the chorus. She notes:

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<sup>59</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreography and Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 59.

With the new emphasis on physicality, as imitative art and as virtuoso display, dance lost irrevocably its connection to a generalized sociability. Dancing became one of several physical pursuits that developed specialized bodily skills, rather than a foundational undertaking that ensured a graceful performance in society and a healthy integrity in life. Dancing on stage no longer maintained a connection via social dance forms with the rhetoric of social comportment. And even social dance practices provided a diversion from, rather than a medium for, social action. Dancing as the celebration of shared physicalized values through which individuals discovered and defined identity no longer existed. Instead, dancing showed what one's body could do.<sup>60</sup>

Speaking broadly, the presentation of such specialized skills within ballet choreography became something to be desired by entertainment-seeking audience members. The bodies of these performers were seen as commodified displays of physicality rather than displays of human experience. Audiences wanted to see large choruses of virtuosic ballet dancers executing movements of which they were not so inclined.

Similarly, when stage dance predominantly lost this connection to social dance, prioritizing the presentation of athleticism, attention drawn to the male ballet dancer's body ignited questions regarding masculinity within society. Ramsay Burt suggests that the turn of focus toward the performing body generated the attitude that it was "problematic and conflictual for men to enjoy looking at men dancing."<sup>61</sup> He continues. "The male body was, of course, the norm against which female anatomical and temperamental traits were judged. Men, by default and by implication, were considered to be less capable of transcending their natural lusts and desires and thus morally inferior. Thus women had some grounds for claiming to be purer and more disembodied than men."<sup>62</sup> Burt claims that this meant it was more appropriate for females to represent the ideal ballet dancer than males. As a result, dancing choruses in musicals would become primarily made up of

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>61</sup> Ramsay Burt, "The Trouble with the Male Dancer..." in *Moving History, Dancing Cultures: a Dance History Reader*, ed. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 46.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 47.

women through the mid-twentieth century—this is not to say that (dancing) men did not exist in the choruses of musical-style shows, they did; still the turn toward accepting the presentation of the female body entrenched a default content expectation for such productions. Male chorus members, especially concerning dance, became merely ancillary to the female chorus dancers.

Prior to this shift in social thinking, however, such associations of moral purity accompanied by fears about the female anatomy's power made it difficult for female performers to obtain such a prominent role in ballet. It was not until the mid-eighteenth century that the role of the female ballet dancer began to take prominence. When Marie Camargo entered the scene around 1726, she adopted many previously choreographed dance steps for men into her own dance vocabulary. At its earliest development, choreography for female roles reflected the patriarchal views of women in society; it was delicate and dainty—no leaps, pirouettes, or any higher leg work. The ballerina had yet to be seen as a “great stage persona.”<sup>63</sup> Because of Camargo—despite the fact that the female ballet costume was something similar to a long dress, an ornate headpiece, and a long scarf—the labor of the female body would begin to become relevant and recognized.<sup>64</sup>

As female performers began to dance more intricate and physically challenging steps, the costumes would become more flexible. This increase in flexibility—meaning a decrease in the amount of fabric covering the body—would not only lead to the showcasing of the physical female body but also its enaction of labor. Following Camargo, Marie Taglioni would help popularize a costume that would later become known as the Romantic tutu. This skirt, made of layers of tarlatan

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<sup>63</sup> Ann Daly, “Classical Ballet: A Discourse of Difference” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 111.

<sup>64</sup> Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library. “Dame en habit de ballet” New York Public Library Digital Collections. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/7c7f3a20-9b13-0130-216a-58d385a7b928>

and muslin, fell around mid-calf. It was not until after the 1862 tragedy of Emma Livry's tutu catching a gaslit lighting instrument, setting her on fire, and eventually killing her that the tutu was shortened once again.<sup>65</sup> Through the 1870s into the 1880s, the tutu became shorter and shorter, eventually leading to the classical tutu, often referred to today as a pancake tutu. The classical tutu is made of layers of tulle, jetting out up to eighteen inches from the dancer's hip, not touching their legs. The female body doing the laboring was not only able to be seen, but the exposed female bodies would become a sought-after attraction for a variety of performance genres.<sup>66</sup> The (female) physical body was a major contributing factor to what the audience would come to expect from choreography and performance: leaps, turns, lifts, legs, arms, and small waists. Moreover, a large group of these newly revealed, athletic, female dancing bodies became the new face of the chorus in ballets, operas, and melodramas—at least in Europe.

Despite the reverence for large choruses of female ballet dancing bodies abroad, in the United States—still a conservative, sentimentalist young country—the idea of a female body being exposed in any way was scandalous through much of the 1800s. While a few dancers and ballet troupes from Europe toured the U.S. through the 1830s-1850s, its popularity would not catch on for a few more decades. One of these touring ballet dancers was French performer Madame Celeste. Wearing the romantic era tutu, historical narratives credit her with helping to “dematerialize the revealed female stage body.”<sup>67</sup> Robert C. Allen's *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque in American Culture* provides a thorough analysis surrounding the presence of ballet in the United States:

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<sup>65</sup> Zoe Anderson, *The Ballet Lover's Companion* (Yale University Press, 2015), 14.

<sup>66</sup> Foster, *Choreographing Narrative*, 167.

<sup>67</sup> Robert Clyde Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 89.



Ballet appealed directly to the senses, and its effect was not mediated or channeled by words. The ballet dancer's talent did not lie in her ability to impersonate but in the grace and agility of her body. Ballet feminized dance and called attention to the female performer in a way and to a degree unthinkable in melodrama. The ballet dancer's presentation of self conflicted sharply with that ascribed to the true woman. Her art was predicated on the display of the physical self, not its effacement. She was constantly in motion, not standing passively by. Her costume foregrounded the materiality of the body, flaunted the physicality of women, revealed the outline of that secret half of the female body that sentimental fashion kept hidden.<sup>68</sup>

Still, this visceral engagement of the female body in the U.S. was met with great resistance. Well into the nineteenth century, ballet dancers were strongly associated with immorality, and productions were labeled as exhibitions “of female legs and bosoms upon the stage.”<sup>69</sup>

Counter to ballet's scandalous reputation in the United States, melodrama, too, contained dancing choruses but was seemingly far more popular. While some melodramas performed in respected theatres of the time attempted to integrate ballet into the plot, the body was not a presentation of feminine physicality, as Allen describes above. The chorus in these productions was simply used to populate the landscape where action was present. Words effectuated the dance, and dance was not, at first, incorporated primarily to show off the bodies' physical capabilities. Foster suggests that melodramas “required the body's zealous conformance to the dramatic action.”<sup>70</sup> Melodramas leaned on music, dazzling scenery, and suspense to enrapture audiences. As the plights of good versus evil drove the majority of the plots, victims awaiting heroic rescue were often rendered speechless. Foster argues such a conundrum invited necessary gestural expression. She posits, “By shifting into gesture at these critical junctures, melodrama helped to consolidate a new, dichotomous relationship between words and movement...Where words could

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>70</sup> Foster, *Choreography and Narrative*, 165.

dissimulate, gesture could only reveal the truth.”<sup>71</sup> This shift required audiences to focus on the embodied action as a necessary element to the narrative in a less intrusive manner. It is noteworthy that this generalized body being discussed is not necessarily gender-specific. Though, “the damsel in distress” trope was common, suggesting that female bodies may have done more of the gestured movement. This seemingly keeps with the notion that it was still more acceptable for (male) audiences to watch a female moving body than a male moving body.

Nevertheless, some melodramas did include dance. At first, social dance was a common component of melodrama either for atmospheric or plot-complementing purposes—particularly in the U.S., where ballet was not as celebrated. The inclusion of social dance in U.S. melodramas would have presumably allowed some male dancing bodies to be present. However, social dance was often considered more of a courting ritual than a presentation of physicality. As a result, the male social dancing body seemingly avoided disrepute. Even so, similar to the delay in popularity of ballet in the U.S., there would be a delay in the decline of social dance on stage—both would be inevitable.

As O.G. Brockett contends, “Like the lavish and spectacular scenery, which grew progressively more elaborate during the period 1800-1830, the ballet of the melodrama was designed, above all, to furnish a colorful and breath-taking display for audiences relatively indifferent to subtleties of style or characterization but avidly responsive to stage spectacle.”<sup>72</sup> Brockett analyzes the 1805 French melodrama *La Forteresse du Danube* by Guilbert De Pixérécourt in which the heroine character sings and dances to infiltrate a prison and free her father. As Brockett points out, “Here the crucial events of the plot are dependent upon the characterization

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>72</sup> O. G. Brockett, “The Function of Dance in the Melodramas of Guilbert de Pixérécourt,” *Modern Philology* 56, no. 3 (1959), 155.

of the heroine as a singer and a dancer.”<sup>73</sup> The movement of her body was motivated by her character’s need to overcome a seemingly dire situation. Although this connection between body, dance, and character is specific to that of a singular performer, such associations for the chorus were on the horizon. Chorus dances, ballet-based or social, in connection with drama would soon combine spectacle *with* characterization rather than acquiescing to an either/or situation.

In contrast, as the public desire for extravagant theatrical spectacle increased, the form of burlesque leaned into such predilections experimenting with how the performers’ bodies could become elements of spectacle. Throughout the 1860s, burlesque and what was affectionately called “leg business” became connected within popular culture, opening up the possibility for accepted displays of feminine physicality within U.S. society. Burlesque was initially rooted in farcical humor and political satire. It was actually a site where women had an opportunity to play male roles and vice versa. One significant shift prompted by burlesque was the notion of how to use performing bodies themselves as extravaganza. For example, Allen highlights Laura Keene’s *Seven Sisters*: “The *Clipper* called it an ‘extravagant extravaganza.’ Its one major innovation was having nearly all parts—male and female—played by women, arrayed in ‘shockingly low-necked dresses.’”<sup>74</sup> Allen makes similar notes for other productions leading to this conclusion:

The feminization of burlesque, raising as it inevitably if implicitly did the thorny issue of female representation onstage and, more generally, the role of women in American society, represents the passing of burlesque’s moral and social innocence...In the 1860s burlesque became something for bourgeois culture to watch—both in the literal sense of deriving pleasure from its spectacle of feminine physical display and in the sense of exercising moral oversight.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>74</sup> Allen, 105.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 108.

Such oversight, when combined with wholesome melodrama and the still scandalous ballet, would lead to the 1866 premiere of *The Black Crook* in New York City, frequently credited as the first American musical.

*The Black Crook's* position as one of the founding productions of musical comedy and musical theatre as we know it today does not merely rest on the historical narrative of its attempt to integrate song, music, text, and dance in order to tell one cohesive story; for evidence suggests melodramas made similar efforts. What is momentous about this production is that it reinvented how ideas of the dancing chorus as character, the female body as commodified spectacle, and dance as a narrative tool could be combined and utilized to serve a production. The display of the material bodies of the dancers in the chorus, as a part of the world of the production, would become essential for its success and the success of future musical theatre forms.

Labeling the production as “one of the most popular and successful stage spectacles of the nineteenth century,” Allen tells the story of how Henry Jarrett and Harry D. Palmer had a desire to produce a French ballet accompanied by fantastic scenery.<sup>76</sup> But, after losing their performance space to a fire, Niblo’s Garden manager William Wheatley had the idea to integrate their vision with a melodrama titled *The Black Crook* by Charles Barras. Allen points out that Barras’s script had “opportunities for song and dance built in,” thus opening the possibility for the dance and the dancers to be a part of the narrative rather than just a piece of extravagant diversion like in popular opera-ballets.<sup>77</sup> (Though, I would argue that its complicated, patch-work of a plot probably needed a little distraction).

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 113

Not dissimilar to the Guilbert De Pixérécourt melodramas analyzed by Brockett, *The Black Crook* utilized dance as a tool to bolster the narrative, transition from scene to scene, as well as add entertainment value. In the opening scene of the production, one of the principal characters, Carline, says, “But come, while ‘Mina is making ready let us rehearse our Festival Dance.”<sup>78</sup> Her line is followed by the stage directions: “Music: Grand Garland Dance by principals and full Ballet, during which the Males gather around the table and eat and drink.”<sup>79</sup> This dance is integrated (albeit lightly) into the narrative in two ways. First, it is directly referenced in the preceding dialogue as part of the play’s world; these characters are seemingly rehearsing for an upcoming festival performance. Second, both the principal characters in the scene and the chorus’s female members, labeled by playwright Charles Barras as “Female Villagers,” dance this number.<sup>80</sup> By including the female chorus in a dance *with* principal characters, they can be viewed as more than auxiliary.

According to archival images of *The Black Crook*, the chorus of dancing girls would have entered this opening scene wearing a post-1862 tragedy of Emma Livry tutu, meaning the skirt’s fabric would have landed quite some distance above the knee. Such a costuming choice would brand the production as that “Sinful Spectacle,” a must-see.<sup>81</sup> One of these images contains a description that states, “This is the original ballet that caused all the trouble on the opening night...when on the stage marched the chorus in *full-length tights!* most of the ladies in the audience left the theatre...they were so shocked...”<sup>82</sup> If we look at these dancing chorus girls

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<sup>78</sup> Charles Barras, *The Black Crook: The 1866 Musical Extravaganza* (Theatre Arts Press, 2015), 13.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>81</sup> An Old Playgoer, “When the Black Crook Was a Token of Total Depravity,” *The Sunday Herald*, Boston, May 25, 1919, E 3.

<sup>82</sup> “The Black Crook,” The Black Crook Collection, 1853-1929, Series IV: Drawings and Prints, Box 2, Folder 3, Performing Arts Collection PA-00113, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin, <https://hrc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15878coll29/id/554/rec/17>.

dramaturgically, it can be argued that such display of movement integrated into the story and costumed in this way allowed for the female chorus body to become integral to *The Black Crook*.

The dancing female chorus body throughout *The Black Crook* would “scandalize with their bold presentation of feminine physicality, but they did so silently in a removed romantic realm.”<sup>83</sup> As previously stated, the dance functioned to serve the plot, transition between scenes, and add spectacle. The female chorus functioned as a collective group of female villagers (and later in the production as fairies, serpents, and more) who lived in the Harz Mountains of Germany in 1600.<sup>84</sup> They were friends of Dame Barabra (and servants of fairy Queen Stalacta). The function of the bodies of the female chorus “is situated both in the context of other socially prescribed and socially meaningful ways of moving and in the context of the history of dance” in Western society, specifically in the United States. For the audience, the notion of scandalously exposing the female body, and even more so the dancing female body in society, is juxtaposed to how those bodies are living and received in the world of the play. In the world of *The Black Crook*, they are not scandalous; they are “normal.” The lightly clothed female body in *The Black Crook*’s 1600’s Harz Mountains of Germany is the way of life.

Because the dance was solely accompanied by music (meaning no lyrics), the audience would have been encouraged to focus on the movement. In fact, the dancers belonged to a French ballet troupe. Employing ballet dance as the style called attention to the female performer with the body unmasked from traditional costuming practices. Indeed, the foreignness of the performers would have also drawn additional intrigue. Although the revealing of the female body was still a relatively new phenomenon in the U.S., it had previously been done within a satirical context, not

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<sup>83</sup> Allen, 101.

<sup>84</sup> Barras, 9.

necessarily within drama. For *The Black Crook*, the use of both dance and the display of feminine sexuality within its imaginary world was justified in the dialogue—contrary to French opera divertissements or burlesque variety skits who most often activated these practices as pure spectacle.

According to an 1897 publication called “‘The Naked Truth:’ An Inside History of *The Black Crook*,” author Joseph Whitton cited production manager Henry Jarrett saying, “‘Legs are staple articles, and will never go out of fashion while the world lasts. They top the list of the ‘Beauties of Nature,’ and we will gather an array of them that will make even the surfeited New Yorker open his eyes and his pocket and hold his breath in astonishment.’”<sup>85</sup> Whitton continues, “‘No Ballet so complete in its *ensemble*, and with so ravishing a collection of the ‘Beauties of Nature,’ was ever before seen, or, if it were, certainly not by cisatlantic eyes.’”<sup>86</sup> Until *The Black Crook*, in the United States, ballet was not typically produced in legitimate, higher class theatres such as Niblo’s Garden.<sup>87</sup> But Jarrett, Palmer, and Wheatly intentionally used the performativity of the female leg as a fundamental component of their drama.

The emphasis on the female body and female chorus throughout this section points to an under-discussed but noteworthy developmental factor perpetuated by *The Black Crook*. Building on the earlier discussion regarding the social shift from male dancers to female dancers, the male dancer gets noticeably left behind. As a result, through the late-nineteenth, early-twentieth centuries, the dancing choruses are predominantly female. Male chorus members were often

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<sup>85</sup> Robert M. Lewis, *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America, 1830-1910* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007), 199.

See Joseph Whitton, “The Naked Truth:” *An Inside History of the Black Crook* (Philadelphia: H.W. Shaw, 1897), [5]-6, 10, 32.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Allen, 76.

present to fill out the world of characters and, if necessary, support the dancing female. Looking at the garland dance once again with this in mind, the stage directions read: “Music: Grand Garland Dance by principles and full Ballet, during which the Males gather around the table and eat and drink.”<sup>88</sup> These directions infer that “full Ballet” means the female villagers—the archival images equally support this inference. The notion of the males simply gather around and wait for the dance to end highlights the fact that their role, in so much as their dancing body’s involvement, was not as significant. At times the gender script for groups of characters such as serpents, fairies, gnomes, and amphibia is unclear in the text; yet, based on archival images of these groups and program dictations, numbers featuring these roles were performed by the female chorus.<sup>89</sup> One image features a male dancer lifting a female dancer in what appears to be a pas de deux—dance for two, typically a male and a female.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, the background landscape of this image paints only female dancers.

The inessentiality of male dancers does not mean male chorus bodies were not necessary; they just functioned differently. Scripting the male chorus bodies within the world but not prioritizing them as dancers speaks to cultural philosophies of the time. Historiographically it supports the concept that socially it was unacceptable for male audience members to enjoy watching other men dance. From a commercial and marketing perspective, promoting and choreographing only a female dancing chorus was necessary for appealing to a larger audience

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<sup>88</sup> Barras, 13.

<sup>89</sup> “Theatre programs for The Black Crook at the Temple, Portsmouth, Boston Theatre, Niblo’s Garden, Gayety Theatre, and an unidentified theater,” The Black Crook Collection, 1853-1929, Series III: Playbills, Programs, and Clippings, Box 1, Folder 23, Performing Arts Collection PA-00113, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin, <https://cdm15878.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15878coll29/id/405/rec/26>.

<sup>90</sup> “The Macgiltons, Eccentric Dancers, at Niblo’s Garden, New York, in the Black Crook,” The Black Crook Collection, 1853-1929, Series IV: Drawings and Prints, Box 2, Folder 1, Performing Arts Collection PA-00113, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin, <https://cdm15878.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15878coll29/id/549>.



population. Whereas using a male chorus was only necessary to support moments of the plot and maintaining the socially accepted presentation of this male body was equally significant.

Principles of the body and movement in ballet, melodrama, and burlesque all collide within the first ten minutes of this five-hour production and continue through its finale, allowing *The Black Crook* to expose a new type of chorus that would prevail in musical theatre. The entrance of such accepted, dramatized feminine physicality into U.S. legitimate theatre would be marked as a milestone in the evolution of the performing body and inspire countless future productions to explore and exploit such a phenomenon. Following *The Black Crook*, the United States would experience a profound increase of spectacular productions centered on the exposure of the female body and collectives of female bodies, as evident with successes such as Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes.<sup>91</sup> Subsequent theatrical forms and productions capitalized on these ideas that would eventually dictate how we conceptualize “the chorus line” even today.

Embracing the novelty of the burlesque-style leg show, in 1890, (White) theatre manager Sam T. Jack would attempt to open up a similar space for Black female performers to thrive. For the better part of the nineteenth century, Black performers—who were almost explicitly male—were subject to performing in minstrel shows. Author of *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls*, Allen Woll argues, “The minstrel show trained generations of black performers...for theatrical and musical careers, but it also forced them to perpetuate the genre’s derogatory stereotypes of black life. Since the minstrel show was often the only outlet for black performers, they had no choice.”<sup>92</sup> Jack’s *The Creole Show* stepped away from the typical

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<sup>91</sup> For more in-depth analysis on their work see Robert Clyde Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

<sup>92</sup> Allen L. Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: from Coontown to Dream Girls* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 2.

plantation backdrop of minstrel shows and circumvented the convention of blackface. Featuring sixteen Black “long-legged chorus girls, smart urban comedy, [and] fashionable costumes” the production exposed White audiences around the country to dancing bodies unlike they had ever seen.<sup>93</sup> *The Creole Show*’s successor, *The Octoroons* (1895), produced by (White) John W. Isham, similarly aggrandized the all-Black female chorus, billing itself as a musical farce.<sup>94</sup> Experimenting with new and evolving performance genres, both were relatively successful in New York City and during their tours around the country. These two productions ignited a change regarding *who* was able to succeed as a female chorus body. Even so, they were still far from altering the racial hierarchies of the industry and the United States.

In 1907 the Ziegfeld Follies premiered—a notable descendant to these leg business, female chorus-centered productions. Inspired by the 1869 French Folies Bergère, Ziegfeld developed a production that further inscribed the notion of the “chorus girl” or the “showgirl” into U.S. entertainment. The Ziegfeld Follies was, in essence, a grand musical revue that presented synchronized dance and pageantry of beautiful chorus girls. Ziegfeld’s chorus became more than just background filler in a production; he positioned the collective of chorus girls as the revue’s primary focus. The productions did not promote any specific narrative; instead, the very premise was to present feminine sexuality as pure spectacle and entertainment. During the nearly thirty years of performances, thousands of women would bear the title “Ziegfeld Girl.”

Linda Mizejewski’s book *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema* analyzes the showgirl’s embodiment of a “fantasy of American womanhood” and how the female body “worked as a powerful icon of race, sexuality, class, and consumerist desires early in this century,

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<sup>93</sup> Stewart F. Lane, *Black Broadway: African Americans on the Great White Way* (Garden City Park, NY: Square One Publishers, 2015), 22.

<sup>94</sup> Woll, 4.

with resonances persisting into the present day.”<sup>95</sup> She argues that Ziegfeld commodified the female body to sell such displays of sexual imagery in a seemingly high-class, respectable manner as a form of entertainment for the middle-class. Mark Franko’s Marxist history of dance in the 1930s suggests, “The chorus girl performs not only the commodification of sex but also the fascination of the commodity itself as spectacle. Her glamorized body makes the commodity work both in and as the activity of exchange.”<sup>96</sup> Through a very strategic marketing campaign, Ziegfeld frequently promoted high spending on the costuming for the girls: the jewels, fabrics, and furs. This aided in the bolstering of the social status of his performers. A quintessential element of the Follies was the parade of young chorus girls simply walking across the stage in grand, expensive costumes. The showgirl body became an icon in American culture; it became a symbol of the ideal, authentic, “American” woman. Furthermore, the showgirl/female dancing chorus member became a less scandalized profession. It was far more widely accepted, admired, sought after, and perhaps most importantly, expected.

It would be irresponsible to omit the verity that, as Mizejewski firmly asserts, the ideal, authentic Ziegfeld Follies dancer body was distinctly White. She cites historiographer Robert C. Toll saying, “‘He [Ziegfeld] never said it, but they had to be Caucasians’... ‘Of some three thousand women he chose to be Ziegfeld Girls...’” there were no people of color.<sup>97</sup> The first person of color to join the Ziegfeld Follies cast was Bert Williams in 1910, a famous Black vaudeville and minstrel performer—though, he performed in blackface.<sup>98</sup> Ziegfeld’s production of

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<sup>95</sup> Linda Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>96</sup> Franko, 34.

<sup>97</sup> Mizejewski, 9.

Whiteness onstage and its association with glamour and idolatry holds a specific weight in the grand narrative that has been, and in some ways still is, the performing body in musical theatre.

In 1921, a new revue-style musical production would challenge such construction of Whiteness onstage, *Shuffle Along*. An all-Black American creative team, music by Eubie Black, lyrics by Noble Sissle, and book by F.E. Miller and Aubrey Lyles, *Shuffle Along* helped to legitimize the presence of Black artists on Broadway. In an interview for CUNY TV's "Theatre Talk," George C. Wolfe, creator and director of *Shuffle Along, or, the Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All that Followed* (2016), referred to the many ways this production was remarkable for its time: the first jazz score—introducing syncopation, onstage romance between Blacks, and integrating White and Black audience members.<sup>99</sup> Woll, argues, "This show broke several barriers (the love taboo, for instance), but its links to the minstrel stage were strong. Its comedy of malapropisms and black chicanery tended to reinforce existing stereotypes rather than change them."<sup>100</sup> However, one character-based formulaic structure did change *how* bodies, particularly chorus bodies, would perform onstage.

In opposition to the pageantry and idolatry of White female sexuality in the Ziegfeld Follies, *Shuffle Along* positioned their female performers in a different way. Wolfe explained:

One of the things that *Shuffle Along* contributed to the formation of the American musical is it was the first time there was a women's dancing hoofing chorus. The first time that women were not ornamentation that would parade about... The chorus of *Shuffle Along* were these stomping, sexy, incredible dancing women... as a result... because of their dynamic. Ziegfeld then hired the girls from *Shuffle Along* to teach the girls in his Follies how to dance.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> George C. Wolfe, "Theatre Talk: 'Shuffle Along,'" interviewed by Michael Riedel and Susan Haskins, CUNYTV 75, YouTube video, 26:45, May 31, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S402aHwD3w0>.

<sup>100</sup> Woll, 78.

<sup>101</sup> George C. Wolfe, "Audra McDonald and George C. Wolfe | Interview | TimesTalks," interviewed by Wesley Morris, *New York Times* Events, YouTube video, 51:31, February 23, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJDbK03o6d8>.

As jazz and tap made their palpable entrance into the Broadway scene, the female chorus reattached itself to associations of skill and athleticism that had waned behind the presentation of sexuality and glamour. In Jean and Marshall Stearns's *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular*, they report, "The most impressive innovation of *Shuffle Along* was the dancing of the sixteen-girl chorus line. When not dancing on stage, they sang in the wings to keep things moving...They started a new trend in Broadway musicals...Above all, musical comedy took on a new and rhythmic life, and chorus girls began learning to dance jazz."<sup>102</sup> Florenz Ziegfeld and George Gershwin were among many successful White artists frequently seen at productions of *Shuffle Along* who would come to "incorporate" ideas they gleaned from the show into their own. Despite having a run of 504 performances and three national tours, *Shuffle Along* would fade into the background of history while White musical productions appropriated and popularized its sound, aesthetics, and even plot elements. As Wolfe points out, the chorus women of the production were subsequently hired by several (White) producers and directors to teach White women how to execute their jazz, hoofing dance style.

A noteworthy line to follow is Ziegfeld's response to *Shuffle Along*. In addition to bringing in chorus girls from the production to teach—not to perform—he also included a song entitled "It's Getting Dark on Old Broadway" into the *Follies* revue. Mizejewski's argument about this number is crucial to understanding what Ziegfeld did *after* the *Follies*. She contends:

The staging of this number in the 1922 *Follies* imaginatively enacted the acknowledgments and anxieties of cross-racial desire. A lighting effect caused the chorus girls and their white costumes to take on a brown tint as they danced...As the song ended, the lighting picked out their white dresses and made their bodies' recede into undistinguishable black,' according to reviewer Seldes. The total effect was whiteness to brownness to predominance of (white) costume over body. The

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<sup>102</sup> Marshall Winslow Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: the Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 139.

image sums up the ghostly projection of beautiful, black, 'primitive' bodies, used to fetishize the blondness and fashionability of the Ziegfeld enterprise.<sup>103</sup>

Following *Shuffle Along's* success, White producers, especially Florenz Ziegfeld, recognized that there was potential for Black bodies and Black cultural forms onstage to enhance entertainment value outside of minstrel-like comedy sketches. Even though Jack and Isham made similar attempts pre-Follies, the trend did not become widespread. Moreover, the performing chorus had yet to be racially integrated. "It's Getting Dark on Old Broadway" in some ways acted similar to blackface (which was used throughout the Follies in different instances); the lighting allowed these White bodies to take on color as a performative tool calling attention to an increasingly race-conscious Broadway and fetishizing "black" female bodies for a White audience. Still, these White performers possessed the agency and privilege to maintain their elegance and voguish status. The power of the racialized, performing chorus body was being commodified.

When commodifying the body for performance, the individual acts of labor can effectuate socially determined identity markers. Helen Thomas posits the notion that the body "is a carrier of symbolic value, which develops in concert with other social forces...the body has to come to be inscribed and invested with power, status and particular symbolic forms that are crucial to the accumulation of certain resources."<sup>104</sup> *Shuffle Along's* laboring Black female chorus bodies perform characters that can do jazz and tap dance while equally performing their socioeconomic conditions of working-class Black Americans. Many shows at the time featuring all-Black casts "[revealed] that the male actors frequently used blackface to make themselves darker, minstrel-style, for comic effect, whereas the chorus girls were generally light-skinned or high yellow and

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<sup>103</sup> Mizejewski, 129.

<sup>104</sup> Helen Thomas, *The Body, Dance, and Cultural Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 56.

often had Caucasian features.”<sup>105</sup> The emphasis on light-skinned Black women in the chorus suggests that the cross-racial desire fostered the potential for the integration of White and (light) Black performers. Notwithstanding the undeniably conspicuous staging of Whiteness, Florenz Ziegfeld has been labeled “a pioneer in racially integrated Broadway productions.”<sup>106</sup> Such an accolade was unquestionably procured when, in 1927, Florenz Ziegfeld took a sharp turn from his flashy, campy Follies producing a whole new type of musical on Broadway, *Show Boat*.

Based on Edna Ferber’s book of the same name and written by Jerome Kern, P.G. Wodehouse, and Oscar Hammerstein II, *Show Boat* is known in history to be a dramatic shift in the genre of the musical play, moving beyond the popular musical comedy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in favor of a more complex, narrative-driven production.<sup>107</sup> Inspired by the trend toward realism and naturalism in drama, integrating dialogue, music, and dance with the intention of evoking an emotional response from an audience, rather than merely entertaining and providing them with opportunities to laugh, would be revolutionary. Originally staged by Oscar Hammerstein II and choreographed by Sammy Lee, *Show Boat* was radically different from the leg show, musical comedies that had been popular for nearly fifty years. *Show Boat* brought about a fundamental shift in the aesthetics of the chorus in a musical production, which would consequently affect their function. The chorus in *Show Boat* enhanced its position as a supplemental narrativizing tool through integration processes—integrating the chorus into the plot and integrating White and Black bodies onstage together as one community for the first time.

The story is about a family of performers who live on a river showboat, the Cotton Blossom, that travels up and down the Mississippi River. It takes place during the time frame 1887-

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<sup>105</sup> Mizejewski, 123.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>107</sup> Jerome Kern, Oscar Hammerstein, and Edna Ferber, *Show Boat* (New York: T.B. Harms, 1927).

1927, attempting to combat ideas of racism in conversation with love, addiction, and economic hardship. Though after the Civil War, Jim Crow laws had segregated countless spaces in the North and South alike and continued to push against any possibility of interracial romantic relationships. The realist, serious content of the plot required the chorus to be more than just supportive background for the principles. They portrayed people who lived along the Mississippi River encountering the Cotton Blossom as it traveled. They were performers on the boat, workers, wives, husbands, etc. Many faced acts of racism or bore witness to such hardship, oppression, and segregation. While they were still, in many ways, anonymous chorus members, they had an essential part to play in the story. In 1934, producer Eddie Cantor suggested:

Only in one show were Zieggy's notions of color and costume distributed. He wondered how he could glorify the colored people in *Show Boat*. He wanted fantastic costumes and typical *Follies* scenery, but both Jerome Kern, the composer of *Show Boat*, and Joseph Urban persuaded him to use realistic effects/ It was the one show where Zieggy compromised and sacrificed his own ideas of glorification. The costumes of every period and locality were faithful historical reproductions and the scenery was as real and unpretentious as any legitimate show. It was a great sacrifice for Zieggy to make, but in the end the total effect of the production proved the wisdom of this move.<sup>108</sup>

*Show Boat's* tendency toward realism would not only change *who* was allowed to perform in the chorus on Broadway, but it would also begin to change *how* the chorus could potentially operate beyond "background."

In Frank W. D. Ries's chronicle of choreographer Sammy Lee's Broadway career, he detailed *Show Boat's* chorus as follows: "after the principals, a chorus of ninety-six, including thirty-six white chorus girls, sixteen white chorus boys, sixteen black male singers, sixteen black female singers, and twelve black female dancers. The thirty-six [white] chorus girls were further

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<sup>108</sup> Todd R Decker, *Show Boat: Performing Race in an American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 106.

See also Eddie Cantor, *Ziegfeld: The Great Glorifier* (New York: A.H. King, 1934), 144.



divided between twenty-four ‘Glorified Beauties’ and twelve dancing girls...”<sup>109</sup> From this breakdown, two noteworthy elements are illuminated. First, there is a specific delineation for singers versus dancers (versus ‘Glorified Beauties’)—an idea I will return to shortly. Second, and most importantly, in the interest of placing a magnifying glass on the segregation in the United States, the production had two choruses: a White chorus and a Black chorus. Todd Decker argues, “The black chorus was central to the success of *Show Boat*. The black chorus numbers would be subject to alteration and elimination in subsequent decades, but in 1927 the black chorus was an essential part of the whole.”<sup>110</sup> Decker provides us with a thorough analysis of the presence and clear distinction of a Black chorus in his book *Show Boat, Performing Race in an American Musical*. His chapter “Colored Chorus Curtains” ultimately argues the use of a Black chorus in opposition to a White chorus or even one integrated chorus allowed for the creation of an additional narrative that ran through the production of *Show Boat*. The “additional narrative” Decker alludes to is that which narrates the inherent social challenges Black Americans faced every day. This narrative went beyond the characters’ difficulties in the show and pointed to a sociopolitical issue within the larger United States.

Although the show offered a sympathetic and earnest portrayal of Black American life in the U.S., there were still several stereotypes the performers of color had to enact. For example, the scene (which was later cut from any subsequent production) “In Dahomey” took place at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. In this number, the Black chorus portrays a living ethnological display of a group of native Africans singing “a parody with primitive gibberish lyrics intended to sound ‘African.’”<sup>111</sup> Ries elaborates:

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<sup>109</sup> Frank W.D. Ries, “Sammy Lee: The Broadway Career,” *Dance Chronicle*, 9:1, (1985) 66-68.

<sup>110</sup> Decker, 106.

<sup>111</sup> Robin Breon, “Show Boat: The Revival, the Racism,” *TDR: Drama Review* 39, no. 2 (1995), 89.

This is supposed to be the Zulu exhibit at the World's Fair and includes movements for the sixteen black male singers, some more-complicated movements for the sixteen black female singers, and a very vigorous and acrobatic dance for the twelve black female dancers. The men demonstrate their spear throwing, and the singing chorus of women has some folk-dance steps in a spiral and traveling figure-eight formation; the dancers have jetés, running steps into a sliding fall onto the knees, and fast spins around the frightened crowd of white folk, who rush from the scene. The 'Zulus' immediately drop their façade and admit they are from 'Avenue A,' rather than Africa, and for seventy-eight more bars of jazzier music they perform 'step dancing at a moderate tempo,' ...<sup>112</sup>

The use of this "African savage" stereotype is just one of many examples where Black performers were subject to racist ideas, even if Hammerstein was attempting to use them in a subversive way. Including Black bodies onstage with White bodies all working together to tell one cohesive narrative had not yet been seen on Broadway.

As I mentioned above, this complicated web of ninety-six chorus members also highlights a tension between singer versus dancer (versus "Beauty") that would continue well into the 1950s. These tensions are equally still wrapped up in race and gendered ideals. Leaning on Reis's detailed breakdown of the chorus, dichotomies of male versus female, White versus Black, and dancer versus singer each serve different functions within the show. In the opening number, the Black male singers are labeled "Stevedores," and the Black female singers are labeled "Gals." They sing about working on the river while the White folks get to play. These singing Black bodies are the first characters in the production with whom the audience interacts. Bearing witness to the laboring Black characters and obtaining information regarding the setting of the story from their voices before the White characters established the production as an empathetic narrative regarding the Black experience in the U.S. at the time—albeit the language and the stereotypes used throughout are undoubtedly harmful from today's perspective, in 1927 staging such affinity for Black bodies

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<sup>112</sup> Reis, 74.

was unheard of. Scripting the Black chorus in this way noted to the audience that their perspective was crucial to understanding the sociopolitical milieu of *Show Boat*.

Further on in the scene, the stage directions read: “A group of dainty, beruffled, MINCING MISSES enter from R. and L. They go over to pictures. GALS moving up stage again, imitate mincing gait.”<sup>113</sup> While the Stevedores still work, the Gals are juxtaposed to the “Mincing Misses”—the White female dancing chorus. According to an archived annotated script, these Mincing Misses would have been portrayed by Ziegfeld’s twenty-four Glorified Beauties. Remembering that Ziegfeld was encouraged to use realistic costuming throughout, the graceful movements and feminine physique guided by his casting of the Beauties would have still framed these bodies as representing ideal American women. As the Mincing Misses float onto the stage, audiences garner an understanding of their bodies and characters as being more affluent and pretentious. When the Gals imitate their walk, a subtext regarding the desire for upward mobility (and potentially Whiteness) arises.

Following their entrance, the next set of stage directions read, “The local BEAUX then make a dashing entrance from Stage R. like the young bucks they are—they stand off and ogle the demure maidens.”<sup>114</sup> While the Stevedores continue to work and the Gals drift upstage to a less prominent viewing position, the Beaux—the White male chorus—sings about the fairness and the beauty of the White female chorus. The Beaux becomes established as opposite the Stevedores as they have time to stand around and fawn over the (White) women. To that end, the groups of men and women are also kept very distinctly separate. The Gals are set up in the text as being cooks

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<sup>113</sup> Jerome Kern, Oscar Hammerstein, and Edna Ferber, *Show Boat*.  
See: “Ziegfeld Script 1,” Performing Arts Research Collections-Theatre, New York Public Library, T-Mss 1987-010, Box 5, 1-1-3, pg 9, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2014/07/08/musical-month-show-boat>.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

and mothers while the working Stevedores tell them to “git along.”<sup>115</sup> The Stevedores do not have time for such distraction and ogling. On the other hand, the Beaux’s precisely position the Mincing Misses as objects for their viewing pleasure.

According to the annotated script, the White female dancing chorus is not present during this scene; they are found when there are, of course, key moments of ballet. For example, in Act Two: Scene Six, the stage directions with annotations read: “The Trocadero Restaurant—New Year’s Eve. Gay Scene. Crowd [Group C and Group D] at tables around Stage. NEGRO WAITERS [Group A] bustling around. Ballet [Ballet] Dance in progress.”<sup>116</sup> According to Decker’s analysis of archival scripts from 1927, “In act one scene one, pink notations...assign letters to each group of chorus members: A for “16 colored” men; B for the “Gals” (Hammerstein’s term for the women of the black chorus); C for “24 white girls” (called “Mincing Misses” in the script), and D for “16 White” men.”<sup>117</sup> Based on his dictation regarding the specifics of each of these groups, it can be inferred that Group B, the Black female chorus, was not present in this scene. Additionally, it suggests that Group C, the Glorified Beauties, were among the crowd with Group D, the White men. This leaves the twelve White female dancing chorus members as the ballet dancers for the scene. Male ballet dancing bodies are not included, suggesting that the social perception regarding the male dancing chorus body had not yet shifted. These female dancers were solely used for “show within a show” purposes. In the plot, their dance was on a stage being watched by an audience, rather than being integrated as an additional way to move the plot itself

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 2-6-31, pg 114.

<sup>117</sup> Doug Reside, “Musical of the Month: *Show Boat*,” Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center, July 8, 2014, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2014/07/08/musical-month-show-boat>.

See “RM 7787 A,” “Show boat: typescript, circa 1927,” Performing Arts Research Collections-Theatre, New York Public Library.

forward. Their bodies and their dance were used for atmospheric and spectacle enhancing purposes.

In the same vein, Ziegfeld's reputation for producing "showgirls" was not completely lost in his transition to this new performance genre. In the number "Who Do I Love You?" the twenty-four "Glorified Beauties" enter the space and strike a series of poses framing the principal characters performing the duet Magnolia and Gaylord. Magnolia is choreographed to weave in and out of the posing Beauties and their large skirts. The Beauties continue to form a variety of poses around the set until the number ends.<sup>118</sup> While their role at this juncture is not necessarily essential to the plot, and they are not present to perform a skill (dancing or singing), they underscore a vital component of the story. Prior to this number, Magnolia was chosen to replace Julie as the leading lady in the show because Julie was revealed to be of mixed race and having an illegal interracial relationship. The bodies of the Glorified Beauties function to amplify and juxtapose Magnolia as the "ideal" (White) American performer.

*Show Boat* marks a foundational moment for the metamorphosing musical comedy genre as it takes on a more serious narrative. Its complex chorus highlights a shifting social consciousness regarding race in the United States, though it perpetuates conceptions of gender roles propping up the (White) female body as an element of spectacle. It arguably also reifies the segregation between White and Black people at this time in history. Not dissimilarly, as the form of musical theatre grows, the concepts of racial integration and gendered faculties, specifically for the chorus, remain in flux.

Throughout the 1920s, vaudeville, musical comedy, and operetta were among popular genres experimenting with the *who* and the *how* of performing. Even though *Show Boat* practiced

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<sup>118</sup> Reis, 73.

normative, patriarchal divisions between male and female choruses, specifically uplifting the (White) female dancing chorus, others considered the possibilities for male choruses. One such show was *The Student Prince* (1924), music by Sigmund Romberg with book and lyrics by Dorothy Donnelly. Featuring thirty-six male chorus members ecstatically singing drinking songs—during Prohibition—the show was a success, running for nearly six-hundred performances.<sup>119</sup> Although producer Jacob J. Schubert was reportedly upset about the absence of a female chorus line, the production’s success prompted him to continue incorporating large male choruses in his subsequent shows.<sup>120</sup> According to Kellee Rene Van Aken’s study *Race and Gender in the Broadway Chorus*, “By 1928 A.B. Waters notes in an article for the *Public Ledger* dated May 10, that operetta has overdone the rousing male chorus, ‘The first few rapturously greeted; of late there has been a definite decline in favor of enthusiasm.’ After four years of boisterous male vocals the novelty had worn off....Musical comedy was slower to pick up on the trend.”<sup>121</sup> Still, Van Aken’s study of this operetta male chorus avoids a conversation regarding dance. The male dancing chorus would not gain traction until the 1940s and 1950s.

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<sup>119</sup> Foster Hirsch, “The Long-Distance Runners,” in *The Boys From Syracuse: The Shuberts’ Theatrical Empire* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 151.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>121</sup> Kellee Rene Van Aken, “Race and Gender in the Broadway Chorus” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2007), 109.

See A.B. Waters, “Nothing too Much,” *Boston Transcript*, New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theater Collections, May 10, 1928.

### 2.3 A Part of the Play: Integrating Dance and the Chorus as a Narrative Tool

As the idea of the “book musical” was growing in popularity, there was an increase in experimentation with integrated musicals that propelled a reimagining of dance’s role within these productions. Choreographers such as Agnes de Mille, Katherine Dunham, and Jerome Robbins would play with the relationship between dance and spectacle, dance and metaphor, dance and psychology, as well as dance and narrative. With these new explorations would also come an evolution of the functions of the chorus: namely, chorus as an essential character(s). For example, the inclusion of grand dance numbers we have affectionately called “dream ballets” opened up windows into the psychology of principal characters or the society in the world of the show. The highly trained dancing chorus in these numbers served as characters who were furthering the plot. Even though these “dream ballets” were often occurring in a liminal space, between real-time moments in a production, they made an impact on how audiences engage with and understand a production.

The popular chronicle of musical theatre history has declared the 1943 production of *Oklahoma!* was the first *fully* integrated musical. But, as more modern historians and scholars such as John Kenrick, Bruce Kirle, and Warren Hoffman assert, the title of “first” is immensely complicated. Kenrick’s broad scope of musical theatre history begins with the statement, “Anyone who thinks that *Oklahoma!* was the first musical to integrate music and dialogue is off by more than two thousand years.”<sup>122</sup> Though he is completely missing dance in that conversation, he goes all the way back to the Greeks. Kirle explores the beginning of the modern musical from the 1910s

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<sup>122</sup> John Kenrick, *Musical Theatre: a History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), 7.

onward: *Nobody Home* (1915), *Rose-Marie* (1924), *Show Boat* (1927), and *Porgy and Bess* (1935).<sup>123</sup> Hoffman acknowledges *Show Boat* (1927), *Pal Joey* (1940), and *Lady in the Dark* (1941) before making the declaration that while these shows “also pushed on the boundaries of the musical’s form and content, for most musical historians there is only Before-*Oklahoma!* and After-*Oklahoma!*” maintaining the line that the show “combined story, music, and dance, creating what forever after would be known as the ‘integrated musical.’”<sup>124</sup> Hoffman’s point regarding the popular marking of time as Before-*Oklahoma!* and After-*Oklahoma!*, whether it is “first” or not, has cemented the year of 1943 as the beginning of “Golden Age” musical theatre.

Looking at the development of the integrated book musical from the less frequently traveled perspective of dance, I would like to begin my Golden Age musical narrative with the 1940 production of *Cabin in the Sky* choreographed by Katherine Dunham and directed and co-choreographed by George Balanchine.<sup>125</sup> A 1999 interview with Constance Valis Hill went as follows:

CVH: Miss Dunham, it has been claimed that *Oklahoma!* [1943], the so-called ballet Americana gained prominence on the Broadway stage. But when I look at *Cabin in the Sky* [1940], I see there was this fusion of American vernacular dance, ballet, and Broadway show dancing. I don’t want to put any labels on anything, but I would like to know what you think about the claim that *Oklahoma!* was one of the first to fuse these forms.

KD: I wasn’t happy about that. Agnes [Agnes DeMille, choreographer of *Oklahoma!*] and I knew each other. It has happened to me several times: people

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<sup>123</sup> Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 16-23.

<sup>124</sup> Warren Hoffman, *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 58.

<sup>125</sup> Balanchine was billed as “co-choreographer.” However, Dunham asserts, “He was staging the entire show, and it kept him pretty busy. I think he did pretty much trust me for the choreography, especially since the company was mine. I couldn’t tell you [if he helped choreograph the number]. When people are able to work together—He may have.

See Constance Valis Hill, “Collaborating with Balanchine on *Cabin in the Sky*: Interviews with Katherine Dunham,” in *Kaiso!: Writings by and About Katherine Dunham*, ed. Vèvè A. Clark and Sarah East Johnson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 245.



taking some of the songs I have researched—you know, popular songs—and translating them. I guess it's bound to happen. I was really annoyed with her [DeMille] because I think her idea came from something called the plantation dances, not in *Cabin in the Sky*, but in our concerts. I had prided myself on using my work and my discoveries for establishing certain things about black dance. [...] I remember feeling annoyed at her because I feel we were the first to do that.<sup>126</sup>

Dunham points out that her use of “plantation dances,” which combined ballet, African American, Afro Caribbean, and American social dances, in her previous ballets *L'Ag'Ya* (1938), *Tropics* (1939), *Le Jazz' Hot'* (1939), or *Rites de Passage* (1941) may have directly influenced de Mille's choreography in numbers such as “The Farmer and The Cowman” or “Laurey Makes Up Her Mind.” Though, she did indeed also use this similar hybrid style of dance in *Cabin in the Sky*. Regardless of whether de Mille was or was not “inspired” by these dances, what Dunham is pointing to here is a larger conversation about historiography that is so often determined by the “winners.” In this case, the “winners” were the more financially successful team, which happened to be White (lyrics and book: Oscar Hammerstein II, music: Richard Rodgers, direction: Rouben Mamoulian, and of course choreography: Agnes de Mille). But, what is crucial to understand is the very idea that creating hybrid dance styles and placing them on stage in a way that served the narrative, style, and themes of a production were happening in multiple spheres at this time.

Dance in musical productions leading up to the 1940s predominantly served three functions: dance as spectacle, dance to transition to another scene, dance to allow the characters to express themselves. Correspondingly, the chorus has functioned as spectacle or background support; it was just starting to become a narrative element. The traditional use of ballet or Western social dances, contained within their own genre, had most often been used in situations where there

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<sup>126</sup> Constance Valis Hill, “Collaborating with Balanchine on *Cabin in the Sky*: Interviews with Katherine Dunham,” in *Kaiso!: Writings by and About Katherine Dunham*, ed. Vèvè A. Clark and Sarah East Johnson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 242-243.

needed to be a waltz or a “show within a show” production number. Jaw-dropping tap numbers were also now popular for entertainment value. Dance had yet to become a seamlessly spoken language within a production.

If we begin our analysis with *Cabin in the Sky* rather than with *Oklahoma!*, the narrative of integrating (hybrid) dance, and thusly the chorus, into the book musical shifts. Laurey’s dream ballet in *Oklahoma!* is still significant in establishing a “fully integrated musical,” and it will not go undiscussed here, but so too is the dance that leads the audience into Jim Henry’s Paradise in *Cabin in the Sky*. In *Cabin in the Sky*, Dunham used dance to create a social atmosphere that was essential for understanding the predominately Black American, Southern town setting for the show. Her hybrid dance style for the people living in this world allowed dance to become a part of their everyday vocabulary. Combining genres from their ancestral culture as well as the culture of the United States allowed for the social and performance worlds to collapse in on one another. The movement began to affect how the people living in the world of the show thought, spoke, and traveled.

In order to understand Dunham’s choreography for *Cabin in the Sky*, it is important first to garner a brief biographical history. She began her dance career as a ballerina in 1928, at nineteen years old. Just two short years later, she formed the Ballet Nègre in Chicago, which was one of the first Black American ballet companies in the United States.<sup>127</sup> In 1936, while studying at the University of Chicago, Dunham was awarded a fellowship to study dance and ethnography in the Caribbean. Her fieldwork was conducted on the islands of Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, and

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<sup>127</sup> Vèvè A. Clark and Sarah East Johnson, “Chronology,” in *Kaiso!: Writings by and About Katherine Dunham*, ed. Vèvè A. Clark and Sarah East Johnson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), xvii.

Trinidad, from which she brought back various dance techniques rooted within the African diaspora.

Upon returning home, she choreographed her first full-length dance piece titled *L'Ag'ya*. *L'Ag'ya* was developed from her ballet training but was equally rendered from dances she learned in the Caribbean, such as a fighting dance from the island of Martinique. This piece was presented in 1938 as a part of the Federal Theatre Project's special Negro Unit branch, of which Dunham was later appointed director. In 1940, she went to New York City to work on the International Ladies Garment Worker's Union's production of *Pins and Needles*, bringing with her dancers from Ballet Nègre. These dancers would also travel with her, just a few months later, as chorus members for *Cabin in the Sky*. In her years post-ethnographic study, Dunham would develop a dance style (that would eventually become known as Dunham Technique) combining Western concert and social dance with Afro-Caribbean dance philosophies such as poly-rhythm, torso isolations, and spiritual awareness.

In a reflection on her time with *Cabin in the Sky*, Dunham states:

What would the connection between the Carnival dance, whose function is sexual stimulus and release, and almost any similar situation in a Broadway musical—for example, the temptation scene on the River Nile in *Cabin in the Sky*? It would be the similarity in function, and through this similarity in function the transference of certain elements of forms would be legitimate.<sup>128</sup>

Carnival dances were typically practiced leading up to the Lenten season, and the movement was often a line connecting the material world with the spiritual world. By combining movements and ideas she gleaned from Carnival dance with Western socially accepted dances such as square dance, swing dance, and cakewalks, she was able to capture, legitimize, and contain said spiritual

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<sup>128</sup> Katherine Dunham, "Thesis Turned Broadway," in *Kaiso!: Writings by and About Katherine Dunham*, ed. Vèvè A. Clark and Sarah East Johnson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 216.

connection, sexual stimulus, and release. This allowed her to codify and create a hybrid aesthetic that would be both familiar yet peculiar for the typical 1940s Broadway audience.

The central story of *Cabin in the Sky* revolves around the character Little Joe who, after being murdered for high gambling debts, is given six more months to live and potentially rescue his soul in order to transcend to Heaven; should he fail, however, he will be condemned to Hell. The demon Lucifer Jr. is determined to bring Little Joe to Hell. In an attempt to succeed, he introduces Little Joe to Georgia Brown, a temptress who manipulates Joe into leaving his wife Petunia and spending a great deal of money on her. In the 1940 production of *Cabin in the Sky*, Georgia Brown was played by Katherine Dunham herself. Little Joe and Georgia Brown go to a nightclub one night to let loose.

Because there is little visual evidence of the 1940 production, the 1943 film of *Cabin in the Sky* serves as the best hint of how the original movement looked as it was also choreographed by Dunham.<sup>129</sup> Several newspaper reviews of the 1940 production also provide some insight. As the chorus, paired into couples, enter Jim Henry's Paradise, they use varied combinations of step touches, abstract body positions, and theatricalized walking, similar to moves used in a cakewalk. As they enter the dance space, the couples jump into a mix of square dancing, swing dancing, and the Lindy Hop. Between movements, there are hints of swaying hips and cha-cha-like steps.

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<sup>129</sup> According to a *New York Times* article published on May 28, 1934, the film "is every inch as sparkling and completely satisfying as was the original stage production back in 1940. On the trip to Hollywood the script was juggled around somewhat and in deference to the Hays office the character of Georgia Brown was toned down..." This article indicates that despite a few alterations the film is relatively true to the stage iteration.

See "'Cabin in the Sky,' a Musical Fantasy, With Ethel Waters, at Loew's Criterion -- New Films at Globe and Palace." *New York Times* (1923-Current File) (New York, N.Y.: New York Times Company, 1943.)

In another review published by *Variety*, a reviewer reported "In the legit version Cabin seemed constantly to be constricted by the limitations of the stage. But difficulty has not been solved in the present film adaptation. The yarn still appears weighed down by unimaginative conception, the few changes in the screen medium merely filling out the story, without expanding or developing its fantasy."

See "Cabin in the Sky," *Variety*, December 31, 1942 (Los Angeles, CA: Penske Business Corporation, 1942), <https://variety.com/1942/film/reviews/cabin-in-the-sky-1200414149/>.

Additionally, isolations of the hips, torso, bent knees, shoulder shrugging, and small foot stomps (all lightly improvised by the individual dancer) are evidence of Carnival dance aesthetics from the Caribbean.

One article reported, “Miss Dunham’s dancers form an odd group. In a hell scene they contort in the manner of dervishes, but in the café scene they are in action first with what is billed ‘lazy steps’ and then the better known ‘boogie woogie.’”<sup>130</sup> Another said, “And ‘now it must be told’ that while the lines and even the songs of the offering are generally unobjectable, the dancing, which practically accompanies all the scenes, is simply one variation after another of the *dance du ventre*.”<sup>131</sup> As reported by reviewers, the dance style was intriguing, to say the least; it was quite different from the large balletic numbers the reviewers typically saw. The reviewers reported seeing both recognizable and unrecognizable dance styles. The combination of Carnival dance with American social dance often practiced in nightclubs at the time generated a conversation that pointed to connections between dance and action, dance and scene, or dance and atmosphere. Dunham’s new dance genre not only allowed the characters to present themselves as they entered the space, but it also metaphorically offered ideas or feelings of temptation, lust, and freedom. The chorus, here, collectively functions to invite the audience into the seemingly salacious club, promoting their unfamiliar wiles. The entrance of this dance arguably underscores Little Joe’s vulnerability to be tempted and surrender to Lucifer Jr. as the dancers have given themselves over to the music that moves them.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibee, “Legitimate: Plays on Broadway - Cabin In The Sky,” *Variety* (Archive: 1905-2000), October 30, 1940 (Los Angeles, CA: Penske Business Corporation, 1940), 56.

<sup>131</sup> Elizabeth Jordan, “Theatre,” *America*, November 16, 1940: 166.

At the time “danse du ventre” in French was translated literally into “dance of the belly.” It has become the nickname given to more scandalous and provocative movement of the (female) body.

See Ainsley Hawthorn, “Middle Eastern Dance and What We Call It,” *Dance Research* 37.1 (2019): 1–17.

From a 2021 perspective, the integration of this dance seems obvious. Nevertheless, in 1940, the common formula was basically scene, song, dance, scene, song, dance—not within the scene there is song and dance that forward or add subtext to that scene. They were separate parts of the puzzle. While Dunham’s dance did not *forward* the plot as we will see with de Mille’s, it was an essential element to understanding the culture and world of the characters. It was “a part of the play.”<sup>132</sup>

On May 9, 1943, *New York Times* critic John Martin titled a section of his review of *Oklahoma!* “A Part of the Play.” He wrote:

‘Laurey Makes Up Her Mind’ is a first-rate work of art on several counts. For one thing, it is so integrated with the production as a whole that it actually carries forward the plot and justifies the most tenuous psychological point in the play, namely, why Laurey, who is obviously in love with Curly, finds herself unable to resist going to the dance with the repugnant Jud. Many a somber problem play has been built on just such a question of emotional compulsions and has failed to illuminate it half so clearly after several hours of grim dialogue. Yet this is a ‘dance number’ in a ‘musical show’!

[...]

She is a genius for capturing human people of whatever locale or social level in their simplest and most honest phrases, ridiculing them sometimes, fairly devastating them at other times, and at still others making them seem like members of a mighty likable race.<sup>133</sup>

Working backward through Martin’s assessment of Agnes de Mille’s revolutionary work, the concept of creating choreography that captures the sociocultural/socioeconomic milieu of the characters was precisely the task Dunham had achieved in *Cabin in the Sky*. Even de Mille reflected on Dunham’s work, saying, “Katherine always seemed natural, and her large scenes with many people always seemed spontaneous—totally deceptive impressions, both. Her large scenes

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

were works of art and were organized with deft skill.”<sup>134</sup> Perhaps the most obvious moment where de Mille’s choreography establishes the locale of “The West” and the spontaneous essence within a large scene is during the number “The Farmer and The Cowman.”

At the opening of Act II, the audience is welcomed into the box social where the “territory folks” engage in a large square dance. “The Farmer and The Cowman” as the opening of Act II reestablishes the locale of *Oklahoma!* providing insight into the social relations amongst community members. Post-Civil War, square dance in the Southwest United States became embedded into the culture. The book *Dance a While*, edited by Anne M. Pittman, Marlys S. Waller, and Cathy L. Dark, states, “Women prided themselves on being able to dance all night without missing a set, and more often than not, they would easily wear out their shoe soles in one evening. Social gatherings were so important to the cowboy that he thought nothing of riding a great distance to ‘squire’ a woman to a dance.”<sup>135</sup> Not long into the dance, the farmers and the cowboys—two distinct groups in the chorus—begin to squabble over fences, cattle ranges, wealth, resources, and women. During the choruses of the song, the square dance resumes. There is great fluidity between dancing, dialogue, and song. A fistfight even ensues until Aunt Eller shoots a gun to break up the fight and instructs the men to sing and get along. The square dance evolves into a more extensive ballet mixed with dramatized square dance movements. This hybridization/theatricalization of square dance helps to blur the line between social dance and performance.

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<sup>134</sup> Agnes de Mille, *Leaps in the Dark: Art and the World*, ed. Mindy Aloff (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 69.

<sup>135</sup> Anne M. Pittman, Marlys S. Waller, and Cathy L. Dark, *Dance A While: A Handbook for Folk, Square, Contra, and Social Dance*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (San Francisco, CA: Pearson Education, Inc. 2009), 153.

Now, prior to “The Farmer and the Cowman” is the Act I Finale, titled “Laurey Makes Up Her Mind”/ “Out of My Dreams” or the “Dream Ballet,” depending on which source you access. Laurey accepts Jud Fry’s invitation to attend the box social with him because she is upset that Curly took too long to ask her. However, she becomes quite emotionally conflicted. Laurey has discordant feelings for Curly but is afraid of Jud. A peddler passing through, Ali Hakim, sells Laurey a “magic potion” that will help her solve her conundrum. She falls asleep and has a vivid dream expressing her emotional anxiety over which invitation to the box social she should accept, Jud’s or Curly’s. This dream comes to life for the audience in the form of a ballet. This infamous “Dream Ballet” would open Broadway audiences up to the idea that dance could tell a piece of the story within a musical production and solidify the chorus as a vital element of a production. Moreover, it would begin to elevate the responsibility of the dancing male chorus. De Mille’s choreography for the “Dream Ballet” positions the chorus in an abstract dream world where their dancing bodies speak Laurey’s subconscious thoughts, making them a vital character(s) in the story.

The number begins with a series of elegant lifts, joyful leaps, and romantic balances between Laurey and Curly. Each time Curley swiftly lifts Laurey, her gaze is upward and outward with arms high in the air. Curley’s gaze is on Laurey as he supports her weight. The transition out of the lifts is controlled and slow as their eyes lock on one another, creating an intimate moment. A group of female chorus members enter the space and see Laurey and Curly together. With their arms reaching up in the air, in a “V,” with palms open and angled in, they look to the sky as if they are praising “finally, they are together!” More female chorus members join, turning with arms open; they pause and face the couple and make an inaudible clap. With another series of leaps, they exit in celebration as if they are going to tell the rest of the town. Throughout this sequence,



each movement in the choreography is controlled, contained, sharp, and “proper” (meaning, the torso stays straight, the legs rarely bend, toes are pointed, arms are strong, etc.) After a few more intimate moments together, the female chorus reenters the stage with flowers, a wedding dress, and a veil. They help Laurey change as the male chorus enters.

Judith A. Sebesta posits, “...[de Mille’s] choreography incorporated dance styles in which the men differed considerably from the female characters, exemplified in the ‘Dream Ballet’ at the end of act 1, with its classic lifts; strong, aggressive cowboys who are grounded; and light-on-their-feet, yielding pioneer women.”<sup>136</sup> The male chorus gallops onto the stage in a deep plié, second position.<sup>137</sup> Their wide stance is seemingly heavy and connected to the ground. The vibe of a “Western duel” between men to solve a dispute is in the air. This moment is strongly juxtaposed from the light-footed, straight-legged movements of the female dancers. During these moments, the audience learns about Laurey’s true feelings for Curley, as well as Laurey’s perception of what the community would feel about the two of them as a couple.

Just as Laurey and Curley are to wed, Jud appears. Laurey’s posture changes, collapsing at the core and retreating away from Jud. Everyone onstage freezes, with phlegmatic looks on their faces. Contrary to the light movements of before, the female performers are now more grounded. They are dressed as can-can dancers, not smiling. Jud stands, hands-on-hips in the center of the female dancers. Laurey lightly falls to the floor stage left as a trio of dancers saunters towards her from right, slowly rolling their shoulders and lifting their skirts to highlight their fishnet stockings. They pause, turning to face stage right as Jud meticulously walks between them and taps them on

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<sup>136</sup> Judith A. Sebesta, “Angry Dance: Postmodern Innovation, Masculinities, and Gender Subversion,” in *Gestures of Music Theater: The Performativity of Song and Dance*, ed. Dominic Symonds and Millie Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 152.

<sup>137</sup> **Plié:** knee bend.

their buttocks, causing them to shift positions slightly. The three look over their shoulder at Laurey with stoic looks on their faces.

The music shifts to an *entendre* of “I Can’t Say No,” Ado Annie’s song, as a new trio of female dances exuberantly take center stage and perform a series of high kicks and acrobatic movements for Jud, who is now seated in a chair downstage center, facing upstage. The promiscuity of the song, Annie’s inability to say “no” to any man, connected to the flashy dance movements, could suggest Laurey’s fear about what Jud’s desires are for their relationship. The female performers all freeze in various locations on stage, and the male performers reenter the space. Following Jud’s lead, they each seemingly force the female dancers to dance with them. After a few eight counts, the female dancers have essentially become puppets that are lifted into the air and hang like rag dolls as the men carry them to their new location. Laurey wanders through the couples staring up at the lifted female performers. By the end of the sequence, she is left alone onstage with Jud. Curley comes to her rescue and fires multiple shots at Jud, failing to kill him. They then brawl over Laurey, resulting in Curley’s death and Jud carrying Laurey away. She wakes up to Jud standing over her and she is terrified.

In her article “Dance Breaks and Dream Ballets: Transitional Moments in Musical Theatre,” Mary Jo Lodge argues, “This physicalization and revelation of Laurey’s inner life is important not only for the character, but also for the musical’s audience because it allows them to see how differently Laurey views herself and her situation from the external image she projects, and to see how her performance of resistance to Curly’s charms shapes the show.”<sup>138</sup> The plot develops through dance rather than song or text and becomes a significant transitional moment in

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<sup>138</sup> Mary Jo Lodge, “Dance Breaks and Dream Ballets: Transitional Moments in Musical Theatre,” in *Gestures of Music Theater: The Performativity of Song and Dance*, ed. Dominic Symonds and Millie Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 76.

the narrative. Meaning, if this dream ballet were to be removed, audiences would be missing a crucial part of the plot.

Lodge points out a critical distinction that potentially developed out of de Mille's "Dream Ballet." Musicals are faced with the challenge of having layers of storytelling tactics. The liminality of singing or dancing as part of the narrative is often at odds with the desire for these productions to still tend toward realism. The chorus, in particular, often walks a fine line of being in the world of the musical and being a metatheatrical commentary on the world of the musical. Thus, Lodge states, "dance function breaks down into two distinct choices—characters either know they are dancing or they don't."<sup>139</sup> Typically the circumstances for the first choice revolve around a show within a show context, like *The Black Crook* or *Show Boat* examples discussed above. This is when the chorus is arguably functioning as bearers of spectacle. With the second choice, the characters dance simply as an additional mode of communication. The chorus or principal characters alike can seamlessly transition between spoken word, song, and dance. In *Oklahoma!*, de Mille was able to lean on this second choice in order to increase the potential for both the chorus and the dance to serve more than one function creating a dynamic scene that took the audience to the next step in the story.

Even so, the chorus has still not been integrated as a singular unit within the production. As has previously been mentioned, using a dancing chorus as opposed to integrating said chorus member into the whole cast was not uncommon leading up to *Oklahoma!*. De Mille stayed the course and used an entirely different dancing chorus to perform the large, flashy numbers, in particular the "Dream Ballet." When the original production was staged, the actress playing Laurey, Joan Roberts, did not dance in the ballet. Instead, there was a second "dream" Laurey that

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 83.

“real” Laurey watched experience her nightmare. This potentially separated “dream world” from “real world” even further. In 1943, this decision also possibly aided in suspending the audience’s disbelief when Laurey stops speaking in favor of dance. As Lodge points out, the use of an entirely different dancing chorus “creatively reinforced the idea that the sequence was a fantasy, happening outside of the realm of the relative reality of the rest of the show.”<sup>140</sup>

However, this separation of skills and thusly the separation of singing chorus/dancing chorus would begin to dissolve with the popularization of the “director/choreographer” role. Prior to *Oklahoma!* most productions typically had a director responsible for the concept and the scenes and a choreographer accountable for the movement, specifically the dancing chorus. However, heading into the 1950s, some productions began to combine these roles. Lodge states:

The rise of the director/choreographer brought fundamental changes to the personnel of musicals...leading to the development of the ‘triple threat’ performer—one who excels in singing, acting, and dancing. With one person controlling the concept and staging the libretto-driven scenes, the staged movement that accompanied singing and the more sophisticated dance movements, the director/choreographer could demand unity both in the larger production, and within the individual performers.<sup>141</sup>

She continues her argument, also stating that because of this shift, the dancing chorus as a virtually standalone entity became far less popular, thus ending the Golden Age of musical theatre.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 82.

## 2.4 When You're a Jet, You're a Jet All the Way: Choreographing Character in the Chorus

Director-choreographer Jerome Robbins and his work with *West Side Story* (1957) caused a fundamental paradigmatic shift in the way (most of) the chorus functioned within the world of a production. For *West Side Story*, an indispensable means of communication was the dance. Deborah Jowitt notes, “There had been ambitious dances integral to a show’s plot before—such as Agnes de Mille’s often-cited ‘Dream Ballet’ from *Oklahoma!*—but none in which dance is a way of defining character from the outset.”<sup>142</sup> Additionally, this ambitious dance score, necessary for articulating plot and character, relied on an aggressively male-heavy, triple-threat chorus. Through the Golden Age, the dancing male chorus was beginning to gain traction. But as Sebesta propounds, Robbins’s choreography took a momentous step toward staging more complex masculinities through dance.<sup>143</sup> His emphasis on individual characters within the unified, integrated singing, dancing, and acting male/female chorus added additional layers of conflict and personality to the narrative through choreography. The opening “Prologue” is nearly seven minutes of pure dance choreography, introducing the audience not only to the power dynamics and hierarchies between and within the Jets and the Sharks but also to the individual personalities of Jet members.

Jowitt suggests, Robbins wanted there to be “no anonymous chorus boys and girls; they all had names.”<sup>144</sup> She continues pointing out how characters are defined in the script. For example,

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<sup>142</sup> Deborah Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 266.

<sup>143</sup> Sebesta, 152.

<sup>144</sup> Jowitt, 275.

Riff, “glowing, driving, intelligent, slightly whacky,” Diesel, Riff’s Lieutenant, “big, slow, steady, nice,” and the youngest is Baby John, “awed at everything, including that he is a JET, trying to act the big man.”<sup>145</sup> Robbins directly translated these characteristics of each individual into their own specific choreographic score. As Riff begins the show with the first snap, the other Jets join in. He leads the gang throughout the number, always in the front of the formations. Riff’s confidence and intellect propels his choreography as his walk pushes forward, leading with his pelvis, chest open, head level. Diesel is positioned to Riff’s right (not coincidentally—his right-hand man). Diesel is equally calm and authoritative. As the Jets, one by one, pause in their walking to execute a low fan kick with arms pushing from the chest into a second position (suggesting their eager, wide-eyed view of their “territory”), Diesel is often one of the last to react—slow and steady wins the race. Baby John, usually located in the center or the back of the group, has few individual moments throughout the “Prologue.” As he is the youngest member, he is typically seen watching the others take these big steps, and only when more than one of the Jets is moving will he dance. His voice is a part of the group, but he has not yet gained the authority to act out of line.

Jowitt points out that Robbins’s choreography establishes an entire social world before the characters even utter a word. She describes:

In this turf war, bravado, stealth, fear, playfulness, and anger meet in combat, revealed in actions that shrug their way into dance and as quickly drop back into everyday behavior. A walk becomes a saunter, acquires a bounce, becomes an easygoing chassé or a soft-edged turn in the air. By the time you notice that the two groups of boys are dancing, you’ve understood the restless animosity that powers the movement, and it becomes as interesting as the steps. By the time the Jets sing their song of unity, you know the premise as well as you would after Shakespeare’s brawling between Montagues and Capulets in Verona’s plaza.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein, and Stephen Sondheim, *West Side Story: A Musical* (New York, NY: Random House, 1958), 1.

<sup>146</sup> Jowitt, 279.

Throughout the show, the audience watches how varied situations affect each of these characters differently. For instance, during the Jets number “Cool,” the character Baby John breaks free of his subdued rank and erratically dances while the others watch. He punches his arm up into the air from a seated position. Then, he slowly releases his arm back down before aggressively punching into his own hand as he travels from behind the group of Jets to an open space on stage, center. They all watch and lean in toward him as he turns and explodes his body to various positions.<sup>147</sup> Baby John is now being allowed to express his frustrations; as they head into the rumble, he gains status and respectability amongst the group. Throughout “Cool,” the choreography fluidly moves between solo moments, duets, trios, and the entire group of Jets. Robbins capitalized on dance’s ability to influence how an audience understood narrative, emotion, and character development using ballet and jazz techniques to give power (or take power) from certain characters or groups of characters.

However, the use of choreography to provide individual characterization was not the case for the entire chorus. Despite Robbins’ desire for “no anonymous chorus boys and girls,” there are still some generic Jets, including Snowboy, Gee-Tar, Mouthpiece, and Tiger, who lack specific character descriptions within the libretto and consequently their choreography.<sup>148</sup> The female Jets, in particular, also lack individuality in their movement score. While Graziella and Velma have a few lines throughout, their choreography in “Cool” is relatively synchronous. Aside from a few varied poses at the end of a phrase, their choreography does not provide insight into their character. Similarly, although Minnie, Clarice, and Pauline are specific names, they are scripted as the Jets’ girls and are lumped together as such throughout the production.

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<sup>147</sup> “*West Side Story* ‘Cool’ on *The Ed Sullivan Show*,” *The Ed Sullivan Show*, September 14, 1958, YouTube video, 4:52, (SOFA Entertainment), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C\\_IvknEFZGs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_IvknEFZGs).

<sup>148</sup> Jowitt, 275.

Perhaps more important than the gap in connecting character traits to the movement of all the Jets is the notion that the same (or any) attention to detail is arguably missing for the Sharks, the rival Latinx gang. The only Shark given a character description in the opening “Prologue” notes of the libretto is Bernardo. Bernardo, “the leader of the SHARKS: handsome, proud, fluid, a chip on his sardonic shoulder.”<sup>149</sup> Notably, Robbins did not *write* the libretto; that responsibility ultimately rested with book writer Arthur Laurents—still, it is choreographed as such. Throughout the production, all of the Sharks are relatively in sync with Bernardo. There is little to no information given to the audience about Chino, Pepe, Indio, Luis, Anxious, Nibbles, Juano, Toro, or Moose—let alone their girls Rosalia, Consuelo, Teresita, Francisca, Estella, and Margarita. By scene four, there is a written character description for Chino, “a shy, gentle, sweet-faced boy, and Pepe, Bernardo’s “lieutenant.”<sup>150</sup> Yet, these additional character descriptions are not mirrored in the individual’s choreography like that of the Jets.

Reflecting upon her time working with Robbins, actress Rita Moreno remarks, “He was astonishing because he did something that no-one ever did. He choreographed for *character*. The steps that Anita did in *West Side Story* were specifically for Anita. No-one else in that play could’ve done those steps—because they were specifically Anita-type steps. That’s how he choreographed. He was a genius.”<sup>151</sup> Although Moreno is unequivocally correct with her reflection of her character’s choreography, the same did not apply to those in the Shark’s chorus. Therefore, although Robbins pushed towards a choreographic evolution for individualizing those belonging

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<sup>149</sup> Laurents, Bernstein, and Sondheim, 1.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>151</sup> Rita Moreno, “Rita Moreno talks about Jerome Robbins,” YouTube video, 7:56, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWjgTgfgUvI>.



to the chorus, it is not an overall or complete shift in philosophy, for it did not apply to the entire chorus.

Nevertheless, the dissonance in treatment of individual Jets choreography versus common Sharks choreography aided in establishing difference and division between the groups. By amplifying characterization within the Jets, the audience was more inclined to empathize with this group. Uncoincidentally, the Jets were White. Though I cannot speak to Robbins's intentions regarding this decision, the outcome remains the same. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez argues, "the drama articulates a binary and hierarchical opposition of power relations, and this binarism establishes the dominant paradigms of the musical: Jets/Sharks; US/Puerto Rico; center/periphery, empire/colony; native/alien; identity/alterity; sameness/difference."<sup>152</sup> His last point of "sameness/difference" suggests that the Jets are the "same" as White Americans whereas the Sharks are people of color and are therefore different. For the chorus, the idea of difference/sameness respectively provides agency and identity to the Jets. By generalizing the Sharks chorus in juxtaposition to the individuality of the Jets chorus, they become further marginalized as a collective Other within the plot. Comparably, returning to Moreno's reflection for a moment, Anita's character revolves around her assimilation to American ways. By affording her a more unique choreographic score, she becomes somewhat separated from Sharks and begins to gain a sense of identity and independence, even if it is subtle.

Furthermore, it is no secret that Robbins attempted to use Latinx-based dance steps as a crucial part of the Sharks' vocabulary in contrast to the pure ballet/jazz of the Jets. This binarism further scripted conceptions of Other onto the Sharks' chorus. Contrary to Katherine Dunham, who

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<sup>152</sup> Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, *José, Can You See?: Latinos on and Off Broadway* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 67-68.

used dance as a cultural product to establish a social atmosphere uplifting movement styles of which the audience was unfamiliar, Robbins used generalized Latinx steps as signals of difference. Rather than creating a hybrid style of dance that gave voice and elevation to the minoritarian group, he prioritized majoritarian dance practices for the entire chorus and only included Latinx steps when he needed to add indications of Latinness. While this indisputably helped to promote distance between the two groups, it also further perpetuated an erasure of cultural identity for the performing bodies. These performers of color were not able to take part in the choreographic innovations of elevating individuality and dance as articulating identity. Rather, they too were further marginalized. In fact, Jowitt points out, “The actors playing Jets and Sharks were not to fraternize during rehearsals or eat lunch together.”<sup>153</sup> Even offstage, Robbins kept them segregated.

Despite evident inequalities that may or may not have helped audiences comprehend *West Side Story*’s plot, Jerome Robbins’s work began to ignite conversations about possibility regarding the chorus. He made a major shift from a group of dancers who play generalized cowboys, villagers, and partygoers to a group of more individualized characters within a group: Riff, Diesel, Baby John, and Action all have their own personalities, their own motivations as given to the audience considerably through dance, but they collectively belong to the Jets. The utilization of dance as an equal mode of communication in *West Side Story* also thrust musicals into a new era of possibility. It is possible for the label of “ensemble” to enter the conversation when speaking about Robbins and *West Side Story*. If the distinction between chorus and ensemble is the conception of uniqueness within the collective, then that is at least partially applicable. It could be argued that the core group of Jets are indeed an ensemble—individual characters working together to forward the narrative. However, I still hesitate to call the chorus in *West Side Story* an ensemble

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<sup>153</sup> Jowitt, 275.

in its entirety due to the lacking of individuality for *all* of those cast as chorus bodies—non-principals—within the show. While some productions continued to follow the model of large, spectacular, and aesthetically driven chorus numbers of the Golden Age, many would turn their concentration to dance’s capacities to communicate. Some would even scale back the size of their chorus to more precisely convey ideas metaphorically.

## **2.5 Rhythm of Life: Neutralizing Gendered Dance Practices through Fosse**

In the 1960s, Bob Fosse took Broadway and movie musicals by storm, challenging the aesthetics of dance utilized in musicals leaning into the notion of dance functioning to metaphorically and abstractly present an idea or feeling. He challenged pre-established, gendered choreographic techniques of dance. From the decline in the quintessence of the male ballet dancer in the late 1700s to the male dancing body’s resurgence in the chorus around Robbins, choreography practices had, for the most part, continued to separate male and female dancers. Fosse began using asymmetrical movements or contorted writs or knees to decenter what the body was “supposed to” move and look like regardless of gender. He would apply his androgynous dance style to a collective chorus prompting a more unified, embodied voice. Fosse’s collective dancing chorus moved to abstractly proffer ideas and hyperbolize a production’s atmosphere and mood.

When he was rising as a dancer and choreographer, Fosse became acutely aware of his own body and how many codified dance techniques of ballet, for example, did not fit on his body in the same ways that it did for others. So, he began to discover what movement aesthetics worked best for him. He took the accepted notion that a chorus had to have excellent dance technique rooted in

ballet training and pushed back on that assumption to develop a dance aesthetic that could be transposed onto any type of body. Thus, all of his dancers would perform such movements on an equal playing field. There were very few moments where male and female dancers had different dance aesthetics or choreographic scores. Additionally, he challenged his performers to use dance as an emotional outlet. Whether the emotion was strong and it had to be expressed in expansive movements or the emotion was contained and conveyed through subtle gestures, he wanted the dance to be driven by emotion.<sup>154</sup>

While Fosse has indisputably choreographed for a vast assortment of production styles, his approach to the chorus is, in fact, unique. Perhaps one of the most iconic Fosse numbers is “Rich Man’s Frug” from *Sweet Charity* (1966). Music by Cy Coleman, lyrics by Dorothy Fields, and book by Neil Simon, *Sweet Charity* tells the story of a young taxi dancer, Charity Hope Valentine.<sup>155</sup> Charity serendipitously meets a film star, Vittorio Vidal, who takes her to the exclusive Pompeii Club to spite his mistress Ursula. To establish the atmosphere of the exceedingly posh club—quite the opposite of the dance hall at which Charity works—the chorus engages in a dance number that also functions as a show-within-a-show for the club patrons. There are two conventions used in this number that can be analyzed as being gendered. First, the chorus is costumed in a conspicuously gendered way; the female chorus members are wearing sparkly shift dresses, and the male chorus members are in tuxedos. Second, Fosse’s choreography frequently groups together or organizes the bodies onstage according to gender. Apart from these elements, the dance movements maintain gender-neutral comportment.

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<sup>154</sup> See Kevin Boyd Grubb, *Razzle Dazzle: the Life and Work of Bob Fosse*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989).

<sup>155</sup> **Taxi Dancer:** a paid dance partner at a dance hall, began to fall out of popularity in the 50s and 60s.

The choreographic score of “Rich Man’s Frug” is broken up into small sections that feature varied groups of chorus members within the collective chorus; the choreography moves in and out of large groups, small groups, all-female groups, all-male groups, and mix gendered groups—every possible combination is utilized. Aesthetically the movement energizes small isolations of the hands, hips, and heads while playing with various contortions and elongations of the arms, legs, and torso for all of the chorus bodies. Virtually any recognizable codified, ballet-based dance aesthetic is avoided. “Fosse walk,” “monkey down,” “mechanical boxer,” “pecking chug,” “cranking at the hip,” and “fur coat” are all unique Fosse movements that the collective chorus performs throughout the entirety of the score.<sup>156</sup> Some movements are deliberate and controlled; others are convulsive and erratic. Male and female chorus members alike employ these Fosse-dance movements.<sup>157</sup>

The chorus themselves function as performers in the club, but they also function as ambiance establishers. The chorus activates a stoic facial expression for the entirety of the number. While the dance within the narrative of the production functions to elevate the pompous, spectacular nature of the Pompeii Club itself, their unimpressed faces highlight that this is just another ordinary engagement for the regular patrons. A stark juxtaposition is curated to situate the vivacious Charity as an atypical participant. Fosse’s choreography promotes sensuality and nonchalance within frivolity.

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<sup>156</sup> See Debra McWaters, *The Fosse Style* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008).

<sup>157</sup> Only one gesture seems to suggest any sense of gender specificity. From the beginning of the number onward, the male ensemble members frequently use “teacup fingers” while holding a cigarette. The “teacup fingers” are a Fosse-favorite where one “simply touches the tips of the thumb and forefinger together so that a circle or an oval is formed...The remaining three fingers are played.”

See McWaters, 8.

In a 1966 article for the *New York Times* titled “Dance: Broadway Style Choreography in Musicals Is Suffering From Sameness—With Exceptions,” Clive Barnes writes, “The effect on the dance element is to produce a style of dancing for people who don’t like dancing, for the basic purpose of the musical is to make money by soothing ulcers and not giving offense to intellectual majorities.”<sup>158</sup> Reflecting specifically on *Sweet Charity*, he observes:

...the choreography is extraordinarily slick and clever and yet perfectly empty of true choreographic interest....One number, very revealing of Mr. Fosse’s methods, is ‘Rich Man’s Frug.’ There was a very similar number in an earlier Fosse musical, ‘Little Me,’ and the principle in both was to reduce movement to robot simplicity and have a whole group of dancers performing eccentric, often jerky movements with the mechanized perfection of a Swiss cuckoo clock.<sup>159</sup>

Barnes ultimately concludes that the dance in *Sweet Charity* was the worst of the season, calling it “a slick caricature of the real thing.”<sup>160</sup> His harsh criticism of Fosse’s methodology speaks to the stark differences in his work compared to de Mille and Robbins, for example. Fosse’s distancing from recognizable dance movements that would undoubtedly please the “intellectual majorities” decentered dance’s function within a musical. The distinction Barnes makes regarding the whole group of dancers performing the same minimalized, robotic movement sheds light on the fundamental difference of Fosse’s work. By resisting standard musical dance aesthetics and applying an overall vocabulary to the entire chorus, attention is drawn to the mood emanating from the eccentrically moving collective of bodies on stage. While chorus characters within Fosse shows were often scripted with gendered associations, his neutral dance style shifted the priority focus onto more abstract ideas and nuances of a scene or production rather than dance’s virtuosity or narrative capacity.

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<sup>158</sup> Clive Barnes, “Dance: Broadway Style: Choreography in Musicals Is Suffering From Sameness--With Exceptions,” *New York Times* (1923-Current File) (New York, N.Y: New York Times Company, 1966), 25.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

In 1975, director/choreographer Michael Bennett questioned the often-ignored labor of the chorus body. *A Chorus Line*, formulated by composer and lyricist team Marvin Hamlisch and Edward Kleban, along with book writers James Kirkwood Jr. and Nicholas Dante, focused on the stories of seventeen dancers auditioning to be in the chorus of a Broadway musical. Through the narrative, the production gave the audience a look into what the lives of the chorus members were like, rather than focusing on the trials and tribulations of a leading man or a leading lady. Stacy Wolf and Liza Gennaro contend that *A Chorus Line* both challenged and affirmed a dancer's role in the chorus. On the one hand, the show points out that every individual in the group has their own story to tell, a background that affects their life. On the other hand, "the ending reminds the audience that the Broadway chorus dancer's ultimate role is to blend in, all differences and distinctions erased."<sup>161</sup> In the last line of the musical, the group directs the audience's attention to their leading lady with the memorable line, "Ooh! Sigh! Give her your attention. Do I really have to mention, She's the... She's the... She's the one?"<sup>162</sup> The story generates a conversation regarding the potential paradox of the chorus, one that has prevailed since the beginning of musical theatre until today: conformity or uniqueness?

Nevertheless, the plot of *A Chorus Line* prompted such discussion; the production itself did not change how the chorus functioned within a musical. Although the characters were chorus members, that was the occupation of their given circumstances; they were actually principals in the show. *A Chorus Line* told the stories of real chorus members—which was beneficial for

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<sup>161</sup> Wolf and Gennaro, 149.

<sup>162</sup> Marvin Hamlisch, James Kirkwood, Nicholas Dante, and Edward Kleban, "One" in *A Chorus Line* (1975), 109

Note: James Kirkwood, Michael Bennett, and Nicholas Dante are credited on the libretto, published by Applause, 1975. Marvin Hamlisch and Edward Kleban are credit on the vocal score published by Morris and Co., 1975.

humanizing them—and promoted a popular narrative that the show was revolutionary in how it challenged the role of the dancer in a musical. Millie Taylor argues that because the actors are performing not only for the audience but also within the show, they are performing for the director Zach, “the song and dance becomes a self-conscious and explicit performative re-enactment of individual identity, even as these individual voices and bodies also performatively construct a group, ensemble, or community for the audience.”<sup>163</sup> Taylor’s notation of the bodies in *A Chorus Line* constructing “ensemble,” poses a question, of which there is not yet a concrete answer. When did the chorus become an ensemble—in terms of popular culture and legitimate functionality?

## 2.6 Conclusion: Chorus or Ensemble?

Playbills of Broadway productions provide a look into when the shift in vocabulary from “chorus” to “ensemble” potentially came about. After surveying Broadway productions nominated for the Tony Award for Best Musical, Playbills prior to the 1980s labeled cast members according to the parts they played in the production. For example, in *The King and I* (1951), performers were grouped under labels such as princesses and princes, the royal dancers, and wives.<sup>164</sup> In *My Fair Lady* (1956), performers were labeled first cockney, second cockney, third cockney, fourth cockney.<sup>165</sup> In *Annie* (1977), they were given specific credit if they played a role such as “Sound

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<sup>163</sup> Millie Taylor, “Singing and Dancing Ourselves: The Politics of the Ensemble in *A Chorus Line*” in *Gestures of Music Theater: The Performativity of Song and Dance*, ed. Dominic Symonds and Millie Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 277.

<sup>164</sup> “The King and I” Program, St. James Theatre, March 29, 1951 (New York: NY, Playbill), 4, <https://www.playbill.com/playbillpagegallery/inside-playbill?asset=00000150-aea3-d936-a7fd-ecf7473b0000&type=InsidePlaybill&slide=4>.

<sup>165</sup> “My Fair Lady” Program, Mark Hellinger Theatre, March 15, 1956 (New York: NY, Playbill), 3, <https://www.playbill.com/playbillpagegallery/inside-playbill?asset=00000150-aea3-d936-a7fd-ecf7ea330001&type=InsidePlaybill&slide=3>.



Effects Man” or “A Star to Be.” They were also grouped as Hooverville-ites, Policeman, Warbucks’s Servants, and New Yorkers.<sup>166</sup> The term “chorus” was not used in these pieces to label such background, supplemental characters. Based on this curated investigation, it appears that *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1981) is the first, or among the first, to use the label “the ensemble” to note a group of actors that will be playing a copious number of supplemental characters.<sup>167</sup> Curiously, a musical following *A Chorus Line* promoting a plot similarly around the role of the chorus performer did not use “chorus” as their label. The term “the ensemble” as a Playbill label would become common practice by the 1990s: *Crazy for You* (1992), *Rent* (1996), and *The Lion King* (1998) were among the popular productions to adopt this new title.

In a 2019 article, “Ensemble or Chorus? Can we still use the Word Chorus?” Mo Brady posits:

For the first half of the 20th Century, the chorus was often split between two separate groups: one of singers and another of dancers. More recently, the fashion has been to refer to these supporting players as an ensemble; in part because the singers and dancers are unified into one group, but also because they are also asked to play minor characters, tumble, roller skate and move the sets.

Somehow, naming these groups of performers “ensembles” has seemed more respectful. By celebrating the different energies and perspectives these supporting actors create, we are giving their work more credence and value. Even while Actors’ Equity Association continues to refer to supporting players as Chorus members, the word has fallen out of fashion with most playwrights.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> “Annie” Program, Alvin Theatre, April 8, 1977 (New York: NY, Playbill), 4, <https://www.playbill.com/playbillpagegallery/inside-playbill?asset=00000150-aea2-d936-a7fd-eef607b90001&type=InsidePlaybill&slide=4>.

<sup>167</sup> “42<sup>nd</sup> Street” Program, Winter Garden Theatre, August, 18, 1980 (New York: NY, Playbill), 2, <https://www.playbill.com/playbillpagegallery/inside-playbill?asset=00000150-aea7-d936-a7fd-eef70d370000&type=InsidePlaybill&slide=2s>.

<sup>168</sup> Mo Brady, “Ensemble or Chorus? Can We Still Use the Word Chorus?” *TheatreArtLife*, The Ensemblist, December 26, 2019, [www.theatreartlife.com/staying-still/ensemble-or-chorus-can-we-still-use-the-word-chorus/](http://www.theatreartlife.com/staying-still/ensemble-or-chorus-can-we-still-use-the-word-chorus/).

Brady's summation of the shift—whenever it happened—suggests that the ensemble label has been adopted out of respect to the individual, laboring bodies cast as supporting players within a production. His point regarding the Actors' Equity Association (AEA) puts additional detail into the mix. A 2018 press release titled "Actors' Equity Launches National Campaign to Recognize Chorus Members at Tony Awards" provides the following definitions: "Actors' Equity defines a Chorus as a group in a Musical or singing and/or dancing group that makes up part of a Dramatic Play (excluding extra and walk-on parts, and Chorus roles where the members speak but do not sing or dance). Actors' Equity considers an Ensemble to be the entire cast of a Musical or Play, inclusive of all principal, featured, chorus and swing roles."<sup>169</sup> AEA's articulation of a chorus leans on the concept of being a group of singers and/or dancers contributing to a production—plain and simple. Their definition of ensemble seems to be synonymous with "cast" or "company." However, building on the use of the word ensemble as used by contemporary playwrights and critics, I am arguing that the ensemble is a group of singing/dancing supporting or background characters possessing individual or unique characteristics that contribute to an audience's understanding of the production as a whole. I also contend that most Broadway musicals have maintained the use of a chorus, a group of singing/dancing supporting or background characters linked together by a generalized role to supplement a production. With these semantics in mind, the ensemble can function on a more nuanced level than a chorus.

From the end of the twentieth century through the beginning of the twenty-first, Broadway choreographers would continue implementing the functions of dance in musical theatre curated by their predecessors. As dance styles have evolved, they still maintain their strong foothold in ballet

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<sup>169</sup> "Actors' Equity Launches National Campaign to Recognize Chorus Members: Actors' Equity Association," *Actors' Equity Association*, (2018), [www.actorsequity.org/news/PR/EveryoneOnStage/](http://www.actorsequity.org/news/PR/EveryoneOnStage/).

and jazz techniques. George Faison, Tommy Tune, Bill T. Jones, Kathleen and Rob Marshall, Susan Stroman, Jerry Mitchell, Justin Peck, Casey Nicholaw, and Christopher Gattelli are among those contemporary choreographers and director-choreographers that have continued to honor the traditions of their predecessors. Steven Hoggett, Camile A. Brown, Sergio Trujillo, Savion Glover, and Sonya Tayeh have recently challenged what Broadway dance aesthetics means, bringing quotidian movement pantomime and African-diasporic practices to the stage in unique ways. While it can be argued that some or each of these artists bring elements of individuality into their work, they have not necessarily changed the function of the chorus to become an ensemble in its entirety.

In 2007, Andy Blankenbuehler would begin a foundational transition toward ensembleizing the entire chorus with his work on *In the Heights*. Influenced by Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse's styles and building on the complex history of the chorus's role and the chorus member's body in a musical, he activates the individual bodies cast in these supplemental roles so that they each affectively operate within the production. Although he has worked on more traditional-style productions such as *9 to 5* (2009), *Annie* (2012), and *Cats* (2016), where he does implement choreographic practices that sustain "the chorus," his work with *In the Heights* (Off-Broadway, 2007; Broadway, 2008), *Bring it On: the Musical* (2012), and *Hamilton* (The Public, 2015; Broadway, 2016) would help him curate a choreographic style that prioritizes the ensemble and the ensemble body as a fundamental production element. Through the use of a hybrid dance genre that melds pedestrian movement with hip-hop, jazz, and ballet, he promotes dance and the dancing body as communication tools to connect the audience to sociological metanarratives that surround the productions on which he works.

### 3.0 En Washington Heights: Staging Authenticity through the Individual Ensemble Body

Other choreographers build portraits... Andy's experience is like a 3-D Imax fresco.

—Klemons, *Hamilton: the Revolution*

Imagine a hot summer morning in Washington Heights. The neighborhood bodega owner begins his day chasing away a young vandal from his shop. A metro worker dawdles on his way to the train. A man bops to the sound of his boombox, nodding “sup” to another who is strolling down the street going who knows where. As the piragüero gently pushes his cart down the sidewalk, a young woman struts past him, waving “hello.” Another woman pauses to dig through her purse for money to buy her lottery ticket. Others pop into the bodega to purchase water, coffee, or a magazine. On balconies, people shake out rugs and hang their clothes on the line. Some begin their day by taking a jog, hailing a cab, or gossiping with a colleague on their way to work. This scene could depict an average Tuesday morning in uptown Manhattan or the opening of the 2008 Tony Award-winning musical *In the Heights*.

Creator Lin-Manuel Miranda “wanted to create something that shows Latinos in the everyday mode [he’s] used to, and not just in gangs.”<sup>170</sup> A review for *Newsday* reported that the production had “the authenticity of the immigrant stories” but with “a heartening minimum of stereotypes.”<sup>171</sup> In other words, it was in contrast to something like *West Side Story* (1957). *In the Heights* has been praised for being the first Broadway musical about Latinx stories created by

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<sup>170</sup> Mark Blankenship, “No Fear of ‘Heights’: Producers Take Risk on Tyro Talent,” *Variety* 405, no. 13 (2007): 55.

<sup>171</sup> Linda Winer, “Review: ‘In the Heights,’ by Lin-Manuel Miranda,” *Newsday*, March 10, 2008 (Melville, NY: Tribune Content Agency).

Latinx artists. Conversations about casting practices, reaching new audiences, cultural hybridity, and “authenticity” have surrounded the production since its inception some twenty years ago when Miranda was a young student writing its first iterations. Miranda’s mission to diversify Broadway—its aesthetics, stories, and soundscape—created a unique set of challenges for aspiring choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler. In order to choreograph Miranda’s vision of showcasing Latinxs in “everyday mode,” he would need to learn the accompanying movement and music styles (hip-hop, salsa, merengue, etc.) not traditionally incorporated into musical theatre productions or even his personal vocabulary. Then, Blankenbuehler would have to negotiate a choreographic score that would highlight the dancers who were, frankly, more skilled than he was in these diverse genres while also blending in “traditional” Broadway dancers trained in Euro-centered movement aesthetics (ballet, modern, and jazz).

In a 2008 interview promoting *In the Heights*, Blankenbuehler remarked, “It’s all about communication... the performance of dance, not the showing off in a studio...is about translating the kernel of an emotional idea to the audience...it comes from understanding life. If you don’t understand life, you can’t understand what you are trying to communicate through dance.”<sup>172</sup> Believing that lived experience is essential to successfully communicating a story or idea allowed him to capture the performer’s body itself as a storytelling apparatus. In this way, the body as a tool could establish an environment on stage that a viewer may identify as being “authentic.”

This chapter argues that Blankenbuehler’s choreography for *In the Heights* creates staged authenticity by making visible the diversity of lived experiences of the individuals shaping the choreography. Because the ensemble in musical theatre has not previously had such augmented

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<sup>172</sup> “Andy Blankenbuehler- *In The Heights*,” MoveTVnetwork.com, Vimeo video, 2:58, February 20, 2012, [vimeo.com/37156545](https://vimeo.com/37156545).

individualization, the ensemble body becomes a foundational entity in creating the world of the musical. The ensemble body is the lens by which the audience gains access into a layered, complex social world that is staged Washington Heights. Through collaborative creation and emphasis on action over spectacle, this ensemble body is choreographed in performance to frame the society from their individual perspectives transporting the audience into a heterogeneous world that might have otherwise been seemingly superficial. The emphasis on individualized choreographic scores in the musical numbers “In the Heights,” “The Club,” and “Carnaval del Barrio,” for example, produce sociological milieus specific to their respective purpose within the narrative. Blankenbuehler’s choreography positions the bodies of the performers in *Heights* to bring people with different ethnic, race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic backgrounds in relation to one another and adapt dance into a variety of social and physical environments necessary for staged Washington Heights.

### 3.1 Blankenbuehlerizing Choreography and Staging Authenticity

Jayzel Samonte’s article for *Movmnt Magazine*, “Heightened Exposure: In the Heights,” reports, “Choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler didn’t cast dancers with traditional dance backgrounds. Blankenbuehler’s talent of conveying a dance landscape seemingly true to the streets required dancers whose abilities interpreted these gyrations authentically. It’s that authenticity from every level of the creative team that makes Heights such a captivating evening.”<sup>173</sup> Many critics and artists similarly hail the production as presenting Latinx authentically. Such praise begs

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<sup>173</sup> Jayzel Samonte, “Heightened Exposure: *In the Heights*,” *Movmnt Magazine*, June 29, 2008, [issuu.com/movmnt/docs/movmnt7](http://issuu.com/movmnt/docs/movmnt7).

the question, what exactly is the relationship between *In the Heights* and dramaturgical, choreographic, or embodied authenticity? Authenticity suggests that something is real, bona fide, genuine. If something is labeled “authentic,” it is supposedly based on facts, giving it a heightened level of authority or believability. Western tourist culture, in particular, thrives on notions of authenticity: certificates of authenticity, authentic cuisine, or authentic experiences.

Associating *In the Heights* with such a promise of authenticity can become problematic when considering the relationship between authenticity and commodification. Although selling access to a culture/cultural product not typical to the Broadway audience (who is, more often than not, middle to upper class and White) is not a new phenomenon, *In the Heights* is the first Latinx show (created by Latinx artists) to do so. Samonte’s identification of the *In the Heights* dance landscape demanding dancers whose abilities could interpret movements authentically, in particular the gyrations, suggests that not every *body* can execute such activity “correctly,” perhaps not even Blankenbuehler’s body. Such an insinuation that there are right and wrong bodies to execute dance movements specific to Latinx culture risks essentializing both the performers and the form. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests:

Live displays, whether recreations of daily activities or staged as formal performances, also create the illusion that the activities one watches are being done rather than represented, a practice that creates the illusion of authenticity, or realness. The impression is one of unmediated encounter. Semiotically, live displays make the status of the performer problematic, for people become signs of themselves.<sup>174</sup>

Because of the production’s call for a dramaturgy attuned to “Latinos in the everyday mode,” the *In the Heights* creative team manufactured a world in which the characters become products of staged authenticity, and the performers become commodified versions of themselves. Similarly,

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<sup>174</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Objects and Ethnography” in *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 55.

situating Latinx-rooted dance movements as requisite to staged Washington Heights's daily activities creates an illusion of an unmediated encounter with a cultural product.

Dean MacCannell's philosophy of "staged authenticity" is typically used to discuss tourism.<sup>175</sup> He suggests that when tourists visit other places, the desire to bear witness to social functions in a society different from their own imposes a layer of pressure onto the society in question to produce entertaining or exciting results. What is manufactured is a sense of the real, but because it is manufactured and set up as a product to be sold, it is no longer truly "authentic;" it represents the "authentic." Translating this philosophy to theatrical productions, specifically musical theatre, goes beyond conceptions of realism or mimesis—the act of imitating real life on stage. Analyzing processes of staging authenticity within the theatrical setting considers social and cultural practices being appropriated so that they become codified. The now codified product then produces a symbol of the original social/cultural practice rather than the genuine enactment of that practice. The practice at issue is indicative of the culture from which it originated. When brought into the theatrical setting and reproduced for audiences in this way, the practice, and therefore its parent culture, is then sold to those audience members similar to a tourist visiting an unfamiliar place.

As suggested in Samonte's review, Blankenbuehler's choreography for *In the Heights* illuminates a crucial conversation regarding (staged) authenticity, commodification, and dance. Susan Leigh Foster's book *Valuing Dance* looks at such a relationship between dance and

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<sup>175</sup> In a 1973 article, Dean MacCannell first explored the idea of "staged authenticity" in regards to tourism. Tourists are invited on exclusive tours to see buildings, schools, community gatherings, etc. that have become structured around the schedule and wishes of the tourist. This added layer is one that curates a production that can repeat for the next group of tourists. What was once everyday life has become staged authenticity; what was once "authentic" has become a packaged product altering its original intention.

See Dean MacCannell, "Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings," *The American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 3 (1973): 589–603.



embodiment and their evolving subjection to commodification processes. What is the value of dance, and how are different genres of dance prescribed value? How do we consider the value of the dance's corporeal element as both separate and connected to the movement? What does ascribing value do to (or for) the dance, the body, and the viewer? Foster considers these questions, among others, to make arguments about commodity, exchanges of labor, and cultural products. In her analysis, she considers three potential capacities where these ideas seem to manifest:

- 1) dance brings people into relation; it summons them collectively into action thereby bringing them into contact with one another.
- 2) dance both expends and also generates physical energy. It charges the body with a special liveliness even as it exhausts those who engage in it.
- 3) dance adapts to all manner of social and physical environments; it can be found everywhere on the planet imbricated within a vast and diverse range of social situations.<sup>176</sup>

On the whole, *In the Heights* brings lower-middle-class characters living in Washington Heights to upper-middle-class Broadway patrons. The dance in *Heights* generates a physically embodied energy within the performers containing the potential to energize the audience; it is exciting, intriguing, and even foreign to many in the audience. Including Latinx social dance throughout the production situates the importance of dance within the culture of Washington Heights. Moreover, the narrative ability of Blankenhuebler's hybrid dance genre (metaphorically or literally) also adapts Washington Heights into a theatricalized musical theatre world, strengthening any plot elements or subtext.

The tension between authenticity and commodification is incredibly complex in any situation, but especially in theatricalized settings where audiences are to suspend ideas of disbelief and give in to the notion that what they are witnessing is, in essence, a reality. Audiences often

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<sup>176</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Valuing Dance: Commodities and Gifts in Motion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 18.

expect an “authentic” performance. Where does this notion of authenticity lie? What are the inherent problems with attempting to produce and manufacture authenticity? How does staged authenticity, replicated for potentially thousands of audience members, impose a false or stereotyped identity on a culture?

To begin, Andy Blankenbuehler is a White choreographer tasked with choreographing a show about a community of color—predominantly Latinx—using movement styles of which he did not have previous experience. In a personal interview with Blankenbuehler, he said, “My comfort zone is in 50s and 60s jazz, but most people don’t do this anymore, so you have to adapt and evolve.”<sup>177</sup> For him to adapt and evolve, he would have to learn dance styles previously unfamiliar to him. In Lyn Cramer’s book *Creating Musical Theatre*, he reflected on this learning process:

I had never done salsa or hip-hop. I grew up rhythmic, dancing tap and swing. It’s not dissimilar. I started taking everyone’s classes and watching whose work I liked...I surrounded myself with very smart people. I studied many videos, attended competitions, and I learned enough salsa to provide a slow building process to form a number. With the hip-hop, I decided I needed to be able to do it, actually dance the style. So, once I could see the number in my head, I would start to choreograph it on my own. Sometimes my work would look like a tap step, and sometimes it would look like a Jack Cole step. Then I would bring these fierce hip-hop dancers into the room, and I would say, ‘How can this be better? How can this look like a real hip-hop step?’ We would take my steps and convert them. I just needed help.<sup>178</sup>

However, to this day, Blankenbuehler affirms, “I don’t *do* hip-hop.”<sup>179</sup> He avoids claiming he is proficiently skilled in the genre.

Nevertheless, since *In the Heights*, he has absorbed hip-hop dance aesthetics into his toolbox of movement possibilities curating a hybrid-dance style he would come to use in every

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<sup>177</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler, interviewed by Amanda Olmstead, May 1, 2018.

<sup>178</sup> Lyn Cramer, “Andy Blankenbuehler,” in *Creating Musical Theatre: Conversations with Broadway Directors and Choreographers* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), 39.

<sup>179</sup> Blankenbuehler, interviewed by Amanda Olmstead.

subsequent production he has choreographed, making him a three-time Tony Award-winning choreographer. Foster posits:

Dance, a longstanding and reliable source for the authentic connection between motion and emotion, is now being commandeered as a site for the manufacture of authenticity...Expertise at dancing in genres as diverse as the classical, the folkloric, the popular, and the social has frequently been utilized to improve one's class or rank, to demonstrate and proclaim superiority, and to advance or affirm national, ethnic, or regional notions of uniqueness and importance. It has equally served as a sign of celebrity, competence, nobility, or solidarity. Those who support dance as benefactors or as dance likewise consolidate social status and secure their standing as connoisseurs or enthusiasts of a specific genre or form of dance.<sup>180</sup>

While Blankenbuehler does not proclaim such authority or superiority of being an expert in hip-hop dance, or Latinx social dance for that matter—he claims quite the opposite—he did learn the form to advance his career. Without acquiring this skill/vocabulary, he may not have succeeded at securing his job as *Heights* choreographer. If Blankenbuehler himself does not claim to have such connection with these forms, how did he produce choreography hailed as “authentic,” propelling him into a space of notoriety?

Through collaboration with other dancers and assistant or associate choreographers, he successfully developed his uniquely hybrid-dance genre. Learning and creating dance in this way brings people in relation to one another, as Foster propounds. This correspondence occurs within the rehearsal process, rather than just between performer and audience member. The exchanges of labor develop a collective, embodied understanding of a cultural product. By actively seeking instruction or input from artists proficient in styles he feels less connected to physically and culturally, he can deepen the connection between his body and the choreographic intent of said styles. Conversely, through such collaboration, he can embrace and implement the skills of those within the production to generate a textured and diversified choreographic score.

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<sup>180</sup> Foster, 6-7.

In an article for *Playbill*, assistant choreographer Luis Salgado (billed as the “Latin Assistant Choreographer”) said this about *In the Heights*, “My very first journey with this show was an explosion of pride through its movement as I worked next to Andy Blankenbuehler enhancing the choreographic authenticity in numbers like ‘Carnaval’ and the ‘Club’ among others [...] ‘the process’ has been the priority on every step of the journey, allowing a unique ownership of the character and community moments in the show.”<sup>181</sup> Salgado aided in the manufacturing and editing of Latinx dance styles throughout the production. For the PBS *Great Performances* documentary on *In the Heights*, Blankenbuehler points out that nearly 75% of the cast was making their Broadway debut, many of whom had never even done a musical before.<sup>182</sup> Working with this novice cast provided him with the unique opportunity to train young dancers in his method of working. He did not have to readjust their way of doing traditional musical theatre choreography on Broadway—which was, in many ways, a hierarchical system that did not afford such dialogic relationships. As Salgado suggested, Blankenbuehler’s collaborative proclivity allowed for a creative process that would open up the possibility for individual cast members to have agency over their characters and the development of community throughout the production. In fact, many of the performers from *Heights* would come to follow Blankenbuehler and work with him on future productions.

Blankenbuehler frequently asserts that he will come into a rehearsal process with 60-70% of the choreography developed, and the additional 30-40% is figured out in production with his team of associates, assistants, and cast. In his preparation, he films himself in his studio,

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<sup>181</sup> Andrew Gans, “Casting Announced for Luis Salgado-Directed In the Heights,” *Playbill*, Playbill Inc., March 2, 2017, [www.playbill.com/article/casting-announced-for-luis-salgado-directed-in-the-heights](http://www.playbill.com/article/casting-announced-for-luis-salgado-directed-in-the-heights).

<sup>182</sup> “*In the Heights*: Chasing Broadway Dreams,” PBS Great Performances, video, 54:00, November 10, 2017.

improvising and creating dance steps. Then, he takes these clips to a few dancers in a studio and says, “This isn’t the step, but the step feels like this.”<sup>183</sup> Reflecting on his process, Blankenbuehler said, “Those dancers often have so much better style than I have. Then they immediately make it look so much more heightened than I can make it.”<sup>184</sup> Much of these dance moves look more like pantomime before making it to the dancers and becoming the codified, technical, energized dance audiences see as the final version.

An interview with longtime associate choreographer Stephanie Klemons (who began as assistant dance captain and swing in *In the Heights*) sheds light on this collaborative process of creating choreography:

He and I together can say we need something that swirls in the air for the last seven counts, but he and I are not going to sit in the studio and continue to choreograph that. For example, we are not going to choreograph lifts together because that is just not our bodies...and so we rely on other people who, we can say, ‘no, put her up this way, try putting her leg like this, maybe try putting her leg like that.’<sup>185</sup>

Klemons also affirms that developing in the space with the cast can help fill in any “dead” moments where dance or bodies may be needed. Blankenbuehler, or Klemons, may say, “we need this moment to feel ominous,” and the performers will create what that feels like for their specific body at that moment. Another technique they use in collaboratively creating is, giving individual cast members predetermined choreography and allowing others to improvise at the same time.<sup>186</sup> As

Susan Leigh Foster points out:

People teach each other dances, and they also teach each other how to dance. In so doing they often repeat movements or phrases of movements, and they copy others’ movements, transferring them into their own lived corporeality. They also inflect

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<sup>183</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler, “Building Broadway: Hamilton Choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler,” Broadway.com, YouTube video, 4:07, June 6, 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=R49vKv8f0Wc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R49vKv8f0Wc).

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Stephanie Klemons, interviewed by Amanda Olmstead, June 6, 2018.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

these movements with their own style or distinctive qualities, all the while retaining an apprehension of the movement's relation to its original articulation.<sup>187</sup>

The improvising ensemble body can promote instincts that add layers of nuance.

By bringing in multiple voices, embodied voices, to the creative process, Blankenbuehler's choreographic ideas can connect in a way far more personal to the specific bodies of the performers. It is common practice for the choreographer to precisely tell the dancer what the movement is and how it needs to look. Typical Broadway dancers are usually highly skilled in ballet, jazz, and tap dance. Ballet, in particular, requires the body to be much more upright than, say, hip-hop. For example, in a moment that involves breakdance, he might not include a dancer who is more rooted in ballet; it does not fit their body or training experience. Similarly, a hip-hop dancer may not have the "pretty" pointed toes and turn out required to do a particular lift. In blending all of these different dance genres, he can create a dance style and choreography that supports dancers of varying training backgrounds within one production. Rather than forcing a body to learn to move in a way that is not veridical to their personal corporeality, he is able to create a score that provides opportunities for individuals to show off their skill set through their embodied character.<sup>188</sup> He has opened up the potential for other storytelling modes through the body within musical theatre beyond the standard ballet, jazz, and tap. By allowing for the flexibility of individual interpretation, ensemble bodies can communicate lived experience. A dialectical relationship is created between Blankenbuehler's body, the performer's body, and their character's body. Such tangible corporeality through dance can lead to a viewer's perception of an authentic embodied presence—one that is manufactured and staged through this dialectical relationship and the codified product of choreographed musical theatre/Latinx dance.

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<sup>187</sup> Foster, 15-16.

<sup>188</sup> Blankenbuehler, interviewed by Amanda Olmstead.

Blankenbuehler's prioritization of communication of ideas (narrative, metaphorical, subtextual, theoretical, or philosophical) over virtuosity and spectacle allows for the movement to rest within the performer's individual body. Supported by experienced practitioners such as Luis Salgado, the enaction of such socially and culturally identifiable movement by a diverse group of bodies attempts to bring the audience in contact with a locale in a way that resists generalization and promotes individuality. Within a theatrical space, as Foster argues, the tension between authenticity and commodity becomes palpable for the performer who has become a product for display. While the performer seemingly has a hand in how they navigate their movement's specificity, they are still being manufactured to produce something of value—at minimum, entertainment. The performer's agency in how the staged authentic presentation of said sociocultural movement is received by the audience allows for the product being displayed to be less replicable and therefore less commodified—but commodified nonetheless. In other words, because of his collaborative creative process and emphasis on the individual's ability to communicate lived experience through dance, the performer is able to manipulate the choreography, so it is derived from their individual ensemble body. The performer, then, produces signs of the authentic body and dance.

As this chapter proceeds through a specific analysis of choreographically abundant numbers, the complication of perceived authenticity/staged authenticity becomes more conspicuous, particularly with "The Club" and "Carnaval Del Barrio." Both of these numbers rest on incorporating Latinx social dance, which engenders the audience to view the characters as (more) authentic. Commenting on dancers doing social dancing, Jane Desmond observes, "They are often taken as evidence of a 'character,' sometimes of a 'national character,' and often of 'racial character.'" This is where the nonverbal aspect of dance or our general ignoring of movement as a

meaningful system of communication reinforce popular beliefs about the supposed transparency of expressivity.”<sup>189</sup> When social dance is staged, it often becomes a mere representation or essentialization of a cultural product and loses its attachment to social relevance. According to Desmond, “The pleasure aspect of social dancing often obscures our awareness of it as a symbolic system, so that dancers are often seen as ‘authentic’ unmediated expressions of psychic or emotional inferiority.”<sup>190</sup> In “The Club” scene, the salsa dancing becomes spectacular, pleasurable, and even sensational. In “Carnaval Del Barrio,” the community celebrates the assortment of countries they come from by waving their flags and dancing accompanying Latinx social dances. In this case, the dance is directly used to accentuate possible identifications of nationality and ethnicity. The dances in “Carnaval Del Barrio” are seemingly organic, almost improvised at times. There is little codified synchronous choreography. The individual doing the dancing shapes the choreography.

Staging Latinx social dance by a White choreographer not trained in these forms risks misappropriation and exoticization. Additionally, as Foster argues, when dance functions as a commodity, it can become “governed by the potential to profit from the money that is exchanged.”<sup>191</sup> For *Heights*, the promise of “authenticity” promoted by reviewers of the production triggers the possibility of bringing in more audience members, thus more profit. However, the dialectics created between choreographer and performer, performer and character have the potential to intervene in these challenges. For example, when Blankenbuehler stages a moment of salsa, Luis Salgado is able to take his personal background as a trained salsa dancer and make that

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<sup>189</sup> Jane Desmond, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 32.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>191</sup> Foster, 52.



moment his. Salgado does not dance Blankenbuehler's salsa; he has the freedom to use Blankenbuehler's idea and make it true to his body and his experience. Salgado's salsa combination may connect movements more fluidly than someone who is not well versed in the genre. He has the potential to more holistically create a salsa score and avoid a generalized interpretation.

It is critical to pause and acknowledge the risk of asserting that Salgado is “naturally” able to execute salsa more “authentically” than Blankenbuehler. The stereotypical connection between Latinness, one's ““naturally expressive body,”” and the “supposed genetic propensity for rhythmic movement”” walks a fine line in this situation.<sup>192</sup> It is Salgado's embodied experience of being trained in Latinx social dance forms that heightens his legitimacy of executing such movements, not his racial or ethnic background. But, Mark Franko contends, “The necessary relation of the fleshy body to its markers of identity and subjectivity lends feeling its structure from experience, through performance, to interpretation.”<sup>193</sup> Latinx social dance danced by a dramaturgically Latinx body does transmit a performed bodily discourse and narrative that enhances the audience's perception of an “authentic” encounter propagated by U.S.-based stereotypes. If the audience visually recognizes the body as Latinx—which can potentially rely on how individual audience members read, identify, and stereotype Latinx markers of identity—the body has the capacity to contribute and lend itself to performance. Still, Salgado has ownership over the movements he presents. Blankenbuehler's collaborative rehearsal environment opens up the opportunity for the individual ensemble body doing the dancing to use its actual lived experience rather than a socially homogenized idea of how something is *supposed* to look. When the individual ensemble body is

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<sup>192</sup> Desmond, 41.

<sup>193</sup> Mark Franko, *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 41.

linked explicitly to Latinx lived experience, like Salgado's, the conception of producing (staged) authenticity through Latinx social dance can become more affective.

The staging of social dance in this way resists commodification processes that make the dance a replicable product. Franko asserts that dance can be turned into social energy; therefore, as a product, dance has the potential to be considered as producing ideology rather than sensuous experiences.<sup>194</sup> If Blankenbuehler's choreography generates such social energy or social connection through the individual's shaping the movement on stage, it can communicate their beliefs or ideas and produce staged authenticity.

### 3.2 "In the Heights": Staging Community, Establishing Vocabulary

It is July 3<sup>rd</sup>—Sunrise.

*(A beat comes in. In the shadows, GRAFFITI PETE is revealed painting various walls in the neighborhood. Enter USNAVI from his stoop.)*

USNAVI: Yo, That's my wall!

GRAFFITI PETE: Pshh...

*(GRAFFITI PETE runs away. USNAVI turns to us.)*<sup>195</sup>

Now, let us imagine that moment again. It is July 3<sup>rd</sup>—Sunrise. Graffiti Pete is walking down the street to find his next target. He places his boom box on the ground, pauses to look at Usnavi's bodega, rubbing his hands together as he comes up with a plan. Pete pulls out his spray cans and pumps one into the air, followed by three backward steps on the beat shift into the next

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<sup>194</sup> Franko, 2.

<sup>195</sup> Quiara Alegría Hudes and Lin-Manuel Miranda, *In the Heights: the Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (Milwaukee, WI: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2013), 1.

song on the radio, to the syncopated rhythm one, (pause) two, and three—analyzing the canvas he is about to develop. Electronic dance music (EDM) plays as he jumps into second position (a position of believing in something), shrugs his shoulders, and lunges right, lifting one spray can and looking at it—the creative juices are beginning to flow. Spinning the spray can in his left hand, he leans left, then jumps to cross his legs, and jumps out into second position once more with his arms out in the shape of a “T”—getting pumped up. He turns over his right shoulder, slowly drags his foot around as he looks left, then he looks back at the bodega—double-checking no one is around. Pete lunges to his right, alternating his arms: punch out with right/pull left into a bent elbow, palms are up with spray cans, switch, switch, switch (to the eight-note rhythm one, and, two, and)—the vision is almost prepared. Once more, he lunges, but this time it is forward into a fourth position (a position of action) before activating his cans behind him and completing a three-step turn toward the bodega storefront—the plan is in motion; the art is blossoming. He jumps into a backward lunge facing the bodega analyzing his work, and leaps back to the front to keep going before Usnavi comes outside and scares him away.

Graffiti Pete is the first character the audience sees in the world of *In the Heights*.<sup>196</sup> In the prologue-style opening, it would have been very simple to have the character walk out, spray a little paint, get caught by Usnavi, and then have the opening number “In the Heights” begin. It would have been just as easy not to have the character at all. Even so, what Blankenbuehler, and the creative team, did was make this moment heightened to dictate its importance. The moment itself is not necessarily the “important” part, though Pete does come back later in the show to paint

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<sup>196</sup> Graffiti Pete is dressed in baggy clothing. Reflecting on hip-hop aesthetics and commodified nuances, Carla Stalling Huntington points out, “And forget not the baggy clothes phenomenon that swept the world as a result of jailed African American men who wear loose fitting coveralls represented by rappers on street corners.”

See Carla Stalling Huntington, *Hip Hop Dance: Meanings and Messages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2007), 141.

a beautiful mural of Abuela Claudia. What is important is the idea that the body performing Graffiti Pete is unique, even though he is not a principal character. Pete's ensemble body dancing movements that fall, arguably, under the genre of hip-hop establish a vocabulary of the piece (which is notably different from Broadway shows at the time). This body says, *In the Heights* is going to move in this way. It informs the audience that bodies other than principal characters will be essential for creating the world of staged Washington Heights. From the very first movement, the ensemble—even if it is just one member—is choreographed as a lens for the audience to understand the show's milieu. The ensemble body is immediately set up as being essential to the dramaturgy of the world.

Charles Isherwood's review of *In the Heights* Off-Broadway on February 9, 2007, makes a note of "Andy Blankenbuehler's joyous choreography, which synthesizes street styles and Broadway athleticism, showcasing the fabulously elastic bodies of the ensemble. A particular standout is Seth Stewart, playing a sweet-hearted graffiti artist, who seems to have little springboards in his sneakers."<sup>197</sup> Isherwood's specific mention of Seth Stewart, who originated the role of Graffiti Pete, is noteworthy. Had this "elastic body" from the ensemble entered the space later in the show or in a group of synchronized dancers, would he have made such an impact? Stewart has an extensive dance background. From the ages of sixteen to eighteen, he began to take ballet classes and was welcomed into the Bachelor of Fine Arts program at Alvin Ailey. After about a year and a half, he left Alvin Ailey to pursue professional work. Stewart was a featured music video and concert dancer for performers such as Jay Z, Madonna, Jennifer Lopez, and Britney Spears. An online interview with Stewart discusses that he grew up with artists such as

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<sup>197</sup> Charles Isherwood, "From the Corner Bodega, the Music of Everyday Life," *The New York Times*, February 9, 2007, [www.nytimes.com/2007/02/09/theater/reviews/09heights.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/09/theater/reviews/09heights.html).

Michael and Janet Jackson and MC Hammer as his inspiration to be a dancer.<sup>198</sup> His very specific embodied experiences helped him to create the role of Graffiti Pete. The choice to heighten Pete's gestures in this opening picture offered Stewart the opportunity to show off his skill, guided by Blankenbuehler, while also adding to the overall atmosphere of *Heights*.

As Blankenbuehler was reflecting on his process of studying and learning hip-hop dance styles with Lyn Cramer, he noted, "The hip-hop that looked like pantomime was really interesting to me...I tried to make hip-hop dance a bit abstract, deconstructing it, so I could apply it to the way people would simply walk down the street."<sup>199</sup> He leaned into this idea of hip-hop dance, having the capacity to become a story language. In another interview for *Dance Teacher Magazine*, he added, "I always tried to make [the dance] look like the city in a very heightened way. If you look around, people always have rhythm about them—the way they push onto the subway or go up and down steps. There is really this natural syncopation to the way people move in the city."<sup>200</sup> The opening number "In the Heights" is an excellent example of how Blankenbuehler choreographs the idea of a city. By curating varied, individualized choreographic scores for each body in this number, staged Washington Heights comes to life; it gives a sense of impressionistic, staged authenticity.

After Usnavi chases away Graffiti Pete, he begins singing directly to the audience. As he narrates an introduction to Washington Heights through hip-hop-based music, the neighborhood comes to life around him. The number begins using quotidian movement to introduce the audience to the idea of the staged city and slowly incorporates abstract ideas within the choreography. A

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<sup>198</sup> Seth Stewart, "Exclusive Interview with Dancer Seth Stewart (*In the Heights* / Madonna)," *I.N-TV*. YouTube video, 7:53, July 6, 2011, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hoTgDLC4ck](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hoTgDLC4ck).

<sup>199</sup> Cramer, 39.

<sup>200</sup> Jeni Tu, "Andy Blankenbuehler," *Dance Teacher*, 30, no. 8 (Raleigh, NC: 2008), 96.

metro worker dawdling on his way to work walks from stage right past the piragüero, who is selling shaved ice, goes up the steps located center stage, and exits. As the city continues to wake up, other people begin to walk down the street, entering from stage left, stage right, or upstage center down the stairs. Throughout the number, there are little break-out scenes that introduce the audience to specific characters. For example, Abuela Claudia stops at Usnavi's bodega to pick up her lottery ticket, and they have a conversation about spoiled milk.

Following Abuela Claudia's exit from the bodega, dance movements begin to creep into the piece. While some pedestrians continue to walk down the street normally, others may add a turn, a syncopated step, or an arm flourish. Though still subtle in terms of "dance," each has an individual movement score that is molded to their character, to their bodies. A man upstage walks to the beat with a stack of newspapers before setting the stack down, pausing, and jumping up into second position to sell another paper. Each of these moments happens in concert with the syncopation of the claves in the percussion score. The piraguero bounces to the beat as he makes his way across the stage. A young woman casually walks at her own pace to stage left. No two people have the same movement pattern or objective; they are just characters living in (staged) Washington Heights.

Usnavi calls out the audience's potential privilege or ignorance regarding their probable lack of exposure to the Washington Heights neighborhood, saying, "You're prob'ly thinkin', 'I'm up shit's creek! / I never been north of ninety-sixth street.'"<sup>201</sup> As Usnavi explains Washington Heights's socioeconomic conditions, the entire ensemble moves synchronously for the first time.

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<sup>201</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda, "In the Heights," in *In the Heights: the Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (Milwaukee, WI: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2013), 3.

In a 2014 interview for the podcast *The Ensemblist*, Lin-Manuel Miranda said this about the importance of an ensemble:

You need an ensemble because you are trying to immerse the audience in a world. And the richer the ensemble, the more immersive the world. You want the *oomph*... One of the times it's most important to use, to deploy your ensemble—right, because everything's a weapon, everything's a tool or a weapon depending on how you're feeling that day—Sondheim always says the trickiest thing about writing an ensemble number is what is something that everyone in this neighborhood is feeling at the same time...they find unison lines to sing on that [idea] with *Heights* we made it about the grind. Everything is about, we get our coffee, we get our paper, we're all working our asses off to get through the day. And so you find those communal moments and build...<sup>202</sup>

The first moment of synchronized movement brings this idea of unison, of community into a visceral experience for the audience. Accompanying the simultaneous movement with Usnavi's lyrics suggests that the gentrification of the Heights is impacting all of them, even if we, the audience, cannot *hear* them discuss the matter. Although this section is communal, synchronistic choreography, the establishment of each individual ensemble member has not disappeared. From the top of the number through this moment, each individual enacts movements in their own way; no two bodies do a movement *exactly* the same. The dialectic between performer and character creates a textured experience that allows the audience to see a diverse (staged) Washington Heights through the ensemble. Rather than a generic, one-size-fits-all view, the audience can see individual characters being affected by a situation differently.

Wherever they are on the stage by the lyric, “our neighbors started packin’ up,” they pause.<sup>203</sup> The movement sequence here is full of small pauses. For Words on Dance at Symphony Space, Blankenbuehler discussed the importance of pauses in movement-based storytelling:

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<sup>202</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda, interview with Mo Brady, “Writing for Ensembles (*Hamilton*, *In the Heights* - feat. Lin-Manuel Miranda),” *The Ensemblist*, podcast audio, July 2, 2020, <https://www.stitcher.com/show/the-ensemblist/episode/181-writing-for-ensembles-hamilton-in-the-heights-feat-lin-manuel-miranda-63385999>.

<sup>203</sup> Miranda, “In the Heights,” *In the Heights*, 3.

In just a moment's time, the audience's eye [can] see something like a close-up or a freeze-frame...even if it was just a sixteenth note, there would be a moment of pause. And in that moment of pause, the audience could learn a story... If you're talking about a sixteenth note, you're forcing the audience to catch something that fast. Which actually, I think, makes them lean forward and pay more attention because they have to work harder.<sup>204</sup>

He acknowledges that this would become a staple for him as a choreographer.

In the second verse of "In the Heights," Blankenbuehler implements this notion of the quick pause to promote a crucial subtext regarding the neighborhood of (staged) Washington Heights. Usnavi sings all of the lyrics for this section center stage while the ensemble is spread around him sporadically. The choreography accompanying these lyrics starts out slow, holding each of the first two shapes for two counts. The movements become gradually faster by the end of the song. On "packin' up," facing whichever direction they are traveling, the ensemble leans back on their heels with both arms straight out in front of their chest, hands loose. It is as if they have been punched in the gut and are falling backward in slow motion. During the pause of "packin' up," this freeze-frame moment highlights the varied impacts gentrification has on the community. To elaborate, if an audience member is looking at Krista Rodriguez, they will understand her situation to be a little less ominous. She is holding a purse in her right arm, and when she gets "punched in the gut," she only contracts slightly and only extends one arm, rather than both. On the opposite end of the spectrum is Afra Hines. Her torso is significantly more collapsed, causing her to lean further back on her heels with both arms extended parallel as if she has been forcefully knocked backward. The ensemble bodies hold this image, and on "and pickin' up," they lift their right foot, leaning forward onto the left foot—making an exaggerated shape of walking—while reaching fists down as if they are picking up suitcases. Some individuals, like Hines, are in a wide stance, closer to the ground.

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<sup>204</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler and Sarah L. Kaufman, "Fresh Steps," Symphony Space and Words on Dance, New York City, NY, October 21, 2019.



Some are in a closed stance, like Rodriguez, and therefore seeming to be shouldering less weight. Depending on whom the audience member is looking at, they may be receiving a story about someone who is in deep despair or someone who is still doing pretty well and was not as severely affected by the changes in the Heights.

Next, the ensemble places their right foot back down and plié into fourth position turning slowly over the right shoulder to face upstage on “and ever since the rent went up.”<sup>205</sup> After a few quickly syncopated shoulder movements through the lyrics, “it’s gotten mad expensive, / but we live with just,” they throw their arms up and hop back onto on the right foot, kicking out the left on the word “enough.”<sup>206</sup> Following this sequence, they begin a stop-motion walk taking one step every two counts for four counts. Then, some return to an average walking speed, some remain slower but relaxed, some are seemingly in a hurry. Each little pause or holding of a movement, as well as the speeding up of the tempo of the movements in this verse, tells the story of getting knocked down by forces outside of one’s control, fighting to pick oneself back up, and accepting that they are going to have to keep moving forward. Every individual handles the situation at various levels and accepts the challenge at different speeds. As the ensemble bodies engage in their personal choreographic scores, they create a layered and elaborate atmosphere. Although their movement is heightened and stylized beyond quotidian practices, the resistance to uniform synchronicity allows the audience to comprehend a more realistic world, a (staged) authentic world.

Reflecting on the individuality within the ensemble, Miranda told *The Ensemblist*:

You know I was in the show, so the first time that I saw the show, I was blown away by all the other plotlines that were happening that were purely visual. You know, with ‘96,000’ [...] we have these individual lines of ‘well if I had the money

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<sup>205</sup> Miranda, “In the Heights,” *In the Heights*, 3.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 4.

I would do this,’ ‘if I had the money I would do this’ and then you see it spread and spread and spread and you can slowly fold it until you don’t even realize the entire company is now doing this crazy unison number. Because we kind of keep going into these solos and solos, and how much can we continue to build while doing a solo. And that was very much a group...that thing was written by committee. It was, ‘All right, can we get away with this happening, and what can we build here?’ And, ‘All right, so, Benny will solo over this while everyone’s going woo.’ And like...I worked very closely with Andy to find the way to make that build musically and physically at the same time.<sup>207</sup>

Although Miranda explicitly mentions the number “96,000,” his reflection is equally true of “In the Heights.” As we see with this analysis, the heightened-every day builds and builds into a fully developed dance as the number continues. The anonymous background actors walking around the stage become individual characters in Washington Heights with lives theoretically independent of the central storyline. Developing the “individual” within the ensemble of *Heights* allows for the creation of a community that promotes the sentiment of real life, of an authentic representation of the Washington Heights neighborhood.

*In the Heights* navigates genuine challenges occurring within the neighborhood of Washington Heights, framing the moving bodies in *staged* Washington Heights so that they are in direct conversation with the actual socioeconomic location, even if done so subtly. Leaning on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Helen Thomas suggests, “As the individual’s body comes to be formed, it bears the unmistakable marks of his or her social class. The inscription of class on the body is a result of three particular determinants, the social locations, the habitus and taste.”<sup>208</sup> Thomas identifies the social location regarding class conditions—economic, social, and cultural—that affect an individual’s everyday life. Although a year is not explicitly noted in the text regarding

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<sup>207</sup> Miranda, *The Ensemblist*.

<sup>208</sup> Helen Thomas, *The Body, Dance, and Cultural Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 57.

the setting, we know that Miranda was writing *In the Heights* in the late 1990s.<sup>209</sup> According to recent research by Miguelina Rodriguez, between 2000-2015, the rent in the Heights “increased six-fold making it the second most gentrifying neighborhood in New York City.”<sup>210</sup> Rodriguez’s research looked specifically at Dominican-Americans living in the Heights during this time. After conducting many personal interviews, she concluded that the community as a whole was greatly concerned about cultural erasure and loss of cultural identity due to such gentrification. Her study specifically discusses bodegas and hair salons as sites community members refer to when talking about the Heights as home; uncoincidentally, those are two key locations in the production of *In the Heights*.<sup>211</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda remarks, “It’s crazy to see your neighborhood inside a theatre you have been to; you’ve seen shows in that theatre... That’s my bodega!”<sup>212</sup> In the section analyzed above, we can see how Blankenbuehler establishes the body as being affected by gentrification but having the will to keep going. Even if this is read sub/unconsciously by the audience, the community created onstage is bolstering Usnavi’s message that explains Washington Heights’s socioeconomic situation.

As the staged social world of Washington Heights comes alive through the bodies of the performers/characters of the entire company, the dancing ensemble body becomes increasingly crucial to forming the idea of a milieu with a complex, layered history. While the principals’ bodies are undoubtedly essential and engaging in telling through their corporality, the ensemble body is doubly performative, for it travels between being mediated and unmediated by text. Such

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<sup>209</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda, “Lin Manuel Miranda '02,” *Wesleyan University*, [www.wesleyan.edu/admission/videos/linmanuel.html](http://www.wesleyan.edu/admission/videos/linmanuel.html).

<sup>210</sup> Miguelina Rodriguez, “Desenvolvimento (Sense Making): A Critical Ethnography on 2nd Generation Dominican-American Professionals and Their Experiences with the Gentrification of Washington Heights, New York” (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2019), 99.

<sup>211</sup> Rodriguez, 141.

<sup>212</sup> “*In the Heights*: Chasing Broadway Dreams.”

relationships between the ensemble body and written text can be arguably broken into three ideas. First, there are moments throughout where the body moves independently of any spoken text. For example, it can move to the beat of the music underscoring dialogue. This means that the viewer can see the ensemble body as directly affected by the text/music and inherently connected to the story. Alternatively, similar to the beginning of “In the Heights,” it can simply move while music is happening but not be in sync with that music. Or, the ensemble body can be seen by the viewer as a separate entity, not connected to the story but living in the same physical space; it is related to the world but perhaps not to the action. When you take a walk down the street, there are people who shape your walk. You pause to let someone walk past, you say “hello,” or you ignore someone completely. Each of those people has their own story, but you are all connected by being in the same milieu at that moment. The same applied to staged Washington Heights. Incorporating this idea elevates the individuality of the ensemble body.

Second, as detailed by the section where Usnavi calls out the gentrification of the Heights, the body can move in sync with the lyrics, but it is not singing. Here, the ensemble bodies become physically connected within the milieu of (staged) Washington Heights. When they are collectively mediated by the text, it points to the notion that they have all been affected by the verbally communicated idea on some level. They may not be directly involved in the story at that moment, but as they subtly move in the periphery, it amplifies Usnavi’s sentiments.

Moreover, there are choruses in the song when the ensemble joins in singing while they continue to move. The next section in the song is the first time when the ensemble sings the chorus. Yet, the unison singing is now the underscore for what can only be described as a constellation of movement sequences; the individual choreographic scores become palpable. Rather than imposing specific choreography on the entire ensemble and asking them to be completely in-sync with one

another as they sing this chorus, Blankenbuehler accommodates each performer's individuality. Throughout this section, his choreographic landscape breathes between brief moments of synchronization and moments of individuality to highlight the uniting principles of this group of people but acknowledge each performer/character's unique personalities. The linkage of movement, music, and text by the ensemble bodies during these moments of unity speaks to Miranda's point of, "What is something that everyone in this neighborhood is feeling at the same time?"<sup>213</sup> The mediation of all of the bodies onstage is a point of connection. The fluidity of the ensemble body to move between mediated and unmediated phases creates a multiplexable environment that promotes the community atmosphere of Washington Heights as well as the sense of staged authenticity.

Blankenbuehler's implementation of individualized choreographic scores while the ensemble sings in unison helps generate a robust staged community environment. These lyrics act as a guide map for understanding the constellation of events that occur:

ALL (except NINA): In the Heights

PIRAGUA GUY/CARLA/DANIELA/OTHERS: I flip the lights and start my day

ALL: There are fights

CARLA/DANIELA/WOMEN: And endless debts

KEVIN/BENNY/PIRAGUA GUY/MEN: And bills to pay

ALL: In the Heights

BENNY/KEVIN/PIRAGUA GUY/OTHERS: I can't survive without café

USNAVI: I serve café

ALL: 'Cuz tonight seems like a million years away!

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<sup>213</sup> Miranda, *The Ensemblist*.

Graffiti Pete enters upstage center with a boom-box executing a slow-motion walk. He sits on the railing for a moment, followed by a quick chaîné turn off upstage right between “pay” and “In.”<sup>215</sup> The Piragua Guy enters upstage enter slowly pushing his cart toward stage left. On the stage deck, Krysta Rodriguez, ensemble, is stage right in the bodega. Rodriguez is upstage of the counter, paying Usnavi for a purchase. Then, she walks around to the front of the counter and stops, posing with one leg beveled and her back to the audience. Afra Hines, ensemble, begins a slow-motion walk toward the bodega from stage left. Her pace returns to normal on “day.” She pauses to greet Luis Salgado on her way through the door, followed by a quick chaîné turn into the bodega with arms in a “touch down” shape (hands in fists) crossing in front of the counter between “pay” and “In.” On the downbeat before “In,” her arms flip so her fists are toward the ground, then back to touch down shape on “In” and back to the reverse with legs bent and back curved on “the.” Ending the movement sequence in front of the counter, posing with one leg beveled and her back to the audience. They all pause by the end of the second “In the Heights.”

Additionally, when the chorus begins, there are people on balconies and hanging out windows performing everyday tasks such as getting dressed, doing laundry, and cleaning. Including mundane tasks in the choreographic score aids in manufacturing the social milieu of staged Washington Heights. Nevertheless, while a group of bodies in the same social location is bound to unifying principles, it is simultaneously made up of unique differences. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus can frame the body moving within this social location. He defines habitus as “generative and unifying principles which retranslate the intrinsic and relational characteristics of

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<sup>214</sup> Miranda, “In the Heights,” *In the Heights*, 4.

<sup>215</sup> **Chaîné:** a series of short turns that travel across space, typically in a straight line.

a position into a unitary life-style, that is, a unitary set of persons, goods, practices.”<sup>216</sup> Habitus is distinct and operates under principles of differentiation. Habitus is incorporated into the body in so much that it constitutes the idea of an individual’s history and how it affects the way they function within given social conditions. For this section, the unifying principles are geographic location, the experience of gentrification, and song melody. The unique differences include but are not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, relationship status, family life, response to stress, or emotional expression. This menagerie of traits affects the characters’ habitus within the staged world created by an individual ensemble body.

Throughout the above choreography, the juxtaposition between quotidian and heightened everyday movement, synchronous and asynchronous movement frames the individual ensemble bodies within the community setting. When a moment becomes heightened, it attracts a viewer’s attention to that body/those bodies. Movement of any kind can be one of the most powerful tools to draw focus onstage. In some instances, two or three bodies may be moving or gesturing in a similar, synchronized way to create embodied community amongst the characters. Jonathan Burrows argues, “The meaning or logic that arrives when you put things next to each other that accumulates into something which makes sense for the audience. This something that accumulates seems inevitable, almost unarguable. It feels like a story, even when there is no story.”<sup>217</sup> When the heightened movement is set next to everyday movement, it suggests to the audience that they are semiotically related; the people living in this world move in both realist and abstract ways interchangeably.

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<sup>216</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “Physical Space, Social Space and Habitus,” *Illinois University Library Archives*, University of Oslo, May 15, 1995, [archives.library.illinois.edu/erec/University%20Archives/2401001/Production\\_website/pages/StewardingExcellence/Physical%20Space,%20Social%20Space%20and%20Habitus.pdf](http://archives.library.illinois.edu/erec/University%20Archives/2401001/Production_website/pages/StewardingExcellence/Physical%20Space,%20Social%20Space%20and%20Habitus.pdf), 15.

<sup>217</sup> Jonathan Burrows, *A Choreographer’s Handbook* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 40.

Lin-Manuel Miranda remembers:

With *In the Heights*, we were very much trying to convey a community. We wanted it to feel like you could follow that person down the block, and there's another musical happening with Nina Lafarga and Ricky Tripp as they exit stage right, and they do their own thing. And it's a credit to [Tommy Kail's] direction [and] Andy Blankenbuehler's choreography that it felt like that. It felt like this community.<sup>218</sup>

Let us take Miranda's suggestion and follow Nina Lafarga for the next part of the chorus. Lafarga, ensemble, is seen entering upstage center wearing a cropped, tight tank top and short skirt with her hair down. She walks directly to Rosie Lani Fiedelman, dressed in Bermuda shorts, a hooded crop top, and short hair. They exchange a few words; it is no coincidence that they meet on the word "fights." Luis Salgado has now left the bodega and crossed to Fiedelman, sending Lafarga into an evasively quick chaîné turn toward downstage right with arms in a "touch down" shape (hands in fists). On the downbeat before "In," her arms flip so her fists are toward the ground, then back to touch down shape on "In" and back to the reverse with legs bent and back curved on "the." Ending the movement sequence near Benny, posing with one leg beveled facing the audience, she pauses, looking back at Salgado and Fiedelman, who are not paired center. They salsa together straight down center stage on "I can't survive." As they salsa, everyone else onstage is in their point of pause, making them the only moving entity. On "café," Salgado and Fiedelman continue their duet, and the others onstage pick up where they left off.

Isolating these three ensemble members, allowing Lafarga's action to drive the plot, a love triangle arises. There may not be a story there, but it feels like a story. When this sequence becomes the focus, the movement (quotidian and danced) accumulates into a narrative completely separate from the central plot of *In the Heights*. If an audience member were to attach to this idea, they would later see Lafarga and Salgado at "The Club" dancing rather intimately with one another,

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<sup>218</sup> Miranda, *The Ensemblist*.



propagating this fabricated story. The initially brief exchange between Lafarga and Fiedelman occurs upstage center, with little obstructing them from view. Such in-depth character development through choreography and the individual ensemble bodies further enhances the production's social world.

Just the same, Salgado and Fiedelman's salsa does not go unnoticed. The inclusion of Latinx social dance within the first three minutes sets up the fact that there will inevitably be Latinx social dance included throughout the show. Furthermore, the entire company's pause during Fiedelman and Salgado's salsa down the strongest path onstage (on the phrase "I can't survive without...") indicates this style is something to pay attention to as it is a cultural practice fundamental to these characters and this social world. Because it is the opening number that institutes a vocabulary for the entire production, immediately establishing this concept is essential.

In Burrows's book, he cites an email correspondence with choreographer Jerome Bel saying:

The first seven minutes of a performance are for free, the audience can accept anything—after this is another problem, then they want what they have paid for—but during those first seven minutes, as choreographer, you have total freedom. You can try to attempt something else, to put the audience on a different track than the usual one for the rest of the performance. It's after those seven minutes that they start to yell at you.<sup>219</sup>

Inaugurating the vocabulary early on is crucial to get the audience on board, making a promise to them about what they are going to see and experience for the remainder of the production. For *Heights*, this means both hip-hop and salsa must be included from the beginning.

During the final line of the chorus, on the beats of the word "away," the ensemble on the stage deck (Salgado, Fiedelman, Lafarga, Hines, Rodriguez, Stewart, and a few others) complete a few synchronized shoulder pops with a foot flick followed by a sweeping arm motion that turns

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<sup>219</sup> Burrows, 80.

the body as if gesturing to a distant landscape. As the next section introduces the Rosarios, Carla, and Daniela, the ensemble returns to “normal” daily life activities. Following these introductions, Usnavi introduces his cousin Sonny and tells of their lives working the bodega. The ensemble begins walking in a stop-time moonwalk. As they take one step forward, they drag that foot back to meet the other. After a quick pause, they repeat on the other foot so that they are walking in place in a stylized way.

As Usnavi steps out of the bodega to address the audience and introduce the partnership with his cousin Sonny, ensemble member Ricky Tripp makes his way to Usnavi and executes a series of pop and lock hip-hop dance moves. For the first few counts of this, the rest of the ensemble is continuing their individualized heightened-walk sequence in the background. Tripp becomes a focus alongside Usnavi; the two even interact when Tripp “buys” a lottery ticket from Usnavi. In the vocal score, a switch in music style is notated at this moment, shifting from “hip-hop, half-time feel” to “Dance-Hall Reggae.”<sup>220</sup> By the lyrics “a few cold waters and / a lottery ticket,” the entire ensemble joins in performing a few select movements that manifest hip-hop aesthetics.<sup>221</sup> Usnavi continues, “Just a part of the routine. / Everybody’s got a job, everybody’s got a dream.”<sup>222</sup> The lyrics emphasize the individuality of the ensemble. As the individual ensemble bodies travel closer to and eventually enter the bodega on “One dollar, two dollars, one fifty, one sixty-nine,” their steps grow larger and larger.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda, “In the Heights,” in *In the Heights*, Vocal Selections (Milwaukee, WI: Williamson Music, Hal Leonard, 2008), 4-9.

<sup>221</sup> Miranda, “In the Heights,” *In the Heights*, 7.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

At this moment, the stage directions in the libretto dictate, “People come through his store.”<sup>224</sup> Reading the script and seeing the action propound the connection between reality and heightened-every day. During the following movement, Usnavi calls out types of purchases made by the customers. Fieldelman does a quick bounce toward the counter to complete her purchase. Lafarga squeezes into the store past Fiedelman doing a series of popping moves. Javier Muñoz walks in to buy a box of condoms—walking back out the door embarrassed.<sup>225</sup> Salgado browses the shelves doing a shoulder pop, then lifts Rodrigues over his head, pausing to see over someone. Graffiti Pete turns through the store to purchase a drink. And Hines and Tripp pop and lock to take coffee from Usnavi.

Blankenbuehler’s interpretation of people coming through the bodega looks much different than what someone would imagine when merely reading the text. His abstraction of an everyday transaction between a community member and the bodega owner using hip-hop augments the piece’s sociological subtext. Hip-hop’s complicated lineage marks it, at its simplest, multicultural and the voice of the disenfranchised. Melissa Catillo-Garsow and Jason Nichols suggest, “...Hip Hop is often an early warning sign of social unrest, an expression of angst and economic or political dissatisfaction and a site for community building and sustainability.”<sup>226</sup> By having every ensemble body take on hip-hop as the vocabulary at this moment, it unites the community in both the struggle and the hope for growth and betterment. In a personal interview, *Heights* first national tour ensemble member Morgan Marcell (Matayoshi), remarked:

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<sup>224</sup> Quiara Alegría Hudes, *In the Heights: the Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (Milwaukee, WI: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2013), 7.

<sup>225</sup> Javier Muñoz was originally cast in the ensemble of *In the Heights* but also doubled as an understudy for Piragua Guy, Sonny, and Usnavi.

<sup>226</sup> Melissa Castillo-Garsow and Jason Nichols, “Hip Hop Latinidades: More Than Just Rapping in Spanish,” in *La Verdad: an International Dialogue on Hip Hop Latinidades* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2016), 3.

Hip-hop allows a lot of story to be told in a little space. It CAN [sic.] be more intricate than other styles, so your imagery tends to be specific. Andy incorporates that into his movement quality. *In the Heights* is a perfect example. You may not know the dancers are doing ‘double decker bus wreck’ with their hands in the back of the bodega, but they are. It creates a vibe on stage that the audience subconsciously feels.<sup>227</sup>

Hip-hop allows people coming through Usnavi’s store to become the community supporting the local bodega, eliciting a “shop small” mentality, fosters sustainability within the neighborhood. Incorporating such subtext through the individual ensemble bodies substantiates the milieu of staged Washington Heights.

After stopping at the bodega, the customers continue to the next part of their day. The stage becomes filled with bodies depicting a typical chaotic weekday morning in New York City. Another change of music style is notated in the vocal score, switching to “Salsa.”<sup>228</sup> In accordance with this shift, Blankenbuehler choreographs a traveling step indicative of a basic salsa in a canon—half of the ensemble salsas while the other half stands still in second position, then they switch. This back and forth happens throughout the entire second chorus. Prior to this moment, only Fiedelman and Salgado have danced salsa. Growing the practice of salsa to include more bodies is crucial to the staged authenticity of *In the Heights*. While Latinx social dance is used very specifically in later numbers, as will be discussed, its slow inauguration here is calculated. The audience first encounters hip-hop as being the primary vocabulary of the piece. To reiterate, hip-hop is employed as the language of struggle and marginalization but also ambition and community. For *In the Heights*, this subtext is vital to the plot. But, the implementation of Latinx social dance as the mode by which the community moves and connects after they have woken up, had their coffee, and are ready to transition into the rest of their day, proposes a less labored, more

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<sup>227</sup> Morgan Marcell, interviewed by Amanda Olmstead, October 21, 2018.

<sup>228</sup> Miranda, “In the Heights,” in *In the Heights*, Vocal Selections, 11.

intuitive component of the (staged) Washington Heights community. Latinx social dance symbolizes the traditions and values fundamental to their way of life.

Blankenbuehler implements another dialectic, this time between hip-hop and Latinx social dance that the ensemble body navigates throughout the production. Jonathan Burrows posits, “One of the greatest strengths of dance is this: if you put two people doing two different dances next to each other, we will almost always find a relationship between the two things we’re seeing—we will even enjoy it.”<sup>229</sup> While the chorus begins with the canon between salsa and stillness, it builds to dance between salsa and hip-hop. The push and pull between living peacefully and facing the weight of a neighborhood crumbling around them permeate the choreography.

Following two brief breakout scenes with Benny and Vanessa, respectively, Usnavi steps out of the bodega. The music pauses, switching to a bass beat, followed by seven counts of rest as he speaks—the vocal score labels this section “Hip-Hop.”<sup>230</sup> This shift suggests a stop-time moment, introspective of Usnavi’s thoughts. The ensemble begins moving seemingly in slow motion. On the first downbeat, Tripp and Graffiti Pete, center, drop to the ground into a low runner’s lunge, right leg forward. Fiedelman is downstage right with her right leg forward, left leg back mirroring Tripp and Graffiti Pete but on a mid-level. Lafarga and Salgado are in a partner dance hold. Others are paused in the middle of reaching into their purse, walking, high-fiving, or completing a transaction. Usnavi sings, “Yeah, I’m a streetlight, / choking on the heat. / The world spins around / while I’m frozen to my seat.”<sup>231</sup> Conversely, the ensemble shifts functions, becoming an extension of Usnavi’s consciousness. They move abstractly and slowly closer to Usnavi. Drawing direct attention to the presentational nature of this new function, the first

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<sup>229</sup> Burrows, 119.

<sup>230</sup> Miranda, “In the Heights,” in *In the Heights*, Vocal Selections, 13.

<sup>231</sup> Miranda, “In the Heights,” *In the Heights*, 12.

movement faces the audience. The ensemble bodies transform from individual characters living in staged Washington Heights to an extension of Usnavi's rendering of his personal history.

In a promotional video for *In the Heights*, Blankenbuehler, accompanied by a few of the ensemble members, annotates this dance break:

In the opening number, there's a moment where the lead character Usnavi talks about seeing the neighborhood from the perspective of being in the middle of it; and it's all going around him. So, what we do is we hit this slow-motion circle where everybody is...going around him. And then when that comes back to life, he sings these lyrics about 'my parents came from nothing' and just inherently those lyrics are saying that it's from nothing and it's going up.<sup>232</sup>

Usnavi sings, "So I'm switchin' up the beat. / 'cuz my parents came with nothing. / They got a little more. / And sure, we're poor."<sup>233</sup> As previously mentioned, the beat switches for this section from salsa, a sound and movement inherently connected to his Latinx heritage, to hip-hop. Because hip-hop is a sound and movement associated with socioeconomic struggles, the show seemingly chooses to activate it during such moments within the narrative. Here, this choice accompanies the challenges Usnavi's parents faced as immigrants. The ensemble faces front, steps forward onto their left leg, then steps their right heel forward to touch. With the right heel on the ground, the foot pivots slightly to accent "the beat." They *rond de jambe, à terre* their right leg backward.<sup>234</sup> The left leg follows, stepping straight back; both legs remain in a *demi plié*.<sup>235</sup> When the left leg steps, the elbows are up, parallel with the shoulders, and the hands make a dropping or throwing downward motion on the word "nothing." The ensemble bodies step the left leg forward again, following the downward throw of the arms. They cross their arms in an "X" over their lap and step

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<sup>232</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler, Michelle Charlesworth, and Harvey Fierstein, "Choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler Talks *In The Heights*," *Broadway Backstage*, ABC7NY, YouTube video, 1:43, May 3, 2008, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRufwdN5NmQ&t=3s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRufwdN5NmQ&t=3s).

<sup>233</sup> Miranda, "In the Heights," *In the Heights*, 12.

<sup>234</sup> **Rond de jambe**: when the leg completes a semi-circular motion.

**À terre**: the foot moves on the floor as opposed to *en l'air*—in the air.

<sup>235</sup> **Demi plié**: small bending of the knees.

the right leg to the side. The arms move from the “X” towards the hips, pulling the torso to the right. Describing this arm transition, Blankenbuehler elaborates, “This arm is electric right here. And then the word is ‘got.’ So as we step forward, it’s like we’re grasping opportunities. This step, I feel like, is a cornerstone thought in the show saying, ‘Life in Washington Heights, life for a first-generation is really difficult.’”<sup>236</sup> Continuing to lean on his explanation, it is clear that as the ensemble rocks back and forth between forward movement and backward movement, they are laboring to succeed, to achieve that “American dream.” Even though the ensemble is moving synchronously here and as a communal expression of Usnavi’s words, the audience still sees them as individuals. Each ensemble body plies at a different level and lunges at different distances. Each variation of the movement highlights their varied embodied experiences with this traditional immigrant narrative.

Usnavi slowly moves through the ensemble while they continue to reflect his consciousness. As his optimism grows, he sings, “But yo, / At least we got the store. / It’s all about the legacy / They left with me, / It’s destiny. / And one day I’ll be on the beach / With Sonny writing checks / to me.”<sup>237</sup> The multivalence of hip-hop allows its allusions to transition accordingly. Notably, Tripp does not execute the same choreography as the rest of the ensemble during this sequence. Instead, he is engaging in his own breakdance-based score around Usnavi, at one point even engaging in a handshake and following him on his cross stage right. Tripp’s hip-hop feels more improvised, free, hopeful. It is less rigid and structured than the other dance happening onstage. In resisting the synchronicity of the other ensemble members, Tripp’s hip-hop establishes a juxtaposition between being afflicted by one’s socioeconomic positionality and one’s

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<sup>236</sup> Blankenbuehler, “Choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler Talks *In The Heights*.”

<sup>237</sup> Miranda, “In the Heights,” *In the Heights*, 12.

ability to transcend that disposition. As Usnavi optimistically sheds light on his feelings about his positionality within society, Tripp's hip-hop speaks to his ambition of eventually making enough money to keep his store afloat and visit this island of the Dominican Republic, where his parents were born.

After this section, the choreography for the remainder of the number flows between salsa, hip-hop, and peppers in other musical theatre-based movements. Such use of contrasting genres highlights dance's adaptability and intertextuality. Susan Leigh Foster suggests, "Dance's adaptability coordinates individual and social realms by focusing on dance's function and purpose in a given situation, giving it both a social and individual meaningfulness."<sup>238</sup> Reading the diverse assemblage of ensemble bodies as they perform varied hip-hops and salsas allows for the multiple narratives of heritage, community, strife, vitality, and aspiration to coalesce. On the final button of the number, "En Washington Heights," the company is evenly spread around the stage and strikes a pose according to their character or ensemble body.<sup>239</sup> As the audience applauds, they continue to absorb the unique characters of the staged Washington Heights community, who remain unmoving until the music picks back up and they continue with their day.

### 3.3 Situating Salsa

Before moving into an analysis of "The Club," it is necessary first to establish a few key concepts related to salsa practices and milieus: origins, adaptations, and aesthetics. The diversity of (staged) Washington Heights fosters a unique challenge when analyzing the function of the salsa

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<sup>238</sup> Foster, 50.

<sup>239</sup> Miranda, "In the Heights," *In the Heights*, 14.



dancing ensemble within “The Club:” who’s salsa is it? Salsa’s origin and dissemination story, like many social dance forms, is complex. In the mid-to-late 1960s, the term “salsa” arguably developed in New York as a synthesis of Cuban, Afro-Cuban, and Puerto Rican music genres.<sup>240</sup> Salsa dance quickly developed with the music, and as it traveled, numerous variations began to manifest: cumbia, Cuban, Afro-Cuban, casino, casino rueda, L.A., mambo, Puerto Rican, and shines.<sup>241</sup> Although each possesses their own technique, they share several commonalities. Juliet McMains suggests that many Latin American social dance forms utilize a “dynamic and flexible spine, weight shifts propelled by core body movement often resulting in weight suspended between the feet, flex knees and a lower center of gravity, centrality of polyrhythms over body lines, and improvisation closely linked to musical structures.”<sup>242</sup> These commonalities have led to a variety of stereotypes and codifications by Euro American practitioners and onlookers—many of which will be complicated in the following analysis of “The Club” choreography.

In the U.S., the common racial binary of White versus non-White causes a convoluted matrix for understanding racial and cultural identities. Such a binary at its core activates processes of Othering and thus the lumping together of races or ethnic identities based on movement similarities. Jane Desmond points out that in European-based dance forms, “the torso tends toward quietude and verticality, and the pelvis rarely functions as an expressive bodily unit of its own.”<sup>243</sup> In contrast, for dances such as hip-hop or Latinx social dance (specifically those derived from the Caribbean), “we can see striking similarities to some forms of West African dance, where pelvic

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<sup>240</sup> See John Charles Chasteen, *National Rhythms, African Roots: the Deep History of Latin American Popular Dance*, 1st ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 9-11.

<sup>241</sup> “The Different Styles Of Salsa,” *Toronto Dance Salsa*, January, 27 2021, [torontodancesalsa.ca/blog/the-different-styles-of-salsa/](http://torontodancesalsa.ca/blog/the-different-styles-of-salsa/).

<sup>242</sup> Juliet McMains, “Dancing Latin/ Latin Dancing: Salsa and DanceSport,” in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 304.

<sup>243</sup> Desmond, 38.

articulation features prominently along with polyrhythmic relationships between stepping patterns in the feet and concurrent arm gestures.”<sup>244</sup> It is important to note that much analysis regarding Caribbean centered Latinx dance practices often revolve around such Euro-centered/Afro-centered elucidation either consolidating Indigenous as Other with African influences or completely marginalizing and neglecting any Indigenous influences altogether. Analyzing the Indigenous influence on Latinx music and dance practices, Ed Morales suggests, “The cumbia is a unique rhythm in Latin America—unlike in Caribbean countries such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, in Colombia the indigenous presence was not wiped out and is felt along with the African and European influences.”<sup>245</sup> He argues that due to similar circle-dance traditions and heavy rhythmic techniques, indigenous and African practices began to fuse.

Yvonne Daniel discusses the relationship between Western social perceptions of the body and perceived Afro-centered movement practices:

Such movements were considered improper because the African-descended dancer would divide the torso while dancing, accent hip and other body part actions, and sometimes lower the entire body toward the floor, all of which was considered very ‘uncivilized’ and ‘barbaric’ for those who loved to dance elongated at the back and elevated on the balls of their feet....Torso division allowed the lower pelvis area and the upper abdomen and chest area to move forward and backward, side to side, and around in clockwise or counterclockwise directions. The dancing torso could be smooth and sensuous in sustained energy or aggressive in percussive bursts of energy, revealing a range of emotional dynamics. It could swing, vibrate, and nuance a wide range of expressiveness, and rumba used all of the dancing torso’s potential.<sup>246</sup>

While these syncretic elements within Latinx dance are certainly still practiced, especially on the local scale, other lines of thought also arose regarding the implementation of the pelvis area. On

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ed Morales, *The Latin Beat: the Rhythms and Roots of Latin Music From Bossa Nova to Salsa and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003), 23.

<sup>246</sup> Yvonne Daniel, *Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora Dance: Igniting Citizenship* (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 99.

the one hand, practitioners of Latinx dance styles concealed their pelvic movements in order to divert attention away from the form's association with Blackness to its alliance with Whiteness. Desmond argues, "dance forms originating in lower-class or nondominant populations present a trajectory of 'upward mobility' in which the dances are 'refined,' 'polished,' and often desexualized."<sup>247</sup> On the other hand, McMains argues, "Western consumers dancing 'Latin' could borrow some of the excitement associated with Latin stereotypes without the burden of racial discrimination....They can enjoy pelvic thrusts or lustful embraces judged to be too wild, sexual, or vulgar within their own cultural frame under the guise of 'Latin' dance."<sup>248</sup>

Conversely, Hollywood depictions of Latinx dance allowed for the stereotypes associated with hips and sexuality to pervade dominant conceptions of what the forms *should* look like. Films such as *Dance With Me* (1998), *Shall We Dance* (2004), and *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights* (2004), as well as the popular ABC television show *Dancing with the Stars*, have romanticized such social dance forms and in many ways erased socioeconomic underpinnings that had marginalized Latinx practitioners. Nonetheless, those who were racially subject to prejudice for engaging their hips in dance still attempted to 'Whiten' their practice by dissociating African diasporic movement techniques from their version of the forms.

For instance, observing salsa in Los Angeles in her book *Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles*, Cindy García questioned if the hip accentuations were consequently replaced with arm accents. She notes, "...when I gazed out at the dancers in Los Angeles salsa clubs, the hips turned inconspicuous under the flourishes of the female arms that shot up to the ceiling, wrists bent, fingers spread as if reaching for something, and then caressing the hair. The

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<sup>247</sup> Desmond, 38.

<sup>248</sup> McMains, 305.

arms demanded attention and often eclipsed the hips as a site of focus, invention, and intervention.”<sup>249</sup> García points out that the shift to arm flourishes alludes to but does not overtly practice sexuality. In fact, toward the end of “The Club,” this practice of semi-sexual arm flourishes receives a special spotlight moment within the choreography.

In García’s ethnography, she identifies two types of salsa, unsequined and sequined. The unsequined salsa is more organic, less codified, and rooted in daily life. The sequined salsa can be highly choreographed, incorporating challenging lifts and footwork. It is rooted in libidinal desires that emerge during nightlife events. Additionally, sequined salsa is often inspired by aspirations to transcend one’s class condition outside of the club. García argues, “By refining dance moves and disguising the working body with their outfits, salsa practitioners can mask the socioeconomic status of their daily lives.”<sup>250</sup> The scene “The Club” in *In the Heights* provides a staged representation of the unsequined/sequined salsa relationship to the socioeconomic struggles of (staged) Washington Heights. Through Blankenbuehler’s choreography of the unsequined/sequined/Blankenbuehlerized salsa dancing ensemble body, the audience perceives the illusion of an unmediated encounter with a staged authentic salsa club.

To begin her analysis regarding such variants of salsa as they connect with conceptualizations of Latinx identities, García articulates that the basic technique of salsa can be distinguished by the footwork pattern, step, step, step, pause, step, step, step, pause. She asserts, “The pause in salsa is the most crucial component of the dance—potentially sensual and volatile.”<sup>251</sup> In “The Club,” these salsa pauses help to illuminate crucial nuances within the story.

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<sup>249</sup> Cindy García, *Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 103.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 7.

García continues, “The pause in salsa spaces becomes a way to understand that enactments of latinidad are relational, contingent upon social and political choreographic codes of time, space, and moving bodies.”<sup>252</sup> This additional layer of reading the salsa pause illuminates negotiations between ensemble bodies, choreography, and identity within the movement score of “The Club.” García’s ethnography examines the tension between salsa as a utopic connection amongst those seemingly belonging to Latinidad versus salsa as a mode by which racial and economic intricacies ignored by Latinidad come to life.

Latinidad as a principle developed to link descendants from more than twenty countries, including Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Central Americas, who embody and embrace a Latinx ethnicity. Initially, its goal was to identify common threads of Latinness promoting some notion of solidarity amongst Latin American geographies historically subject to European or United States interference and control. However, in *The Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature*, Marta Caminero-Santangelo suggests, “The meaning of ‘latinidad,’ ostensibly a fairly straightforward term that translates to ‘Latinoness,’ is actually quite fraught... ‘latinidad’ implies questions of authenticity...and, perhaps most of all, of difference and opposition.”<sup>253</sup> For example, such a conceptual framework has led to erasures or exoticizations of Blackness.<sup>254</sup> Caminero-Santangelo examines the numerous ways in which the term is used throughout scholarship (citing scholars such as Juan Flores, Arlene Dávila, Frances Aparicio, and Susana Chávez-Silverman), ultimately arguing, “Understanding ‘Latinidades’ as a lens through which to examine interactions *among* different Latino groups—including discrimination, tension, power struggles, mutual

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>253</sup> Marta Caminero-Santangelo, “Latinidad,” in *The Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature*, ed. Suzanne Bost and Frances R. Aparicio (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 13.

<sup>254</sup> García, 16.

cultural influence, *and* solidarity practices—is a valuable corrective for the homogenizing thrust of the label in its singular form.”<sup>255</sup> AfroLatinidad, as it were, becomes a philosophy to discuss a marginalized identity within Latindidad. This revitalized epistemology is particularly helpful when interrogating social hierarchies of salsa clubs as it illuminates notions of inclusion and exclusion.

Together the individual ensemble bodies activate layers of sequined, unsequined, L.A., and New York salsas—resisting the notion of performing choreography. By creating a multiplexed environment through the ensemble, the audience receives the notion of staged authentic salsa. Moreover, through the identification of social and economic dynamics regarding the relationship between salsa and Latinidad, specifically through García’s distinction of unsequined versus sequined salsa, crucial and perhaps unwitting choreographies within “The Club” of staged Washington Heights become visceral. Although much of García’s analysis derives from sites in Los Angeles rather than New York, her discussion regarding the a/effects of commodifying salsa is pertinent for *In the Heights*; it is, after all, a commodified dramatization of real life. Additionally, in preparation for *Heights*, Andy Blankenbuehler traveled to Los Angeles for a few months to learn salsa, strengthening the connections between the salsa moments in the production with L.A.-style salsa.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Caminero-Santangelo, 23.

<sup>256</sup> Blankenbuehler, interviewed by Amanda Olmstead.

### 3.4 “The Club”: Staging Salsas, Staging Mobility, Staging Unity

A trumpet blares and the stage lights turn red, transitioning the audience out of a scene full of familial conflict into “The Club.”<sup>257</sup> Luis Salgado swirls Nina Lafarga onto the stage from downright, dropping her into a split before landing center stage. Other couples quickly join them from various directions, executing their own salsa scores. The staged club atmosphere is clearly established as the dances resist any sense of synchronization—at first. Throughout the scene, the dance shifts from a seemingly casual activity to a sensational spectacle. Blankenbuehler’s structuring of the choreographic score for “The Club” travels between unsequined and sequined salsas, underscoring the desire for upward mobility and escape for community members—specifically the character Vanessa. Additionally, it provides a dynamic interaction with this Latinx dance style for the audience who is seeking “an authentic and exhilarating journey” about “a tight-knit Latin American community.”<sup>258</sup> By layering unsequined or sequined salsas through individualized choreographic scores, the individual ensemble body promotes nuance regarding the socioeconomic relationships within this staged club space resulting in the comprehension of the scene as a presentation of an “authentic” Latinx social space.

Staging an authentic salsa club relies on the individuality of the choreographic scores to establish uniqueness. But, to promote the narrative of community or communal thoughts, there are brief moments of synchronicity. Additionally, throughout “The Club,” different dancers pause in different ways for different reasons. There are arguably are two types of pauses: the salsa pause

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<sup>257</sup> The scene preceding this number (Act One: Scene Eleven) involves an argument between the character Nina and her parents regarding her choice to drop out of college.

<sup>258</sup> Cover copy, *In the Heights*, by Quiara Alegría Hudes and Lin-Manuel Miranda.

and the Blankenbuehler pause. Each presents a dedicated opportunity for the audience to take a breath, read, and absorb potential subtext.

The salsa pause reflects the typical structure of the social dance and is most frequently found when the dance is occurring atmospherically, alongside dialogue within the scene. Pondering what constitutes “salsa,” García questions any possible alterations in the location or motivation of the salsa pause. She asks, “If one dances pause-step-step-step instead of step-step-step-pause, is this the same salsa? Or if another dances step-step-step-pause while crossing behind instead of forward and back, is this still salsa? One forgets to pause, while during that same pause, another invents a backward spin: Still salsa?”<sup>259</sup> Her questions speak to the idea of salsa’s improvisational characteristic, the cultural variants of salsa, but also to the individuality of the choreographic scores throughout *Heights*, and specifically to those featuring Latinx social dance. García contends, “Seasoned dancers know, however that the dance is not salsa without the pause. The salsa pause is a situated moment, but it is not static.”<sup>260</sup> Why does this matter? If the pause insinuates legibility of the dance as “salsa,” but the mobility of the pause promotes heterogeneity of style, then the employment of this varied salsa pause throughout illuminates staged authenticity. If all of the couples were to step, step, step, pause, the score would read as being deliberately choreographed and artificial in a club space that is supposed to be more spontaneous. Whereas if couple A’s pause is at the beginning of their sequence, couple B’s pause is at the end of their sequence, and couple C’s pause is a few beats longer, the dance is read as salsa, but it is read as unique salsas.

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<sup>259</sup> García, 7.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.



The Blankenbuehler pause is manufactured to serve the narrative of the show, sometimes coinciding with the salsa pause. Blankenbuehler implements pauses when he wants to punctuate a moment as being significant or wants the audience to notice what is occurring in the pause. As articulated earlier, he asserts that this freeze-frame forces the audience to lean forward and pay more attention. When Usnavi and Vanessa enter the club, a crucial Blankenbuehler pause occurs. Everyone in the club stops dancing and yells “Vanessa,” directing attention to her and Usnavi at the top of the stairs.<sup>261</sup> Dramaturgically, this infers that she is a “regular” at this club.

As they make their way toward the dance floor, following some brief dialogue, the club once again rings out with, “Wepa! Vanessa!”<sup>262</sup> “Wepa!” being an enthusiastic greeting or cheer; translated to English, it could mean something like “Awesome!” or “Cool!” At this moment, all of the women dancing are dipped by their partners toward downstage. The dip follows a circular pattern as the female dancers are brought back upright to their partner, and the couples continue dancing their own score. Blankenbuehler synchronously pauses the ensemble to position the focus on Vanessa and elevate her status within this salsa space.

Following this grand pause, a few individual male ensemble members begin to exhibit their desire for what García defines as “salsa capital.”<sup>263</sup> She suggests:

While women must be chosen to dance by a man of high salsero status, any man from around the circle with enough skill and confidence can participate simply by edging out the salsero already in the circle...Even though the men and women perform together, male homosociality and social positioning take center stage....Men and women both perform heightened renditions of their gender in order to gain approval and acceptance from men who are higher up on the salsa hierarchy.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda, “The Club,” in *In the Heights: the Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (Milwaukee, WI: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2013), 80.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> García, 109.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 114-115.

Women become tokens of male status as they compete with one another to establish dominance and “win” the female body at stake. In “The Club,” the male ensemble members take turns trying to win over Vanessa. First, Javier Muñoz comes up to Vanessa and begins lightly dancing with her as she talks to Usnavi. Their choreography takes on a more polished, upright position. After a few counts, Vanessa and Usnavi begin to make their way toward the bar stage right when interrupted again by, “Wepa! Vanessa!”<sup>265</sup> This time another male in the club, Ricky Tripp, approaches Vanessa executing a sexual body roll with a pelvic thrust toward her before taking her by the waist and beginning to dance. Their interaction is short-lived; in retrospect, this could be read as a distancing from the inherent Blackness in his practice. The integration of these pauses by the ensemble continually illuminates Vanessa’s heightened level of allure. For the next few counts, ensemble salseros/as, including Vanessa, weave in and out of partners. Vanessa’s proclivity to maintain her seemingly upper-level position in the salsera hierarchy is punctuated by the fact that she does not turn any of these men down, even as she is actively conversing with Usnavi.

After Vanessa is absorbed into the dancing crowd, the choreography shifts functions: from asserting Vanessa’s positionality to re-uniting the bodies onstage, avoiding any sort of tension as her status is accentuated. The circulation of power from the previous sequence begins to calm and promote an air of community and acceptance. Although the movement is not synchronous, there is a continuity about the dance. For example, the footwork pattern seems to roughly follow the step, step, step, pause model. Some ensemble bodies lift both arms up on the pause, and some pull their arms low and back on the pause. The salsa pause, here, aligns with what could be identified as a Blankenbuehler pause. There is a clear choice by the choreographer to connect the individuals during these few counts. The dancers are not directly coupled and are therefore individual entities.

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<sup>265</sup> Miranda, “The Club,” *In the Heights*, 81.

Uniting these salsero/as in a Blankenbuehlerized salsa pause alongside an assumed quest for hierarchal positionality once again suggests a utopic environment in which the structure is acknowledged but not—yet—energized. Nevertheless, these brief moments also situate the salsero/as in direct opposition to Usnavi and Benny, who are now at the bar, not dancing. Usnavi and Benny will take on an “other” (unsequined) label shortly. The music softens, and Vanessa exits the dance floor to spend time with Usnavi.

As the scene takes place stage right, the ensemble maintains the staged atmosphere of “The Club” as they move between unsequined and sequined salsas. Salsa pauses throughout allow the audience to read different individuals or couples and make assumptions—subconsciously, especially if they are actively watching the scene and not the dancing—regarding their salsa ability and socioeconomic status. For example, Graffiti Pete or Tripp are dancing a more localized salsa, whereas Lafarga or Fiedelman are in partnerships showing off more difficult skills. To an audience member used to seeing synchronous choreography in musical theatre, the myriad of ensemble dance scores and salsa styles promotes a sense of improvisation. The very thought of how challenging it would be to choreograph such layered uniqueness kindles the staged authenticity of the salsa club atmosphere. When the Blankenbuehlerized salsa pauses align, they become a manifestation of community and a quick reminder that this is indeed a curated spectacle

When Vanessa reaches Usnavi at the bar, Salgado (marked at this moment in the libretto as “Club Guy”) approaches her and asks if she wants to dance.<sup>266</sup> Risking losing her desirability as a salsera, she initially turns him down in politeness toward her date. But, Usnavi insists she go dance with Club Guy. Benny steps in, saying, “That’s messed up, she’s tryin’ to make you

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 82.

jealous!”<sup>267</sup> On the beat following “jealous,” the couples on the dance floor all pause in concert with their salsa sequence. In this Blankenbuehlerized salsa pause, the female ensemble bodies strike a pose lower than their male partners. During the pause, Usnavi responds, “Jealous, I ain’t jealous! I can take all these fellas, whatever!”<sup>268</sup> The levels of these ensemble bodies are choreographed into this pause to help in drawing attention to the “fellas” of whom Usnavi is alluding. Asserting his masculinity, framed by the (sequined) salseros, implicates him within the homosociality of the salsa space—even though he has yet to dance, he will.

After witnessing the sensuality that arises between Salgado and Vanessa, Usnavi intervenes. The stage directions read, “USNAVI *grabs* VANESSA *from* CLUB GUY *and dances with her*. CLUB GUY *is pissed...*”<sup>269</sup> What *actually* happens is far more interesting. Usnavi enters the dance space with some congruency regarding the basic step, step, step, pause, but his arms are chaotically flailing around in the air. He dances upstage of Vanessa and Salgado to assess the situation before he cuts in. When he finally interjects, he does *not* dance with Vanessa first; rather, he dances with Salgado. Salgado remains still and confused as Usnavi holds his arms and wiggles his legs around with no sense of technique or style. It is obvious that Usnavi is no salsero.

While this happens, Vanessa salsas in place and watches. The surrounding ensemble couples and individuals slowly dance inward toward them before directing their attention to Usnavi and the action at hand. This transition visually signals to the audience that something different is about to take place. Correspondingly, Graffiti Pete grabs her by the hips to spin her around and dance with him. After a few counts, she backs up slightly, and everyone on the dance floor forms a circle around him. Pete begins to execute a hip-hop breakdance sequence—not unusual for his

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Hudes, 81.

character, *but* it affirms his low positionality on the salsa hierarchy. At the end of his dance, Usnavi pantses him. The choreography resumes its atmospheric function, ensemble couples once again engaging in their individualized salsa scores, while a scene between Benny and Nina occurs downstage right. Usnavi and Vanessa are included in this coupling upstage.

Following the scene, attention is redirected back to the dance floor. Two salsero/a couples complete a highly sequenced sequence. The salsero of each couple (Salgado and Tripp) lift their salsera (Fiedelman and Lafarga, respectively) into the air. Fiedelman and Lafarga are flipped upside down and hit a split in the air on the accent of the music. Graffiti Pete and Muñoz walk on either side of Vanessa and help her slide to the ground and pop back up on the next accent of the music.

As the dance break moments progress, the ensemble actively engages in the exchange of salsa capital and economy of desire. In the libretto, the stage directions read, “*A chorus of boys swoops in on Vanessa, stealing her from USNAVI, alternating as they swing her around the floor.*”<sup>270</sup> As the club becomes more theatricalized, the “chorus of boys” sings, “Vanessa, let me get the next one! / Vanessa, let me interject some! / The way you sweat, the way you flex on the floor, / It makes me want you more!”<sup>271</sup> For the first iteration of this verse, the ensemble men standstill in a semi-circle around Vanessa and use their upstage arm to point at her. The point begins in a bent arm from their shoulder, moves upward to a straight arm, then draws a line downward to Vanessa. As they point to her, she stands center, arms at her hips, rhythmically isolating her pelvis. Some of the men resign themselves to other women waiting on the periphery. Others wait for a chance to jump in and have a solo encounter.

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>271</sup> Miranda, “The Club,” *In the Heights*, 85.

Muñoz is first as he stands behind her for a few beats with his hands on her hips. Then Joshua Henry slides in on his knees as she turns away from Muñoz. Sitting on the right knee with the left foot on the ground, he touches her leg, initiating a turn inward toward him. Her turn finalizes when she sits on his left knee. He spins her back upward and slides on his knees downstage of her as Pete slides on his knees towards her. Tripp, Muñoz, Salgado, and Usnavi remain standing with their arms open, suggesting that they are ready for their turn. They step to the beat in their semi-circle, almost like a predator circling their prey. Usnavi takes her hand and they both face front. The two synchronously right step, left step, right step, pause—his skill is improving. Though, Graffiti Pete is behind Vanessa with his hands on her hips. They face one another and begin a partnered version of the step before Pete pulls her away from Usnavi, and Salgado sweeps her into his arms. They continue to repeat their verse, taking turns with Vanessa but now waiting for their turn whilst dancing with other females on the edges of the space.

In response to Vanessa continuously being swept up as a commodity in the salsa club exchange, Usnavi sees another high-status salsera at the bar. Nina Lafarga, who was the featured sequined salsera with Salgado at the opening of the number, is Usnavi's new target. Lafarga's pause to, at the very least hydrate, opened the opportunity for Usnavi to prove his masculinity and move up the sequined salsa ladder by association. On the final beat of the Vanessa-driven salsa economy section, there is a Blankenbuehler pause. In this pause, Salgado dips Vanessa downstage center on the ground. Others are paused in various levels. The objective of this pause is to note a shift in the passage of time. The ensemble continues dancing with their partner, or at times switching partners, but in a slower, more muted way. Focus is directed once again to the bar stage right for a quick scene between Usnavi and Lafarga. He asks her to dance. After her acceptance,

there is a strong beat in the music accompanied by a few more lift movements in the dancing ensemble. Time is reactivated.

The stage directions for the remaining minute and forty-one seconds of the scene read:

*USNAVI takes her out on the floor. Everyone is dancing. VANESSA and CLUB GUY. USNAVI and CLUB GIRL 2. BENNY and CLUB GIRL 1. NINA finds another guy to dance with and spins by BENNY. BENNY is pissed. USNAVI swoops in and takes VANESSA out of CLUB GUY's hands and dances with her. CLUB GUY, without missing a beat, glides back in and takes VANESSA back, mid-tun. To add insult to injury, he grabs CLUB GIRL 2, and is now dipping and spinning them both on the dance floor. During this impressive display, USNAVI and a very drunk BENNY slide in and each grab a girl, leaving CLUB GUY dancing alone. CLUB GUY, angry, starts to tap USNAVI on the shoulder. Without missing a beat, BENNY hauls and punches CLUB GUY across the face. More and more instruments add to the mix. The dancing gets intense, crazy. It is a whirlwind of movement, a release of stress...<sup>272</sup>*

In short, a heated dance battle ensues. The ensemble “circles up” again around the edges of the dance floor to watch Usnavi and Lafarga (Club Girl 2) versus Salgado (Club Guy) and Vanessa. They step, step, step, pause in place while clapping and cheering on the salsero/as competing for validation and legitimacy. It is of note that both Lafarga and Vanessa are both wearing red dresses.

Despite the use of Lafarga and Vanessa as props to negotiate social positioning, it is evidently clear that Usnavi is the unsequined dancer who came to the club on a whim, and Salgado is the sequined salsero who is highly skilled and processes a great deal of salsa capital in this club. The number continues to spotlight various sequined salsero/a couples. Afra Hines, who was one of the sequined salseras in the opening of the number, is now dancing with Benny from upstage left to center stage. Benny does not dance; instead, he claps toward her as she gives a solo performance. After this moment, Muñoz brings his new partner, Nina, into the dance space (sending an angry Benny back to the bar). As Usnavi dances with Lafarga, he is turning her while

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<sup>272</sup> Hudes, 86.

standing in a wide second position. Salgado dramatically jazz splits to the ground sliding directly between Usnavi's legs, standing straight back up, and stealing Lafarga away from him. Salgado now has *both* Lafarga and Vanessa center stage as the entire club watches and cheers them on. Usnavi joins Benny at the bar.

Blankenbuehler's choreography grows into a spectacular performance as it becomes more structured and synchronous. The unison salsa employs a mixture of Hollywood-ized and Whitened styles. One key moment is when the ensemble women all trust fall into the arms of the men on the side. Although breakout moments are still present throughout, he uses the synchronicity and hybridization of style to juxtapose the dramatic tension that is building between Benny and Nina, who had a fight prior to "The Club." Usnavi and Vanessa's dance feud is undoubtedly playful.

Benny and Usnavi take a shot and then begin dancing, semi-synchronously with one another back onto the dance floor. Their independent duet exaggerates their unsequined technique and decorum as they execute movements that would be deemed highly inappropriate for a legitimate salsa club. For instance, Usnavi gallops in a circle while slapping his butt. To contrast this carnivalesque interpretation of salsa, the salseras group together center stage. They step, step, step, pause together while flourishing their arms up in the air and around their bodies. Stepping out of the group, Vanessa approaches galloping Usnavi, extending her hand. Their game has paid off, and they run upstage together.

The remaining synchronous choreography of the salsero/a couples increases the intricacy of the arm movements, and the emphasis on the pelvis softens. The sexual tension in the room has been resolved. However, the less emphasized couple Benny and Nina, are still at odds. Salgado is now dancing with Nina, center. Theirs is the only iteration of salsa that is being danced closely



with emphasis on the pelvis. Unable to assert his masculinity through salsa capital, Benny steps in and punches Salgado (Club Guy), ending the scene.

McMains illuminates:

The New York style was admired for its suave partnering, sophisticated poise, and commitment to breaking on the second beat. Los Angeles dancers became renowned for their speed, acrobatics, and attack. Intricate footwork was the hallmark of Puerto Rican dancers. And casino style from Cuba and Miami was distinctive for its pretzel-like turns and the group *rueda*, in which the women are passed around a circle of men executing moves simultaneously...Rivalries heightened the dancers' drive to outdo one another through improvisational interplay on the social dance floor, cross-fertilization strengthening, and proliferating the diversity of salsas.<sup>273</sup>

"The Club's" conglomeration of these salsa styles, unsequined and sequined, elucidate the diversity of the staged Washington Heights community. By actively incorporating such extraordinary levels of difference, Blankenbuehler resists codifying or essentializing salsa. Staging improvisation promotes self-expression and agency for the individual ensemble bodies. The utopic emphasis on individuality allowed for the complication of Latinidades to be present on stage but not overtake the narrative of community.

As the salsa dancing bodies during "The Club" navigated the nightclub economy, the audience bore witness to various ensemble members gaining legitimacy and agency. Their individual bodies were essential to framing the narrative and activating crucial nuance within the number that would permeate through the remainder of the show. García argues that salsa is a site of social transformation. She advocates, "Globalization's pressures to homogenize the practices of salsa in L.A. butt up against increasingly sophisticated processes of differentiation. Practitioners attempt to reinstate stylistic and identitarian boundaries when they blur and flow into one another without a moment of pause. Thus borders based on hierarchies of nation, race, and class are

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<sup>273</sup> McMains, 318.

reinforced.”<sup>274</sup> Blankenbuehler, with the collaborative assistance of Salgado and others, promoted differentiation of salsa identities within the choreographic score for “The Club.” Initiating salsa, Blankenbuehler, and Blankenbuehlerized salsa pauses confront or highlight such socioeconomic complexities. But, in order to support the production's narrative of community and unity in the face of hardship—as well as navigate the inherent challenges of being a Broadway production whose longevity rests on meeting consumer expectations—this staged authentic salsa does indeed blur the line between idealistic representation and realistic delineation.

### **3.5 “Carnaval Del Barrio:” Staging Latinx Nationality through Social Dance**

Building off of his use of staged authentic salsa that illuminates nuances of nation, race, class, and unity through the choreography in “The Club,” Blankenbuehler actuates multiple Latinx social dance genres in “Carnaval Del Barrio” as celebratory tools of nostalgia and translocality. Juliet McMains summarizes Puerto Rican writer Mayra Santos-Febres’s argument emphasizing that “salsa engendered a 'translocal' community because the common local experiences of oppression and rebellion described in salsa lyrics and echoed in the movement cut across national boundaries.”<sup>275</sup> McMains posits, “Although this translocal community shares a common spoken language in Spanish, it might be better defined by the values and experiences encompassed by salsa: skill at improvisation, mixed origins, polymetered rhythms that coexist and fuse, economic deprivation in *el barrio*, and feet that constantly shift unpredictable patterns in response to the

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<sup>274</sup> García, 152.

<sup>275</sup> McMains, 306.

environment.”<sup>276</sup> McMains's choice to italicize *el barrio* performatively elevates the Spanish term for neighborhood as a connective identity marker. Similarly, the increased use of the Spanish language throughout “Carnaval Del Barrio” connects these decedents or migrants from numerous Latin American countries. Blankenbuehler employs movement as an embodied communication of the translocal community of (staged) Washington Heights. He activates individualized choreographic scores that allow for the embracement of improvisation, mixed origins, and polyrhythm. Through this individualization, he once again draws attention to the diverse individual ensemble bodies of this community who are dealing with the after-effects of a power outage in *el barrio*.

“Carnaval Del Barrio” reveals the characters’ woes regarding their economic positionality in its lyrics, but its choreographic score commemorates their heterogeneity. According to a 2013 document titled “Immigrant Settlement Patterns” released on the City of New York government website, between 2007-2011, approximately 49% of the 162,898 residents of Washington Heights were “foreign-born.”<sup>277</sup> Washington Heights was home to the largest immigrant population in New York City. Immigrants from the Dominican Republic (60.4%), Mexico (4.3%), Ecuador (5.4%), Cuba (2.2%), El Salvador (1.4%), and Colombia (1.2%) accounted for the majorities of that “foreign-born” population. A separate report noted that 7% of the population of Washington Heights were of Puerto Rican descent.<sup>278</sup> In a 2015 Community Health Profile published by the New York City Health Department, specific to the combination of the Washington Heights and

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> “Immigrant Settlement Patterns in New York City,” *The Newest New Yorkers, 2013 Edition*, The Official Website of the City of New York, New York City Small Business Services, [www1.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/data-maps/nyc-population/nny2013/chapter3.pdf](http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/data-maps/nyc-population/nny2013/chapter3.pdf).

<sup>278</sup> “Washington Heights Manhattan: Commercial District Needs Assessment,” The Official Website of the City of New York, 2019, <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/sbs/downloads/pdf/neighborhoods/avenyc-cdna-washington-heights.pdf>.

Inwood neighborhoods, it was revealed that 27% of residents lived below the Federal Poverty Level. 54% of the population faced rent burden, spending more than 30% of their gross income on rent.<sup>279</sup> This brief demographic overview provides insight into the translocality of the neighborhood as well as its economic disparities. It illuminates the diversity of the community and the correlation between immigrant and impoverished.

As audiences of *In the Heights* witness the community of staged Washington Heights clean up following chaos that erupted in consequence of an electricity blackout, they observe residents fending for themselves as the ConEdison electric company tells them it will take twenty-four hours to fix. Transportation methods have been suspended, and they are stuck in the heat of the fourth of July. To calm everyone down and boost their spirits, Daniela begins to sing about her time in Puerto Rico as a young child. She reminisces about the joy of parranda's (Puerto Rican social events during Christmas time). Daniela calls for a spontaneous Carnaval to distract from the afflictions of the moment. The Piragua Guy and Luis Salgado are among the first to join in her merriment. Salgado begins an accompanying beat by hitting the Piragua Guy's cart. He is striking the front of the cart where a painted Puerto Rican flag is displayed. The Piragua Guy starts a mambo upstage center. Mambo is a dance that originated in Cuba (sidestep left, right ball, change left, sidestep right, left ball, change right to the rhythm one and two, three and four). Sonny and Graffiti Pete watch him for a set, almost as if they are learning the step before they join him.

After some more encouragement, the stage directions indicate, "*The community gets into it.*"<sup>280</sup> The general salsa step rhythm is activated in the majority of the individual ensemble

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<sup>279</sup> "Manhattan Community District 12: Washington Heights and Inwood," *Community Health Profiles* 2015, New York City Health, The Official Website of the City of New York, 2015, <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/data/2015chp-mn12.pdf>.

<sup>280</sup> Hudes, 117.

scores—step, step, step, pause. However, variations become visible. The subtle differences are located in the size of the step, the activation of the hips, and the way the pause is performed. For example, Lafarga kicks her foot out slightly, making a small circular motion during the pause before placing it back on the ground for the subsequent step, almost like a cumbia step. Cumbia is traditionally practiced in Colombia. Hines’s step looks more like merengue; she chugs along as if they are marching. The merengue comes from the Dominican Republic. All of the steps are much lower to the ground, more unsequined, than the performance of salsa in “The Club.”

The community joining in the impromptu celebration via these varied dance styles speaks to the significance of dance’s purpose within each of these originating societies. John Charles Chasteen’s *National Rhythms, African Roots: The Deep History of Latin American Popular Dance* contends that cultural dance practices—broadly—have generated connection and solidarity amongst groups. He specifically suggests, “Folk dance is frequently an aspect of ethnic identities, a stock element of nationalism. In Latin America few provinces or regions lack identifying dances, habitually staged on national holidays by school children. Latin America’s national rhythms, then, are a high-energy, high-profile, high-stakes version of this phenomenon.”<sup>281</sup> Much of *In the Heights* uses dance as a signifier of solidarity and connection. It is the emphasis on dance as a given element of nationalism in “Carnaval Del Barrio” that connects this staged translocal community through movement practices and philosophies as a response to their often-onerous environment. One frequently repeated chorus recites:

Lyrics  
Alza La Bandera  
La Bandera Dominicana

Translation  
Raise the Flag The  
Dominican Flag

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<sup>281</sup> Chasteen, 12.

Alza La Bandera  
La Bandera Puertorriqueña  
Alza La Bandera  
La Bandera Mejicana  
Alza La Bandera  
La Bandera Cubana<sup>282</sup>

Raise the Flag  
The Puerto Rican  
Flag Raise the Flag  
The Mexican Flag  
Raise the Flag  
The Cuban Flag

Many individual ensemble bodies wave these flags as they weave about the stage completing their varied Latinx social dance steps. The joyous waving of the flags alongside a myriad of dance styles promotes diverse identities while generating solidarity amongst the group. Hints of mambo, salsa, cumbia, merengue, and bomba can be seen throughout. As the rhythms of these movement styles of mixed origin can resist directly aligning with one another, the audience can perceive such moments as being improvised.

Upon analyzing the highly personalized choreographies, the question arises: how much of the number is actually improvised? The answer—very little. When placing two recordings of “Carnaval Del Barrio,” performed by the Broadway cast, beside one another, the individual ensemble bodies undoubtedly have unique flourishes to their movements that vary between these recordings.<sup>283</sup> However, the overall movement score and traffic pattern for every individual are indeed repeated from performance to performance. Moreover, the cast in these videos differed somewhat as one features Lin-Manuel Miranda as Usnavi, and the other features Javier Muñoz,

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<sup>282</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda, “Carnaval Del Barrio,” in *In the Heights: the Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (Milwaukee, WI: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2013), 121.

<sup>283</sup> “Carnaval del Barrio- *In the Heights* OBC,” YouTube, video, 8:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Omu3afOVNiQ>.

“*In the Heights* 2.5 // ‘Carnaval del barrio’ sub español,” YouTube, video, 8:09, June 5, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Qk7S\\_Z1EVw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Qk7S_Z1EVw).

his understudy. The use of an understudy shifts the ensemble tracks slightly as swings are put in the place of anyone missing. In theory, this would affect how a track would look if it were truly improvised. Each individual ensemble body adds their own take onto the movement score—for example, the addition of arm movements, a hip sway, or even a quick turn—but, for the sake of replicability and consistency, the core of the choreography for each ensemble track remains intact.

Blankenbuehler structures brief sequences during the number that are very “musical theatre,” synchronized dance. Consequently, when the individuals break away into their own score, the juxtaposition heightens the perception of improvisation. Following the first chorus of “Alza la bandera,” Usnavi and Piragua Guy sing together center as the ensemble dances around the edges of the stage space.<sup>284</sup> Each individual ensemble member is moving in their own style, but they occasionally meet in a synchronous arm gesture upward or turn. A few male ensemble members move inward toward Usnavi and Piragua Guy. They place their hands on one another’s shoulders to form a circle around them. The men take a few syncopated steps and then spin outward to partner with a female member. The pairs salsa with one another. While each pair has the same general pattern, the movement remains unique to the individuals. For example, Salgado and Lafarga, the main sequined salsa couple from “The Club,” complete a few extra turns than the other couples. Rodriquez adds an arm flourish toward the end that others do not.

When Benny enters the scene, the synchronized moments stop and the individualized celebrations continue. The uniqueness of ensemble bodies arguably becomes more intelligible as they seemingly dance to rejoice rather than to execute any sense of choreography. During the next chorus, the company begins two conga lines around the stage: the stage left conga line moves in a circle, the stage right conga line moves in a straight diagonal. This back and forth between

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<sup>284</sup> Miranda, “Carnaval Del Barrio,” *In the Heights*, 121.

perceived improvisation and synchronization in “Carnaval Del Barrio” promotes diversity, uniqueness, inclusivity, and solidarity. Additionally, it creates the perception of a staged translocal community. Jayna Brown argues, “Dance is a means for communication, forming new communities, remembering, and cultivating cultures....Popular dance offers wonderful heterogeneity and contradiction. Forms can be immediately commercialized, yet they are incapable of being owned. They are by definition public and collective, yet they can also be intensely private, articulations of a bodily interiority.”<sup>285</sup> As the community of diverse ensemble bodies dance personalized notions of popular social styles within the frame of the Broadway production, they cultivate an understanding of culture that is presented to the audience. The dances communicate, remember, and offer a sense of heterogeneity while helping to unite those living in staged Washington Heights.

For the final verse, everyone stops dancing as Usnavi sings:

Maybe you’re right, Sonny. Call in the Coroners!  
Maybe we’re powerless, a corner full of foreigners.  
Maybe this neighborhood’s changing forever  
Maybe tonight is our last night together, however!  
How do you wanna face it?  
Do you wanna waste it, when the end is so close you can taste it?  
You could cry with your head in the sand.  
I’m a-fly this flag that I got in my hand!<sup>286</sup>

His provocation sparks a bolstering of energy within the choreography. Tripp and Graffiti Pete begin to integrate hip-hop dance movements. Lafarga and Salgado incorporate some sequined salsa. Henry hip-hops for a few counts, then salsa’s with Rodriguez. The dance continues to meet in brief moments of synchronicity while prioritizing the notion of improvisation. The doubled

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<sup>285</sup> Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 15.

<sup>286</sup> Miranda, “Carnaval Del Barrio,” *In the Heights*, 124.



meaning in the word “powerless” as he alludes to the potential demise of *el barrio* heightens the stakes of needing community and optimism. The final few stage directions read, “*The community explodes into a final chorus...Neighbors exit as the carnaval continues onto the next block.*”<sup>287</sup> Through their individual and synchronous dances, they maintain high-energy and pride toward the celebration of their different ethnic identities. Even as they face the high-stakes of gentrification, their dance generates an embodied connection that, at least at this moment, has the power to transcend any impending repression.

### 3.6 Conclusion: Adapting Environments

Reflecting on when he was first asked to interview for the role of *In the Heights* choreographer, Andy Blankenbuehler remembers, “I really believed that I was not right for the show, but I wanted to give a really good audition...because I believed in the players involved...and so, I went in, and I have a great interview because all I did was quote Jerome Robbins...I couldn’t present hip-hop or salsa cuz I didn’t know anything about it.”<sup>288</sup> He explains how the music he was given to choreograph had rich moments of syncopation and lush lyrics that allowed him to use more percussive action to tell the story in a way that fit their tone, even though it was not hip-hop. Ultimately, he did not get the job. Another choreographer—who is unknown to the public—got the job, but when that did not work out, about a year later, he got a call from the team asking him to join them on the project. Reflecting on his work with *In the Heights*, Blankenbuehler remarked,

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<sup>287</sup> Hudes, “Carnaval Del Barrio,” *In the Heights*, 126-127.

<sup>288</sup> Blankenbuehler, “Fresh Steps.”

*“In the Heights* was a life-altering experience...”<sup>289</sup> In *Heights*, he was able to discover and practice what would become key Blankenhuebler-choreography vocabulary: stop-time moments, circular patterns, pauses, heightened pedestrian movement, hip-hop enhancement, and the active fourth position.

Blankenhuebler’s prioritization of communication of ideas (narrative, metaphorical, subtextual, theoretical, or philosophical) over virtuosity and spectacle is arguably most tangible when he uses heightened pedestrian or pantomimic movement. Audiences witness the ensemble body yield an array of recognizable shapes that they can then attach to emotional states, character attributes, or narrative. Interpreting these postures and gestures through the individual ensemble body enacting them generates a complex sociological environment within the world of the production. The individual ensemble bodies portray individual characters living in (staged) Washington Heights and are positioned as necessary for comprehending the socioeconomic effects on their community. The staged authenticity of this world becomes established through the augmentation of the individual ensemble body moving in a uniquely personalized way. Particularly, when framed by Latinx social dance, the individual ensemble bodies read by the audience as a dramaturgically Latinx body become understood as presenting an unmediated encounter with a cultural product. Blankenhuebler’s choreography adapts the milieu of the production into an embodied narrative (literal, supplemental, or nuanced) in service of manufacturing a lens through which these bodies and characters can transport the audience into experiencing heterogeneous, translocal community.

As Blankenhuebler’s career progresses, his understanding regarding the potential for the ensemble to communicate with the audience beyond the text continues to develop and evolve.

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<sup>289</sup> Cramer, 34.

Moreover, his proficiency in the genre of hip-hop grows—even though he maintains that he does not *do* hip-hop, he does indeed *use* hip-hop movement aesthetics within his choreography. By adapting environments into a visceral, embodied arena, the audience receives multiple modes of communication by which they can absorb the plot and its associated metanarratives.

#### 4.0 “We Ain’t No Cheerleaders:” Cheerleading Bodies, Hip-hopping Bodies, and the World of *Bring it On: the Musical*

In 2000, Jessica Bendinger brought the world the first *Bring it On* film. During the two decades following its inception, five additional filmed sequels and a Broadway musical would be developed. Bendinger originally pitched producers Max Wong and Caitlin Scanlon an idea called *Cheer Fever*, a documentary about national cheerleading championships. According to journalist Kase Wickman, Bendinger said, “I wanted to mix cheerleading and hip-hop, the two tastes that taste great together, it’s like peanut butter and chocolate [...] It would be so funny to put them together because they are so antithetical to each other.”<sup>290</sup> Her comment is seemingly ironic to anyone familiar with the sport in 2021 as the two concepts now go hand in hand.<sup>291</sup> Wong and Scanlon would help Bendinger turn her idea into a teen movie classic. Wong recalls:

I hated cheerleaders. And you just realize that everyone in America has an opinion about cheerleaders. You love cheerleaders, you hate cheerleaders, you were a cheerleader, you want to f--k a cheerleader [...] we just really, really liked the fact that Jessica was talking about cultural appropriation. That hadn’t been discussed in teen movies, and here’s this sort of poppy cheerleading movie where she’s actually talking about societal issues that are really engaging in a really important fashion.<sup>292</sup>

Wong’s statement points out the potential for cheerleading to be an accessible subject for a large audience; from hating cheerleaders to sexualizing cheerleaders, people could connect on some level to the activity. Such a wide-spread association would allow Wong, Scanlon, and Bendinger

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<sup>290</sup> Kase Wickman, “*Bring it On: the Complete Oral History*,” August 6, 2015, <http://www.kasewickman.com/?p=2748>.

<sup>291</sup> I first started cheerleading in 2003. Nearly all of our tryout routines and even competition routines were set to music from the *Bring it On* soundtrack. As my “career” progressed, the dance style within cheerleading began to acquire more and more hip-hop aesthetics. It could potentially be argued that the *Bring It On* film directly influenced what the form looks like today.

<sup>292</sup> Wickman, “*Bring it On: the Complete Oral History*.”

to subvert cheerleading as a tool to discuss cultural appropriation and socioeconomic/sociopolitical disparities within the United States.

The *Bring it On* saga illuminates tensions inherent in the form of cheerleading in the United States related to race, class, gender, and sexualization. For example, the theme of an upper-middle-class, mostly White school competing against a working-class, school of color is at the forefront of nearly every iteration of *Bring it On*, including the musical. As Wong points out, the very form of cheerleading both affirms and challenges societal issues. Arguably the most perceptible issue the sport illuminates is the strict, gendered roles scripted onto the athletes, the uniforms, and the choreography. As the athletes conform to these strict gender roles, they simultaneously challenge assumptions of femininity as “dainty” and perform intense physical labor within their routines. Furthermore, there has been a long history of discord regarding race, class, and cheerleading. Popular culture consistently associates the sport with White, affluent teenagers. If cheerleading as a sport exposes such societal discrepancies, then how does cheerleading on Broadway challenge typical ideas of the chorus/ensemble?

In 2012, following an out-of-town tryout in Atlanta and a U.S. National Tour, *Bring it On: the Musical* would find its way to Broadway. Featuring music by Tom Kitt and Lin-Manuel Miranda, lyrics by Amanda Green and Miranda, and book by Jeff Whitty, the musical is inspired by the original 2000 film—though any *Bring it On* fan would tell you the plot actually aligns more with that of the third film installment *Bring it On: All or Nothing* starring Hayden Panettiere. It tells the story of a White cheerleader who must move schools, leaving behind her award-winning cheerleading team. Upon arriving at her new, inner-city school, she finds a diverse group of classmates but no cheerleading squad. Instead, they have a dance crew. In an attempt to maintain her status as a cheerleading champion, she convinces the dance crew to join her in developing their

own cheerleading squad and compete against her former school. After a series of missteps, she learns the cinematic life lesson that being true to yourself and your friends is far more important than receiving a trophy.

In order to successfully pull off the task of staging the Varsity National Cheerleading Competition for this production, as well as legitimize the characters as cheerleaders, director-choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler cast precisely half of the ensemble/swings from a pool of collegiate and professional cheerleaders. Blankenbuehler described the casting process: “I wanted to surround myself with true authenticity. So, we made the decision early on to not teach actors to do cheerleading.”<sup>293</sup> Jessica McDermott (Colombo), a consultant for Varsity Spirit (one of the world’s leading cheerleading associations) and judge for the Universal Cheerleading Association, was also brought onto the production team to ensure that all of the difficult and potentially dangerous cheerleading stunts and tumbling were choreographed and executed accurately and safely. McDermott attested, “Safety-wise when you are throwing people in the air, you need people who are trained to do that.”<sup>294</sup> Cheerleading ensemble member Antwan Bethea reported:

Andy Blankenbuehler and Jessica McDermott (Colombo) set out to recruit highly skilled collegiate and professional cheerleaders. Half of the ensemble were experienced cheerleaders, and the other half were skilled singers & dancers. In a nutshell, the cheerleaders taught the singers/dancers all the technical skills of cheer stunts and the cheer lingo. In turn, the ensemble members who were familiar with ‘stage life’ taught the cheerleaders things like vocal exercises and stage etiquette. For example, as the cheerleaders were learning how to belt or the difference between downstage and upstage, we were teaching the dancers/singer the proper grips of an elevated stunt and how to absorb when catching a fall. In the performances, I think the goal was to have the two styles/backgrounds blend so well that it would appear everyone on stage was a cheerleader and a singer, and a dancer.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Patrick Hinds, “Episode 14: *Bring it On: the Musical*,” *Broadway Backstory*, TodayTix, November 7, 2017, <https://www.todaytix.com/broadway-backstory/episodes/bring-it-on-the-musical>.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Antwan Bethea, interview with Amanda Olmstead, June 13, 2020.

Bethea's illustration of the rehearsal process points to Blankenbuehler's creation of a collaborative environment. Not dissimilar to *In the Heights*, he relied on others skilled in genres he was not to help enhance the execution of the choreography.

As Bethea suggests, with McDermott's guidance, Blankenbuehler successfully blends a group of dancing ensemble bodies and a group of cheerleading ensemble bodies that together make up the aggregate ensemble body of *Bring it On: the Musical*. Each of these bodies is skilled in their respective genre. Still, how Blankenbuehler has choreographed these bodies in cooperation with one another manufactures a cohesive lens through which the audience can view this particular world. Although some dancing ensemble bodies may play cheerleader characters, they may not have the specific skill of a trained cheerleader. For example, a cheerleading virtuoso can execute challenging stunts and gymnastics, while a dancer may not have such curated muscle capacity or tumbling ability. In fact, none of the principal characters are professionally trained cheerleaders.<sup>296</sup> Thus, a carefully crafted choreographic score is necessary to blend these components of the ensemble body to deflect from any disparities in cheerleading-based training amongst the entire cast, creating the illusion of an actual cheerleading squad.

This chapter analyzes the numbers "What I Was Born To Do" (Truman High School), "We Ain't No Cheerleaders" (Jackson High School), "Friday Night" (Jackson High School), "It's All Happening" (Jackson High School), "Legendary" (Truman High School), and "Cross the Line" (Jackson High School). By looking at the choreography in conversation with the practice of cheerleading historically, I argue that Blankenbuehler's work strategically choreographs the

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<sup>296</sup> Helène Yorke was originally cast as Campbell in the out of town try outs. During this development process the lead actors were learning how to do professional cheerleading in gymnasiums, challenging stunts and tumbling included. The night before tech rehearsals, Yorke broke her foot attempting a standing back tuck and had to leave the production. A prime example of why Blankenbuehler decided not to try and train actors how to do cheerleading.

overarching ensemble body in order to promote a sharp juxtaposition between the majorly White, Truman High School and the predominantly non-White, Jackson High School socially, economically, and racially. Additionally, the dialogue between the forms of cheerleading and dance works to frame the cheerleading ensemble body and the dancing ensemble body in such a way that reveals and practices social and historical tensions of race, class, gender, and sexualization. Highlighting these tensions through the choreography transmits such narratives to an audience, even if they are not explicitly addressed within the text of the musical.

Blankenbuehler carefully blends cheerleading, dance, and heightened gesture to create a choreographic score that allows the audience to absorb what they are watching. For example, there may be a high-flying stunt in one location of the stage, followed by a slow dance movement in another location. Generating such fluidity between styles prevents the choreography from becoming ineffectual, for the audience is kept on the edge of their seat, waiting to see when the next high-flying stunt will happen. Keeping the audience energized in this way can help the choreography hold a strong position of importance to the narrative. In Jonathan Burrows's *A Choreographer's Handbook*, he suggests, "Virtuosity raises the stakes to a place where the audience knows something may go wrong. They enjoy watching this negotiation with disaster. Will the performer fall, or forget what they're doing, or will they get through it?"<sup>297</sup> The cheerleading ensemble body, in particular, enhances this negotiation with disaster due to their performance of high-risk maneuvers. Audiences enjoy watching skill; it keeps them invested in what is going to happen next.<sup>298</sup> Burrows adds, "However, if everything is virtuosic then there's nothing against which to read the virtuosity: it has to be in balance with other modes of

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<sup>297</sup> Jonathan Burrows, *A Choreographer's Handbook* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 76.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.



engagement.”<sup>299</sup> If the choreography were all cheerleading all the time, the juxtaposition between cheerleading and dance that communicates a narrative regarding sociocultural tensions would lose its potential to create meaning. As the audience leans in to witness such presentation of skill, they are also consuming what socially inscribed bodies are executing these movements, which in turn can call attention to or challenge the idea of who is “able” to perform what and how.

Blankenbuehler uses the dialogue between virtuosity and ensemble body to both illustrate and perform the relationships between race, class, gender, sexuality, cheerleading, and dance. Both of these styles frame the individual ensemble bodies to inform the overall message of the show. Using professional cheerleaders as cheerleading ensemble bodies and professional dancers as dancing ensemble bodies allows Blankenbuehler to accentuate further the layered differences between cheerleading and dance. For instance, the virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies are mostly White. When there are moments of high-flying stunts featuring White female bodies, audiences connect to those bodies as focal points, drawing attention to such an exhibition of Whiteness within the form of cheerleading. Whiteness becomes implicated as an obligatory component of cheerleading virtuosity. The non-White virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies, like Bethea, are obscured for the first half of the show to keep the focus on Whiteness as a standard component of cheerleading. Conversely, by including a higher number of diverse bodies within the dance numbers of the entire production, non-Whiteness becomes an ineluctable narrative element of dancing virtuosity, particularly hip-hop dancing virtuosity. Hip-hop’s socioeconomic/sociopolitical relationship with minoritarian groups becomes elevated through these non-White virtuosic dancing ensemble bodies facilitating a strong juxtaposition between the forms.

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<sup>299</sup> Burrows, 76.

Moreover, cheerleading and dance alike have historically become associated with femininity. Within each, there have been precise expectations regarding gendered roles and gendered aesthetics. For contemporary cheerleading, flyers in stunts are always female. Female cheerleaders wear skirts, while male cheerleaders wear pants. Additionally, female cheerleaders are often stereotyped as skinny, White, blonde girls, and male cheerleaders are often assumed to be gay or less manly. The number “It’s All Happening” challenges these clichés and fosters acceptability of individuality through both the text and the ensemble bodies featured in the choreography. The all-female identifying hip-hop crew must recruit male bodies to create a cheerleading squad successfully. These male ensemble characters, specifically males of color, resist at first citing such stereotypes before giving in and participating. By the end of the production, the hip-hop dance crew becomes a champion-level cheerleading squad representing ensemble bodies of color and all genders, subverting the preconceived, predetermined notions regarding race, class, gender, sexuality, and virtuosity. The cheerleading virtuosos, specifically the few cheerleader virtuosos of color, become more visible for “It’s All Happening” in order to supply the new squad with a higher level of cheerleading authority and validity. Blankenbuehler’s choreographic score for the now syncretic hip-hop/cheerleading dance crew/squad challenges historical juxtapositions of the forms, promoting a newly inclusive and reparative arena.

#### **4.1 “Cheerleading, you say...:” Scripting Whiteness and Femininity**

In *Bring it On: the Musical*, the cheerleading functions as a microcosmic example of society in the United States. During the last seventy years, cheerleading has become semiotically linked with White suburban school districts. Whether that link has been affirmed through societal

practices or popular culture, the sport and those who practice it are associated with popularity, wealth, and sexuality. In recent decades, the sport has become exponentially expensive to practice and has further marginalized those belonging to a lower economic class—more often than not, that means people of color. In *Bring it On: the Musical*, the (mostly White) suburban school praises its nationally ranked cheerleading team while casting judgment on the diverse inner-city school that does not have a cheerleading team. In order to convince students of the inner-city school to change their hip-hop crew to a cheerleading squad, Campbell (the White cheerleader transfer from the suburban school) lies to her new friends, saying, “each member of the winning squad gets a scholarship to the college of their choice.”<sup>300</sup> The character Danielle, who is Black and the head of the hip-hop crew, agrees to make a squad because of this potential for financial gain and upward mobility. In *Bring it On; the Musical*, cheerleading becomes a tool to highlight and challenge such historically marginalizing systems within the United States.

Examining the history of cheerleading in the U.S. illustrates how the presentations of Whiteness and femininity in *Bring it On: the Musical* developed. Cheerleading became a formalized activity in the mid-nineteenth century. At its inception, only males performed the practice. The thought was that men had the ability, power, and volume to rally a crowd. In the 1920s, women began slowly participating and arguably became the primary practitioners because of World War II. In one iteration of their study titled, “Hands On Hips, Smiles on Lips! Gender, Race, and the Performance of Spirit in Cheerleading,” Laura Grindstaff and Emily West report, “The activity became increasingly associated with girls and women through the 1950s and 1960s and by the mid-1970s the process of ‘feminization’ was mostly complete; consequently, the

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<sup>300</sup> Jeff Whitty, Tom Kitt, Lin-Manuel Miranda, and Amanda Green, *Bring it On: the Musical* (New York, NY: Music Theatre International, 2012), 64.

‘masculine’ emphasis on leadership was overshadowed by concerns with attractiveness, sex appeal, and popularity—criteria that, at desegregated schools, tended to favor middle-class white women.”<sup>301</sup> Patty Simcox and Sandy Olsson in *Grease* are the quintessential examples of that ideal 1950s cheerleader. Grindstaff and West’s later article “Cheerleading and the Gendered Politics of Sport” states, “Cast as a feminine auxiliary sport for the latter half of the twentieth century, cheerleading has served as an icon of normative—meaning white, heterosexual, middle class, and American—girlhood as well as a ready target for those contesting that ideal.”<sup>302</sup> Although the opening number of *Bring it On: the Musical* attempts to position cheerleading as a legitimate sport that takes extreme athleticism and skill, rather than just an auxiliary practice, the majority of the Truman High School cheerleaders are indeed White, heterosexual, middle class, and American.

Through the mid-to-late twentieth century, race and class structures within the United States continued to divide and isolate people of color, affecting the acceptance of non-White participation in cheerleading. Grindstaff and West argue:

Transposed to the realm of cheerleading, this [division] means that people of color and working-class white women are less likely to be perceived as ‘naturally’ suited to cheerleading because unrestrained emotional expressiveness *per se* is less the goal than adherence to the particular (middle-class, white, female) rules and standards of emotional expression that regulate the performance of spirit. Cheerleading is thus a culturally sanctioned space for a certain type of emotion work in which certain groups seem to belong more naturally than others; it is a site where different emotional scripts associated with different groups of actors conflict.<sup>303</sup>

As Grindstaff and West note, people of color and even the White working-class have been labeled as emotionally excessive. José Esteban Muñoz’s original 2006 article “Feeling Brown, Feeling

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<sup>301</sup> Laura Grindstaff and Emily West, “‘Hands on Hips, Smiles on Lips!’ Gender, Race, and the Performance of Spirit in Cheerleading,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2010), 149.

<sup>302</sup> Laura Grindstaff and Emily West, “Cheerleading and the Gendered Politics of Sport,” *Social problems (Berkeley, Calif.)* 53, no. 4 (2006), 500.

<sup>303</sup> Grindstaff and West, “‘Hands on Hips, Smiles on Lips!’,” 145.

Down,” as well as the collection of his last set of writings called *Sense of Brown* edited in 2020 by Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong’o, complicates ontologies of emotion and provides crucial insight regarding minoritarian theories of affect. Explicitly discussing the Latinx stereotype of being “hot,” “fiery,” or “passionate,” Muñoz suggests that such associations develop out of “the affective performance of normative whiteness is minimalist to the point of emotional impoverishment. Whiteness claims affective normativity and neutrality....Minoritarian identity has much to do with certain subjects’ inability to act properly within majoritarian scripts and scenarios.”<sup>304</sup> The affective normativity engendered by Whiteness in opposition to stigmatized minoritarian groups has dictated *who* can be emotional and *how* they can be emotional. Speech, gestures, or dance deemed to be excessive and unrefined counter the carefully practiced decorum of the (White-dominated) upper-business class. Though the basis of cheerleading is the very notion of exuding high levels of enthusiasm, as Grindstaff and West suggest, a specific set of expectations bounds this emotional output. Facial expression, placement of hands-on-hips, high kicks, and the waving of pom-poms are all codified to keep zealous sentiments contained within the performance of the form as per the majoritarian script.

For example, “facial” or “cheer face” are labels given to often exaggerated facial expressions used during cheerleading competitions or performances. Facial typically coincides with vowels; when you say “A,” “E,” “I,” “O,” or “U” with extra energy, raised eyebrows, and a chin pop, that is facial. In fact, there is a category on a judge’s scorecard at competitions to award points to squads based on their appropriate levels of facial. Additionally, this scripting of facial is undoubtedly gendered in accordance with U.S. cultural, normative, majoritarian

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<sup>304</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, ed. Joshua Chambers-Letson, and Tavia Nyong’o (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 11-13.

expectations. In 2020, a Netflix documentary titled *Cheer* aimed to illuminate the intense athleticism, dedication, and virtuosity involved in the sport. Navarro College cheerleading coach Monica Aldama is frequently heard commenting on whether or not a female cheerleader is smiling during practice.<sup>305</sup> The male cheerleaders are given feedback on their athletic abilities, not how their face looks. The female athletes actually risk being removed from the routine if they do not use enough “facial.” During *Bring it On: the Musical*, we see evidence of this gendered, emotional script when Campbell teaches the new Jackson cheerleaders about “cheer face.” As they practice, she specifically articulates what the male cheer face is supposed to communicate, “Men, keep those feelings bottled inside, covered by shades of ‘steely determination.’”<sup>306</sup>

However, the culture surrounding the form has certainly evolved to be rather dramatic. Who falls? Who wins? Who loses? Cheerleading competitions can become seemingly the most important thing in a young person’s life. Winning nationals, for example, is what squads train for tirelessly. Blankenbuehler remembers this from his pre-production research, “I started attending a lot of cheerleading competitions, which was unreal. I remember the first competition I attended. I have never seen such raw emotion, both high and low—crying like the world was ending, screaming like you learned how to fly. It was an unbelievable education to me. It was frightening.”<sup>307</sup> Therefore, in developing the show, he wanted to recreate such emotional stakes for these characters. He said the tension created within the plot “can be about cheerleading, but I have to firmly know that it is life and death for that person. And then the decision about whether I

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<sup>305</sup> *Cheer*, directed by Greg Whiteley, Arielle Kilker, and Chelsea Yarnell (Corsicana, TX: Netflix, 2020), Series.

<sup>306</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 74.

<sup>307</sup> Hinds, “Episode 14: *Bring it On: the Musical*.”

do something or not does not feel like ‘Oh, I’m a blonde girl who is spoiled and has everything.’ It doesn’t feel unimportant because it truly is life or death.”<sup>308</sup> Still, to be in the socioeconomic position to have the privilege of dedicating one’s sole priority to cheerleading speaks miles about the relationship between the sport and society.

To that end, cheerleading can be an incredibly expensive sport to practice, and the cost is not easily afforded by those belonging to the working-class. Gymnastics lessons, gym memberships, uniforms, shoes, competition fees, and travel are all expenses families pay for their child to participate. An argument can be made that these costs are primarily for those belonging to an elite, competitive cheerleading squad. However, in the last twenty years or so, most school-based squads also participate in competitions. To even make it onto a squad, one must be proficient in tumbling, jumps, and dance. Thus, cheerleading as a form inherently privileges people of certain economic status reaffirming class and racial prejudices. By way of illustration, under 20% of the cheerleading ensemble bodies in the cast are of color, compared to the 50% of non-cheerleading ensemble bodies that are of color. The casting of the show seemingly reflects the demographic statistics of the professional sport itself.<sup>309</sup>

These ideas of gendered prescriptions, class expectations, and racial divides within the sport of cheerleading are directly addressed in *Bring it On: the Musical*. The general story follows high school senior and cheerleading captain Campbell, as she is redistricted from Truman High School to Jackson High School. Strong juxtapositions between the two schools become evident through the script, lyrics, music, labels, movement styles, and bodies. Truman High School, the

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

<sup>309</sup> For example, the 2020-2021 season roster for the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders suggests that approximately 11% of their squad members are persons of color. Additional rosters include: New England Patriots (7%), New Orleans Saints (26%), Kansas City (17%), and Baltimore Ravens (37%).

suburban, mostly-White school, has a cheerleading squad that is incredibly influential to its daily life. The audience is introduced to this celebrated group in the opening number, “What I Was Born to Do.” Jackson High School, the inner-city, more diverse school, does not have a cheerleading squad; instead, they have a dance crew. The audience is introduced to this group five numbers later in “We Ain’t No Cheerleaders.”

When Campbell finds out she is being redistricted, her friends comment on how “scary” Jackson is and explicitly point out that they do not have a cheerleading squad. One of her friends, Kylar (who, like the others, is a White cheerleader), presents this piece of gossip during their conversation: “The legends of old say that five years ago the Jackson cheerleaders were a rough group of girls. Like Hells Angels, but cheerleaders. At the Cornucopia Dance, they started a school-wide riot and held a gaggle of cafeteria ladies in a three-day hostage standoff. And so the Jackson cheerleading program was canceled until the End of Days.”<sup>310</sup> At this point in the production, the audience has yet to be introduced to Jackson High School. Though the audience is unaware of the racial demographic of Jackson at this time, these lines set up a perception of Jackson by those who go to Truman using racial stereotypes revolving around words such as “rough” and “riot.” Calling attention to the idea that the school *had* cheerleading, but the sport was taken away because of the young women’s supposed actions is a subtext that cheerleading has been reserved for a culturally sanctioned space of regimented suburbia versus the “undisciplined” inner-city. This rumor instills a socially dictated perception of *who* will be the students at Jackson.

When Campbell enters Jackson High School for the first time, the rumor simmers in the background as the diverse ensemble of students enters the space. Therefore, by the time the hip-hop crew sings their introduction, “We Ain’t No Cheerleaders,” the audience has already garnered

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<sup>310</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 20.



preconceived notions of these characters and the history associated with their group. When analyzing “What I Was Born to Do” directly beside “We Ain’t No Cheerleaders,” the numbers highlight the antagonism between the forms. Members of the Truman High School cheerleading squad (and their apparently adoring fans) sing the song on the left. Members of the Jackson High School dance crew sing the song on the right.

These Truman girls are super-human girls  
And there is nothing that they can’t do  
And beyond all the squads  
They’re semi-demi-gods  
And when our powers combined  
We do what we were born to do

...

We work and we fight and train and hustle  
We get mani/pedi’s but we’re made of muscle  
We got one shot that we work all year for  
We got more balls than the team we cheer for  
Nationals is getting closer by the minute  
Last year, we took bronze, this year we’re gonna win it!  
Bring it!

—“What I Was Born to Do”

Sing it wit me if ya feel me  
We don’t get down with no pom-poms  
(Hell to the naw)  
When we roll through with our crew  
No one can do what we do, it’s true  
But we would still do it if no one was watching  
And let’s be real, who could blame them for watching?

...

You can call us arrogant  
But we work for what we have  
Call us whatever is clever  
Forever, please but don’t you ever call us  
“Rah rah, sis boom bah”

—“We Ain’t No Cheerleaders”

These numbers, in lyrics and choreography, are an introduction to the distinct differences between a cheerleading squad and a dance crew, socially and aesthetically. “What I Was Born to Do” promotes athleticism, discipline, elitism, and Whiteness. “We Ain’t No Cheerleaders” suggests flexibility, informality, community, and a sense of Blackness and Brownness. The number provides an opportunity for the minoritarian groups to present themselves, countering preceding processes of Othering. They both provide insight into the socioeconomic/sociopolitical

environments surrounding their activity. Further analysis will showcase how Blankenbuehler choreographed the ensemble bodies within each of these numbers, among others, to illuminate the sociohistorical tensions between these forms.

#### **4.2 “What I Was Born To Do”—Truman High School: Producing Whiteness through Cheerleading**

Blankenbuehler has asserted that dance is a frame that informs what the audience should feel, look at, or understand in a moment. For *Bring it On: the Musical*, cheerleading is an additional element of this framing device. What cheerleading adds, in terms of pure visual spectacle, is a multitude of levels and dimensions not typical of any dance genre. Taking into consideration for a moment, the frame in photography typically brings the viewer into the picture. To be clear, this is not the wooden object you put the photograph inside; this is a presentation technique used in visual art mediums to place a subject in relation to other elements. It not only has the potential to make the picture more visually appealing, but the frame provides further details and information. The frame creates specific focal points through the relations it establishes. For example, cheerleading has the ability to draw the eye of the viewer more vertically than dance. It generates the possibility for a viewer to engage more actively as their eye has to travel a further distance to absorb all of the picture. Therefore, if the ensemble is the lens for the broader, more overarching messaging for the show, then the relational positioning of a body high in the air for a cheerleading stunt literally elevates their significance and ability to impact how the show is creating meaning.

Beginning with the opening number of *Bring it On: the Musical*, cheerleading frames the socioeconomic milieu of the production. Virtuoso cheerleading ensemble bodies are specifically

featured throughout to introduce the audience to the form's inherent racial, class, and gender bias. On the surface, the opening number "What I Was Born To Do" introduces the audience to Campbell, her passions, and the Truman High School cheerleading squad. But underneath, through the individual ensemble bodies, it positions the form of cheerleading and its practitioners as elite and predominately White. For anyone unfamiliar with the *Bring it On* films, they get their first taste of how these laboring athletic women are sexualized and how those very same women are typically White, middle to upper-middle class. In this opening number, Blankenbuehler postures the ensemble bodies to function not only as characters within Truman High School but as the socially dominant aesthetic by which audiences are to compare Jackson High School against later on in the show.

Lights come up on a young woman, Campbell, standing alone, occupying the strongest space onstage, slightly downstage of center, body facing the audience. She begins praying to a higher power that she be elected captain of the squad following tryouts that evening. Campbell expresses that she has worked her "whole life to lead Truman High to Nationals."<sup>311</sup> Then, she begins singing about the first time she discovered a vocation that would become a driving force in her life. Her importance is quickly established, but so too is the significance of the ensemble. The ensemble begins cheering, "Go! Go! Go, Campbell! Go!" crossing through the dimly lit space, and two co-ed partner cheerleading stunts (one base and one flyer) go up. As the male bases extend their arms, the flyers stand on their two legs with their arms extended into a "high-V." The pairs are positioned to Campbell's downstage diagonals, creating a frame around her while they slowly turn clockwise. These two stunts are very simple yet mouth-dropping to an audience member who is not frequently exposed to the art of cheerleading stunts.

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<sup>311</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 1.

In Jonathan Burrows's *A Choreographer's Handbook*, he states, "The first things the audience see when a performance begins form a contract. This contract teaches the audience how to read the performance, at the same time as the performance is unfolding. The contract is the key to understanding the continuity that holds and gives sense to the piece."<sup>312</sup> Because cheerleading aesthetics have rarely been included within musical theatre, bringing in actual cheerleading right from the top of the show lays a new foundation for this specific production. Including high-flying stunts in the first three minutes of the production forms this contract, immediately indicating that *Bring it On: the Musical* will be unambiguously staging the sport of cheerleading and all of its natural spectacle. Thinking back to the previous chapter's discussion regarding authenticity, the utilization of authentic cheerleading movements aids in the adaptation of the environment and generation of energy. Incorporating stunts at the top of the show also has the potential to precipitate energy and excitement for something new and different. The opening establishes a promise that the audience will continue to be engaged and energized for the duration of the production.

Blankenbuehler's decision to implement these stunts as the initial choreography piece in the show initiates the contract between the production and the audience. By showcasing virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies first, a high amount of energy is effectuated between the performers and the audience. In the first two minutes of the show, they watch the performers negotiate with disaster—will they fall?<sup>313</sup> The typical Broadway space—sans cheerleading—is adapted to allow for this high-spirited sport to be reciprocally adapted for the stage. Blankenbuehler's positioning of the stunts on the left and right thirds of the space, as well as in the foreground of the stage picture, allow the viewer's eye to see these (White) athletic ensemble bodies before being

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<sup>312</sup> Burrows, 37.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 76.

redirected to Campbell at the top of this triangle. These ensemble bodies are dressed in typical high school cheerleading uniforms—white sneakers, short skirts, and sleeveless tunics. And, because these ensemble bodies are professional cheerleaders, their labor appears effortless. Campbell's assertion that she made a vow to become a cheerleader like those in front of her, previously labeling them as "superhuman," is augmented by these trophy-like displays. Becoming a cheerleader was her first goal; winning nationals would become her second goal. At nationals, the cheerleaders win a big trophy. At this moment, the cheerleading ensemble bodies function as character, spectacle, and iconographic metaphors of trophies concurrently.

During the lyrics, "Slow motion down the hall as kids all stop and stare," Campbell remains downstage center as the Truman High School squad fills in the space around her. Just to her upstage right diagonal is another cheerleader that will become instrumental to the story, Skylar. She is sitting on a male's shoulder. The eye is then drawn upward over Skyler's left shoulder, directly behind/above Campbell, to a cheerleader in a pyramid stunt. This cheerleader is being manipulated by her two male bases so that her legs look as though she is walking (on air). To Campbell's left is her boyfriend Steven, and a few other cheerleaders are positioned at various levels within this group. They all move as if they are walking and waving in slow motion. All of the male bases are costumed in some version of red and white attire, noting that they are a part of the squad; though, they are not dressed in their performance uniforms like the female cheerleaders.

The above section begins the introduction to cheerleading as a gendered form. To begin, the costuming for the opening establishes the notion that cheerleading for the female squad members is their everyday life persona. By placing these characters in their full cheerleading uniform, it dictates this as their foundational identity. The male cheerleaders have hints of costuming that indicate they have a position on the squad; but, by blending uniform and everyday

attire, they become distanced from their identity as a cheerleader. To affirm their gendered role in society and resist the feminization of the label “cheerleader,” the men are doing all of the “heavy” liftings inferring that they have more laboring power. They lift the women who are tossing their hair, checking their make-up, and giving the *Princess Diaries* “thank you for being here today” wave.<sup>314</sup> These young women are stereotypically set up, at first, as being more delicate and concerned with their image. What is additionally vital to note about this featured group of cheerleaders is the members are mostly White.<sup>315</sup>

On the edges of the stage, forming a triangle around the featured cheerleaders, are other students from Truman High School. Dressed in everyday clothing, this group takes varied levels lower than those on the same plane as them in the featured center group. In other words, the cheerleader stunt in the back is at an extremely high level, and as a result, those ensemble members on the floor next to them are standing. Those on the same line as Campbell are at the lowest level, and they are kneeling. The differences in height between the cheerleader group and the student group keep the focus on the cheerleaders. They are glorified by the bodies lower than them. All of these students are facing into center stage and are positioned in dimly lit lighting. The bodies of these ensemble members also make up a more racially diverse demographic. The diverse student ensemble is set apart from the far less diverse group of cheerleaders setting up the ties between Whiteness and the sport.

As the song continues, Campbell, Skylar, Kylar, and Steven exit the stage. The ensemble takes over singing the chorus: “These Truman girls are superhuman girls...” The Truman High

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<sup>314</sup> *The Princess Diaries*, Walt Disney presents a Brownhouse production, a Garry Marshall film; produced by Whitney Houston, Debra Martin Chase, Mario Iscovich; screenplay by Gina Wendkos; directed by Garry Marshall (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Home Entertainment; Distributed by Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2001).

<sup>315</sup> This statement comes with a few exceptions depending on the night of the performance, due to the use of swings within the ensemble.

School students (non-cheerleaders) spread out amongst the stage. The racially diverse ensemble bodies are located much further upstage. An audience member watching this, especially from the orchestra section of the house, may not be focused on those bodies, as they are occupying the weakest spot on the stage. This suggested focus, then, directs the audience to understand the perceptively White ensemble bodies as holding a more dominant position within Truman. The downstage bodies move to stage left toward the cheerleaders as they reenter. The upstage bodies are unmasked; however, they plié their stage right leg so their bodies lean backward. Their focus is then directed to downstage right and upward, where the cheerleaders set up for a stunt that then files diagonally upstage, replacing the bodies that once occupied that space (now having repositioned themselves to upstage left). This stunt is called a “show and go,” where the flyer is put straight up into a full with feet together and then taken back down to the ground in one fluid motion. By lowering their bodies and facing themselves in anticipation of the upcoming, high-flying spectacle, those non-cheerleading bodies are still kept out of focus. If these bodies are continually manipulated, so they are not the focus, why have them on stage at all? Simply put, to populate the space. Choreographing these bodies in such a way that they can be students of Truman without dismantling the crux of the story (suburbia vs. inner city) allows for the ensemble bodies portraying Truman cheerleaders to be more palpable.

One trope of the *Bring it On* saga is the “roll call cheer.” “Roll call cheers” are used to introduce the individual cheerleaders by name to the crowd. For example, the iconic opening of the original *Bring it On* film is the roll call cheer for the Toros, “She’s perky, she’s fun! And now she’s number one! K kick it, Torrance! T T T Torrance!”<sup>316</sup> *Bring it On: the Musical* has a similar

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<sup>316</sup> *Bring it On*, directed by Peyton Reed, writer Jessica Bendinger (Santa Monica, CA: Beacon Pictures, Wonderworks Films; Distributed by Universal Pictures, 2000).

moment in “What I was Born to Do.” It begins with Skylar, followed by Kylar, then the mascot Bridget. During each of these features, the ensemble is spread out around the individual speaking. The ensemble is positioned at lower levels or angled so that Skylar and Kylar are the focus.

Being angled toward someone is not, of course, the only way to give them focus. When Bridget scurries from upstage left to downstage right, the ensemble abruptly shields their faces from her. Each body onstage is positioned differently. Those bodies further downstage take an abstract position on the floor. Those further upstage take varied levels, contorting their bodies. The sharp contrast between facing and glorifying the previous two cheerleaders to awkwardly and outrightly blocking oneself from the mascot creates a unique antithesis to be deconstructed. The character of Bridget is written to be quirky, curvy, and unathletic. She takes on the popular trope of someone who was not attractive or popular enough to be a cheerleader, so she was given the seemingly lower-level position of mascot. The rejection of her existence portrayed by the bodily postures of the entire cast of characters onstage affirms the stereotype that female cheerleaders must be fetching, slender, and thusly popular. Looking at Bridget through the lens of the ensemble bodies labels her as a type of Other in this world. Such labeling will come to be important when Bridget is also redistricted but has a less stressful time assimilating to Jackson High School. As Bridget is desexualized at this moment, the window becomes wider for the female cheerleaders to be subject to just the opposite.

Even though there are plenty of male cheerleaders on the Truman High School squad singing this song, the sport is feminized and sexualized through the lyrics continually referring to the squad members as “girls.” The final roll call is for Steven, the only time a male cheerleader is featured. Steven is the stereotypical “Ken Doll” type: athletic, tall, blonde hair, and blue eyes. When this moment happens, he objectifies his female counterparts in his lyrics: “What’s up, my



name is Steven I'm so (handsome it hurts) / Don't need an umbrella, I stand under miniskirts (What!) / Yeah, I'm a (boss), I don't care what the haters say / (How many dudes can say they pick up girls all day?).”<sup>317</sup> As these lyrics begin, a female ensemble cheerleader does a roundoff (a cartwheel where the feet come together in the middle) toward Steven. When she is upside down during this move, he bends down, and she flips over his downstage shoulder and pushes up into the hands of the male base standing behind Steven. The male base catches her foot, and she stands on one leg with the other in a heel-stretch. Steven stands underneath her. This action calls attention to the underneath of the female flyer's skirt, placing this space of the female body in direct conversation with the male bodies surrounding it. Steven moves to downstage center as the original partner stunt to his right and an additional partner stunt to his upstage left enter shoulder stands. The flyers tip toward stage right into the arms of two different bases, which then push them straight back up to where they were (almost like a Weeble Wobble)—once again, placing the male cheerleaders in a position of power. They are seen as the support system lifting the female cheerleaders; what goes unseen is the intense athletic labor of the core and other muscles being engaged by the female cheerleader.

Based on the production I watched, I believe it is important to note that the front group was perceivably White bodies.<sup>318</sup> However, in the back group, the base who catches the flyer then pushes her back up in the Weeble Wobble is a man of color. He is not in the focal point of the stunt, but he does labor to make the stunt work. His placement as a cheerleader on the Truman squad becomes an interesting pause point for investigation. The performer in question is Antwan Bethea. According to the Playbill for the production, he was a cheerleader for East Carolina

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<sup>317</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 3.

<sup>318</sup> *Bring it On: the Musical*, (Videorecording), St. James Theatre, December 14, 2012, Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, NYPL Performing Arts Library, New York, New York.

University and a professional cheerleader for the North Carolina NBA team, the Charlotte Bobcats, making him one of the twelve professional cheerleader ensemble bodies in the cast.<sup>319</sup> Furthermore, out of the twelve professional cheerleader ensemble bodies, he is one of three bodies of color. In a personal interview with Bethea, he recounted:

One reason I believe I was cast was because of my unique look; a young, black male with dreadlocks. Without a doubt, my appearance screams “Jackson High School,” but in a pair of brown slacks, collared shirt, and my hair pulled back, I was a Truman prep. With help from the wardrobe and hair department, every ensemble member had a Truman side and a Jackson side. Don’t get me wrong, in the Jackson scenes, I was definitely featured more than my stunt partner, Courtney, a petite, blonde white girl from Texas. Naturally, she was featured more than I was in the Truman scenes.<sup>320</sup>

Although his skills are necessary to help portray an award-winning cheerleading squad, to keep the apparent racial juxtaposition between Truman and Jackson clear, his body could not be in focus.

Immediately following the “roll call” section just discussed, there is a breakout scene where it is announced who on the squad is to be awarded the title of captain. Transitioning into this scene from the two stunts just discussed, the group downstage right crosses and joins the principal cheerleaders (Campbell, Skylar, Kylar, and Steven) downstage left. The main base and flyer from the upstage stunt also cross downstage right. Bethea, however, makes an exit upstage right and is not present in this focused moment. Bethea reflected, “I would ask myself, ‘what motives and choices are made by a young, black kid in a preppy school?’”<sup>321</sup> One of these motivating factors was the very idea of not standing out and blending in when necessary. Bethea

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<sup>319</sup> Antwan Bethea, *TwanBringItOn.com*, <https://www.twanbringiton.com>.

<sup>320</sup> Bethea, interview with Amanda Olmstead.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

provided some critical insight into the relationship behind this idea of blending in and Blankenbuehler's creative process. He noted:

I was fortunate enough to be the Cheer/Stunt Captain on the 2<sup>nd</sup> (Inter)National Tour, which gave me a different perspective of the production from an outsider's view. Watching a show more than once gives you the opportunity to discover something new happening on stage, something you may not have noticed before. Andy wanted the ensemble to always be acting in the moment but never taking any attention from the focal point, typically the principal actor on stage. He wanted there to always be cohesive movement, like a well-oiled machine, one moment flowing into the next. When I watched the show from the audience, it was like looking through a kaleidoscope: all the patterns, colors, and designs dancing around the focal point in the center. Of course, the lighting and wardrobe department played a role in that imagery, but the ensemble delivers the experience.<sup>322</sup>

Keeping cohesive movement in the ensemble while navigating a continually shifting focal point requires transition moments, such as the one described above. Transitions provide the audience with an opportunity to breathe and absorb what they just witnessed before the next moment begins. But, in these transitions, the narrative cannot stop; the piece's integrity must stay intact. So, even if this cohesive movement transitions from a stunt to walking to class (offstage), it plays an important role. Bethea's exit, accompanied by the exit of other diverse ensemble bodies, allows the focus to zero in on this specific group of (White) cheerleaders. Following this breakout scene, however, Bethea and others reenter. They do not just reenter to reenter. The next section requires the presence of cheerleader characters and thusly cheerleading ensemble bodies. Those who exited for the breakout scene slowly come back into the space as if it is now cheerleading practice after school or sometime later at Cheer Camp. The action, as Bethea points out, is always motivated.

"What I was Born to Do" attempts to highlight the mysticism of the female cheerleader, the outrageous expectation of perfection, superhuman, demi-gods. The cheerleaders build upon and counter this presumption of godliness by pointing out the work, the labor that goes into what

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

they do. They have to train their bodies, fight for every stunt to stick, push every tumbling pass to be faster. The lyrics illuminate the notion of beauty with the mention of mani/pedis. An all too common stereotype projected upon women is they are too delicate to do work; they might break a nail. Here, there is the suggestion that although they may care about their looks, they still execute great physical exertion.

During this section, the spectacle ramps up. It is evident that the professional, virtuosic cheerleader bodies are now on the stage. As Campbell sings the lyrics discussed above, a series of dramatic tumbling passes and stunts begin around her. It is during this section that a sharp eye will notice the cheerleading ensemble body of Melody Mills. Previously in the number, Mills has blended in with the other Truman High School female cheerleaders. She has been consistently positioned on the ground in lower levels of elevation or upstage locations. Presumably, all of her moments leading up to this section have also been in softer lighting to not draw focus. Mills is a female body of color. The opening night Playbill cites that she “has danced and choreographed for the NBA, NFL and artists Jay-Z, Rihanna, Kayne West and Shakira.”<sup>323</sup> It is not until this moment when the song switches from introducing the specific members of the Truman High cheerleading squad to highlighting the work performed by the cheerleaders that Mills is featured.

As Campbell counters toward downstage right to open the floor for this section, Mills and another female cheerleader complete synchronized roundoff back handspring, back-tucks from downstage right into the arms of male cheerleaders upstage left. Mills is in the group further downstage. Out of the male cheerleaders’ arms, the two then tumble back to their starting positions, completing a roundoff into a roundoff, layout, step-out. A “layout, step-out” is when the person

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<sup>323</sup> “Bring it On: the Musical” Program, St. James Theatre, July 12, 2012 (New York: NY, Playbill), 7, <https://www.playbill.com/playbillpagegallery/inside-playbill?asset=00000150-aea8-d936-a7fd-eefc733a0002&type=InsidePlaybill&slide=5>.

tumbling goes back into what seems like a backflip; however, the body is not tucked in; it is flat. The tumbler then separates their legs midair and lands on one foot, followed by the other, rather than landing with two feet together. The spectacle of these tumbling passes draws the audience's eye to those bodies rather than to Campbell, who is in a spotlight downstage right. Even though they are crossing to a weaker position on stage and are in a more dimly light space, this type of movement's impact is far more significant than the bodies themselves onstage. The virtuosity and the athleticism of the bodies supersede other elements of their individual dramaturgy.

As the sequence develops, both Mills and Bethea are active in the creation of awe-inspiring pyramids. Pyramids occur when more than one stunt becomes connected to make a cohesive tableau. Bethea is a base for the stage right section, while Mills is a flyer for the center section. Mills, however, is lower than the other two flyers, propping them up to be the focus. The stunt Mills is in eventually comes down, and she puts her back to the audience and points up to each of the fliers remaining in the air. These two flyers, perceptively White cheerleading ensemble bodies, are more brightly lit than Mills. The audience's full attention is on these two bodies. These stunts complete a twist down cradle. A twist down is when the bases slightly throw the flyer up out of their hands; she makes one full rotation with her body, then is caught in their arms in a cradle position.

Finally, the moment comes where Campbell, Broadway actress Taylor Louderman, is integrated into the world of cheerleading. Up until the end of the song, her feet have remained firmly on the ground. She is put into one of the simplest stunts in cheerleading, a half. A half is where the flyer stands on the hands of two bases, with the support of a back base, with her feet apart and level with the chests of the bases. On either side of her, professional cheerleaders complete twist up, show-and-goes. Taking one foot in the hands of the bases, the bodies of the

flyers twist up to full extensions (above the bases heads), then immediately back down. They back walkover out of these stunts. One of these flyers is Mills. But, the focal point is Campbell, who is in the middle taking attention away from Mills's ensemble body.

Behind Campbell is the first basket toss of the production. A basket toss is where bases make a "basket" with their hands, using one hand to grab their own wrist and their other hand to grab the opposite base's wrist. The flyer is then put into this basket by the back base. From the basket, the flyer is launched into the air. She is able to complete several different skills while in the air before coming back down and being caught in a cradle position. In this instance, the flyer completes a toe touch. A basket toss can be jaw-dropping, especially to a viewer who has rarely seen them executed, if at all. The fast pace of each of these stunts is consistently pulling focus for an audience member.

When Campbell comes out of the stunt, she completes a simple pop-down dismount. A "pop-down" is when the flyer's feet are put together, and she is lowered straight to the floor. Arguably the simplest of dismounts, it removes any risk of injury for Louderman but still incorporates her into the world of cheerleading. Campbell's stationary position in the center stunt allows for all of these moments to be seen in relation to her. Though she is completing the first thing learned in Stunting-101, she is supported by professionals performing thrilling stunts to distract the audience from the simplicity. André Lepecki suggests that curating an audience's perspective is crucial "to unify and harmonize the viewer's gaze with representational, theological, and discursive powers."<sup>324</sup> In art, photography, and architecture, a central vanishing point is defined as a point of convergence, often on the horizontal plane, where receding parallel lines meet

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<sup>324</sup> André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 74.

and seem to disappear. By organizing the moments onstage in a triangle around Campbell, she seemingly becomes this single point that grounds the eye. The audience then operates in two ways: first, with an immobile eye focusing on this point; second, using peripheral sight through the visual pyramid surrounding the focal point. Lepecki contends that this creates a reduction of what is produced onstage:

[W]hat is reduced in perspective is not only the tridimensionality of space, but the embodied nature of perception as the corporeal grounding of sensation surrenders itself to algorithms of visibility. What is lost then is the embodiment of vision by the means of an operation that subtracts from perception our stereoscopic, decentered, constantly moving eyes and replaces them with an artificially monocular monomaniacally fixed point of view.<sup>325</sup>

As the audience focuses on the action and the character of Campbell, what is surrendered is the acknowledgment of the corporeality of these performers. The kaleidoscope of action, as Bethea observed, moves the eyes of the spectator so that no one thing is focused on for too long, removing the possibility of in the moment, in-depth analysis.

In his interview with Lyn Cramer for *Creating Musical Theatre*, Blankenbuehler noted this:

I view a lot of choreography as impressionist painting. So, when you see such a painting, your eye is forced to go to the focal point...Sometimes you don't want to know where to look because that mayhem makes the focus resonate. In general, you want to have a focal point. What's around the focal point tells the audience how to feel about the focal point, and that's what the artist says in an impressionist painting. That's what I view as texture. Focus is the narrative line....If I've done my job well, I'm not looking at the other dancers. I'm only looking at the focal point...However, my brain is taking in the feeling around them, and that's what I call texture.<sup>326</sup>

Although Campbell is positioned as the focal point, the audience concurrently sees her and the texture of action surrounding her in their periphery. Her simplistic stunt choreography could call

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Lyn Cramer, "Andy Blankenbuehler," in *Creating Musical Theatre: Conversations with Broadway Directors and Choreographers* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), 33-34.

attention to her lack of cheerleading skills; however, the surround of virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies provides a lens that elevates the perception of her ability. If a still photograph were taken of this action, Campbell would be the focal point of the image. Attention could be directed toward her simplicity, but nevertheless she is doing a stunt alongside more intricate stunts. The ephemerality of the action keeps the eye of the viewer constantly moving. This allows Blankenbuehler to create the illusion that she is the fixed point of view but compels the audience to see her through the lens of the moving ensemble bodies.

Despite the movement controlling the stereoscopic experience and the number's texture, Blankenbuehler has still tended to which bodies he wants to aim the focus or the corresponding narrative line. In the next to last stunt in this number, two halves go up on either upstage corner and are angled toward downstage center. Mills is the flyer upstage right. In front of them, with their backs to the audience, two additional flyers step into their own stunts on one foot and are brought to a full extension keeping the weight on that singular foot. Bethea is a base for one of these stunts; his back is also to the audience. The flyers then step the open foot into the hands of the flyers in the two half stunts putting their weight onto that foot. They kick the foot that was previously in the male bases' hands into the air, then fall into a cradle. Mills and the other flyer in the half become lifting laborers alongside the male bases. Focus is on the higher-flying flyers, which are White bodies. The through-line that illuminates the sociohistorical connection between Whiteness and cheerleading stays intact. However, the textured surround challenges this Whiteness by including ensemble bodies of color.

Once the stunts are complete, the ensemble is spread out on stage, performing cheerleading-like dance movements, including jumps. For the final stage picture, the female cheerleaders complete a roundoff double back handspring toward upstage. Two of these



cheerleaders enter into a final stunt, a full-extension liberty. A liberty is a one-legged stunt, where the free leg is bent, tucking the foot to the weight-bearing knee. All ensemble members make their way to the edges of the stage, outside of the line that signifies a competition cheerleading mat. The stage is clear, with the exception of these two stunts upstage, just off-center, and Campbell center stage. All bodies except Campbell and the two flyers are in dim lighting. Now still, unmoving, these three White cheerleading character bodies are the exclamation point on the number.

“What I was Born to Do,” on the surface, introduces the audience to Campbell, Truman High School, and the sport of cheerleading. But through an analysis of the specific choreographic scores of the ensemble, the number also introduces the audience to the nuances of race and class bias inherent in the form of cheerleading. This subtext is a key plot element for the entire production. While it is not necessarily discussed explicitly, the dramaturgy of the choreography and of the ensemble bodies functions as a supplemental narrative line that informs the audience how to feel about or understand the primary action.

#### **4.3 “Yo, hip-hop is our national pastime:” Hip-Hop and the Crew**

Before analyzing the Jackson High School numbers, it is essential to discuss a brief history of hip-hop as a signifier of both difference and community in *Bring it On: the Musical*. Throughout the *Bring It On* saga, hip-hop, specifically hip-hop dance, has been used as a way to introduce people of color and of minoritarian status as Other. However, as the plot moves forward, hip-hop shifts functions to empower those once Otherized people and become reflective of agency. The same is true for the musical. Hip-hop is layered with nuance; majoritarian (White) perspectives stigmatize it. Minoritarian groups embrace and activate hip-hop as a tool for unification and

identity transmission. The creators of *Bring it On: the Musical* used hip-hop as it relates to music, dance, and identity as a key contrasting component to separate Truman and Jackson. Such a juxtaposition concludes in a reparative narrative that uplifts the marginalized characters and attempts to legitimize their practice of hip-hop in the majoritarian public sphere of the Varsity National Cheerleading Competition.<sup>327</sup>

According to Patrick Hinds of the *Broadway Backstory* podcast for TodayTix, “Knowing that the music for the show would need to have two distinctly different sounds for the music of Truman High School and the music of Jackson High School, Andy wanted to bring on two different music writers.”<sup>328</sup> He first approached Tom Kitt for the Truman High School music and then Lin-Manuel Miranda for the Jackson High School music. Miranda recalls being wooed by Blankenbuehler to work on the project, “I said, ‘I don’t know if I have a whole score in me.’ He goes, ‘I don’t want you to write the whole score.’ I was like, ‘what?’ And he goes, ‘I would like you to split it with Tom Kitt and you guys kind of write the rival schools.’” Amanda Green, who was added to the team as a lyricist, remembered, “So what it started out was, it wasn’t a strict division of Truman and Jackson, of the two high schools, although it was roughly that, it was more of a division of the kinds of songs. Pop songs would be Tom and I, and the hip-hop songs would be Lin...”<sup>329</sup> Despite Green signifying a less apportioned relationship between the two schools than initially intended in the end result, the general use of pop songs for Truman and hip-hop songs

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<sup>327</sup> All of the Truman High School related numbers have a distinct pop music sound and utilize dance aesthetics rooted in ballet, jazz, and cheerleading. The numbers for Jackson High School are more of a hip-hop hybrid combining hip-hop music with pop, and hip-hop dance with jazz. Arguably this hybrid form acclimates the sensitivities of a typical Broadway audience to the genre, still not yet common place in Broadway musicals.

<sup>328</sup> Hinds, “Episode 14: *Bring it On: the Musical*.”

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

for Jackson created enough of a contrast that positioned the schools' respective soundscapes as identifiable characteristics.

The utilization of hip-hop as a signifier of Other draws on a broader sensibility of the connection between the form and the African Diaspora. Halifu Osumare, author of *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop: Power Moves*, argues that understanding the sociopolitical context of the form must be first understood in relation to the musical context and influences. Drawing on the work of scholar Paul Gilroy and musician John Miller Chernoff, he describes the reciprocity between dance, music, action, and interactions in everyday life as a crucial dialogue of cultural expression and socialization across the diaspora. The practice and spread of rhythm create “a sensibility for embodiment of the rhythm and a natural call and response” relationship between the moving participant and the music.<sup>330</sup> He states, “Socialization of the individual through music and dance, including hip-hop, then, becomes an important aspect of African-based cultures.”<sup>331</sup> This emphasis on socialization led to the development of hip-hop crews in disenfranchised communities, in particular those belonging to Black and Latinx populations, as a way to connect and gain power outside of majoritarian practices.

Mark D. Nelson's foreword to *La Verdad: An International Dialogue on Hip Hop Latinidades* discusses hip-hop's multicultural origins. His history provides insight into the complicated relationship between English-speaking and non-English-speaking hip-hop practitioners. Originally a culmination of Caribbean and Black American practices, as hip-hop made its way into American popular culture, the Spanish-speaking products became marginalized and pushed to the fringes of the genre due to its perceived lacking of marketability for English-

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<sup>330</sup> Halifu Osumare, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop: Power Moves*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 48.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

speaking audiences. Correspondingly, although it is certainly a part of Latinx culture, it became commonly associated with Blackness more broadly in popular culture.<sup>332</sup> Nelson points out:

...Hip Hop became powerfully identified with groups who had the most developed traditions of English-language vernacular improvisation, African Americans and West Indians. The poetic genius that quickly emerged, from the ground up to accompany the beats, transformed Hip Hop, at least in the public eye, into a pre-eminently African American discourse, a voice of a newly disfranchised section of the Black U.S. population left behind by deindustrialization, austerity, and a rejection of the redistributionist policies of the 60s.<sup>333</sup>

As hip-hop disseminated around the globe, it constructed an identity akin to an American cultural product. Osumare similarly articulates, “The implicit irony of African American centrality in global popular culture is that black Americans have a long history of being marginalized politically, socially, and economically...On the other hand, blacks as the quintessential ‘other’ have defined U.S. cultural identity on an increasingly national level since the Jazz Age.”<sup>334</sup>

Perceptions and conceptions of racial construction in the United States often revolve around this Black/White binary, although such dynamics are far more complex. Michelle Wright argues “that Blackness operates as a construct (implicitly or explicitly defined as a shared set of physical and behavioral characteristics) and as phenomenological (imagined through individual perceptions in various ways depending on the context).”<sup>335</sup> Many of the complications of such an identity label lie with whether or not someone “passes” as being White. Thus, Wright contends, “the concept of Blackness as located in the body cannot be sustained by any serious further

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<sup>332</sup> It is notable that hip-hop was indeed a part of the conversation regarding *In the Heights*. However, perhaps because of this sociocultural shift in association, hip-hop was less used as an identity marker or tool for establishing Other in the production.

<sup>333</sup> Mark D. Nelson, “Foreword: A Little Hip Hop History from the Bronx and Beyond,” in *La Verdad: an International Dialogue on Hip Hop Latinidades*, ed. Melissa Castillo Planas and Jason Nichols (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2016), x.

<sup>334</sup> Osumare, 23.

<sup>335</sup> Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 3.

investigation because simple observation reveals a broad variety of Black bodies...there is no one gene, history, nationality, language, politics, society, culture, or any other factor that can serve as the basis for the identity category of Black...”<sup>336</sup> One of the ways in which the phenomenological idea of Blackness is sold, received, or interpreted is through hip-hop.<sup>337</sup>

Patricia Herrera’s “A Sonic Treatise of Futurity: Universes’ Party People” acknowledges, “The complex layering in hip-hop, along with its oral, collective, and participatory dimensions that derive from African music traditions, challenge Western notions of musical conventions and social order.”<sup>338</sup> Herrera asserts that the dissonance between Western understandings of music and hip-hop caused it to be labeled “noise” and deemed to be abhorrent by the majoritarian population of the United States, at least during the 1970s when it was beginning to breach into popular culture. Her project deals with the sonic aspects of hip-hop and avoids a conversation regarding the hip-hopping body specifically; but, she does suggest, “Since both the ear and eye adhere to the racialization of the Other, performing bodies of color on the stage will ‘never really lose their referent’ as racial Other; thus, listeners might only hear hip-hop music—the rapping, scratching, and beatboxing—as noise and decide to tune it out or police it.”<sup>339</sup> The eye’s racialization of the performing bodies of color on stage as Other are framed by such connotations regarding hip-hop music and, as Herrera posits, are often ignored, criticized, or controlled.

Similarly, in *Bring it On: the Musical*, the hip-hop crew is framed by these U.S.-based phenomenologies that connect hip-hop music and Otherness. While not all of the hip-hop dancing

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>338</sup> Patricia Herrera, “A Sonic Treatise of Futurity: Universes’ Party People,” in *Race and Performance after Repetition*, ed. Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas A. Jones, and Shane Vogel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 75.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 75-76.

bodies in the production are Black bodies, as Wright notes, it is not the location of Blackness in the body that Otherizes them. The hip-hop crew is, at first, positioned as Other due to its association with hip-hop as antithetical to majoritarian musical and social conventions. The hip-hop dancing bodies in *Bring it On: the Musical* become unequivocally opposite to the cheerleading bodies. In his piece “The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power,” Thomas DeFrantz argues, “These listeners and dancers come, I think, to physically invest in the enactment of cool dissention; they learn the dances for obvious associations of physical power contained within the dancing body magnified by the crucible of race. If these dancers can empower impoverished black bodies of the inner city, surely they might offer dynamic celebration to young dancers in the vanilla suburbs.”<sup>340</sup> The hip-hop crew in *Bring it On: the Musical* is highly demonstrative of DeFrantz’s statement. In 1977, the Rock Steady Crew became one of the first hip-hop dance crews formed in the Bronx. It was “an outlet for inner-city youth who were otherwise ignored by mainstream institutions, including the government and schools.”<sup>341</sup> Jackson High School’s hip-hop crew honors this history.

During the song “Friday Night,” audiences are introduced to the importance of the inner-city Jackson High School hip-hop dance crew as an outlet for expression and fraternity. The title of this section, “Yo, hip-hop is our national pastime,” is a line in the song sung by the character Cameron, played by Black American male actor Dominique Johnson.<sup>342</sup> In “Friday Night,” audiences witness what the hip-hop crew looks like in action for the first time after observing the

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<sup>340</sup> Thomas F. DeFrantz, “The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power,” in *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*, ed. André Lepecki (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 71

<sup>341</sup> Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar, *Hip Hop Dance* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2012), xvi.

<sup>342</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 45.

Truman High School cheerleading squad's performance. As previously indicated, the very label of "dance crew" is set up as a hip-hop variant to counter the cheerleading "squad."

When Campbell first meets Nautica, La Cienega, and Danielle, the lead members of the Jackson High School hip-hop dance crew, the interaction goes as follows:

CAMPBELL: Can I just say, your dancing, I thought your dancing was amazing?

DANIELLE: Why, thank you. We work hard at it.

CAMPBELL: If you need someone else on your squad, I've got a ton of experience

DANIELLE: Squad? We're a crew...a hip-hop crew.

CAMPBELL: Oh, sorry! My people call it a squad.<sup>343</sup>

Danielle walks away from Campbell in silence. Nautica and La Cienega vocally react and then call out Campbell's unknowing mistake. She naively meant "cheerleaders" as "her people," but it is obviously set up to seem as though she meant "White people." This scene sets up the number "We Ain't No Cheerleaders." What *is* the difference between a squad and a crew, cheerleading, and dance? Why is the subtext of this scene, as well as the lyrics of its correlating song, loaded with social, political, and economic issues? Does that subtext relate to the activity, the bodies performing the activity, or both? As a byproduct of the genre of hip-hop, hip-hop dance crews have been directly linked to people of color (specifically Black Americans). *Bring it On: the Musical* includes this connection as a clear plot point to counter the association of cheerleading and Whiteness. Subsequently, the individual ensemble bodies who are choreographed as focal points in these numbers reflect the associated demographics.

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 33.

#### 4.4 “We Ain’t No Cheerleaders” on a “Friday Night”—Jackson High School: Producing or Subverting Other through Hip-Hop

“Do Your Own Thing” precedes “We Ain’t No Cheerleaders” and moves the audience from the world of Truman High School to the diametrically opposed Jackson High School. “Do Your Own Thing” serves several purposes. First, it suggests Jackson has a rougher, less friendly atmosphere than Truman—as evident by the action of the live production and the stage directions in the libretto that read: “A metal detector onstage. Campbell arrives at school among a line of students passing through but she’s the only one who sets it off.”<sup>344</sup> Campbell’s reaction to the alarm is, “Oh God, I didn’t know—uh, hang on—” as she empties out her belongings. Campbell is met by a collective command “Move!” then two bars of music containing banging noises before another “Move!” from the Jackson High School students.<sup>345</sup> Second, the number establishes an entirely new set of vocabulary for the audience, hip-hop dance. And third, it sheds light on Campbell’s less-than-unconscious bias toward both the students and the environment of the inner-city school. The use of hip-hop music, dance, and identification generate a new contract between the production and the audience. Therefore, by the time the audience reaches “We Ain’t No Cheerleaders,” the juxtaposition between the sociocultural milieu of the schools has already been established: upper-middle-class versus working-class, White bodies versus bodies of color, pop music versus hip-hop music, cheerleading versus hip-hop dance.

To visually signify the sociohistorical connection between hip-hop and demographics, Blankenbuehler creates a significant pivot in the ensemble bodies he prioritizes as focal points. At

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.



this moment in the show, the cheerleading ensemble bodies can take somewhat of a back seat, especially the White cheerleading ensemble bodies. The dancing ensemble bodies, a much more diverse population, are able to become a central focus. The ensemble body functions similarly to “What I was Born to Do,” promoting a narrative line that connects the historical associations of a form to the production through embodied practice.

In “What I was Born to Do,” Blankenbuehler commonly altered the stage positioning of groups of White bodies or bodies of color to call attention to the Whiteness of the Truman High cheerleading squad. For the choreographic scores of Jackson High School, he is able to call attention to the diversity of the school by emphasizing individual bodies throughout the numbers so they can each be seen and read. There is minimal synchronized movement or flashy spectacle as there is in “What I was Born to Do.” These individual choreographic scores feature hip-hop-based dance movements. Blankenbuehler primarily features bodies of color throughout the Jackson High School numbers. Because the vocabulary at the top of the show set up the cheerleading, and by proxy Whiteness, as the frame by which the audience understands the show, these hip-hop moving bodies of color are still positioned as antithetical to that idea. These characters become viewed as Other, at least for the first twenty minutes or so of their stage time.

When Campbell enters the space through the metal detector center stage, the orchestrations are very percussive, almost as if it were an anxious heartbeat. The hip-hop-based dance movements through this section accompany the punctuated beats. Hip-hop is known for isolating body movements in such a percussive manner. Susan Leigh Foster states, “Specific features in the choreography of each genre, whether b-boying, popping, or roboting, manifested metaphors of

strength and savy.”<sup>346</sup> She continues highlighting popping, “...through its mastery of flow and explosion invoked the oppositions of powerlessness and power, enslaved and emancipated, inner bodily space and outer, threat of destruction and empowerment.”<sup>347</sup> Her profound assertions become visceral when the audience witnesses Antwan Bethea, now featured downstage right at the top of the number “Do Your Own Thing.” As Campbell makes her way around the stage, asking for help with navigating the new school, she moves to Bethea, who is performing an individualized hip-hop-based dance score. At this moment, everyone onstage is relatively still or engaging in quotidian-based movement (I.e., getting books out of one’s locker), ensuring that this interaction will be the focal point. Bethea, dressed in black, baggy clothing, and long dreadlocks, dances toward her (centerstage). She walks backward, almost running away, as he “pops” at her. Bethea’s hip-hop virtuosity and power position at this moment invoke a dismantling of norms for Campbell’s character and the audience. The rumors that have been previously told to the audience are affirmed; Jackson High School will move and look differently than Truman. Consequently, Campbell will have less power at Jackson.

DeFrantz suggests that hip-hop dances “gain power from their subversive (black) stance outside the moral law of (white) America. The black body in America has long been legislated and controlled by political systems both legal and customary. In social dance, the black body achieves a freedom from traditional American strictures defining legitimate corporeality.”<sup>348</sup> However, for a typical Broadway audience, the choreographed hip-hop maintains an indisputable connection to marginalized groups, informing how they read the bodies doing the movements. In “Do Your Own

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<sup>346</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Valuing Dance: Commodities and Gifts in Motion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 100.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

<sup>348</sup> DeFrantz, 51.

Thing,” the hip-hop indeed functions as an Othering tool. It is not yet free from the strictures; it is not yet a legitimate corporeality, for the juxtaposition between Truman and Jackson is still too palpable.

In the first moments of *Bring it On: the Musical*, the audience heard and witnessed the Truman cheerleading squad’s pronouncement of self before preconceiving any assumptions about their group, the people in the group, and their practice. But, by the time the audience reaches the Jackson hip-hop crew’s first number, they have already signed and accepted the “contract” for the Truman vocabulary; they have received information and judgments regarding Jackson. Nevertheless, I argue that it is with “We Ain’t No Cheerleaders” that the use of hip-hop switches from an Otherizing tool to an articulation of difference and uniqueness. “We Ain’t No Cheerleaders” is a moment for the audience to pause and hear the Jackson hip-hop crew identify themselves and their functions. The number attempts to demystify those conceptions through their lyrics and choreography. In theory, this number allows “hip-hop” to create difference and distinction without Othering, becoming a method of empowerment and character development. However, the hip-hop crew dances little to no hip-hop in this number. Instead, the performing bodies of color, labeled as “hip-hop,” are accompanied by familiar Broadway-style choreography challenging the expectations and stereotypes previously imposed upon the crew. This is the first time in the show that the audience is not confronted with an adventitious movement style.

Another one of Jonathan Burrows’s choreography principles is “familiar movement.” He claims, “Sometimes recognizable movement frees the audience from having to work out what they’re seeing, enough that they notice more important things...Sometimes, however, recognizable movement becomes a subject so strong—for instance the subject ‘contemporary

dance,’ or ‘ballet’—that we don’t notice anything else at all.”<sup>349</sup> Blankenbuehler’s choreographic score for the first thirty-five minutes of the show is relatively unlike anything Broadway audiences are used to seeing. Although he utilizes musical theatre dance throughout, the coalescence of cheerleading with musical theatre and hip-hop with musical theatre is unfamiliar to the majority of the audience. Therefore, they are asked to take in a great deal of information, working out what they are witnessing in the moment. Using primarily musical theatre dance for “We Ain’t No Cheerleaders” offers the audience a moment to breathe and not have to process the movement, but rather process the ideas surrounding the movement. Blankenbuehler’s use of musical theatre dance creates distance between the bodies of the hip-hop crew members and the implications concerning hip-hop as being rough and less congenial. Broadening the hip-hop crew’s movement vocabulary unseats such misconceptions by reframing the dancing bodies as having the capacity to adapt to different environments or situations.

As suggested in the lyrics highlighted above, the number “We Ain’t No Cheerleaders” is instantly juxtaposed to “What I Was Born to Do” in the first line. It proposes the idea that, even though there is an audience when the group performs, they dance for themselves rather than for the applause. When it is suggested that they are a squad (a term used to classify the group of White cheerleaders at Truman High School), they are quick to establish a new vocabulary, calling themselves a crew and insisting that they do not “rah-rah, sis boom bah.” The notion of class is then brought up when the members of the dance crew call out the fact that they have to work for everything they have—suggesting that even their life outside of the dance crew is more of an uphill battle than the White cheerleader from Truman High School to whom they are singing. The characters performing this number are people of color connecting ideas of race and class. Both of

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<sup>349</sup> Burrows, 32.

these socially inscribed labels of identity are also potentially illuminated in the dialect suggested through the lyrics. So, what of the choreography and its relationship to the ensemble bodies?

A majority of the song is sung-through as the characters walk around the stage. There are pockets of dance movements that never exceed an “eight-count” in length. Any movements enacted are done so by ensemble bodies of color. None of the White-ensemble bodies are onstage at this moment.<sup>350</sup> The dance movements are all relatively subtle: a few body rolls and gentle arm accents. Individuals within this small group have an opportunity to “show off” their dance skills as members of the hip-hop crew. As Danielle sings, “Now would a cheerleader do this?” an individual ensemble member executes a series of three or four movements, all of which add up to, at the most, “jazz-funk,” not hip-hop.<sup>351</sup> For example, the first ensemble member windmill’s her arms from right to left, extends her right leg in a slow battement, and ends with a chaîné toward upstage.<sup>352</sup> Then, when Danielle sings, “Now would a cheerleader do that?” a second member executes a few undefined arm sways and a grand plié.<sup>353</sup> None of the movements in this number are particularly noteworthy. Still, in the moment, the audience hears that these bodies are a hip-hop crew while visually receiving and digesting movement they recognize.

Despite the relatively unexciting number, in comparison to the awe-inspiring cheerleading stunts of “What I Was Born to Do” and the thought-provoking hip-hop of “Do Your Own Thing,” “We Ain’t No Cheerleaders” produces a dissonance between hearing lyrics about hard work, skill, and nonconformance while witnessing graceful, mellow, and Euro-centered movement. Such

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<sup>350</sup> It is noteworthy that the understudy for the character La Cienga, included in this group of dancers, was White for the Broadway show. However, La Cienga’s position as a transgender character keeps her in a marginalized status.

<sup>351</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 36.

<sup>352</sup> **Battement:** one leg extends to the front, side, or back of the body.

<sup>353</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 36.

dissonance subverts the hip-hop of “Do Your Own Thing” in order to reclaim the label and resituate the genre from the perspective of the crew rather than from the perspective of the ignorant squad. Even though the number did not actually produce much hip-hop, the audience was able to adjust their perceptions of Jackson High School and the hip-hop crew, ultimately allowing for the return of hip-hop in “Friday Night.” However, this time the bodies are not cast in a negative light; instead, they are seen as showcasing versatility, expressing ambition, and celebrating difference.

To transition into “Friday Night,” the male ensemble bodies shift the physical scenery on stage, weaving in moments of hip-hop-based isolations. It is essential to point out that for this number, I will be using “male ensemble bodies” to mean “male scripted ensemble bodies.” For this number only, a few of the professional female cheerleaders featured as flyers in stunts during the Truman High School numbers are hidden behind baggy clothing and hats, labeled as one of the “guys” in the scene, presumably to continue to the narrative of difference between Truman and Jackson without any hesitation. As the guys wait for the ladies of the crew to perform, several of the male ensemble members gesture as if they are straightening their “tie” with both hands accompanied by a slight head bobble. Others shrug their shoulders and “adjust” their “jackets” with the slight tug of a hand. They unite in a lunge forward onto one leg and thrust their hips forward and back on the lyrics, “We’re waiting for the ladies / On Friday night.”<sup>354</sup> Next, they square up to a partner locking in a handshake before breaking into individualized sequences. The scene builds as more and more male ensemble bodies enter the space and eventually all meet in a synchronous moment by the third “A’ Get Your Hands Up!” as they rock in a deep second position, backs to the audience, between hands up overhead pointing stage left and hands down at the lap.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 44.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

Introducing the hip-hop crew through the lens of the enlivened male ensemble bodies sets up two key elements that will become important to understanding Jackson High's social dynamics: gender and sexuality. On a fundamental level, using language in the lyrics such as "ladies" and "girl" imprints the female gender onto the bodies of the hip-hop crew. Additionally, yelling "That's my girl in the middle of the crowd!" while enacting pelvic isolations conspicuously dictates a sexual connotation for the audience.<sup>356</sup> This overt use of gender labels in sexualizing the hip-hop crew is of particular note when considering prominent crew member La Cienega.

La Cienega is a female-identifying transgender character originally played by Gregory Haney. In an interview for *Broadway Backstory* book writer Jeff Whitty said this:

The goal for me, from the very beginning was, I am going to put a trans character onstage, and then I am never going to talk about it the whole show. It is never going to be a discussion. There will never be that moment of after school special tears...just really, really make her absolutely the queen bee...La Cienega very often is the...one who is the voice of practicality...I object very strongly, saying that a trans character is *magical*...It's the equivalent of an archetype that people of color refer to the 'magical Negro' who is always coming in and sort of making white people's lives better. I didn't want to do that with a trans character either.<sup>357</sup>

Gregory Haney, himself, said this to *Broadway Backstory*, "I wanted her to be the powerful woman who walked in the room, and everybody had to look at her."<sup>358</sup> As hip-hop was used early in the show as a signifier of Other, and La Cienega is one of the hip-hop crew's principal members, she initially takes on this label of Other. Nonetheless, all of the characters in the show warmly accept La Cienega. Her identity has been well navigated far before the audience becomes involved in this moment of their lives. Seeing this moment through the male ensemble as they sexualize and fawn over the ladies of the crew assures the narrative of La Cienega's integration and embracement in

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

<sup>357</sup> Hinds, "Episode 14: *Bring it On: the Musical*."

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

their world is understood by the audience. Correspondingly, the hip-hop-based choreography score for all of the ensemble bodies (crew and non-crew, male and female scripted) during “Friday Night” now gestures towards more than racial acceptance, but also acceptance of gender identity—though there remains a distinct divide between male and female roles.

By choreographing only male scripted ensemble bodies in the crowd, a male gaze is produced, guiding the audience to read the female-identifying bodies in a sexualized way. Laura Mulvey’s now-classic essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” coining the term “male gaze” has been appropriated to other disciplines such as dance. She writes, “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.”<sup>359</sup> It is obvious that if someone is performing, the objective is to be seen. Even so, this Friday night performance of the hip-hop dance crew is curated for the audience through how the male ensemble sees it. Mulvey elaborates, “As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist...” (during the introduction of “Friday Night” the male ensemble is the main voice advocating for the watching of the ladies) “...he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate...” (“That’s my girl”) “...so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look...” (pelvic-thrusting and pointing as the ladies enter the space) “...both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.”<sup>360</sup> She continues, “The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action.”<sup>361</sup> The male ensemble set up the physical stage environment, dictating where the female

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<sup>359</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Media and Cultural Studies KeyWorks*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 346.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.



bodies will go when they enter the space. They provided themselves with risers on which they can sit or stand and look down upon the girls from their position of power.

In a way, there is still a process of Othering occurring during the choreography of “Friday Night,” males Othering the females. Juxtaposing the male/female ensemble bodies in this way establishes a narrative regarding an explicit gender dynamic within Jackson High School. Remember, in Truman High School, there were indeed male cheerleaders. While they, too, sexualized the female cheerleaders, they were on the squad together. There was a dampening of an us versus them mentality. Nevertheless, the incredibly specific gendered scripts within the form of cheerleading maintain a collocation. By establishing an assumed status quo of gender-based roles for the first half of the production, even if La Cienega is wholeheartedly accepted as female-identifying transgender student, when these rules become broken by the end of the show, the reparative nuance is received more strongly.

The crew, wearing tight leggings and shiny jackets, enters the space from the upstage left diagonal, an entrance Blankenbuehler asserts suggests “a child’s perspective on life.”<sup>362</sup> Choreographing their entrance from a location that is symbolic of naivety amplifies the power of the male bodies who hold more prominent stage positions. As they enter, they sing, “I know you came here just to see me tonight, / So what are you waiting for.”<sup>363</sup> The crew performs a hip-hop-based dance sequence to an electronic music sound. Half of their sequence is choreographed with their backs to the audience. At one point, two ensemble males actually step between the crew

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<sup>362</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler, interview with Gillian Pensavalle, “Episode 218,” *The Hamilcast*. Podcast audio, May 4, 2020. <https://www.thehamilcast.com/andy-blankenbuehler/>.

This will be further discussed in Chapter Four.

<sup>363</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 45.

dancers and the audience, taking a squat to watch the backs of the dancing ladies from a lower angle.

During the next section, Cameron sings: “Yo, hip-hop is our national pastime, / tick-tock, now it’s ‘shakin’ that ass’ time. / All a y’all are wishin’ that ya lady was that fine-- / The little lady in the middle, yeah, that’s mine!”<sup>364</sup> At this point, Danielle is on one of the risers, back to the audience, surrounded by the male ensemble and the crew. Twig steps in with lyrics that announce his lust for the character Bridget, who has switched places with Danielle. Twig’s sexualization of Bridget is also remarkable here. At Truman High School, she was subjugated as the mascot. Her curvy figure and quirky personality caused her to be cast aside by the cheerleaders and marked undesirable. Now, at Jackson High School, she is being welcomed and championed by the hip-hop crew and its fans.

Another dance break erupts; this time, the girls are all in a line, fluidly moving their arms and rolling their bodies through various positions. Danielle steps out of the line to introduce Jackson High School’s mascot, “Lucky McClover.” Earlier in the show, Campbell reveals to Danielle that she felt lost without cheerleading until she learned about the crew. Danielle decides that for Campbell to join, she must prove her worth by performing in the Leprechaun suit “from the old days when Jackson was an Irish neighborhood.”<sup>365</sup> Campbell enters the dance break wearing the Leprechaun suit. She begins dancing solo, and eventually, the crew circles around her

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<sup>364</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 45.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 42.

It is noteworthy that the Truman High School’s mascot is a parrot, a symbol of high class and nobility. Jackson High School’s mascot is the Irish. The notion that a formally Irish neighborhood is now home to impoverished people of color is significant. Additionally, the very idea that the non-White school’s namesake, Andrew Jackson, historically owned slaves and the students at the school are hailed as “the Irish” adds an additional layer of complicated racial performativity within the text. In the original *Bring it On* film there was also a hint toward such Irishness as the inner-city school was the East Compton Clovers.

and starts mirroring her dance moves. This staged improvised dance battle is reminiscent of early hip-hop dance crews:

Dancing became a hobby that was practiced all night. Fierce competitions came to define these events; their leaders encouraged dance competitions between members of various crews and posses as acceptable means of establishing a group's reputation.

Winning these competitions became another way of dueling between rival gangs. Rivalries between crews, as groups of dancers came to be known, were handled in 'battles,' [...] The battles became a foundational element of hip hop as the competitive element replaced gang violence with an emphasis on talent, expressiveness, and strategic moves as battle tactics.<sup>366</sup>

This staged battle allows for unique breakout moments for each member of the hip-hop dance crew and even some of the male ensemble members who attempt to jump in before being pushed out by crew members. Voyeurs on the periphery encourage dancers in the battle by pumping their fists and shouting, "Move!"<sup>367</sup> This "Move!" is an echo of the opening of "Do Your Own Thing!" However, like the hip-hop in "Do Your Own Thing," it was initially used as an aggressive distancing tool. Now, it is used as encouragement. The movements throughout the number are enthusiastically celebrated as Campbell becomes accepted into the group.

The music slows into a time-stop moment where Danielle vocally admires Campbell-the-Leprechaun's dancing. She sings, "Look at this little rich white girl turnin' it out, / Wow, I can't be mad at that."<sup>368</sup> During her lyrics, the rest of the hip-hop crew is lined up diagonally behind Campbell, mirroring her dance moves. As I have previously argued, this switch to synchronistic movement suggests acceptance and embracement.

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<sup>366</sup> Rajakumar, xxiii-xxix.

<sup>367</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 45.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 47.

When the music shifts back into “live” time, the girls all sing, “I know you came here just to see me tonight, / So what are you waiting for?”<sup>369</sup> At this moment, each hip-hop crew member is paired up with a different male ensemble member. Campbell and Danielle are paired. They all stand in pause. Remembering that pauses indicate significant moments, Blankenbuehler is signaling that much of the ensemble's objective was rooted in the sexualized exhibitions. Moreover, this pause allows the audience to see the gendered pairs in contrast to Campbell and Danielle, who had other objectives for the evening. Danielle wanted to see what Campbell had to offer. Campbell wanted to prove herself. During this battle, Campbell competed to be included by this group, using their movement genre—to the best of her ability anyway. In the dialogue following the number, Danielle expresses her surprise in and acceptance of Campbell. She remarks, “This crew is a family. So welcome to our family.”<sup>370</sup>

#### **4.5 “It’s All Happening”—Jackson High School: Turning a “Crew” into a “Squad”**

When Campbell becomes desperate to take down her nemesis Eva and her formerly beloved Truman High School cheerleading squad, she lies to Danielle and her peers at Jackson, convincing them to create a cheerleading squad, abandon their label as a hip-hop dance crew, and compete at the Varsity Nationals Competition. Reacting to Campbell’s suggestion, Danielle immediately responds with, “You know what this reminds me of? Those movies, you know what I’m saying, where the white dude or white lady makes a trip to the scary ‘inner city’ and, you

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 50.

know, fixes dem colored folks right up!”<sup>371</sup> Campbell ironically assures her that is not the case. Desperate for a positive outcome, she lies to Danielle, saying the winner would get a twelve-part reality series on MTV, and each squad member would receive a scholarship to the college of their choice. Previously in the show, Campbell encounters Danielle working at a fast-food restaurant where she learns Danielle is saving up money for college. Capitalizing on Danielle’s vulnerabilities, the lie works, and the crew begins recruiting boys to join their new squad. The number “It’s All Happening” tracks the evolution of this journey, blending hip-hop and cheerleading along the way. Though the use of hip-hop dance is perhaps less explicit than it is in “Do Your Own Thing” or “Friday Night,” the Blankenbuehlerized hip-hop does remain the prominent vocabulary. He further blends movement aesthetics to aid in the transition between hip-hop crew and cheerleading squad. Hip-hop continues to act as a frame of difference, but the heightened hybridity of pedestrian movement, hip-hop, musical theatre dance, and cheerleading begins to assimilate the embodied Jackson vocabulary into a more Truman-centered movement vocabulary.

Blankenbuehler’s choreography for “It’s All Happening” renegotiates ideas of who can be a cheerleader in terms of race, class, and gender. He gradually begins to integrate the ensemble bodies dismantling previous structures used to frame Jackson as non-cheerleader. The virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies of color, previously masked in the Truman numbers, start unveiling and activating their skill; they are no longer *just* ensemble bodies functioning as students of Jackson. The White virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies, previously masked in the Jackson numbers, are inserted to point to an acquiring of cheerleading as a Jackson vocabulary. Nevertheless, their moments are brief and far more reduced than their performance for Truman.

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 63.

To ensure that the audience's comprehension of Jackson High School's demographic remains intact, the dancing ensemble bodies of color still maintain prominence as the lens for the number over White ensemble bodies. To deconstruct the notion that belonging to a movement-based performance group at Jackson was reserved for female-identifying characters, the plot of the number and Blankenbuehler's corresponding choreography integrates male and female ensemble bodies. Commingling the varied categories of ensemble bodies further propels the reparative process.

To understand the complexities of how gender plays a role in the reparative nuances of the now cheerleading Jackson High School, it is necessary to contextualize competitive cheerleading. Throughout the 1990s, the rise of what is called "all-star cheerleading" (an extracurricular activity unrelated to a school system) shifted the practice from being "a primarily female, sideline activity to a more gender-mixed, athletic, competitive activity."<sup>372</sup> All-star cheerleading is purely competitive. It does not involve cheering for other sports; it *is* the sport. For two minutes and thirty seconds, the athletes take the mat and perform intricate, arduous stunts, Olympic level tumbling, jumps, and synchronized movement segments. There is little to no "cheer leading" actually involved. As all-star cheerleading progressed, the difficulty of stunts and tumbling also increased. Stunts went from a simple, three people lifting one person off of the ground and only onto their knees to four people lifting one person standing in their hands, arms fully extended, to three people lifting one person standing on one foot in their hands stretching their leg out in an arabesque, all the way to one person lifting one person on one foot doing a heel stretch, and more. Colleges are even allowed to lift one person who then lifts another person (three people high). This evolution called for an increase in strength and lifting power; one could say an increase in "manpower."

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<sup>372</sup> Grindstaff and West, "Cheerleading and Gender Politics," 501.

Now, more often than not, co-ed partner stunts, as they are called (one person lifting one person), are done by a male-female pair. Today, all-star and college cheerleading typically utilize male athletes as their primary lifters. These male athletes also often have the ability to throw powerful tumbling passes, often completing more “flips” than the female athletes, though not always. High school cheerleading squads also have a prominent competition component. As all-star cheerleading evolved to be more and more demanding, high school cheerleading attempted to keep up. However, high school cheerleaders are still also responsible for supporting the other sports teams at their school.

But rarely do you see male cheerleaders in school settings where their primary job is to support a sports team and pump up a crowd on the sidelines. According to interviews conducted by Grindstaff and West, “Male cheerleaders communicated discomfort with their sideline role in the way they acted during games, holding back from yelling and expressing less enthusiasm than their female teammates.”<sup>373</sup> In an interview with cheerleaders at Delta State University in Mississippi, one male cheerleader reported, “...guys hate cheerleading. We hate going to games and standing there and doing motions or yelling. We just want to put the girls up [in stunts].”<sup>374</sup> This sentiment rang true through several of their reports. What is notable about the male cheerleaders’ feelings in this study is that their distaste for cheer leading is supported by coaches and choreographers. Male cheerleaders are choreographed in routines to have fewer dance or cheer-based roles—definitely no pompoms. They also receive very different feedback in practice than their female counterparts. Reminiscent of the *Cheer* documentary mentioned earlier, the

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 508

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

female cheerleaders are expected to be peppy, bubbly, energetic, and smiley, while the male cheerleaders are expected to lift them.

The majority of the Act II opening number “It’s All Happening” centers around recruitment for the new squad, specifically finding “the very best boys.”<sup>375</sup> After all, they will be unable to win if they cannot perform exceedingly athletic stunts, and for that, they need “manpower.” Danielle sings, “They gotta be strong and they gotta be fine.”<sup>376</sup> The first quarter of the song follows Danielle, Nautica, La Cienega, Campbell, and Bridget assembling their new roster. All of the male ensemble members keep turning them down or avoiding them. Leading up to asking Twig, the ladies only employ quotidian movements—staying within realist conventions of interacting with people. The irony is not lost on the fact that Twig is the name given to the smallest male character who would unquestionably have a more difficult time acting as a base in a cheerleading stunt. Still, the ladies are desperate, and perhaps he could persuade some of his male friends to join. Two ensemble ladies walk downstage of Twig. Heightening their persuasive techniques, they turn their backs to the audience, place a hand on each of his shoulders, bend forward slightly, sway their hips, and then body roll toward him. La Cienega is behind Twig, mirroring the two female dancing ensemble bodies. Expressing his avidity for this proposition, and arguably for the enhanced sensuous attention he is receiving, Twig sings:

What are y’all, scared?  
Ya think cheerin’ is feminine?  
Then I’m a feminist swimmin’-in-women gentleman!  
Consider it, it’s a little different isn’t it?  
Your thinking is limited give it a minute envision it—  
Dead in the middle of seventy women on television,  
Every little bit of precision is magnificent!<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 64.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 66.



By highlighting the potential to be surrounded by skilled women on television captures the attention of other guys. Twig's perspective seemingly shuts down the preconceived notion that cheerleading is feminine due to its libidinous prospects, successfully enticing other males to join. Although his sentiments perpetuate the sexualization of the female body, he succeeds in disrupting the Jackson gender divide status quo.

As Twig sings, the male ensemble members onstage watch the female ensemble members walk away from him. They look at Twig on the beat after "feminine" then pivot their body toward him on the accented beat after "gentleman." A few male ensemble members jump toward Twig from stage right. Now in a clump stage right slightly behind Twig, they are opposite a group of female ensemble members who have gathered stage left. On the word "magnificent," (White) professional cheerleading ensemble member Courtney Corbeille is revealed through a quick twist up, show and go—she is lifted by two of the male members of this clump. Blankenbuehler surrounds Corbeille with diverse male ensemble bodies as she is brought back to the ground prompting the audience to understand her allure from their perspective. Then, Corbeille does a round-off, back handspring toward stage left and joins the group of female ensemble members. The guys watch her virtuosity with wonderment and desire.

For much of this number, the women are scripted as incentives for the males if they join the squad. By subverting the male's proclivity for objectification, the female ensemble bodies seemingly lure them by activating their performance skills, both cheerleading and dance. Since the nineteenth century, the desire for embodied virtuosity set high expectations for those engaging in any physical practice. Such expectations implemented a body that would be bound to such promise of skilled performance for spectators. Susan Leigh Foster argues, "If the physical demands of virtuosity leached from the body any connection to a signifying sociability, they did not

desexualize it. Rather, the objectification of the body accomplished in these physical regimens rendered it a more neutral and compartmentalized receptacle for an abundance of sexual connotations.”<sup>378</sup> The very form of cheerleading is a prime example of this relationship between the physical body, virtuosity, and sexualization. If the lyrics are not intelligible enough for the audience, it is abundantly clear through the ensemble blocking and choreography that this group of guys are interested in cheerleading solely because of the prospect of being surrounded by women.

Slowly, as more ensemble bodies saunter onto the stage, the lockers set center stage separate to reveal male ensemble members individually pop and locking to the music's beat, inferring that the ladies are starting to affect and reel in the men. Soon, four male ensemble members, spread out in different locations, are completing synchronous hip-hop isolations with Nautica. Following the isolations, almost everyone onstage begins to do a variation of the running man bounce groove, hopping back and forth between the feet as if running in place. This gentle build-up narrativizes their growing squad. However, the use of hip-hop-based movement throughout this number frames the ensemble bodies of Jackson as lacking in the fluency of cheerleading vocabulary, perpetuating their dissimilitude.

Cameron makes his way downstage center. A small group of four female company members walk past him, pause, and continue to upstage right. Then, a small group of male and female-identifying company members cross to him from stage right before pivoting and returning to the location from which they came. It is as if they were still trying to convince him to join, but he declined. Through these groups, the audience sees the increasing pressure being placed on

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6. <sup>378</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Corporealities: Dancing, Knowledge, Culture, Power* (London: Routledge, 1996),

Cameron. Finally, he is approached from upstage left by eight male ensemble members, led by Campbell. Using a “Wikipedia Article” that claims Michael Jordan was a cheerleader as a last-ditch effort, they send him into an existential dream about becoming a professional basketball player. The stage lights go dark as the company flees the stage leaving Cameron alone.

Musically, the rhythm shifts from a metronomically regular beat to a syncopated beat that emulates the sound of basketballs bouncing. The lights come up for the downstage space, leaving upstage dark. Male ensemble members line up behind Cameron and execute hip-hop-like dance movements that pantomimically signal playing basketball. The male hip-hopping ensemble bodies speak to Cameron’s resistance. Accompanying his lyrics, the “Guy Backups” yell, “RRRRRAH! RRRRRRAH! SIS BOOM!”<sup>379</sup> This echoes “We Ain’t No Cheerleaders” and Danielle’s line, “...don’t you ever call us/ Rah rah, sis boom bah.”<sup>380</sup> Cameron sings, “...pop & lock till we bop to the top.../ (Ladies), Bring it on if ya love hip hop! / (And me), I’ll grab ya when ya flip and drop!”<sup>381</sup> On the word “Top,” he turns to face upstage and points to the air space above upstage center (still unlit). Simultaneously, (White) professional cheerleader Lauren Whitt is thrown into a twist basket toss, coming into the light where Cameron is pointing. The inclusion of a virtuosic cheerleading moment here signals Cameron’s acceptance of joining the squad.

Accordingly, the music shifts back to the pop sound and co-ed pairings form around the stage. The company completes a few small arm-focused dance movements together, fostering a sense of unity between the once separate Jackson males and Jackson female-identifying students. During a moment of celebration, Michael Naone-Carter, who identifies as “a Hawaiian Polynesian

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<sup>379</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 69.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 69-70.

performer and self-taught tumbler,” completes a back tuck downstage left.<sup>382</sup> He is the first non-White performer to be featured executing a virtuosic cheerleading moment. Following a moment of pause between Danielle and Campbell, the company clumps together in a “V” formation reminiscent of a standard formation used in cheerleading competitions, with Danielle at the point. They all pledge their commitment to this new adventure in a canon of hand raising.

Quickly, the company spreads back out across the stage, this time all taking individual spots around the space. Each member has a downlight spotting their body and space they occupy; no *body* is hidden from view. Danielle and Campbell sing, “We can leave behind the world we,” and the company joins in singing “know.”<sup>383</sup> On “know,” the company jumps to second position with arms and palms spread at either side—an active presentation of Blankenbuehler’s belief that second position is a stance for believing in something.<sup>384</sup> The diversity of bodies onstage, in terms of race and gender, synchronously energizing this moment illuminates the optimism towards change and possibility.

For the 2013 Tony Awards, the staging of this moment diverts from its original choreographic score. In this iteration, to accentuate Campbell and Danielle’s point, Whitt and Corbeille are put up into half stunts upstage right and left, respectively. Although these White virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies are once again focal points of the stage picture, the stillness of the entire company potentially allows the audience to see everything on stage, rather than quickly receiving flashes of moments. However, it is still noteworthy that no virtuosic female cheerleading body of color is featured. Activating a higher level of cheerleading for the Tony

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<sup>382</sup> “Bring it On: the Musical” Program.

<sup>383</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 71.

<sup>384</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler and Sarah L. Kaufman, “Fresh Steps,” Symphony Space and Words on Dance, New York City, NY, October 21, 2019.

Awards performance illuminates a desire to enchant audience members, many of whom belong to the White middle-to-upper class. Adding this element and suppressing the hip-hop changes the idealist view being expressed by the company. Now, even though the new Jackson High School squad says they can leave behind the world they know, a world that privileges White cheerleaders, the inherent Whiteness of cheerleading is seemingly still inescapable. Even though Bethea and Naone-Carter are virtuosic cheerleading bodies of color and are indeed bases for these stunts, they are not explicitly positioned as focal points. For the Tony Awards, featuring one more virtuosic cheerleading stunt follows to place a spectacular exclamation point on the number.

For the original production choreography, the company's diversity is on full display as they complete a series of synchronous hip-hop-enhanced movements. No cheerleading movements have been included in this score. Before the final button of this number, each row of bodies steps uniquely dances toward the front of the stage before circling back upstage, allowing the next row to come forward. The featured virtuosic cheerleading bodies who were flyers for Truman are now both quickly introduced with a star-like lift—the flyers are laying on their sides with their body spread out like a star as two male ensemble members each lift them over their heads, making a half-turn toward upstage before bringing them back to the ground. Once again, this is a hint at cheerleading, but it is not a formal cheerleading move. Blankenbuehler does use the White virtuosic cheerleading bodies, Whitt and Corbeille, but the combination of a fast pace move, costumes that cover their arms and legs, and the turning of their bodies so that their backs are to the audience distracts away from their Whiteness as a performing convention. The number wraps up with everyone firmly on the ground, walking into a straight line along the edge of the stage apron, followed by a blackout.

Although “It’s All Happening” resists employing formal virtuosic cheerleading, its subtle integration alongside quotidian blocking and Blankenbuehlerized hip-hop dance begins the process of re-situating Jackson High School’s relationship to the form. The music switches to a more pop-centered sonic scape, but the choreographic score resists fully submitting to a Truman-style way of moving. Blankenbuehler’s blending of movement styles preserves the Jackson High School embodied identity while also forwarding their cheerleading-novice positionality. Coalescing the ensemble bodies disrupts the strict divide between male and female performers at Jackson as well as ignites the potential for the success of cheerleading bodies of color within the narrative. Ultimately Campbell’s naïve plan to deceive the students of Jackson crumbles. Be that as it may, in favor of a happy ending, the students forgive her and agree to compete at the Varsity Nationals Cheerleading Competition anyway. Prioritizing uniqueness, diversity, and resistance to majoritarian scripts, the Jackson squad chooses to put their own spin on their cheerleading routine.

#### **4.6 Welcome to Varsity Nationals: Cheerleading versus Hip-Hop**

The climax of *Bring it On: the Musical* is, of course, the Varsity National Cheerleading Competition. Antwan Bethea reflected on the accuracy of the staged competition in the production:

As far as depicting the progression of a cheer season (Tryouts, Summer Camp, Regional Competition, then Nationals) and depicting the importance and the weight of those events to the cheer world, *Bring It On: the Musical* was fairly accurate. Even down to the attitudes and demeanors of specific personalities because of how important perfecting the routine is. It can be quite obsessive at times, but that’s the nature of a competitor and a champion. Andy visited one of these national championship competitions to observe athletes behind the scenes and in action. He wanted to deliver that same drive and intensity of a squad who has been practicing week after week all season long, preparing for that very moment. He even used the

same branding throughout the show to perfectly match the actual cheer world; Varsity Brands ® [sic].<sup>385</sup>

Bethea's rumination illuminates Blankenbuehler's desire to produce a sense of verisimilitude beyond the skills needed to actuate the cheerleading. His taking into account attitudes, demeanors, and specific personalities further perpetuates the significance of his meticulous choreography of virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies versus dancing ensemble bodies, White ensemble bodies versus non-White ensemble bodies, and male ensemble bodies versus female ensemble bodies.

In his efforts to stage the competition, undoubtedly with the assistance of Jessica McDermott (Colombo), Blankenbuehler utilizes the rules and regulations of the Varsity National Championship to guide the choreographic scores for both Truman High School and Jackson High School. However, for Jackson High School's routine, "Cross the Line," Blankenbuehler deconstructs such specificities of the form regarding competition regulations, aesthetics, movement vocabulary, race, and gender to support the show's underlying message of embracing unquity and challenging majoritarian scripts. Many of the intricacies of how he broke the competition rules would go unnoticed to an untrained eye. Having said that, Blankenbuehler uses the Truman High School score as a guidepost for creating or even contrasting the Jackson High School score for an unknowledgeable viewer. By dramaturgically placing Truman High School first, the audience is guided to how a routine should look. As a result, when they see Jackson High School's routine, at the very least, it is noticeably dissimilar. In order to successfully stage a national cheerleading competition, Blankenbuehler must employ all of the virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies and carefully craft routines that give or take focus to those bodies accordingly.

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<sup>385</sup> Bethea, interview with Amanda Olmstead.

When Truman High School performs their entire two-minute and fifteen-second routine titled “Legendary,” more virtuosic bodies are needed to stage the squad than were used in “What I Was Born to Do.” In the opening number, all of the ensemble bodies were spread out between cheerleader characters and student characters. The cheerleaders wore uniforms or parts of uniforms, and most of the ensemble who were written as cheerleaders for that scene were professional cheerleading ensemble bodies. Contrarily, the non-White professional cheerleaders were not written as cheerleaders, for it was necessary to conceal their virtuosic cheerleading ensemble body until Jackson gained those skills. For the competition, however, it is all hands on deck. All of the virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies are necessary to legitimize Truman High School as a champion-level squad. Other scripted cheerleaders onstage include two female dancing ensemble members and principal characters Eva, Skylar, Kylar, and Steven.

Clearly delineated uniforms mark the cheerleading ensemble bodies and principal characters as a cohesive unit: matching white athletic sneakers, skirts for the females, pants for the males, and modest tunics. The female cheerleaders are also wearing a matching long sleeve bodysuit under their tunic. By completely matching, unique personal ensemble body characteristics become more muted. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is Antwan Bethea. As he noted in an interview, his dreadlocks make him stand out as “Jackson,” but by pulling his hair back into a ponytail, he becomes “Truman.”<sup>386</sup>

Categorically, “Legendary” follows the format and expectations of a typical high school competition routine. The music for the routine is completely pre-recorded and includes sound effects that punctuate specific movements, such as a toe-touch or a basket toss. The only time the

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid.



performing bodies utter words is when they are doing the short cheer portion of the routine. It begins with the entire squad on the mat, inside the white line, with their heads down, at attention.

When the music starts, the Truman squad begins their first dance sequence. All of the dance in routine implements the highly codified cheerleading movement vocabulary.<sup>387</sup> Admittedly, it is all still Blankenbuehlerized cheerleading, and a few pirouettes and chaîné turns make their way into the dance as well. Nevertheless, these are movements that are repeated throughout and are indicative of the practice of cheerleading. For example, one of the opening movements is a squad toe-touch. Toe-touches traditionally begin with the arms in a “High V,” and as the legs come into the air on either side (toes pointed), the arms cross and swing to the “T” position. The entire squad executing a toe-touch in this codified way helps to blend the non-professional cheerleaders with the virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies.

Blankenbuehler’s positioning of ensemble bodies throughout the Truman cheerleading routine attempts to resolidify the lens juxtaposing Truman and Jackson by once again using the choreography in such a way that draws attention to Whiteness. Beyond the conformity of the uniforms, Bethea and other non-White cheerleading bodies, while actively involved in all things virtuosic for this number, are obscured by several (White) bodies so that they remain out of focus. Moreover, Ann Cooper Albright argues:

Because it carries the intriguing possibility of being both very abstract and very literal, dance can foreground a body’s identity differently. Some contemporary choreography focuses the audience’s attention on the highly kinetic physicality

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<sup>387</sup> Among these movements are:

**High V:** arms straight up in the air making a “V,” hands in fists, thumbs tucked, with palms directed down.

**Low V:** arms straight down by the sides making a “V,” hands in fists, thumbs tucked, with palms angled in.

**T:** arms straight out from the shoulders, hands in fists, thumbs tucked, with palms directed down.

**Table Top or Daggers:** arms bent into the body with elbows pointing down and hands by the shoulders, in fists, thumbs tucked, palms directed inward.

**Left Punch Up:** Right-arm bent, hands in a fist, thumb tucked, on the right hip. Left-arm straight up in the air near the ear, hand in a fist, thumb tucked, palm directed inward.

of dancing bodies, minimizing the cultural differences between dancers by highlighting their common physical technique and ability to complete the often strenuous movement tasks.<sup>388</sup>

Because of the common kinetic exertion by the virtuosic cheerleading bodies, their physical technique and ability take precedence, though Blankenbuehler still employs specific tactics to solidify the lens. Following the group toe-touch, several members of the squad fan out and begin a short cheer-dance sequence. At the same time, a stunt group throws a basket toss upstage center, and two male cheerleaders complete round-off, back layouts from the center to the downstage corners. In the cheer-dance sequence, Melody Mills, a female cheerleading body of color, is located downstage, closest to the audience on the mat. Typically, this would give her more power regarding stage position. However, her dance moves all take place on the floor. This means that everything higher than her actually draws focus; her body is seen in the periphery, but it is only supplemental. Bethea is one of the two tumblers. Arguably this does mark him as a focal point, for he is one of three spectacle-based moments on stage that are different from the dancing cheerleaders. But, as soon as his tumbling pass begins, the eye is drawn vertically to Whitt, who is high in the air from her basket toss. Among the dancers are Steven and Eva, who are center, in front of the basket toss group, performing different dance moves. Whitt, Steven, and Eva are the focal points.

From here, the squad transitions to the next formation, where the two dancing ensemble members and four principals are spread out. The virtuosic cheerleaders complete a standing back tuck. Out of the back tuck, Mills steps forward and, mirrored by another cheerleader, executes a tumbling pass toward stage right. Again, this would draw focus if a group pyramid was not being

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<sup>388</sup> Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference: the Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 3-4.

performed further upstage. The verticality of the stunts, along with their spectacular displays of athleticism and skill, automatically takes over the eye of the viewer. Every awe-inspiring moment features a White virtuosic cheerleading ensemble body, or principal, as the cornerstone of a moment. Frequently, in the event an audience member is not paying attention, a cheerleader on the ground is pointing up to where a girl will be in the air, actively telling them where to look.

The entire “Legendary” routine follows the rules dictated for the Varsity National Cheerleading Competition—aside from a few tumbling passes having to begin outside of the white line simply because the stage space is smaller than what a real mat space would be.<sup>389</sup> None of their stunts are illegal; they stay within the time frame, they use cheer movements, their actual cheer is adequately performed, and their uniforms are picture-perfect. Although they follow the rules of sportsmanship and conduct on the mat, in true *Bring it On* fashion, drama arises in the holding area following their performance. As Eva and Campbell come face to face for the first time in opposing cheerleading uniforms, Eva goes off the rails in a rant, trying to prove how wonderful she is. She sings, “You’re all a bunch of losers! / I’m here to represent! / I’m dazzling! Magnificent! / I am the one percent!”<sup>390</sup> At this point in her rant, she turns to the Jackson squad, who have gathered around to witness her tantrum, and says, “The fact remains: there is no way you can win. In real life—people like you can’t.”<sup>391</sup> Eva’s unambiguous sentiments once again frame the inner-city Jackson High School, particularly the students of color, as Other. As she storms off, everyone stands stunned.

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<sup>389</sup> “UCA School and Open Rec Rules & Regulations,” Universal Cheerleaders Association, UCA High School Cheerleading Championship, 2021, [https://www.varsity.com/uca/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/20-21\\_uca\\_competition\\_schoolrules.pdf](https://www.varsity.com/uca/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/20-21_uca_competition_schoolrules.pdf).

<sup>390</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 109.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

Jackson High School is called to the mat, and Danielle tells the squad, “Today we’re gonna show them who we are, and not by their rules but by ours.”<sup>392</sup> Her provocation is two-fold. On the one hand, it signals a challenge of the rules of cheerleading. On the other hand, it summons a confrontation against majoritarian scripts and assumptions. Their routine “Cross the Line” does both. The Jackson High School squad members include virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies, now in different costumes, dancing ensemble bodies, and the principal characters Campbell, Danielle, Bridget, Nautica, La Cienega, Twig, and Cameron. They work together to subvert and upend the “rules” of cheerleading.

When the number begins, all of the Jackson squad members are located outside of the white line. As the lyrics to “Cross the Line” begin overhead, they slowly step over the white line onto the designated mat space. Their uniforms are hardly a representation of how cheerleading uniforms should look. Immediately breaking the rules, several of the female members are wearing crop tops exposing their midriff.<sup>393</sup> Although this is not explicitly a rule, some of the female members are in pants, going against normative displays of femininity in the sport. Another break from the traditional practice of male athletes being in pants, many of the male Jackson cheerleaders are wearing shorts. Breaking the rules, some are even wearing basketball sneakers, certainly not the traditional white cheer sneaker. The choice to costume the Jackson squad discernibly different from the Truman squad (and typical cheerleading squads in general) elevates the focus on their embodied performance as also being distinct.

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>393</sup> **Uniform Guidelines:** All participant uniforms must cover midriff when standing at attention. Hair for all athletes does not have to be worn the same but must be secured off the face with a simple style that considers all diversities [This is a recent addendum to the rules].  
See “UCA School and Open Rec Rules & Regulations.”

Even as they stand still along the periphery of the mat, the audience is being prepared to witness an unprecedented competition performance.

The first stunt to go up features Danielle in a full extension center stage as Bethea and another male ensemble member tumble across the front of the stage. The second stunt to go up features Mills, who until now has kept up a low profile regarding the display of her cheerleading virtuosity. A third stunt occurs downstage left; this time, they lift Twig—the first male to function as a flyer in the entire show. Each of these stunts challenges the aesthetics of White female cheerleading bodies that have been featured as the standard via the Truman High School scenes and choreographic score. The audience is encouraged to notice the divergence through the amplification of these bodies.

In “Cross the Line,” there is far less tumbling and stunts than during “Legendary.” While those moments certainly exist and are necessary to the number's objective, they complement the narrative of the routine rather than drive it. Priority is placed on the diverse company bodies and how they are navigating this typically unfamiliar space. In contrast to Cooper Albright's thought regarding certain choreography minimizing emphasis on difference, she suggests:

Other dances foreground the social markings of identity on the body, using movement and text to comment on (often subvert) the cultural meanings of those bodily markers. Tracing the layers of kinesthetic, aural, spatial, as well as visual and symbolic meanings in dance can help us to understand the complex interconnectedness of personal experience and cultural representation so critical to contemporary cultural theory. Indeed, much contemporary dance makes visible the movement between these personal and social realities.<sup>394</sup>

Blankenbuehler activates his highly hybrid dance-genre used in “It's All Happening” to foreground the social markings of difference while still promoting a sense of conformity. Despite

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<sup>394</sup> Cooper Albright, 3-4.

none of the movements in “Cross the Line” being from the codified cheerleading vocabulary, the first half of the Jackson routine does use a prerecorded pop song, indicative of a standard cheerleading routine. Halfway through, the squad sings, “Everyone’s gonna stand up and say ‘rewind that!’”<sup>395</sup> The music makes a record scratch noise, and Blankenbuehler implements a stop-time moment where the squad pauses and physically backtracks through the prior few motions. Now, the music switches to a more aggressive hip-hop beat featuring a mash-up of “Do Your Own Thing” and “Friday Night.” Although Blankenbuehler’s hip-hop is undoubtedly “hip-hop-lite,” it still illuminates a complex cultural reality, especially when directly situated against Truman High School. While the label of “cheerleading squad” afforded the students of Jackson High School access to a space that they may not have had otherwise, uplifting more explicit, hip-hop-centered aesthetics further mobilized, even if symbolically, the embodied voices of those from a disenfranchised community.

Throughout the remainder of the number, the dancing ensemble (and principal) bodies sustain their hip-hop choreography even as virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies execute tumbling and stunts around them. Hip-hop frames the dancing bodies so that they continue facilitating this complicated socioeconomic lens. Mills remains one of the featured flyers, bolstering her capacity to function as a tangible representation of the reparation process. One of her stunts, about halfway through, is actually an “illegal” stunt for high school level. High schools are not allowed to go above two and a half high. Meaning, a base can lift a flyer, but the flyer who is lifted cannot lift another flyer—that would be three high and is precisely what occurs. Incorporating this stunt wows the audience as it is perhaps the most intricate of the stunts they have witnessed thus far. Furthermore, it frames Mills’s body as highly virtuosic, on par with the

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<sup>395</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 111.

other White flyers. Mills's ensemble body functions to add nuance that women of color can also perform such arduous maneuvers.

Following the three-high stunt, the entire Jackson squad slowly walks to the front of the mat. As they sing, "We don't need first place, we know how bright we shine," one by one they step over the white line located along the front edge of the mat.<sup>396</sup> Crossing the white line, the metaphor for the entire number, is against the rules.<sup>397</sup> As the diverse bodies line the front of the stage singing in reflection of what the future holds, the audience also receives a moment to absorb the unique individuals that make up the squad. The non-virtuosic company bodies take a few steps backward to make room for the virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies to complete a standing back tuck. The ensemble executes a few cheerleading arm movements before putting Campbell, Mills, Whitt, and Corbeille up in a final group stunt. The remainder of the choreography subversively employs cheerleading movements using hip-hop flourishes to transition between each. Finally using the cheerleading motions, after breaking the rules so that it would be impossible to win, proves that these bodies can indeed *do* this activity, but on their own terms. They defied the majoritarian script in favor of coming together and promoting their individuality.

Backstage after their routine, the Jackson squad encounters members of the Truman squad. Truman member Kylar enthusiastically responds to their performance, "You guys...were like, a clarion call of inspiration for all assembled"<sup>398</sup> Blankenbuehler's contiguity of "Legendary" (Truman High School) and "Cross the Line" (Jackson High School) provided a visceral

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<sup>396</sup> Whitty, Kitt, Miranda, and Green, 112.

<sup>397</sup> **Competition Performance Area:** Boundary for the NHSCC [National High School Cheerleading Championship]--Any team member stepping outside or touching outside the performance area will cause the squad to receive a .5 penalty per occurrence. The white line is considered a warning mark.

See "UCA School and Open Rec Rules & Regulations."

<sup>398</sup> Libretto 114.

confrontation between suburbia and inner-city, White and non-White, majoritarian and minoritarian, and cheerleading and hip-hop. By setting the two in literal competition with one another, the audience was asked to consider the differentiation between the squads. The framing and positioning of the ensemble bodies in relation to one another and with regard to the genre they were performing transitioned the lens by which the audience was to view each routine. In the end, “Cross the Line” challenged how cheerleading routines looked, how cheerleaders dressed, and *who* could be a cheerleader. It generated an optimistically reparative metanarrative regarding the socioeconomic, sociocultural, and sociopolitical future of cheerleading.

#### **4.7 Conclusion: Reparative Cheerleading**

*Bring it On: the Musical* in text, music, and choreography attempts to confront and alter the institution of cheerleading. Blankenbuehler choreographs multivalent ensemble bodies to signal majoritarian assumptions concerning identity. Then, once the majoritarian script is established through the text, music, and/or choreography, he intentionally deconstructs that narrative by repositioning the ensemble bodies in a way that visibly marks the embodied affect of that shift. Hip-hop is originally framed as marking Other—rough and frightening—onto the ensemble bodies of the diverse, inner-city Jackson High School students. Once Campbell meets these individuals, he activates a hybrid dance aesthetic that lessens the harsh preconceptions of the hip-hop crew before revitalizing the hip-hop and the ensemble bodies as expressive, ambitious, and unique. During the Truman High School moments, Blankenbuehler uses White virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies as focal points to carefully mask virtuosic cheerleading ensemble



bodies of color in order to promote the audience's viewing of Truman through the lens of Whiteness. In the final moments of the show, he subverts the form of cheerleading to give agency to the previously suppressed virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies of color and the other squad members of Jackson High School, elevating a rectifying narrative and subtext that cheerleading does not need to be bound to majoritarian presumptions. *Bring it On: the Musical* only ended up running on Broadway for 173 performances. Although it did not necessarily make waves in the larger real-life context of cheerleading, Blankenbuehler's conscientious and meticulous choreography of the ensemble bodies generated an opportunity for an audience to critically reflect on such sociological metanarratives beyond the campy presentation of this idiosyncratic Broadway production.

## 5.0 Who Tells the Story?: Dialectic Activations of the Ensemble Body

When the Battle of Yorktown sequence ended that day, the largely black and Latino cast (singing a song written by a Puerto Rican composer, wearing costumes selected by an African-American designer) climbed on top of boxes and chairs to celebrate having done the impossible. Andy Blankenbuehler would spend the next 16 months trying to recapture how exhilarating the moment felt. It took him until a week before opening night on Broadway to feel that he had succeeded.

—McCarter, *Hamilton: the Revolution*

What began as an improvised, celebratory moment between the cast during a workshop presentation in 2014 would become arguably one of the most powerful moments of choreography in *Hamilton*. At the end of “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down),” the cast is spread equally across the set: standing on boxes, benches, chairs, the stage deck, the stairs, and the second-level balcony. They are all doing just that, standing. As the ensemble, made up of predominantly bodies of color, sings about winning their (the United States of America’s) freedom, the audience sees this triumph in U.S. history through these diverse bodies. This forced perspective illuminates and challenges current civil rights and equality narratives while adding a sense of pride, hope, and optimism. For the four-minute and two-second number filled with athletic, aggressive, sensational dance, the final fifteen seconds of stillness becomes the exclamation point on a compelling and informational piece.

In a 2016 interview, Andy Blankenbuehler recalls, “In many ways, I saw the readings and wondered if I needed to choreograph it. Like, was it better just sitting on a chair and saying the words... We needed to stay out of the way of the words... I always see choreography, but especially with *Hamilton*, as an Impressionistic painting, where the surround of bodies has to inform what

you are supposed to be looking at it.”<sup>399</sup> Reflecting once again on inspiration drawn from art, in his 2019 talk for Words on Dance, he discusses Michelangelo’s *Moses*, “I remember reading a thing about Michelangelo and he said he could not start the carving until he knew the exact instant that he was trying to capture.”<sup>400</sup> When he and his wife went to see *Moses* at San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome, he remembers: “Moses is sitting...with his [left] foot back... And the intense look is because this is the instant before he stands up and changes the world. His leg is like that because...there’s weight on his big toe...The strength of the sculpture is that he knows action is about to happen. So, in that moment, I realized that I have to choreograph in fourth position for the rest of my life. Because characters who take action are the heroes.”<sup>401</sup> Blankenbuehler’s interest in visual art, in particular Impressionism and Michelangelo, has influenced how he conceptualizes the ensemble’s potential affect. He considers the ways in which both choreography and the ensemble can actively translate ideas, feelings, and subtext through the body. Specifically, with *Hamilton*, he choreographs an omnipresent ensemble essential to providing an elevated sense of humanity both inside and outside the historical narrative of Alexander Hamilton.

Leading up to this chapter, I have argued that Andy Blankenbuehler has used individualized choreographic scores to draw attention to, or away from, the ensemble body in order to shape the narrative, characters, and overall meaning for the audience. His choreography for *In the Heights* and *Bring it On: the Musical* have primarily steered away from the synchronous (ballet, jazz, or tap) choreography that has been iconic for large Broadway musical productions. Blankenbuehler has created room for individual characters to live their own unique lives within

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<sup>399</sup>Andy Blankenbuehler, “Building Broadway: Hamilton Choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler,” Broadway.com, June, 6, 2016, YouTube video, 4:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R49vKv8f0Wc>.

<sup>400</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler and Sarah L. Kaufman, “Fresh Steps,” Symphony Space and Words on Dance, New York City, NY, October 21, 2019.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

the ensemble. These individual ensemble bodies generate a comprehensive world for a production while effectuating multiple communication lines (story, mood, emotion, etc.). However, several routes of Blankenhuebler's work coalesce in *Hamilton* when he prioritizes the collective ensemble body to promote a narrative of inclusivity and ubiquity. There are moments throughout the production where the individual ensemble body is perceptible and affective, but these individual ensemble bodies are predominantly converged to form a collective ensemble body. Rather than distinctive individuals on their own journey, living in the world of the play, and sometimes coming together to convey a common idea through their unique voices, the collective ensemble body is a unified entity functioning to communicate an element of the story, a principal character's psychology, unspoken aspect of the libretto, abstract idea, or metaphor. The collective ensemble body, on some level, activates the traditional, generalized group concept of chorus character. Nevertheless, for Blankenhuebler, the individual ensemble body is an element of the collective; depending on the choreography and staging, one or the other takes precedence.

Additionally, Blankenhuebler's hybrid dance style that includes heightened everyday movement, hip-hop, jazz, among other genres, is once again the vocabulary for embodied communication. But, the choreography score implements far more synchronization. While he has always declared that narrative should supersede virtuosity, his choreographic score for *Hamilton* takes this notion to an even higher level as he ceaselessly presents ideas first and dance steps second. He attests to the concept that the ensemble, as both performers and characters, knows how the story of Alexander Hamilton ends; therefore, their omniscient capacity provides them with the knowledge to comment on a moment in a more nuanced manner. Blankenhuebler establishes a dialectical relationship between individual and collective in *Hamilton* that allows the ensemble body to function outside of time, linking the past with the present, opening up the opportunity for

an audience to connect to sociological metanarratives generated from the inherently layered production.

This chapter analyzes the functions and philosophies of the individual and collective ensemble body in the numbers “Alexander Hamilton,” “Helpless,” “Satisfied,” and “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down).” To conduct my analysis, I rely primarily on the film of *Hamilton* released for Disney+ on July 3, 2020.<sup>402</sup> To combat film edits, consider casting changes, or repeatability of moments, I also consider the *Hamilton* performances at the 2016 Annual Tony Awards and the 2016 Grammy Awards that have been uploaded onto YouTube and Vimeo, respectively.<sup>403</sup>

## **5.1 “Together We Can Turn the Tide:” Moving From and Between Individual and Collective Ensemble Body**

In order to investigate *Hamilton*’s collective ensemble body, it is essential to remember the building blocks of the “ensemble body.” Beyond being cast as “ensemble,” the “ensemble body” is that which takes into account the performer’s dramaturgical body as it functions concurrently with the character’s body. For *Hamilton*, the ensemble body is most notably framed through Blankenbuehler’s work, but also through the work of costume designer Paul Tazewell. Because

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<sup>402</sup> *Hamilton*, produced by Walt Disney Pictures, 5000 Broadway Productions, Nevis Productions, Old 320 Sycamore, Radical Media; directed by Thomas Kail written by Lin-Manuel Miranda; distributed by Disney+, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, July 3, 2020, New York, NY.

<sup>403</sup> “70th Annual Tony Awards ‘Hamilton,’” *YouTube*, BroadwayInHD, October 15, 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch/b5VqyCQV1Tg](http://www.youtube.com/watch/b5VqyCQV1Tg).

In, Merl, “[1280x720] Grammys 2016 Watch Lin Manuel Miranda and the Cast of Hamilton Perform - The Verge,” *Vimeo*, March 14, 2018, [vimeo.com/260119105](http://vimeo.com/260119105).

the ensemble is primarily a collective unit and the notion of the unique individual is ancillary, the ensemble body becomes distinguishable in a way different from what we saw with *In the Heights* or *Bring it On: the Musical*. Instead of relying on individualized choreography scores and movement interpretations, discerning the visibility of the ensemble body within the collective begins with Tazewell's creations.

Bridging the gap between past and present, Tazewell chose to have “‘Period from the neck down, modern from the neck up.’...[he] ‘didn’t want Chris [Jackson] to be in a powdered wig as Washington.’...[he] ‘wanted to see him for who he was.’”<sup>404</sup> At the beginning of the show, and for the majority of the production, the collective ensemble is wearing parchment-colored trousers, a matching sleeveless top (that ranges from button-up vests to corsets to waistcoats) and black leather riding boots. Tazewell arguably walks a fine line between period and modern in the costume as a whole. For example, the female ensemble members are also wearing trousers. Although the trousers themselves are period, women wearing pants in the late eighteenth century is not. Similarly, the use of vests or corsets is period-appropriate, but the fact that they are the primary garment used as the top, thus exposing the individual ensemble body's arms, is not. Throughout the production, the ensemble members occasionally layer on other clothing articles to add dimension or identification to their characters, but this will be discussed in further analysis. Contrary to *Heights* and *Bring it On*, where the costumes were vastly different for each character allowing for increased individuality, *Hamilton* utilizes the more or less matching ensemble costume to connect them as a collective visually.

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<sup>404</sup> Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: the Revolution : Being the Complete Libretto of the Broadway Musical, with a True Account of Its Creation, and Concise Remarks on Hip-Hop, the Power of Stories, and the New America*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., ed. Lin-Manuel, Miranda, and Jeremy McCarter (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 113.

Notwithstanding their clothing conformity, everyone in the company has their hair styled to fit their unique, individual contemporary personalities. While Tazewell's use of period clothing garments grounds the production in its historical time, the modern use of those pieces, accompanied by contemporary hair stylings, keeps the performers' bodies in the present.<sup>405</sup> Incorporating the perceptible aspects of the individual ensemble body (skin color, hairstyle, body shape, etc.) as part of the costume allows them to be visually distinguishable from one another. Their dramaturgical bodies, specifically their physical identifiers, are utilized and embraced as unique markers blending performer and character, all the while relinquishing to conceptions of a shared, embodied voice.

Tazewell's costuming quickly establishes the ensemble's unique position as a constant reminder of two distinctive revolutions—past and present. *Hamilton's* fundamental principle challenges the conventionally White historical narrative of the founding of the United States by telling the story of America, then, by America now.<sup>406</sup> The company, made up of predominantly bodies of color, thrusts the show's existential question "who lives, who dies, who tells your story?" into a visceral arena. Jeremy McCarter's introduction to *Hamilton: the Revolution* suggests, "It tells the stories of two revolutions. There's the American Revolution of the eighteenth century, which flares to life in Lin's libretto... There's also the revolution of the show itself: a musical that changes the way that Broadway sounds, that alters who gets to tell the story of our founding fathers, that lets us glimpse the new, more diverse America rushing our way."<sup>407</sup> To tell the story of the American Revolution, the collective ensemble body, wearing hints of eighteenth-century clothing,

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<sup>405</sup> It is important to note that Paul Tazewell is one of just three African American costume designers to be nominated for a Tony Award for Best Costume Design (play or musical). He is the only one to win—for *Hamilton*.

<sup>406</sup> Rob Weinert-Kendt, "Rapping a Revolution," *The New York Times*, February 5, 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/theater/lin-manuel-miranda-and-others-from-hamilton-talk-history.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/theater/lin-manuel-miranda-and-others-from-hamilton-talk-history.html).

<sup>407</sup> McCarter, 10.

functions as slaves, merchants, soldiers, townsfolk, and cabinet members. However, revolutionizing theatrical practices, the noticeably diverse individual ensemble bodies challenge traditional musical chorus aesthetics and functions. They maintain visual, contemporary uniqueness as their ensemble bodies resonate between eighteenth-century U.S. and twenty-first-century U.S., individual and collective.

Beyond Tazwell's costume design, how does ensemble communicate the dialectics between past and present, individual and collective? How does Blankenbuehler's negotiation between the individual ensemble bodies and a collective ensemble affect an audience's comprehension of the material? Blankenbuehler still choreographs individualized ensemble scores throughout *Hamilton*. Even so, he often places the individual ensemble body alongside or in sync with other individual ensemble bodies allowing for multiple lines of communication to exist at once but through a connected embodied voice. This relationship prioritizes the collective ensemble making it more powerful. Both the individual and collective ensemble bodies comment on the historical narrative of Alexander Hamilton's time while also alluding to the social systems of the present. Specifically, according to the very premise of the production, the individual ensemble body can challenge historical narratives that have systematically marginalized non-White bodies. However, the collective ensemble body becomes necessary to achieve such a larger conversation about a diverse society made up of Black, Brown, Latinx, Asian, and White bodies. The bodies onstage cooperatively produce the historical discourse of Alexander Hamilton's life. Concurrently, those bodies are produced by both historical and contemporary cultural discourses of difference.

For example, ensemble member Sasha Hutchings remembered first hearing about *Hamilton* and the idea that a person of color would portray Thomas Jefferson. In an interview for the podcast *The Ensemblist*, she said:



I was like, ‘That doesn’t work. He was a slave owner. He was like terrible.’ And then I saw it, and I was like, ‘Oh! Totally works!’ Because it’s like this thing that’s making you face an ugly truth about how we got here—but in a way that kind of empowers you to feel like you can change it or that there’s hope. It’s a hopeful way of looking at: we’re not our worst selves, we’re not our best selves. We have to deal with all that as people. And that’s one of the things in the show; there’s always this sense of like, not yet. There’s more work to be done. There’s that moment in the show [Hamilton’s] like, ‘We studied, and we fought, and we killed / For the notion of a nation we now get to build.’... We’re still doing that.<sup>408</sup>

She continues reflecting on her experience as a woman of color participating in the ensemble of the show. Remarking on her doubled-ness, her duality of Sasha/ensemble member, Hutchings tells of how she has a responsibility to support the show in whatever way is necessary—sometimes that means being an extension of Burr’s thought process, sometimes that is being a senator, or sometimes that is being herself.<sup>409</sup> She explained, “A lot of times I come on, and yeah, I do enter the show just as Sasha. I like to come on as honest as possible to set the tone of the show because the show requires so much honesty...Just be you...Honesty is more interesting than anything else.”<sup>410</sup> As I will explain later, Hutchings’s proclamation that she moves between characters, ideas, and herself throughout the show creates a multivalent individual ensemble body that is able to live in the 1780s and the 2010s simultaneously. In a similar fashion, her ensemble body is equally a part of the collective ensemble that undertakes an omniscient narrator/participant capacity.

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<sup>408</sup> Sasha Hutchings, interview with Mo Brady, “The History of the Ensemble: Hamilton (Feat. Neil Haskell, Sasha Hutchings),” *The Ensemblist*, podcast audio, July 1, 2020, <http://www.theensmblist.com/podcasts>.

See Lin-Manuel Miranda, “Non-Stop,” in *Hamilton: the Revolution: Being the Complete Libretto of the Broadway Musical, with a True Account of Its Creation, and Concise Remarks on Hip-Hop, the Power of Stories, and the New America*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., ed. Lin-Manuel, Miranda, and Jeremy McCarter (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 142.

<sup>409</sup> Hutchings was one of the original Broadway ensemble cast members of *Hamilton*. This idea of “third girl from the right” comes from a reference she makes about herself in the podcast *The Ensemblist*—it is not necessarily her “role.”

<sup>410</sup> Hutchings, *The Ensemblist*.

It is important to note that not every ensemble member shares this same philosophy. Neil Haskell, for example, reported this to *The Ensemblist*, “I’m not up there playing Neil, but I am playing these characters in their set circumstances, but trying to be as real as possible and not trying to look like a dancer, not trying to look like an actor.”<sup>411</sup> Haskell’s reflection speaks directly to the idea that each ensemble member *owns* their ensemble body. They have the autonomy to make character choices within the show that serve specific moments based on their consciousness. For Haskell, he intellectually and creatively chooses to develop unique, realistic characters that are more separate from his dramaturgical person, but the very notion that his body is present in this space and has a sense of autonomy energizes his ensemble body. When their individual ensemble bodies then move synchronously alongside others, all dressed alike yet different, the choreography generates a unified embodied voice that can be seen—the collective ensemble body—even though the individual body can still be read.

## 5.2 “We Move as One:” Synchronism and Hip-Hop

*Hamilton’s* dualities between historical and contemporary have opened a space for a reflective dialogue within the production regarding society’s development in the United States. Blankenbuehler’s choreographic dualities of heightened everyday movement versus codified dance and asynchronous versus synchronous impact the ways in which the bodies onstage are read and understood. By fluidly engaging these dichotomies, the audience receives layers of information that encourage them to consider the relationship between past and present social

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

convictions. While Blankenhuebler occasionally positions the individual ensemble body as a focal point for critical consideration, it is the collective ensemble body that becomes vital to understanding the resonances of past and present illuminating and elevating metanarratives regarding the position of people of color within the society of the U.S. today. Moreover, the use of hip-hop movement by the collective ensemble body signals to the audience how to view history through a contemporary lens—a lens that amplifies socially/historically disenfranchised bodies, voices, and lived experiences.

Critics of *Hamilton*, such as Harvard professor and historian Annette Gordon Reed have called out the production's avoidances of the topic of slavery concerning the founding fathers portrayed. In an article by Liz Mineo, Reed criticizes the light portrayal of Hamilton as an advocate for freedom and equality for all:

“In the sense of the Ellis Island immigrant narrative, he was not an immigrant,’ she said. ‘He was not pro-immigrant, either.’ [...] ‘He was not an abolitionist,’ [Reed] added. ‘He bought and sold slaves for his in-laws, and opposing slavery was never at the forefront of his agenda.’ [...] The musical simplifies and sanitizes history, said Gordon-Reed. ‘The Hamilton on the stage is more palatable and attractive to modern audiences.’<sup>412</sup>

Many others have similarly criticized the hypocrisy and supposed problematic nature of having bodies of color portray characters who were identifiably White and had a hand in continuing slavery in the U.S. However, critics such as Tracy Clayton have recognized the production's attempt to cross-examine how history is conveyed and disseminated. In a tweet following the release of the production on Disney+, she said, “im late w the hamilton criticism stuff & im clearly biased but.. i really like that this conversation is happening. hamilton the play and the movie were given to us in two different worlds & our willingness to interrogate things in this way feels like a

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<sup>412</sup> Liz Mineo, “Correcting ‘Hamilton,’” *Harvard Gazette*, Harvard Gazette, July 7, 2020, [news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2016/10/correcting-hamilton/](https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2016/10/correcting-hamilton/).

clear sign of change.”<sup>413</sup> The “two different worlds” Clayton alludes to are the 2015 world in which we first were introduced to *Hamilton* at The Public and the 2020 world in which access to the production via Disney+ revived its pervasiveness in society. She continued to acknowledge that the nuance in the show deserves attention, especially now.

In the lead up to the Disney+ release of *Hamilton*, on June 29, 2020, activist and academic Rachel Cargle created a post on Instagram captioned, “Lin-Manuel Miranda reached out to me and we worked together to find parallels between his lyrics and the current times to use as yet another tool to bring attention to realities of what is going on right here and right now.”<sup>414</sup> Cargle compares the news headline “Parents Are Bringing Their Children to Black Lives Matter Plaza For a ‘Once in a Lifetime Experience’”<sup>415</sup> with the lyrics “If we lay a strong enough foundation / We’ll pass it on to you, we’ll give the world to you, / and you’ll blow us all away.”<sup>416</sup> Another comparison she draws is the headline “Confederate Symbols Are Coming Down, Despite Trump’s Ire”<sup>417</sup> with the lyric, “We’ll never be free / until we end slavery!”<sup>418</sup> Cargle’s curation enhances Clayton’s

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<sup>413</sup> Tracy Clayton, (@borkeymcpoverity). 2020. “im late w the hamilton criticism stuff & im clearly biased but.. i really like that this conversation is happening. hamilton the play and the movie were given to us in two different worlds & our willingness to interrogate things in this way feels like a clear sign of change.” Twitter, July 5, 2020 2:32 PM EST. <https://twitter.com/brokeymcpoverity/status/1279845518227787777?lang=en>.

<sup>414</sup> Rachel Cargle, (@rachel.cargle), 2020. Instagram, June 29, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCByOMJnhNq/>.

<sup>415</sup> Daniella Cheslow, “Parents Are Bringing Their Children To Black Lives Matter Plaza For A ‘Once In A Lifetime Experience,’” *DCist*, WAMU 88.5 - American University Radio, June 17, 2020, [dcist.com/story/20/06/11/parents-are-bringing-their-children-to-black-lives-matter-plaza-for-a-once-in-a-lifetime-experience/](https://dcist.com/story/20/06/11/parents-are-bringing-their-children-to-black-lives-matter-plaza-for-a-once-in-a-lifetime-experience/).

<sup>416</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda, “Dear Theodosia,” in *Hamilton: the Revolution: Being the Complete Libretto of the Broadway Musical, with a True Account of Its Creation, and Concise Remarks on Hip-Hop, the Power of Stories, and the New America*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., ed. Lin-Manuel, Miranda, and Jeremy McCarter (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 128.

<sup>417</sup> Abby, Phillip, “Confederate Symbols Are Coming down, despite Donald Trump’s Ire - CNN Video,” *CNN*, Cable News Network, June 12, 2020, [www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2020/06/12/confederate-monument-symbols-military-bases-pkg-phillip-ebob-vpx.cnn](https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2020/06/12/confederate-monument-symbols-military-bases-pkg-phillip-ebob-vpx.cnn).

<sup>418</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda, “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down),” in *Hamilton: the Revolution: Being the Complete Libretto of the Broadway Musical, with a True Account of Its Creation, and Concise Remarks on Hip-Hop, the Power of Stories, and the New America*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., ed. Lin-Manuel, Miranda, and Jeremy McCarter (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 122.

suggestion that the show's nuance needs to be examined to grasp the relationship between past and present. But text analysis is not enough. Lin-Manuel Miranda intended for the story of Alexander Hamilton to be seen, and more importantly, to be seen in this way—through the bodies of people of color. While the principal characters are undoubtedly a driving force for this conversation, I argue it is the collective ensemble representing the (past and present) society affected by these founding fathers' decisions that engenders and bolsters the vital nuance to which Clayton alludes.

Miranda's use of hip-hop music creates dissonance between *Hamilton* and traditional Broadway practices as well as the perception of *Hamilton* as a historical retelling. It helps to open up a dialogic space where it is possible for people of color to portray these traditionally White founding fathers. Contrary to hip-hop's presence in *In the Heights*, it is not used as a cultural product of the people in the world of *Hamilton*. Moreover, counter to *Bring it On: the Musical*, hip-hop is not used as a tool for Othering. Instead, it is used as a common, unifying language. As Miranda and McCarter posit, “[hip-hop] is, at the bottom, the music of ambition, the soundtrack of defiance, whether the force that must be defied is poverty, cops, racism, rival rappers, or all of the above.”<sup>419</sup> Hip-hop—music, dance, and philosophy—allows for the entire company to work together to not only braid itself into the historical narrative of Alexander Hamilton but also the political environment of the United States post-2015. As argued above, the political environ of the United States during the year 2020 is also now a recognizable factor for comprehending the production.

It is perhaps obvious to say that hip-hop music calls for hip-hop dance. As many, including myself, have emphasized, Blankenbuehler's hybrid style of dance in his choreography does indeed

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<sup>419</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton: the Revolution: Being the Complete Libretto of the Broadway Musical, with a True Account of Its Creation, and Concise Remarks on Hip-Hop, the Power of Stories, and the New America*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., ed. Lin-Manuel, Miranda, and Jeremy McCarter (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 22.

include hip-hop. However, thus far, I have argued hip-hop dance prioritizes the individual and is directly tied to the body from which it is performed. How does the genre of hip-hop, then, function for a collective ensemble body? Susan Leigh Foster argues that the original call for hip-hop dance to be performed by crews or in groups established the form as a collective entity with the ability to “[braid] itself into a local geographical and political environs.”<sup>420</sup> For *Hamilton*, Blankenbuehler uses hip-hop dance aesthetics to frame and unite the collective ensemble as a lens by which the audience is to view a production. It functions as an apparatus that further focuses how the ensemble is to be understood in relation to sociopolitical environs at a given moment within the production or in concert with the real world in which the show is being produced. As Foster suggests in *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*, “If the choreography helps viewers to contemplate where they have come from and where they might be going, it serves not so much as a repository of knowledge but as an orienting tool for determining and affirming a system of beliefs.”<sup>421</sup> Choreographing synchronously and collectively danced hip-hop orients a viewer in a more or less contemporary setting with a set of beliefs akin to defiance associated with the past/present *Hamilton* environ. Hip-hop dance’s connection to “the music of ambition [and] the soundtrack of defiance” has equally made it a site for sociopolitical commentary.<sup>422</sup> When danced synchronously, its ties to counterculture and resistance to oppressive forces unite the collective ensemble fighting for past/present revolution(s).

Traditionally, large, synchronized Broadway dance numbers have been directly categorized as pure spectacle, entertainment for entertainment’s sake moments. “Brotherhood of

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<sup>420</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Valuing Dance: Commodities and Gifts in Motion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 100.

<sup>421</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London: Routledge, 2011), 184.

<sup>422</sup> Miranda, *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 22.

Man” (1961), “Turkey Lurkey Time” (1968), “One” (1975), “42<sup>nd</sup> Street” (1980), “Jellicle Ball” (1980), “Anything Goes” (1987), and “Blow High, Blow Low” (2014) are just a few examples of these show-stopping numbers featuring a large chorus of synchronized dance. Reflecting on *Hamilton*, Neil Haskell explains, “When you see an old classic show and the dancers are in the background doing like ‘falap, ball, change, falap, ball, change, jazz hands.’ Ya, know? They don’t really look like people because they aren’t being people. But, when you see a show that makes the dancers more pedestrian and makes them more relatable, that’s kinda cool.”<sup>423</sup> His articulation of the “pedestrian” presence in *Hamilton* is precisely what makes the moments of synchronicity prioritize the ideas and the narrative over virtuosity and showmanship. As Blankenbuehler resists typical musical theatre choreography in preference of a heightened gesture-based score, he humanizes the collective ensemble. When he activates hybrid pedestrian/hip-hop moments, the audience recognizes the human ensemble body taking on an additional mode of communication that is sonorous with a complicated history and sociocultural associations.

Discussing the complex layers of hip-hop, Carla Stalling Huntington posits:

While hip hop dance initially had its texts labeled as rebellious, able to evoke a revolution in regards to socio-economic and racial oppression, it quickly became usurped into reinforcing capitalism, happening quickly with respect to rap music and somewhat more slowly for danced texts. Nevertheless, hip hop dance texts combined the force of emotional and mental understandings of centuries of oppression and articulated bodily phrasing meant to spin capitalism around on its head and shoulders, and popped the locks of power (at least momentarily) so that African Americans knew that they did not have to go along or all get along under the guise of Western power structures.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Neil Haskell, interview with Mo Brady, “The History of the Ensemble: Hamilton (Feat. Neil Haskell, Sasha Hutchings),” *The Ensemblist*, podcast audio, July 1, 2020, <http://www.theensemblist.com/podcasts>.

<sup>424</sup> Carla Stalling Huntington, *Hip Hop Dance: Meanings and Messages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2007), 60.

Huntington points to the codification of hip-hop and its yielding to capitalism as a form for mass consumption; *Hamilton*, in many ways, is no exception. Nonetheless, her point is that the underpinnings of struggle and oppression are still present in the text of hip-hop movements. The hip-hopping individual ensemble body and collective ensemble body in *Hamilton* concretize such narratives of socioeconomic and racial oppression. Their embodied nuance constitutes a conversation regarding slavery and racial injustices in the United States society. The collective ensemble body, made up of diverse individual ensemble bodies, has the potential to reflect the societal presence and thought that moves between the past/present dichotomy. In the analysis below, I illustrate how, although dance can always be argued in terms of spectacle, these notions of emphasizing narrative, nuance, and communication shape the collective ensemble's function as an active force.

### 5.3 “Alexander Hamilton:” Establishing the Omnipresent and Omniscient Ensemble

Lin-Manuel Miranda's inspiration for the musical, Ron Chernow's biography *Alexander Hamilton*, embeds Hamilton's life firmly in the slave culture of Nevis, St. Croix, and the Caribbean.<sup>425</sup> Chapter One, “The Castaways,” gives pause, reflection, and perspective on those enslaved bodies. It may have been easy for a biographer to skip the details that do not readily apply to Alexander Hamilton. But, Chernow's 731-page biography paints an arguably thorough picture of the backdrop of Hamilton's childhood. “It is hard to grasp Hamilton's later politics without contemplating the raw cruelty that he witnessed as a boy and that later deprived him of the

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<sup>425</sup> Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 7-27.



hopefulness so contagious in the American milieu,” writes Chernow.<sup>426</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler transposes this crucial backdrop onto the stage through his choreography for “Alexander Hamilton.” Like the biography, the focus throughout the production is on the character Alexander Hamilton, but the surrounding bodies inform *how* the audience sees him. Without reading Chernow’s biography, the cruelty and hardships that shaped Hamilton live on stage through the ensemble’s bodies and movements from the moment the show begins.

Throughout “Alexander Hamilton,” Blankenbuehler’s choreography incorporates hip-hop dance as a tool to accentuate and translate the underlying events of historical “real life” while implementing contemporary critical inquiry. Heightening reality through hip-hop and gesture allows him to communicate diversity, reflection, and agency due to hip-hop’s resistance to normative social and theatrical practices. In prioritizing the collective ensemble body, he is able to unify different embodied voices and augment subtext and nuance. *Hamilton*’s complex language and music techniques challenge an audience—that has not listened to the soundtrack on repeat—to pay close attention or be left in the dust. If he were to rely on the individual ensemble body, he would be asking the audience to also absorb eleven additional (sub)texts as opposed to one. This request is valid at specific moments, but if it were to be the dominant philosophy, it would potentially be overwhelming, especially during the opening number. Blankenbuehler argues, “The real success of *Hamilton* is that it succeeds on a lot of emotional levels, but you can follow the story even if you miss 35% of the lyrics.”<sup>427</sup> By leaning on the collective ensemble, the story and message can be received beyond the lyric as they traverse between peripheral affect and explicit storytellers. In “Alexander Hamilton,” specifically, the collective ensemble is positioned to

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<sup>426</sup> Chernow, 33.

<sup>427</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler, interview with Gillian Pensavalle, “Episode 217,” *The Hamilcast*. Podcast audio, May 4, 2020. <https://www.thehamilcast.com/andy-blankenbuehler/>.

inaugurate the union of information ahead and implement hip-hop as an embodied text as well as an aural text. The collective hip-hopping ensemble body narrates past/present social struggles while providing an optimistic sense of change and possibility.

As lights go up on Leslie Odom Jr.'s Aaron Burr entering the playing space stage right, the ensemble is positioned around the edges of the stage leaning on walls, posts, etc., snapping to the slow spoken word of the opening number. Anthony Ramos's John Laurens/Philip Hamilton, Daveed Diggs's Marquis de Lafayette/Thomas Jefferson, and Okieriete Onaodowan's Hercules Mulligan/James Madison then enter the space, dressed in fully parchment-colored attire as they play simultaneously both—and neither—character throughout this number. To elaborate, from the beginning to nearly the end of “Alexander Hamilton,” all of the principal characters in the company act as omniscient narrators, privileged to relay the narrative of historical events but not quite characters within the story. For the sake of perspicacity, I will be using the names of the characters these performers will portray with the understanding that they are not yet fully personified. Furthermore, I will be implementing the specific character names as Miranda has scripted them in *Hamilton: the Revolution*.

Following Aaron Burr and John Laurens, Thomas Jefferson sings, “And every day while slaves were being slaughtered and carted / Away across the waves, he struggled and kept his guard up.”<sup>428</sup> After this line in the book *Hamilton: the Revolution*, Miranda adds a footnote to reflect; “At the top of every musical, it’s essential to establish the world. Hamilton’s early life was marked by trauma and a firsthand view of the brutal practices of the slave trade.”<sup>429</sup> Featured on stage are

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<sup>428</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda, “Alexander Hamilton,” in *Hamilton: the Revolution: Being the Complete Libretto of the Broadway Musical, with a True Account of Its Creation, and Concise Remarks on Hip-Hop, the Power of Stories, and the New America*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., ed. Lin-Manuel, Miranda, and Jeremy McCarter (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 16.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

Burr, Laurens, and Jefferson; everyone else is either off stage or in the periphery. It is not until after James Madison sings, “Put a pencil to his temple, connected it to his brain, / And he wrote his first refrain, a testament to his pain,” that the ensemble steps further into the playing space and becomes more prominently involved in the action.<sup>430</sup>

In *The Hamilcast* interview, Blankenbuehler said this about his omnipresent, omniscient ensemble:

I believe, in my head, that this show is told in hindsight [...] the company knows how the show ends [...] and the story is so good that they forget that it’s a story [...] That they have to start living it actively in the present tense... as storytellers, they actually need to become mesmerized by their own story because it’s such an impossible story and a real story that applies to all of us that they live it urgently in the present.<sup>431</sup>

Established as observers at the top of the show, while Hamilton’s story continues to develop, the collective ensemble begins to take on the role of narrator and have an active role in the storytelling, similar to the principal characters. Their method of telling is literal, metaphorical, and abstract. Living outside of time, they help create a layered dialogue regarding past and present. To convey these ideas through dance, Blankenbuehler has developed a concept he calls “The Three Engines:” the intellectual engine, the heart engine, and the gut engine. He posits the idea that stories can affect us in different places at different times, maybe even from more than one place simultaneously. Movement, then, transpires from these engines. By Burr’s lyric, “Well the word got around, they said, / ‘This kid is insane, man,’” the ensemble has moved further toward center.<sup>432</sup> Facing different directions, they slowly lean toward Burr, moving their hand to their ear as if they are listening. Then, they repeat a few shoulder shrugs. Blankenbuehler reflected on this

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<sup>430</sup> Ibid.

<sup>431</sup> Blankenbuehler, “Episode 217,” *The Hamilcast*.

<sup>432</sup> Miranda, “Alexander Hamilton,” *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 16.

moment, saying, “I am receiving word about this kid named Alexander Hamilton, but look how hard my body has to work to reach the word. So, I am hearing it in my chest and my gut at the same time, and I move with it.”<sup>433</sup> Demonstrating the dance movements, he sings, ““Word got around, they said,’ yes he’s cool.... I get the word, and I am cool with it.”<sup>434</sup>

Burr continues, ““Get your education, don’t forget from whence / you came,”” the ensemble moves their hands behind their heads with their elbows wide and parallel to the ground.<sup>435</sup> Blankenbuehler notes, “I think the first step of every show is really important, and I always get conflicted about how to start. So, the very first step of *Hamilton* is very intentional to say that intellect and intellectual accomplishment is what our show is going to be about.”<sup>436</sup> Technically, this movement is not the “first step” because it takes two eight-counts for the ensemble to transition to the location where this gesture begins. Nevertheless, once they are in place, this moment stimulates focus and inaugurates the concept of embodied communication for the production. The movement is initiated from the head, suggesting that this part of the story comes from the body’s intellectual engine. However, it is notable that Blankenbuehler chose, here, not to do a movement one would typically associate with education or knowledge. Instead, he selected a move that resembles someone putting their hands behind their head before an arrest. Intentionally or not, the choice of implementing a socially coded gesture semiotically communicates the impression of surrender to the audience. As the unmistakably racially diverse ensemble bodies hold this gesture, an underlying narrative emerges.

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<sup>433</sup> Blankenbuehler, “Fresh Steps.”

<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

<sup>435</sup> Miranda, “Alexander Hamilton,” *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 16.

<sup>436</sup> Blankenbuehler, “Fresh Steps.”

*Hamilton* was born during the onset of the Black Lives Matter (2013) movement accompanied by the “hands up, don’t shoot” slogan, which followed the deaths of Black American’s Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner. The physical expression of putting one’s hands up in the air became central to the movement’s choreopolitics. André Lepecki argues that the notion of choreopolitics “requires a redistribution and reinvention of bodies, affects, and senses through which one may learn how to move politically, how to invent, activate, seek, or experiment with a movement whose only sense (meaning and direction) is the experimental exercise of freedom.”<sup>437</sup> Dance scholar Anusha Kedhar mused:

By raising their hands in the air, the protesters remind us over and over and over again that all the bodily proof we need of Michael Brown’s innocence is the position of his body when he died. The gesture reminds us that Michael Brown was shot while he was kneeling, with his head down and his arms up. It reminds us that the police violated the code not to shoot when a person’s hands are up. It reminds us that the black body is never presumed innocent moving in white spaces. That space itself is white.

The hands up don’t shoot slogan implores the protestor not only to stand in solidarity with Michael Brown by re-enacting his last movements, but also to *empathize* by embodying his final corporeal act of agency. As a collective gesture, it compels us to take note of and publicly acknowledge the bodily proof of Michael Brown’s innocence.<sup>438</sup>

As the Black Lives Matter protests continued through 2020, the choreopolitics included hands raised in the air, kneeling with hands behind the head, and laying on the ground with hands clasped behind the back. The reclamation of these surrender gestures by protesters generates “movement

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<sup>437</sup> André Lepecki, “Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: Or, the Task of the Dancer,” *TDR: Drama Review* 57, no. 4 (December 1, 2013): 20.

<sup>438</sup> Anusha Kedhar, “‘Hands Up! Don’t Shoot!’: Gesture, Choreography, and Protest in Ferguson,” *The Feminist Wire*, October 6, 2014, [thefeministwire.com/2014/10/protest-in-ferguson](http://thefeministwire.com/2014/10/protest-in-ferguson).

vocabularies—embodied acts of resistance—connect[ing] protesters in ensemble movement akin to that of a company of dancers.”<sup>439</sup>

As Blankenbuehler employs this choreopolitical gesture on the words, “get your education,” we are reminded that many Black and Brown families living in the United States are forced to educate their children on the harsh realities of racial bias in our police system.<sup>440</sup> These bodies are disproportionately affected by extreme police action. The re-reading of *Hamilton* upon its release on Disney+ was in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement’s resurgence following the killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, giving this moment the potential to become even more palpable as an embodied act of resistance.

If we diegetically connect this kinesthetic sign of surrender with the choreography, a subtext of past/present struggle and oppression emerges. After the pause with their hands behind their head, the ensemble pulses downward, suggesting that the story is affecting the body’s gut engine on the downbeats of “forget from whence you came.”<sup>441</sup> The hands behind the head become perhaps even more active than they were previously during the pause on “education.” As Kedhar suggests, such an enaction can implore the possibility of remembrance and empathy regarding the constant denial of innocence. How does reading this movement sequence in this way affect the narrative and events occurring onstage? Remember, the ensemble represents the people surrounding Hamilton’s life in the Caribbean: plantation owners, merchants, and slaves, as well as alluding to our contemporary society in the United States. Chernow’s biography describes, “Violence was commonplace in Nevis, as in all the slave-ridden sugar islands. The eight thousand

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<sup>439</sup> Rodney Diverlus, “Black Lives Matter Toronto: Urgency as Choreographic Necessity,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 176 (2018): 66.

<sup>440</sup> Miranda, “Alexander Hamilton,” *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 16.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid.

captive blacks easily dwarfed in number the one thousand whites [...] Hamilton would regularly have passed the slave-auction blocks at Market Shop and Crosses Alley and beheld barbarous whippings in the public square.”<sup>442</sup> As the audience bears witness to the story affecting the ensemble bodies’ gut engines, the historical remembrance of violence, trauma, and brutality to Black bodies lives alongside the contemporary injustices inflicting Black bodies in the United States. The past and the present coalesce.

While Burr is standing still in second position center stage singing the lyrics, Laurens, Jefferson, and Madison counter the ensemble’s movement from the periphery inward and travel to the outer edges of the stage facing away from the audience. During this sequence’s choreography, the three men also stand, unmoving, in second position with their arms resting at their sides. Although movement typically pulls focus for an audience, the contrast between the moving ensemble bodies and the stillness of the four characters who hold positions of power in the story also generates its own metaphorical line. These four men (historically White men) stand still and turn their backs to the harm inflicted upon people of color.

I must reiterate that the connections I make here may or may not have necessarily been intended by Blankenbuehler. But, it is the ensemble body’s, in particular the individual ensemble body of color’s, propensity to carry the potential for such a reading that is profound. Staying with this moment a little longer, one ensemble member in the collective stands out as executing slightly different movement at the end of this sequence. Following the pulse downward, the choreography ends in a second position plié with “bucket arms”—simply put, this gesture emulates the act of picking up a bucket, arms down toward the ground in fits as if they are grasping handles. All of the collective ensemble members have their heads down, looking at the ground as they reach their

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<sup>442</sup> Chernow, 19.

bucket arms, except Thayne Jasperson. Jasperson is one of the few White ensemble bodies onstage. At this moment, located just upstage right of Burr, he holds a stronger position in relation to an ensemble member that may be further upstage left, for example. As the only White male visible at this moment, the choice to not lower his head is immediately juxtaposed to all of those, in particular the bodies of color, who do. Such a slight differentiation impacts how his individual ensemble body is read in conversation with the rest of the collective ensemble body.

For Blankenbuehler, these “bucket arms” on the word “came” symbolize hard work and labor. He explained this image further at the talk with Words on Dance at Symphony Space:

This action on the word ‘came’ is don’t forget from where you came. Like, hard work.... Pick yourself up by the bootstraps. This moment is believably showing the tension it takes to actually go through with life.... So, if I have to pick up a bucket, I don’t think like a ballet dancer and pick up the bucket. I do whatever it takes to pick up the bucket.<sup>443</sup>

The move is low to the ground, signaling the struggle of coming from a place of poverty or oppression. In just a few quick seconds, the collective ensemble body signals social concepts and stratifications that sculpt the past and the present. The individual ensemble bodies with their heads down convey more exhaustion, more labor. The story is affecting them in the gut engine of the body. Jasperson, with his head up, is affected in the intellect engine of the body. While he can conceptually empathize with his cohort of ensemble bodies, but he has not had such an onerous past afflicting him.<sup>444</sup> Despite the assumed intention of synchronized choreography, the collective ensemble body, complete with heads down and up, still functions within sociohistorical boundaries. The individual ensemble body within the synchronous collective narrates the notion that no contemporary retelling of history can erase the harmful hierarchies that are embedded in

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<sup>443</sup> Blankenbuehler, “Fresh Steps.”

<sup>444</sup> It is also noteworthy that Thayne Jasperson later plays British loyalist Samuel Seabury (as well as understudies King George III).



the body. Not everyone has had the same struggle, and we as a country still have yet to reach a place of equitability and equality.

Next, the ensemble sweeps their left arm diagonally upward toward Alexander Hamilton's soon-to-be entrance location, center stage on the lyric, "The world's gonna know your name. What's your name, man?"<sup>445</sup> As Lin-Manuel Miranda's Hamilton sings, "Alexander Hamilton / My name is Alexander Hamilton," the ensemble stands in second position, arms down by their sides, elbows slightly away from the body, hands in fists, and backs towards Hamilton.<sup>446</sup> For Words on Dance, Blankenbuehler demonstrated the dance of this section with dancers Eliza Ohman, Corey John Snide, and Ryan VanDenBoom. Following the demonstration, he remarked:

Let's talk about Impressionism for just a second. What happens on that phrase is, you're going to look at Aaron Burr. So, he's dead center. And so he is telling you the next plot point.... So Burr's walking in center, you're gonna see him. But I want you to feel everybody else. So that you don't necessarily have to watch the dance; you just feel their impact to it. And so then when it's finally time to introduce Alexander Hamilton, everybody turns away. And, literally, it is just like I turned the colors on the stage so that you have no choice but to look at Alexander Hamilton.<sup>447</sup>

The periphery of collective ensemble bodies focuses the audience's attention. Furthermore, their affective capacity gives them the power to suggest *how* an audience reads the body or event to which they are encouraging such recognition.

In the following section, a series of pantomimic scenes take place. The collective ensemble body becomes crucial to prescribing and reading the focal points of these segments. As Eliza Hamilton enters the space, telling the tragic story of Alexander Hamilton's parents, ensemble

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<sup>445</sup> Miranda, "Alexander Hamilton," *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 16.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

<sup>447</sup> Blankenbuehler, "Fresh Steps."

member Sasha Hutchings steps in as a symbol of Rachel, Hamilton's mother.<sup>448</sup> Hutchings's individual ensemble body momentarily breaks from the collective ensemble choreography and voice, elevating her capacity for embodied communication beyond the collective. On the lyric, "Two years later, see Alex and his / mother bed-ridden," Hutchings is lifted into the air by two male ensemble members and slowly turned clockwise.<sup>449</sup> She is lying on her right side with her arms stretched upward toward her head and her legs separated, almost in a "star" position.

Now, according to Chernow:

A persistent mythology in the Caribbean asserts that Rachel was partly black, making Alexander Hamilton a quadroon or an octoroon. In this obsessively race-conscious society, however, Rachel was invariably listed among the whites on local tax rolls. Her identification as someone of mixed race has no basis in verifiable fact. (See pages 734-35.) The folklore that Hamilton was mulatto probably arose from the incontestable truth that many, if not most, illegitimate children in the West Indies bore mixed blood. At the time of Rachel's birth, the four thousand slaves on Nevis outnumbered whites by a ratio of four to one, making inequitable carnal relations between black slaves and white masters a dreadful commonplace.<sup>450</sup>

Regardless of this myth's validity, *Hamilton*'s casting choices and presumably Blankenhuebler's choice to use Hutchings as Rachel allows a place for this myth to live within the musical's space. What does the position of Hutchings's ensemble body suggest in this moment? Moreover, what does the collective ensemble body, pausing with arms raised, propound in this moment?

First and foremost, Hutchings's individual ensemble body navigates the dualities between her and performer, as well as between her and the character of Rachel. She is perceived as Sasha Hutchings, but also, in this moment, as Rachel Hamilton. The casting of Hutchings, a Black

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<sup>448</sup> Hutchings also plays Rachel in a later moment of the production. In an article for *Dance Magazine*, when asked about a notable ensemble role she said, "Twice in the show they talk about Hamilton's dead mother, and I get lifted up, and then at the end I'm waiting for him. Andy's created a lot of images so you can see what Hamilton is thinking about." Suzannah Friscia. "Hamilton's Dance Revolution." *Dance magazine* 90, no. 6 (June 1, 2016): 26.

<sup>449</sup> Miranda, "Alexander Hamilton," *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 16.

<sup>450</sup> Chernow, 9.

woman, as Rachel actuates the metanarrative regarding the comprehension of bodies and identity across past/present renderings. Notwithstanding the production's predilection of casting people of color in roles historically understood to be White bodies, Hutchings is cast as a White character whose identity was smeared because she was rumored to be mixed race. In her book *Choreographing Difference*, Ann Cooper Albright posits:

In a historical moment when the 'body' is considered to be a direct purveyor of identity and is thus the object of so much intellectual and physical scrutiny, a moment when academics and scientists, as well as artists and politicians, are struggling to understand the cultural differences between bodies, dance can provide a critical example of the dialectical relationship between cultures and the bodies that inhabit them.<sup>451</sup>

Therefore, to begin comprehending the relationship between Rachel's identity suppositions and Hutchings's ensemble body—and subsequently a more extensive discussion about bodies of color and past/present society conceptions—we can look to the choreography as a translation apparatus.

Logistically speaking, the use of elevation as a blocking or choreography tool undoubtedly creates a more dynamic and engaging stage picture. Placing a body higher in the air as others remain on the ground will naturally attract a viewer's eye. When the act of elevating a body is accompanied by lyrics discussing their ultimate death, a visual metaphor ignites, suggesting the ascension of their soul from Earth into the spiritual world beyond. But, who this body is in relation to the production/story is important.

At *Hamilton's* original opening at The Public in 2015, Hutchings's ensemble body as Rachel most likely would have been viewed similar to that of the other company members who took on the roles of White characters. Taking on the role of a White woman whose family owned slaves illuminates conversations regarding agency, reclamation, and power. However, when

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<sup>451</sup> Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference: the Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 3.

*Hamilton* was released on Disney+ in July 2020, following the killing of Breonna Taylor, an additional conversation was unveiled. While Rachel ascends into the beyond, Alexander Hamilton is seated on a chair in front of her. The collective ensemble surrounds them, standing in a mirrored position to which Hutchings is laying: legs apart, arms stretched out, and palms open.

As discussed in Chapter One, at the Words on Dance talk, Blankenbuehler reflected, “Raising the arms over the head must mean something—in real life, we don’t often reach our arms over our head.”<sup>452</sup> So, if a character does indeed reach their arms overhead, “[w]hatever [they] are reaching for better be important.”<sup>453</sup> In other words, he does not choreograph arms over the head lightly. When the ensemble reaches their arms overhead, the attention is thusly directed upward to Hutchings, but as Blankenbuehler contends, the arms over the head signal more than just a change of visual focus. Raising the arms in the air once again brings with it the socially coded gesture of “hands up, don’t shoot”—this time associating the gesture with the death of a woman of color. Watching as Hutchings is slowly turned in the air before being brought back to the ground, the collective ensemble focused on her body with their arms up is reminiscent of the protests surrounding the death of countless Black and Brown bodies at the hands of police.

Albright suggests that dance has the capacity to generate critical thought regarding cultural difference and the body as supplier of identity. At this moment, the dance creates a juxtaposition between the stillness of the diverse collective ensemble bodies watching the moving individual ensemble body of Sasha Hutchings. The collective represents society’s ability to act (or not) when an individual, particularly a Black individual, is being affected. The duality of the past/present omnipresent ensemble with arms raised communicates protest for racial justice. While the

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<sup>452</sup> Blankenbuehler, “Fresh Steps.”

<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

collective ensemble lives in the slash between historical/contemporary society, their identity is constructed through the audiences' perception of them in each movement. Dance, even if that dance is stillness, provides a critical look at the dialectical relationships between body/society, body/character, and character/stages society. The collective ensemble body representing past/present stands still, proposing an opportunity for intellectual reflection regarding Hutchings/Rachel/Black female bodies.

Next, Christopher Jackson's George Washington moves the story to another monumental loss in Alexander Hamilton's life—the apparent suicide of his cousin Peter Lytton. Lytton was given custody of Alexander and his brother James after the death of their mother, Rachel. Chernow reports:

Lytton had a black mistress, Ledja, who had given birth to a mulatto boy with the impressive name of Don Alvarez de Valesco. On July 16, 1769, just when the Hamilton boys must have imagined that fate couldn't dole out more horrors, Peter Lytton was found dead in his bed, soaked in a pool of blood. According to court records, he had committed suicide and either 'stabbed or shot himself to death.' For the Hamilton boys, the sequel was equally mortifying. Peter had drafted a will that provided for Ledja and their mulatto child but didn't bother to acknowledge Alexander or James with even a token bequest.<sup>454</sup>

The passing of Lytton left the Hamilton brothers with nothing and the need to fend for themselves. It would mark their choice to split ways, and Alexander would choose a job as a "clerk for the mercantile house of Beekman and Cruger," ultimately setting him on his path to the United States.<sup>455</sup>

In *Hamilton*, this moment paints a different picture, and the dissonance between these retellings is consequential. Chernow highlights the court's dictation that Lytton committed suicide by either stabbing or shooting himself. Blankenbuehler's choreography pantomimes a hanging.

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<sup>454</sup> Chernow, 26.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 27.

Following the staging of Rachel's death, the ensemble transitions into the next section by moving to the periphery, some gathering set pieces and props. Ensemble member Ephraim Sykes takes on the role of Peter Lytton.<sup>456</sup> Sykes walks to center stage and steps up onto the chair where Hamilton had previously been sitting. He has a tight light focused around him, and the surrounding stage is dimly lit. The majority of the collective ensemble is seemingly "unaware" of his actions. As he stands on the chair, he pantomimes wrapping a rope around his neck before raising onto his toes, reaching the arm "holding the rope" up into the air, and dropping back onto his heels, letting his head hang loose. Sykes removes himself from the chair by shifting his weight onto his left foot and slowly pivoting to stage left by swinging his right leg around, hinting that he is swinging from the noose. The horrifically visceral image of a Black man being hanged is perhaps more tangible than staging Lytton shooting himself. This action, similar to the arms raised overhead, is compounded with sociohistorical meaning.

Although the moment Sykes enacts Lytton's fictitious hanging is under six seconds long, it has the potential to perform as a representation of the unimaginable violence against Blacks in the United States. Amy Louise Wood's *Lynching And Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940*, tells of the horrific acts of racial violence that escalated following the Civil War and Reconstruction. Wood specifically analyzes the prevalence of photography as a reproduction of this brutality, so much so that the images themselves gained a high level of cultural power. Photography's ability to capture a moment instilled a sense of authenticity and tangibility that allowed those not physically present to witness after the fact. The common association of

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<sup>456</sup> I will be using Ephraim Sykes here as he was the *performer* in the Disney+ recording. Sykes later plays George Eacker, the man who killed Philip Hamilton, and understudied Hercules Mulligan/James Madison. He is currently most known for his roles Seaweed J. Stubbs in the NBC Live production of *Hairspray Live* (2016) and David Ruffin in *Ain't Too Proud* (2017).

lynching with hanging is arguably derived from the popularity of such photographs. Wood purports, “images of confident, restrained white men beside bodies of debased black men could validate the racist convictions of the white southerners who gazed on them not only because viewers assumed the visual accuracy of the surface image but because they believed that the photographs made manifest interior truths about the essence of racial character.”<sup>457</sup> These photographs were not created as documentation of such atrocities but rather as souvenirs for White people who enjoyed attending lynchings as a casual, amusing activity. While *Hamilton* is not explicitly referencing such a specific antecedent, this moment manifests a stage picture reminiscent of these photographs for a Broadway audience. Through the negotiation between Sykes’s individual ensemble body and the onlooking collective ensemble bodies, the audience can receive an impressionistic allusion to this historical nuance.

In these six seconds of *Hamilton*, the majority of the collective ensemble has their backs to Lytton as the act is occurring. However, hauntingly evocative of the intrigue of bearing witness to such an act of inhumanity, one White ensemble body is gazing at the image of this Black ensemble body pantomiming being hanged. At first, it could be argued that this was an in-the-moment choice by that particular performer; however, it appears to be a choice choreographed into this ensemble track. When viewing both Betsy Struxness and Hope Easterbrook in this track, both are just behind Hamilton, looking up at Lytton.<sup>458</sup> Reflecting on choreographic philosophies during his interview for *The Hamilcast*, Blankenbuehler posits, “...if you want to feel the idea, [they] can’t face front. If you want to see the idea, they have to face front.”<sup>459</sup> The collective ensemble

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<sup>457</sup> Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 85.

<sup>458</sup> Betsy Struxness was in the Original Broadway Cast. Hope Easterbrook was Struxness’s replacement featured in the Disney+ film.

<sup>459</sup> Blankenbuehler, “Episode 217,” *The Hamilcast*.

facing away from Lytton pulls back on the intensity of *seeing* the idea of his suicide—and allegorical lynching. Could they be the generalized society of the United States turning their backs on yet another catastrophic death of a Black body? When Sykes drops his heels to the chair as if he has been hanged, Hamilton contracts slightly from the torso. Could their backs be turned so that focus is being brought to the effects of this event on Hamilton? Could the individual White ensemble body *seeing* the idea echo the “tremendous symbolic power” of the “public and visually sensational” event that hundreds if not thousands of White spectators observed? This moment is fleeting and up to individual interpretation but nevertheless adds to the nuanced narrative embedded within *Hamilton*.

As Washington continues, “Left him with nothin’ but ruined / pride, something new inside, / a voice saying,” (the company joins) ““Alex, / You gotta fend for / yourself.””<sup>460</sup> The collective ensemble is spread around the stage in second position, now directing their attention inward toward Hamilton. Blankenbuehler’s philosophy of second position as one that communicated believing shifts from the focus on Lytton to Hamilton. As the “voice” tells Hamilton he has to believe in and fight for himself, the “voice” is confident, embodied by the ensemble’s stance. On the word “voice,” the ensemble brings their hands near their hips, and on “saying,” the hands build to the stomach. This movement comes from the gut engine: the famous “my gut is telling me” sentiment. On “Alex,” their hands make fists, and their arms cross in an “X” shape in front of their chests. Not only is “X” in the name Alex, but “X” is also often utilized to represent the defense when drawing up a football play, as a mark to mean faith or sincerity, a signature—especially in the Middle Ages for those who did not have reading or writing skills, or even “X marks the spot” on a map. Susan Leigh Foster argues, “Choreography, whatever its meaning, can provide clues to this

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<sup>460</sup> Miranda, “Alexander Hamilton,” *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 16.



specific experience of the physical in the ways that it records or documents movement, and also in the ways that it sets forth principles upon which movement is to be learned and crafted. The notion of empathy then theorizes the potential of one body's kinesthetic organization to infer the experience of another."<sup>461</sup> Whatever the reading of the embodied "X" by the omniscient ensemble, this movement is generated from their gut engine but ends at the heart engine. Each individual ensemble member could interpret the objective of this "X" differently: Alex, fight for yourself, believe in yourself, educate yourself; the world may not know your name yet, but they will, or even trust your heart, and it will lead you to your goal. All of these messages apply to Alexander Hamilton at this low point in his life.

Next, Hamilton becomes completely surrounded by an abundance of seemingly chaotic movement as Aaron Burr sings. In *Hamilton: the Revolution*, Miranda reveals, "We double the tempo here because Hamilton's found his way out: He's going to double down on his education, and make himself undeniable. The image in my head is Harry Potter finding out he's a wizard. Everything suddenly makes sense."<sup>462</sup> Using a combination of Blankenbuehlerized hip-hop and heightened gesture, the ensemble bodies break out into individual choreographic scores that occasionally meet in moments of synchronicity. The individual ensemble body gains recognition as it moves in and out of sync with the collective of ensemble bodies. The duality between individual and collective is discernible throughout this section.

Additionally, hip-hop movement becomes more tangible from this sequence onward, elevating the past/present paradigm. Although the individual ensemble bodies maintain a connection as a collective entity, the detachment of synchronous choreography allows for the

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<sup>461</sup> Foster, *Choreographing Empathy*, 175.

<sup>462</sup> Miranda, *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 17.

collective ensemble body to institute more than one function. The individual bodies smoothly move through the functions, to transition, to reveal a character's psychology, to tell a piece of the story, and to present an idea abstractly. This moment of hyperactivity allows for the individual ensemble body to obtain a sense of validation and significance, but the unified voice of the collective remains. As a whole, the choreography creates another pantomimic, metaphoric sequence narrativizing Hamilton's path from the Caribbean to New York City.

Burr's lyrics tell the story of Hamilton's time as an apprentice and clerk for Beekman and Cruger—later Kortright and Cruger—"tradin' sugar cane and rum and all the things / he can't afford."<sup>463</sup> Hamilton is center stage behind a table reading, writing, and navigating business deals. All the while, ensemble members make frequent crosses, both miming the holding of or actually manipulating physical props such as papers or barrels. Their action points to the work involved with moving these goods. However, in the text, Miranda has left out a crucial commodity, of which the production's critics say is a misstep of *Hamilton*, slaves. Chernow paints the following picture of Hamilton's apprenticeship in St. Croix:

On January 23, 1771, during Hamilton's tenure, his firm ran a notice atop the front page of the local bilingual paper, the *Royal Danish American Gazette*: 'Just imported from the Windward Coast of Africa, and to be sold on Monday next, by Messrs. Kortright & Cruger, At said Cruger's yard, Three Hundred Prime SLAVES.'... One can only imagine the inhumane scenes that Hamilton observed as he helped to inspect, house, groom, and price the slaves about to be auctioned.<sup>464</sup>

Chernow's description illuminates Alexander Hamilton's direct relationship with slavery before coming to the United States. Although Hamilton himself did not own slaves, he was not naïve to the institution. In an interview with Terry Gross for National Public Radio, Miranda noted that

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<sup>463</sup> Miranda, "Alexander Hamilton," *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 17.  
See Chernow, 31.

<sup>464</sup> Chernow, 32.

slavery is “a system in which every character in our show is complicit in some way or another...Hamilton—although he voiced anti-slavery beliefs—remained complicit in the system.”<sup>465</sup> As previously stated, *Hamilton* is often denounced for not including or challenging the notion that these founding fathers did little by way of abolishing slavery, not to mention those such as George Washington, who indeed owned slaves. Despite the omission of the word “slaves” in these lyrics and much of the production, I argue that there is space within the ensemble's choreography throughout the show, but particularly in this section, to include slaves as a crucial part of the narrative.

Throughout the organized chaos of mimed or real objects moving around the stage accompanied by both pedestrian and dance movements, there are also ensemble members who are executing more codified dance alongside heightened everyday movement in order to communicate more nuanced ideas. For example, there is a repetition of stacking one's fists on top of each other against any rhythm in the score, as if they are trying to climb or pull a rope. With the legs in a demi pli  , there is a weight to the dance of this sequence, suggesting a more labored experience. Additionally, the syncopation and irregular rhythmic patterns of the hip-hop movements also propose a feeling of hard work or struggle. Reading the individual laboring bodies, whether dancing or manipulating “props,” within the collective ensemble provides the opportunity for the audience to interpret these bodies as a part of the society of St. Croix, including those who were enslaved. Burr indicatively postulates sugar cane as the primary example of goods being traded. For the Caribbean Islands, sugar plantations were the driving force behind the economy. Those plantations operated using slaves as their primary source of labor. Burr's allusion to these

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<sup>465</sup> Terry Gross, “‘The Past Isn't Done With Us,’ Says ‘Hamilton’ Creator Lin-Manuel Miranda,” *NPR*, June 29, 2020, [www.npr.org/2020/06/29/884592985/the-past-isn-t-done-with-us-says-hamilton-creator-lin-manuel-miranda](http://www.npr.org/2020/06/29/884592985/the-past-isn-t-done-with-us-says-hamilton-creator-lin-manuel-miranda).

plantations sets up the possibility for the pantomiming, laboring ensemble to exemplify such slave-based-labor.

The Black moving ensemble bodies contain the capacity to multiply signify, especially when the backdrop is an eighteenth-century plantation economy and the vocabulary is hip-hop. Jayna Brown contends, “Different sites of dance production, the where and the when, inform the meaning of the movements, but I argue emphatically that black movement is always multiply signifying. This means that the same dance phrase can be read differently by different people, depending on the place and the time.”<sup>466</sup> However, although the White ensemble bodies may be enacting the same dance phrases, these bodies are going to be read differently within this setting. The collective ensemble body may represent the society of St. Croix at this moment, but the individual ensemble bodies are multiply signifying historically racialized ideas of class and labor. Depending on which body an audience member is focused on at a given time, they may be receiving different information. Still, the overall world is generated, allowing the multitude of possibilities to exist even if they are in the periphery.

After the landscape of St. Croix is painted, Blankenbuehler continues to use pantomimic gestures to complement the lyrics. He navigates a delicate balancing act between when to give the audience subtext through the movement and when to support the text being spoken. Such a negotiation allows the audience to have time to draw their own conclusions about an idea while also not having to work too hard to enjoy and understand the production's dense text. When Burr says, “Scammin; for every / book he can get his / hands on,” he hands Hamilton, who crosses to him downstage, a red book.<sup>467</sup> At this time, much of the ensemble is in a second position, demi

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<sup>466</sup> Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 15.

<sup>467</sup> Miranda, “Alexander Hamilton,” *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 17.

plié, spread across the stage. Blankenbuehler has choreographed a repetitive movement of the arms that replicates the turning of pages in a book. On the second-level balcony, the principal characters perform a similarly repetitive movement that suggests pulling books off a shelf. No matter where the audience is looking, the idea of reading books will be communicated. A similar tactic is used for the following line, “Plannin’ for the future.”<sup>468</sup> Once again, returning to the notion of which engine the story is affecting, most of the company completes a movement that directs the attention to the head, suggesting the simple idea of thinking and planning.

Throughout the number “Alexander Hamilton,” we have seen that both the collective ensemble and individual ensemble body is continuously in a state of flux from historical character, to metaphorical idea, to representation of society, to narrator, etc. Neil Haskell reflected, “We transform a lot as the ensemble. Sometimes we’re playing the lead character’s reactions and emotions and different experiences, and then all of a sudden we’ll *shwoo* and transfer into being a townspeople with our own ideas and thoughts and problems.”<sup>469</sup> Following the pantomime complementing Burr’s lyrics, the ensemble transitions once again into their omniscient observer role. Hamilton hands his red book to ensemble member Ariana DeBose, making eye contact with her before she backs up slightly to join the rest of the collective ensemble on the now bare stage (the table has been removed). As the lyrics, “In New York you can be a / new man,” are repeated several times by the company, Hamilton responds each time with “Just you wait.”<sup>470</sup> A few ensemble members remove ropes that have been hanging from above, tied to a mooring hook downstage left. DeBose turns and hands the red book off to Angelica Schuyler, and the rest of the ensemble watches as principal characters such as Eliza Hamilton, Angelica Schuyler, and John

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<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

<sup>469</sup> Haskell, *The Ensemblist*.

<sup>470</sup> Miranda, “Alexander Hamilton,” *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 17.

Laurens/Philip Hamilton ready Alexander Hamilton: putting on his brown jacket, giving him books, and handing him his bag respectively. The company forms parallel groupings, making an isle diagonally from downstage right to the stairs upstage left. On Hamilton's final "Just you wait," they all lunge in the direction that he will be walking, angling themselves so that their focus is on him and he becomes the highest character onstage. All of the focus is placed on Hamilton and his potential to affect the world upon his impending arrival in the United States.

As Hamilton is presumably on the ship crossing the Atlantic, while he walks upstage across the second-level balcony, the entire company is now looking out at the audience. The company moves to a straight line along the apron of the stage while foreshadowing Hamilton's fatal flaws, "You could never back down. / You never learned to take your time!" But perhaps more important than these lyrics is their stillness.<sup>471</sup> The lights are much brighter than they were at the beginning of the number, and the audience is now able to take a breath and truly absorb the diversity of the bodies in the cast—ensemble and principals. Jonathan Burrows argues, "Stillness and silence are as strong as any other material, and without them your audience will become exhausted...Pause as material can be very powerful."<sup>472</sup>

Following the pause in movement, the company simultaneously turns their heads to the right, once again putting Hamilton back in focus. Before Hamilton descends the stairs, the ensemble breaks out across the stage and performs individual scores that contain, once again, layered meaning. For the narrative of this final stretch of the song, Hamilton's "ship is in the harbor now."<sup>473</sup> The collective ensemble acts as the crew, preparing the mooring lines for the ship to

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<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

<sup>472</sup> Jonathan Burrows, *A Choreographer's Handbook* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 91-92.

<sup>473</sup> Miranda, "Alexander Hamilton," *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 17.

dock—some of the ensemble is manipulating actual ropes, some of them are pantomiming the existence of ropes. Those using real ropes convey the story of the ship docking. The pedestrian nature of this choreography prioritizes the communication of this portion of the story over any sense of virtuosity or showmanship. But, for those without the actual ropes, their score breathes between pantomimic, heightened everyday movement, and codified dance to communicate more metaphoric or abstract lines of thought. By the end of the line, “Oh, Alexander Hamilton / When America sings for you,” the ensemble not navigating ropes and set pieces pauses in fourth position.<sup>474</sup> Blankenbuehler asserts that the fourth position is active. The synchronicity of this position, combined with the omniscience of those engaging the position, elevates its potential meaning. Hamilton is about to take action in the United States. The ensemble bodies commencing their action in this production. And, the ensemble characters are going to begin their work to bring the ship to dock.

The next lyrics sung by the company are, “Will they know what / you overcame?”<sup>475</sup> The dance here is a drag turn, followed by hip-hop dance-based movement reminiscent of pulling ropes. Each ensemble member has a slightly different version of where their arms are in relation to the rope—pulling it and then tying or untying it to/from the mooring hook. They then gather any “leftover rope” and take it to where it needs to go, but they do this in an exquisitely stylized fashion. Contiguously, the individual ensemble bodies then simply walk around the space, not to any particular beat. They are interrupted by Burr singing, “see if you / can spot him.”<sup>476</sup> The collective ensemble synchronously takes a quick stutter and uses a hand to move their head as if to look for him. On “Another immigrant, / comin’ up from the bottom,” they scoop their hands

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<sup>474</sup> Miranda, “Alexander Hamilton,” *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 17.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid.

down to the ground and back up and move into slightly more up-tempo hip-hop style choreography.<sup>477</sup> Narratively, their actions here personify the characters of slaves or lower-class shipyard workers, but quickly they return to a more ambiguous position as omniscient narrators. Through the lyrics “America forgot him,” the collective ensemble steps toward the audience mimes putting on a backpack, nodding to the idea that school children in the United States do not learn about Alexander Hamilton and the contributions he made to the establishment of the country.<sup>478</sup> They then pivot, turning their backs to the audience. The lights dim on the main stage deck, and attention is then directed to the lead characters in spotlights on the second-level balcony.

Lyrically, there is a fundamental shift that occurs with this final section. The number speaks either about Alexander Hamilton in third person or to Alexander Hamilton in second person. On Mulligan/Madison and Lafayette/Jefferson’s “We fought / with him,” first-person perspective is used for the remainder of the song.<sup>479</sup> The characters Mulligan/Madison, Lafayette/Jefferson, Philp/Laurens, Eliza Hamilton, Angelica Schuyler (Church), Maria Reynolds, and Aaron Burr are speaking in first person. Blankenbuehler’s assertion that the story is told in hindsight is evident by the fact that the entire number uses past-tense to introduce the audience to the narrative. However, the Mulligan/Madison, Lafayette/Jefferson line initiates a pivot in function for these company members as they begin to transition from omniscient narrators to principal characters within the story. The ensemble has a less obvious adjustment. Following Burr’s, “And me? I’m the damn fool that / shot him,” the ensemble takes one step to pivot their bodies ninety-degrees, with their torsos facing the wings and their heads looking over their shoulders at Burr, who is center stage.<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>477</sup> Ibid.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid.



Then, the entire company (sans Alexander Hamilton) faces front and sings, “There’s a million things I / haven’t done, / But just you wait!”<sup>481</sup> There is a multitude of ways the “I” in this line can be read. First, the notion that the company, specifically the collective ensemble, is often positioned as Alexander Hamilton’s consciousness suggests that they could be speaking on his behalf. Second, the collective ensemble and Burr are slowly walking toward the audience during this line, giving them more focus than the principal characters located around the second-level balcony. Intentionally moving the collective ensemble with Burr at this moment connects them as omniscient narrators. Still, their “I” is multifaceted. The “I” could simply refer to their character positioned within the narrative of the show. Or, and perhaps more interestingly, the “I” could be their individual ensemble body living both inside and outside of the production. As the audience looks at the menagerie of individual ensemble bodies on stage, the notion that those contemporary bodies have a million things left to do in this world is equally efficacious.

The final line, sung by all, including Alexander Hamilton, is “Alexander Hamilton.” Following this line, there is a button in the music, a final beat, in which Burr looks at Hamilton, Hamilton looks diagonally up and out, and the rest of the company bows their head toward the floor. Blankenbuehler divulged, “As Americans, we owe a lot of people, a lot of people sacrificed and used their hearts and souls and brains to make this country. And so, the end of the opening number is not a bow to Alexander Hamilton; it is a bow to the ideals that make us our country.”<sup>482</sup> The bow as a punctuation to the opening number, synthesized in this way, further supports the fluidity between the dialectics of past/present and collective/individual.

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<sup>481</sup> Ibid.

<sup>482</sup> Blankenbuehler, “Fresh Steps.”

Furthermore, the dichotomy between imagination/reality is also operative within the bow. Randy Martin argues in his book *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*, “Dance both appears in the conjuncture of imaginary and performative spaces and puts the constitutive features of a composite body on display. For dance is both a bodily practice that figures an imagined world and a momentary materialization through performance of social principles that otherwise remain implicit.”<sup>483</sup> His idea of the composite body is one “mediated across a conflicted space of the imaginary (literally the representational domain where images appear) and the performative (the practical means through which imaginary forms are enacted).”<sup>484</sup> In the imaginary/performative space of *Hamilton’s* Revolution-era America, dance, even if it is encompassed within a hybrid genre that includes pedestrian movement, connects embodied social principles of today with the imaginary narrative of the past. The bow given by the collective ensemble body is mediated between these spaces of past/present, imaginary/performative. It is a bow to the United States’s history, the United States’s present, and the United States’s future—a future that is hopefully made better through the telling of this story in this way.

#### **5.4 “Helpless” / “Satisfied:” Subverting Patriarchal Practices**

The numbers “Helpless” and “Satisfied” featuring Eliza and Angelica Schuyler, respectively, unveil the love triangle between Alexander Hamilton and the two elder Schuyler sisters. During “Helpless,” the ensemble takes on the roles of party guests at the winter soldiers’

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<sup>483</sup> Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 109.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid.

ball. Conversely, during “Satisfied,” when the number essentially repeats from Angelica’s perspective, the ensemble doubly plays echoes of the party guests while also providing omniscient, retrospective commentary. They become two of only a few numbers where the female ensemble members are noticeably female characters. Throughout each, the ensemble maintains its collective ensemble body identity, but it becomes divided along gender lines; analysis can observe a male collective ensemble body, a female collective ensemble body, and an overall collective ensemble body. Accompanying this articulation of gendered ensemble bodies, Blankenbuehler choreographs a hip-hop-enhanced, social ballroom-based dance score that dialectically follows and challenges typical patriarchal conventions.<sup>485</sup> The choreography of the overall collective ensemble complicates past/present gender relationships creating a subtext that gives agency and power to the collective female ensemble body.

In an article published through *HowlRound.com* titled, “Why *Hamilton* is Not the Revolution You Think it Is,” James McMaster asks a popular question, “Given all of the cross-racial casting, why was gender-bent casting beyond the musical’s imagination?”<sup>486</sup> His article continues to challenge why the production neglected to make more “revolutionary” moves regarding feminism. Undoubtedly, McMaster’s piece sparked a great debate in the comments section below. As a response to this article, Liz Whittaker Chapman responded:

I recently read an article that praised *Hamilton* for the way in which it presents its female characters... They’re allowed to be complex and real and they defy the tropes that women are usually given in musical theatre. It’s true the show doesn’t pass the Bechdel test. But it seems unfair to criticize the women for having lives that revolve around *Hamilton* IN A SHOW CALLED *HAMILTON*. This particular story doesn’t focus on the women. It focuses on Alexander Hamilton. It doesn’t

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<sup>485</sup> I am choosing to use the terminology “social ballroom” to refer to traditional partner dances that are non-competitive. Their primary function is for social engagement, but there is a formality associated with their structure. In many cases, they were often performed in a ballroom-style location as a mode of patriarchal courtship.

<sup>486</sup> James McMaster, and Liz Whittaker Chapman, “Why *Hamilton* Is Not the Revolution You Think It Is,” *HowlRound Theatre Commons*, February 23, 2016, [howlround.com/why-hamilton-not-revolution-you-think-it](http://howlround.com/why-hamilton-not-revolution-you-think-it).

claim to do anything else. There simply isn't enough time or room in this particular narrative for the women to be given the same stage time. That's okay. They're still given complexity. Furthermore, the ensemble IS gender-blind casting.<sup>487</sup>

Chapman's assertion that the ensemble "IS gender-blind casting" missteps slightly in that the ensemble is very decisively made up of six male and five female ensemble tracks. But, her point is that the ensemble *functions*, for the most part, outside of gender prescriptions; thus, it is in that regard different and even revolutionary regarding feminism and traditional musical theatre practices. Semantics of this debate aside, I argue that what these critiques suggest is "missing" from the show is actually present within the ensemble, more specifically within the choreography of the ensemble body—collective and individual.

For all intents and purposes, every piece of musical theatre that scripts a social ballroom dance sequence employs socially dictated expressions of patriarchy. The 1997 Official Syllabus of the College Ballroom Dance Association, *Ballroom Dance: American Style* by Shirley Rushing and Patrick McMillan instructs, "It is the responsibility of the man to initiate and complete a movement pattern. His knowledge of a variety of movement patterns makes dancing more interesting just as one's knowledge of different subject matter makes conversations more interesting."<sup>488</sup> Grand numbers such as *My Fair Lady's* "Embassy Waltz" (1956), *Cinderella's* "Ten Minutes Ago"/ "Waltz for a Ball" (1957), *The Sound of Music's* "Ländler" (1959), and even more modern productions such as *Anastasia's* "Once Upon a December" (2017) use the traditional practice of the male chorus member as the lead figure, while the female chorus member is turned, dipped, and lifted. Blankenbuehler leans on such patriarchal male/female coupling as well as the

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<sup>487</sup> Ibid.

<sup>488</sup> Patrick McMillan and Shirley Rushing, *Ballroom Dance American Style: Smooth, Rhythm, Latin* (Dubuque, Iowa: Eddie Bowers Pub., Incorporated, 1997), 4.

basic practices of turning, dipping, and lifting the female body. Janet Wolff's piece "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics" argues:

Body politics need not depend on an uncritical, ahistorical notion of the (female) body. Beginning from the lived experience of women in their currently constituted bodily identities—identities which are *real* at the same time as being socially inscribed and discursively produced—feminist artists and cultural workers can engage in the challenging and exhilarating task of simultaneously affirming those identities, questioning their origins and ideological functions, and working toward a nonpatriarchal expression of gender and the body.<sup>489</sup>

Blankenbuehler's use of ideologically gendered social ballroom practices aid in affirming the identity of the characters within this historical moment in the 1780s alongside Paul Tazewell's costuming.

Tazewell's use of trousers as the base costume for the collective ensemble resists "period-appropriate" practices regarding gender. Simply put, women in the late eighteenth century would wear a large skirt or dress, certainly not pants. Although the use of a corset for the female ensemble top versus the vest for the male ensemble top does still hint at a construction of gender, for the majority of the production, the ensemble presents and functions rather androgynously. For this scene, Tazewell adds parchment-colored, petticoat skirts to the bottom of the female ensemble costumes, small parchment-colored bows to their corset shoulder straps, as well as high heels and Continental Army jackets to the top of the male ensemble costumes.<sup>490</sup> Additionally, the female ensemble body maintains the exposure of her arms. When juxtaposed to Angelica, Eliza, and Peggy Schuyler's more eighteenth-century appropriate costumes, silk taffeta dresses with long sleeves, the collective female ensemble body becomes emblematic of the promise of freedom,

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<sup>489</sup> Janet Wolff, "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 97.

<sup>490</sup> However, in the scene preceding, "Right Hand Man," the female ensemble members *also* have on the Continental Army jacket.

sexuality, and autonomy for women in U.S. society. In “Helpless,” the overall collective ensemble is closer to the *character in the story* side of the function scale than the *narrator of the story* side of the function scale. Though, when the number becomes duplicated in “Satisfied,” we will see the feminist work that challenges the traditional female role within social ballroom dance, shifting the collective female ensemble body’s function to omniscient commentator.

It is during “Helpless” that the audience learns of Alexander Hamilton’s rapidly developing relationship with Elizabeth Schuyler. When discussing this moment in *Hamilton: the Revolution*, Jeremy McCarter points out, “The musical theatre canon offers many ways to depict this courtship: sweeping waltzes, soaring ballads, the conventions of stage romance. Lin had a better idea. Having grown up on hip-hop and R&B, he saw that the story of Alexander and Eliza’s relationship is hip-hop and R&B’s *wheelhouse*.”<sup>491</sup> Once again, Miranda’s tendency toward hip-hop opened a window for Blankenbuehler to layer in a hybrid movement style that calls on the overall collective ensemble body as an instrument for social commentary. Within the social ballroom dance score, Blankenbuehler uses hip-hop and twenty-first-century social dance practices to provide a contemporary dialogue of feminine sexuality and bodily agency.

The short number “A Winter’s Ball” sets up the narrative of Alexander and Eliza’s courtship as Burr, Hamilton, Laurens, and the ensemble men take over the stage:

BURR: Now Hamilton’s skill with a  
quill is undeniable  
But what do we have in common?  
We’re reliable with the

ALL MEN: Ladies!

BURR: There are so many to deflower,

ALL MEN: Ladies!

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<sup>491</sup> McCarter, 68.

BURR: Looks! Proximity to power.

ALL MEN: Ladies!<sup>492</sup>

On the first “Ladies!” female ensemble member Carleigh Bettiol enters downstage right holding a wine glass. This is the first time the audience sees the new additions to the female ensemble costume (skirt, bows, and heels). She walks diagonally to upstage left, acknowledging the men seemingly trying to flirt with her, and exits. Bettiol began her path from the strongest position onstage, suggesting to the audience that the idea of “Ladies!” will be an essential concept for the foreseeable future. The choice to have her move upstage guides the audience’s view to the point of her exit, where Angelica Schuyler then enters—despite the collective male ensemble moving and singing. Angelica, unmoving, maintains the focus onstage. The power given to these women through the staging echoes a subtle detail in Chernow’s biography on which Miranda seems to have latched for inspiration:

Sleighting parties full of pretty young women succeeded in crossing snowdrifts to attend receptions. Hamilton subscribed to ‘dancing assemblies’—fancy-dress balls attended by chief officers—held at a nearby storehouse....In this anomalous setting, the women courted these revolutionaries in powdered hair and high heels.<sup>493</sup>

Chernow’s articulation that it was the women engaging in the act of courting men, rather than the traditional practice of men instigating the courting, gives a bit of insight into the power dynamics within the winter soldiers’ ball. As will be shown through the choreography, the women have agency; they are beyond props to be manipulated by male actors.

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<sup>492</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda, “A Winder’s Ball,” in *Hamilton: the Revolution: Being the Complete Libretto of the Broadway Musical, with a True Account of Its Creation, and Concise Remarks on Hip-Hop, the Power of Stories, and the New America*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., ed. Lin-Manuel, Miranda, and Jeremy McCarter (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 70.

<sup>493</sup> Chernow, 128.

Burr continues to narrate, crossing along the apron downstage, “A winter’s ball / And the Schuyler sisters are the envy of all.”<sup>494</sup> Hamilton, eager to climb the social ladder from a once penniless orphan to a respected statesman, meets Angelica centerstage. While the audience is not yet privy to their conversation, the suspense of this seemingly secretive interaction will be resolved in due time.

As the company transitions into “Helpless,” the stage deck turntable is activated, helping to swirl the rest of the overall collective ensemble onto the stage. As Eliza begins to sing, she is accompanied by “Female Ensemble, Angelica, Peggy,” rhythmically singing “Hey” on the upbeat.<sup>495</sup> This pert, “Hey,” suggests that these women are making the first move toward the men as they choose their partners for dancing. Four male/female ensemble couples commence on the rim of the turntable. Eliza, Angelica, and Peggy Schuyler are center. By the lyric “Helpless,” the choreography of the four couples synchronizes and begins to frame Eliza.

For the majority of the overall collective ensemble’s choreography, the couples avoid “closed position.”<sup>496</sup> Instead, they use a cuddle position, parallel position, promenade position, or sweetheart position.<sup>497</sup> In short, each of these requires the partners to stand next to one another in

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<sup>494</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda, “Helpless,” in *Hamilton: the Revolution: Being the Complete Libretto of the Broadway Musical, with a True Account of Its Creation, and Concise Remarks on Hip-Hop, the Power of Stories, and the New America*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., ed. Lin-Manuel, Miranda, and Jeremy McCarter (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 71.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid.

<sup>496</sup> “**Closed position:** partners facing each other separated by a small space. Shoulders are parallel, woman slightly to the right of the man, man’s right hand placed on woman’s shoulder blade, her left hand placed on his right biceps. Man’s left hand holds her right hand in an extended position.”

See McMillan and Rushing, 12.

<sup>497</sup> “**Cuddle position:** woman is on man’s right, both facing the same direction. With a double hand hold man’s right hand holds woman’s left hand at waist level. His left hand holds her right hand at waist level.

**Parallel position:** man and woman stand beside each other, left shoulders adjacent for left parallel, right shoulders adjacent for right parallel.

**Promenade position:** man and woman are side by side. Man’s right hip is adjacent to the woman’s left hip and upper torsos form a ‘V’ in smooth dances, a straight line in rhythm dances.

**Sweetheart position:** facing the same direction with the woman on the man’s right side, his right hand holds her right hand over her right shoulder. His left hand holds her left hand in front at waist level.”



some fashion rather than to face one another. This avoidance of a closed position is indicative of eighteenth and nineteenth-century social ballroom dance practices. The closed position was once thought to be utterly scandalous. Jane Desmond reports:

...dance manuals included drawings showing ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ ways to embrace while dancing, specifically the position of the head, arms, and upper body, and the required distance that should be maintained between male and female torsos. In manuals directed toward the middle and upper classes, bodies that pressed close, spines that relaxed, and clutching arms were all denigrated as signs of lower-class dance style.<sup>498</sup>

She continues by highlighting the idea that the closed position was once considered to be sexually dangerous as it was thought to cause women to “take leave of their senses.”<sup>499</sup> If the closed position did indeed cause women to relinquish themselves to their male partner, avoiding the closed position in this choreography prevents any suggestion of losing one’s autonomy.

Additionally, Baroque minuets such as the fleuret or the allemande were used as courting tools. Carol Téten describes, “The social dances reflected a mating ritual which gives an eloquent picture of the social mores of the era....There was a constant interplay between maintaining polite distance and fulfilling the pull of sexual attraction.”<sup>500</sup> Although Blankenbuehler certainly curates a piece of choreography that is historically inaccurate, he plays with this push and pull between 1780s decorum and 2010s decorum in the dance sphere. As Chernow articulates, these soldiers’ balls were themselves anomalous. During *The Hamilcast* podcast, Blankenbuehler reflects, “I wanted the atmosphere to feel like, ‘Who is the hottest person to catch?’... I had no interest in a gavotte. I had no interest in a social dance of the period. But, like, how do we take the social dance

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See McMillan and Rushing, 12-13.

<sup>498</sup> Jane Desmond, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 32.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

<sup>500</sup> *How to Dance Through Time, Vol. IV: The Elegance of Baroque Social Dance*, directed by Carol Téten. Dancetime Publications, 2003, <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/how-to-dance-through-time-vol-iv-the-elegance-of-baroque-social-dance-2>.

of a period idea and make it hip?”<sup>501</sup> The atmosphere that Blankenbuehler creates fosters the anomaly of the soldiers’ balls, allowing the women to step out of the social mores of the era. But, for an audience ignorant of that nuance, it also allows the collective female ensemble body to freely court the male collective ensemble body, hinting at a contemporary norm of permissiveness and independence.

Peppering in social ballroom movements such as arch turns, parallel pivots, hesitations, spirals, balances, walkarounds, cuddles, and twinkles, Blankenbuehler creates the idea of a social ballroom dance. Because each couple remains in a designated location, at least for the first section of the dance, it could be labeled a “spot dance.”<sup>502</sup> The audience sees the female/male couples, recognizes these more formal movements, and understands it to be a social ballroom dance. However, the majority of the movement throughout is hip-hop isolations and grooves such as pop-locks, bounces, snakes, lunges, and even grinding. When Eliza and the women sing “Grind to the rhythm as we / wine and dine,” the male ensemble bodies are in front of their female counterparts; both are facing the same direction.<sup>503</sup> The “polite distance” of social ballroom dances of the era is broken as the men grind on the women.

In her article “Grinding on the Dance Floor: Gendered Scripts and Sexualized Dancing at College Parties,” Shelly Ronen articulates that grinding generally involves “a woman rubbing her buttocks into a man’s groin and her back against his torso in a repetitive motion to the beat of the music.”<sup>504</sup> Although Ronen maintains that the male partner is predominantly in control of the

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<sup>501</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler, interview with Gillian Pensavalle, “Episode 218,” *The Hamilcast*. Podcast audio, May 4, 2020. <https://www.thehamilcast.com/andy-blankenbuehler/>

<sup>502</sup> “**Spot dance**: a dance that is executed in one area of the floor (swing) as opposed to moving in the line of dance.”

See McMillan and Rushing, 13.

<sup>503</sup> Miranda, “Helpless,” *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 71.

<sup>504</sup> Shelly Ronen, “Grinding On The Dance Floor: Gendered Scripts and Sexualized Dancing at College Parties,” *Gender & Society* 24, no. 3 (June 1, 2010): 361.

action within this danced interaction, she suggests, “The line for women’s agency was drawn at initiation, as they could only be powerful by submitting or withholding their bodies from initiating men.”<sup>505</sup> Ronen labels grinding as a “significant means of sexual signaling,” which directly speaks to the use of social dance as a mating ritual across time. Once approached, therefore, women would choose compliance or cessation.”<sup>506</sup> During the winter soldiers’ ball, the women initiate the courting and choose their dancing partner. They, then, hold the dominant position, typically reserved for the male partner during standard grinding practices. Contrary to Ronen’s observation, the female partners do not completely relinquish or submit to the male immediately following the initiation challenging the philosophy that the woman either has to comply with the male or cease their interaction. The choreographic score swiftly maneuvers between patriarchal social ballroom dance conventions and the collective female ensemble, maintaining a sense of agency and control.

It is through the use of hip-hop that the collective female ensemble bodies can exude power in a world in which they might otherwise have had none. Original Broadway *Hamilton* ensemble member Betsy Struxness elaborates:

I think the rise of hip-hop on Broadway is allowing the women to finally show the community what we’re worth. There are very few times on Broadway when women aren’t being either sexy, dainty, or cute as dancers. Hip-hop needs strength, aggression, and athleticism. There is nothing weak about hip-hop...It can seem very pedestrian and ridiculously intricate within the same breath. Very few genres offer the same.<sup>507</sup>

To Struxness’s point, staging a synchronous mating ritual through hip-hop, controlled by the collective female ensemble body, is relatively the opposite of Eliza’s choreography. As the collective ensemble body, male and female, carnivalizes patriarchal social dance practices, they

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<sup>505</sup> Ibid., 367.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid., 362-367.

<sup>507</sup> Betsy Struxness, interviewed by Amanda Olmstead, October 16, 2018.

elevate the audience's understanding of Eliza's character as being purer and more refined. Her stillness in a sea of salacious dancing, her sleeves surrounded by exposed women's arms, her coy approach to Alexander following the fast-paced coupling of the others at the party all frame Eliza as being unique. Chernow cites Alexander Hamilton saying this about Eliza: "“Her good sense is destitute of that happy mixture of vanity and ostentation which would make it conspicuous to the whole tribe of fools and foplings...She has good nature, affability, and vivacity unembellished with that charming frivolousness which is justly deemed one of the principal accomplishments of a *belle*.””<sup>508</sup> Contrasting the collective female ensemble body with Eliza in this way reminds the audience that they exist both inside and outside of time. By casting a contemporary feminist perspective on their historically scripted characters, they can be read as having the prerogative to choose what social mores they abide by or not. Within the show, they are given the capacity to oscillate between and around traditional gender roles while Eliza is rooted firmly to plot and is bound, more or less, to traditional gender roles.

The following section of “Helpless” tells of the introduction of Eliza to Hamilton by Angelica. As these conversations begin to take place downstage, behind the principal characters, the ensemble couples transition from moving with their partner to moving as a group—emulating the large group social dances of the eighteenth century. The overall collective ensemble begins moving in a counter-clockwise direction to the upstage right space forming a diagonal line structured from the downstage right corner upwards towards the left.<sup>509</sup> The collective female

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<sup>508</sup> Chernow, 130.

See “From Alexander Hamilton to Margarita Schuyler, [February 1780],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0613>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett, New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 269–271].

<sup>509</sup> “**Line of dance:** (LOD, also known as line of direction) counter-clockwise direction in which the dancers move around the dance floor.”

See McMillan and Rushing, 13.

ensemble is facing toward the audience, and the collective male ensemble is facing away from the audience. The women fan their right arm up and over into the right hand of their male partner. Then, the male partner lifts the connected hands prompting a loop turn, moving their female partner under their arm, switching places.<sup>510</sup> The couples now face front in a cuddle position and complete a full turn together in either direction. Blankenbuehler explains the events during the dialogue between Hamilton, Angelica, and Eliza:

...there's a dance that's happening stage right that's like you see in many a movie where [...] the hands are up, and there's that couple going under the arm and, like, that's as close as we get to anything period-appropriate in the entire show. And, I also wanted to use that there cuz [sic] I knew I wanted to use it as the recognizable framing device when it repeats—cuz [sic] it's so specific—and then intentionally break it the second time when Angelica breaks for “Satisfied.”...[T]ake something that you recognize so that when it repeats and breaks, you notice the break. You have to make it obvious.<sup>511</sup>

Choreographing a more patriarchal, period-appropriate moment during Eliza's “Helpless” once again speaks to her naïve, abide by expected social conventions personality. Therefore, when Blankenbuehler subverts this moment during Angelica's “Satisfied,” the collective female ensemble body gains more power. Likewise, the audience comes to understand Angelica to be more mature, wise, and pushing against the gendered conventions of the time in the historical moment.

The remainder of “Helpless” stages Eliza and Alexander's courtship through their wedding. “Satisfied” begins as Angelica's toast to Eliza and Alexander at their wedding but quickly *rewinds* to “A Winter's Ball” as she remembers the first moment she met Alexander. The company of bodies onstage abstractly moves through a series of lighting effects and returns to the

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<sup>510</sup> “**Loop turn:** woman's inside turn to the left (counter-clockwise).”  
See McMillan and Rushing, 13.

<sup>511</sup> Blankenbuehler, “Episode 218,” *The Hamilcast*.

staging that begins with Bettiol's entrance downstage right as the men sing, "Ladies!" in their diagonal formation. Blankenbuehler narrates this moment for *The Hamilcast*, "That shade of the men there, like every man, just wants to score...when the audience sees it repeat, they start to see 'Oh Hamilton, that's Hamilton. Hamilton wants that.'" <sup>512</sup> The staging becomes understood to have doubled meaning as "Helpless" is duplicated but seen through Angelica's perspective rather than Eliza's.

After the company sings "This is not a game..." in "Satisfied," the staging has returned to Hamilton and Angelica's first encounter, but this time the audience hears their conversation. <sup>513</sup> It is arguably at this moment that Blankenbuehler's metaphorical use of diagonals begins to take shape. Blankenbuehler discloses:

In symbolism, in painting, a diagonal that goes from—like an ingenue's entrance—so she's upstage left, and she's facing downstage right, it's a child's perspective on life. And if you are facing the other way, it's a mature adult's perspective on life...and so that's why an ingenue in a show enters from up left and rushes down right. It's cuz she's hopeful; she wants the right things. And so, when somebody's cynical, they're facing downstage left. <sup>514</sup>

After Angelica makes her ingenue entrance upstage left, Hamilton executes a counter cross assuming the downright diagonal looking at Angelica with hope and youthful longing. Angelica remains relatively center until she sings, "And I realize, / Three fundament- / tal truths at the exact same time..." <sup>515</sup> Halfway through the line, the company vocally joins her. At this moment, she turns slightly to face the downright, idealistic angle. The overall collective ensemble has now returned to the upstage right space in their diagonal line that featured the eighteenth-century social

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<sup>512</sup> Ibid.

<sup>513</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda, "Satisfied," in *Hamilton: the Revolution: Being the Complete Libretto of the Broadway Musical, with a True Account of Its Creation, and Concise Remarks on Hip-Hop, the Power of Stories, and the New America*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., ed. Lin-Manuel Miranda, and Jeremy McCarter (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 80.

<sup>514</sup> Blankenbuehler, "Episode 218," *The Hamilcast*.

<sup>515</sup> Miranda, "Satisfied," *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 82.

ballroom dance style choreography in “Helpless.” They command the mature adult’s perspective angle to punctuate the internal conflict Angelica is encountering.

As Blankenbuehler pointed out, the social ballroom sequence becomes a recognizable moment in time for the audience; but as it is repeated, the choreography is directly broken in order to communicate Angelica’s subtext. The collective female ensemble is facing toward the audience, and the collective male ensemble is facing away from the audience. The women fan their right arm up and over toward the right hand of their male partner. Then, the male partner ducks under the arm of their female partner as the female partner steps forward past them, switching places. The collective male ensemble stands straight with their left arm behind their back. The right arm is bent upward, holding the gesture to count “Number one!”<sup>516</sup> Rather than turning back to face their male partner as they did in “Helpless,” the collective female ensemble lunges toward Angelica onto their left leg. The collective female ensemble’s deviation from the social ballroom dance sequence here, adding a contemporary spin, allows them to become an abstract, retrospective extension of Angelica’s consciousness. Their right arm goes straight back into a diagonal with their left arm bent, hand to toward their heart, palms are open in “blades.” The collective female ensemble gaze is toward Angelica—from the upstage right to the downstage left diagonal, the cynical angle. Their body posture mirrors the diagonal on which they are looking, suggesting to the audience that Angelica’s consciousness knows she will have to be mature and responsible about her situation, even if it is not what her heart wants.

Correspondingly, the role of the overall collective ensemble during this number is now noticeably different. Rather than being characters at the winter soldiers’ ball, within the story of “Helpless,” they are now omniscient narrators and commentators on the complicated social and

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<sup>516</sup> Ibid.

personal dynamic of the elder Schuyler sister. Not only are they singing with Angelica, but their movements now complement *her* as opposed to the setting of the ball. The overall collective ensemble is no longer engaging in more traditional social ballroom dance practices that were present in the first iteration of this scene. Instead, their movements have taken on a more metaphorical subtext quality. As she sings, “My father has no sons, so I’, the one / Who has to social climb for one,” the overall collective ensemble is now facing away from her, right arm behind their backs, left arm slowly pointing up toward the sky.<sup>517</sup> Miranda points out, “...Philip Schulyer really had *loads* of sons. I conveniently forgot that while I was writing this in service of a larger point: Angelica is a world-class intellect that does not allow her to flex it.”<sup>518</sup> The overall collective ensemble’s back is to her, pointing to such exclusion.

When Angelica introduces Hamilton to Eliza, she faces the downstage left corner, the angle of a mature adult. During the introduction between Hamilton and Eliza, the overall collective ensemble replicates the recognizable social dance movement in the upstage right diagonal from which they deviated on “Number one!” The women fan their right arm up and over into the right hand of their male partner. Then, the male partner lifts the connected hands prompting a loop turn, moving their female partner under their arm, switching places.<sup>519</sup> The couples now face front in a cuddle position and complete a full turn together. As the scene momentarily steps back into real-time, as opposed to Angelica’s retrospective narration, the overall collective ensemble resumes the social ballroom dance choreography as it was in “Helpless.” Not only does this help to establish the shift in time, but it also complements Angelica’s mature decision to introduce him to her sister

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<sup>517</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid.

<sup>519</sup> “**Loop turn:** woman’s inside turn to the left (counter-clockwise).”  
See McMillan and Rushing, 13.



because of her responsibility as the older sibling to marry up in the world. She is choosing to maintain the status quo.

On “Number two!” the male dips the female partner out of the cuddle position toward Angelica before releasing the hold. The collective female ensemble bodies turn to face upstage right with their arms up in the air, heads slightly lowered. A gestural image of surrender is evoked through the collective female ensemble. Angelica must surrender her feelings for Alexander; she must surrender her intelligence and independence to take her place as wife to an upper-class businessman.<sup>520</sup> The collective male ensemble separates from the collective female ensemble and moves to stage left. The collective female ensemble is left alone, surrendering, and independent. Recreating a stage picture reminiscent of the end of “Right Hand Man,” the collective male ensemble forms a single-file line, as if they are in a military formation, positioning Hamilton in the middle of the line. They manipulate their heads with their left hand to direct their focus toward Angelica, who is just off of center. When Angelica suggests that marrying a Schuyler sister would elevate his status, the male ensemble members separate in either direction revealing Hamilton, and they reform the line behind him. His status is metaphorically elevated to the front of the line. The collective male ensemble then takes various levels to turn Hamilton to his left to face Eliza on “Maybe that is why I introduced him to Eliza.”<sup>521</sup> This puppeteering, physically done by the male ensemble but intellectually done by Angelica, highlights the push and pull between gendered dynamics of control and power. Although Angelica possessed the ability to quietly elevate Hamilton’s social status by introducing him to her sister (inciting their marriage), the male body or male person still maintained a heightened position within colonial American society.

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<sup>520</sup> It is perhaps noteworthy here that Angelica Schuyler was actually married to businessman (and eventual English parliament member) John Barker Church three years prior to meeting Alexander Hamilton.

<sup>521</sup> Miranda, “Satisfied,” *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 85.

Amid the dialogue between Eliza, Alexander, and Angelica, the overall collective ensemble has reinstated the social dance sequence one more time. They quickly move through the scenes regarding Eliza and Alexander's courtship before pausing one last time in Angelica's thoughts. Blankenbuehler reflects:

And so, at the end of "Satisfied," the diagonal, like you meet Hamilton on the correct diagonal, all of those things happen on the correct diagonal. And then, when Angelica's offering her toast, it's on the mature diagonal. And then, at the end of "Satisfied," when she's saying he could be mine, she's facing him on the idealistic angle and then chooses to switch the angle, and so she chooses the angle, so Eliza rotates downstage, Hamilton goes upstage, Angelica turns to face the other way and says, "at least I have his eyes in my life," and then she restores the original toast on the angle that says, 'im going to face life like a mature adult, knowing how things really work.

[...]

She's like I could've been idealistic and in love and have hope in my life, but that's not the way it works. She shifts the entire number to face the other way... Hamilton's down right, and then they both switch places, and she turns her focus to the left, and at the very last second...Eliza turns her head to the right....so Angelica is looking the cynical angle [and] Eliza [is looking] the idealistic angle.<sup>522</sup>

The dynamic of the angles Blankenbuehler articulates here also resonates within the ensemble. During this second *entendre* of Angelica's toast, the entire company faces the downstage left diagonal toward Alexander and Eliza. The omniscient ensemble possesses more knowledge than in the first iteration. They have shifted from being naïve and in the moment with Eliza to being learned, mature, and supporting Angelica.

During "Helpless" and "Satisfied," the overall collective ensemble body subverts both eighteenth-century gendered social practices, but also gendered practices of dance within musical theatre. The collective female ensemble body negotiates the past/present duality as they move between permitting patriarchal conventions and challenging them. Through Blankenbuehler's

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<sup>522</sup> Blankenbuehler, "Episode 218," *The Hamilcast*.

choreography and inclusion of hip-hop movements, the female ensemble body can be seen as autonomously initiating, encouraging, and practicing sexuality. They affirm the identity of feminine characters within the plot while also challenging ideological forces that would have typically structured them within patriarchal scripts—particularly during the Revolutionary War. Blankenbuehler still works within selected patriarchal practices such as the male/female coupling and hits at social ballroom dance choreography of the time. However, by choreographing “Satisfied” to directly subvert these ideas, the collective female ensemble body signals the promise that gendered philosophies will indeed shift. Because “Helpless” and “Satisfied” split the collective ensemble along gendered lines, a divergence from the majority of the production, when the collective ensemble coalesces, their unified embodied voice supports a twenty-first-century feminist sociological metanarrative of equality and freedom from patriarchal conventions.

## **5.5 “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down):” Communicating Revolution**

I like being a soldier. It’s pretty badass that men and women are given the same choreography. It’s only sort of gender-specific in the ball, actually.

—Morgan Marcell, “Hamilton’s Dance Revolution”

Reflecting on her time working with Blankenbuehler, original swing ensemble member Morgan Marcell divulged:

I know many choreographers that address issues such as class, gender, race, sexuality through movement. But that is such a vast list of civil rights issues we face in the current climate, that I think it is hard not to address one of them. I do think using dance as a narrative tool, however, is Andy’s strength, so it makes his views on those issues subtle yet effective. The RIGHT [sic.] in our civil rights, humanity, is woven into the backbone of the piece like a constant thread

you never see, but feel. For instance, in *Hamilton*'s "Yorktown," female dancers play soldiers, customarily men for that time. As an audience member, you're focused on the battle at hand, but you leave the theater noticing that females carried as much weight as the males, both physically and in their storytelling. The actual number isn't about equality for women, but it's a thread in the blanket.<sup>523</sup>

Following "Satisfied" and leading up to "Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)," the female ensemble bodies have resumed their more gender-neutral position within the collective ensemble. They returned to their riding boots and pants immediately following "Satisfied," and one by one began to acquire the Continental Army jacket. Tazwell also adds a matching parchment-colored waistcoat to the collective ensemble costume. These additional clothing elements visually orient the collective ensemble further into the past historical narrative of *Hamilton*. Throughout "Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)," the collective ensemble seamlessly transitions between soldiers and embodied illustration of Hamilton's consciousness. As Marcell suggests, the visibility of the contemporary association augmenting the ensemble body is still present and woven into the piece, but it is not as explicit as it was in "Alexander Hamilton" or "Helpless"/ "Satisfied." Reunifying the collective ensemble body for the battle marks a vital shift or advancement in the historical narrative, and consequently, the production narrative once again uplifts the optimistic outlook of revolution—the American Revolution and the theatrical revolution.

Remembering the 2014 workshop presentation of *Hamilton*, McCarter illuminates:

The biggest jolt came toward the end of Act One, when the actors came onstage wearing blue coats with red trim and brass buttons: unmistakably the uniforms of George Washington's Continental Army. That day, for the first time, 150 audience members had the mind-altering experience of watching black and Latino actors, young men and women from communities that have seen their freedom infringed for hundreds of years, win freedom for us all.<sup>524</sup>

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<sup>523</sup> Morgan Marcell, interviewed by Amanda Olmstead, October 21, 2018.

<sup>524</sup> McCarter, 113.

Regimented by their uniforms, the collective ensemble bodies portray the soldiers fighting for the freedom of the United States—male, female, Black, White, Brown, et al. This pivotal battle in the war for independence marks a transition in the country’s history, in Alexander Hamilton’s life, and the production. At the top of “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down),” Lafayette and Hamilton’s illustrious “Immigrants: We get the job done” reemphasizes the importance of this story told in this way (by people of color).<sup>525</sup> In the event that the audience has become complacent to the significance of the bodies on stage in the hour leading up to the number, the quintessential principle behind the production is revived. Although the collective ensemble bodies are written character-wise to represent more of the past narrative than the liminal past/present omniscient observer/commentator that they have portrayed for the majority of the production, through Blankenbuehler’s heightened gesture and hip-hop (and arguably their hairstyles), the individual ensemble bodies within the collective can still be discerned keeping the past/present dichotomy operational.

To energize and intensify the vitality of the Battle of Yorktown within the narrative, Blankenbuehler moves from choreographed pedestrian movement to a more aggressive hip-hop score complemented by the use of guns as a crucial prop. He fluidly moves the collective ensemble in and out of narrator, principal character’s consciousness, metaphor, and character(s) within the story to elevate their significance. Additionally, he strategically utilizes moments of stillness to amplify viewing and reading the *bodies* onstage. Susan Leigh Fosters suggests that sometimes choreography can be “envisioned as providing an arena in which to encounter and potentially

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The ensemble is seen wearing these jackets throughout the first act. However, this is the first time they *all* have the formal, full-sleeved coats on.

<sup>525</sup> Miranda, “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down),” *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 121.

transcend the histories of oppression, colonization, or enslavement that form part of the corporeal legacies of potential collaborators so as to celebrate a common humanity.”<sup>526</sup> Blankenbuehler’s amplified hip-hop dance aesthetic creates an opportunity for the choreography to transcend the White founding father narrative and unite an optimistic contemporary community in an embodied celebration of optimism.

After Lafayette and Hamilton part ways, the collective ensemble inches into a semi-circle around Hamilton—who has moved center stage. They reprise lyrics from the number “My Shot,” but the choreography is different. Repeating the words, “I am not throwin’ away my shot!” seven of the collective ensemble bodies take a deep step every two counts to enter the space.<sup>527</sup> It is as if they are quietly sneaking through the woods. Beginning with Sasha Hutchings downstage right, they initiate a canon of lunges, moving their hands to their chests with elbows up, parallel to the ground. Each ensemble body moves to the syncopated rhythm within, “Hey yo, I’m just like my country, I’m young, / scrappy and hungry.”<sup>528</sup> Hamilton slowly turns counter-clockwise to follow their movements. The audience is able to absorb each individual ensemble body taking and holding their step in this sequence. Not only is it a unified voice of the troops and Hamilton readying for battle, but it is individual voices reminding themselves what they are fighting for.

When George Washington enters the space, they all meet in a salute and pulse as if they are marching. On the lyric “‘Til the world turned upside down!” the salute shifts into an abstract gesture where the fist grinds against the head.<sup>529</sup> Each individual ensemble body interprets this movement differently. For example, Thayne Jasperson rests the back of his hand on the forehead,

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<sup>526</sup> Foster, *Choreographing Empathy*, 71.

<sup>527</sup> Miranda, “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down),” *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 121.

<sup>528</sup> Ibid.

<sup>529</sup> Ibid.

the palm opens, and the fingers one by one twist the hand in a circle. For Seth Stewart, the salute ever so slightly remains, crossing the bladed hand across the front of the face. For Ephriam Sykes, the palm opens outward from the salute, closes into a fist, and the elbow moves the arm in front of the face. These subtle differences allow the individual ensemble body to remain present and have agency within the collective ensemble—particularly in a number where their unique bodies have become more masked by the jackets.

In a video interview for the *Wall Street Journal*, Blankenbuehler, with the help of associate Stephanie Klemons, explains the movement accompanying Hamilton's monologue, beginning with "I imagine death so much it feels / more like a memory."<sup>530</sup> Through this sequence, the collective ensemble functions as an embodied interpretation of Hamilton's consciousness.

Blankenbuehler begins:

So throughout the show, there's many times where Hamilton sort of goes into his own head, speaks about his fears, speaks about his desires, his needs. There's a monologue that says 'I imagine death,' and he does it several times in the show. And in my head, what I wanted to capture was, like, the pause of time and do a filmic close up to almost, like, see what's in the back of his head. So, as they're marching into the Battle of Yorktown, his first time in total command of his battalion, what we see is his group of marching troops sort of freeze, and they bring to life this lyric that he says.<sup>531</sup>

He continues: "So, right away, a thing that is very important is that we stop-time so that the audience knows this gesture is very stylized."<sup>532</sup> In a formation behind Hamilton, five members of the collective ensemble, active but controlled, move forward into a lunge on their left leg allowing the arms to follow as if they are walking in slow motion. On the word "memory," they move their

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<sup>530</sup> Ibid.

<sup>531</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler and Stephanie Klemons, "'Hamilton' Choreographer Breaks Down His Moves," photographed by Cassandra Giraldo, *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 4:22, May 23, 2016, [www.wsj.com/video/hamilton-choreographer-breaks-down-his-moves/8F716467-E023-4900-B149-D6BB3A40B66E.html](http://www.wsj.com/video/hamilton-choreographer-breaks-down-his-moves/8F716467-E023-4900-B149-D6BB3A40B66E.html).

<sup>532</sup> Blankenbuehler, "Hamilton' Choreographer Breaks Down His Moves."

right hand with an open palm behind their head, and their left hand comes up to point to their forehead. They nod up on “this is” and back to center on “where it.” On “gets me,” the left hand is brought down below the chin, open palm, chin resting between the thumb and the pointer finger. Blankenbuehler adds, “This position right here is important to me. It’s this sense of pride that says, ‘I believe in something so much you can put a knife to my neck and I’m not gonna change how I feel.’”<sup>533</sup> Acknowledging the open palm of the right arm, still located behind the head, as the notion of a “memory,” he adds, “...from memory up in the back of my head, we have this very vicious, violent position where now he’s not afraid of facing death.”<sup>534</sup> For the phrase, “On my feet, / The enemy ahead of me,” the step activates a metaphor for marching, and an arm movement forward emulates looking down the barrel of a gun.<sup>535</sup>

During this Hamilton consciousness section, the collective ensemble body provides a contemporary, embodied, and metaphorical introspection to Hamilton’s thoughts through the Blankenbuehlerized pedestrian and hip-hop gestures. They move in and out of fourth position anticipating the action of battle that is about to happen. Continuing through the movements of this section, the following breakdown Blankenbuehler gives is about the lyric “at least I have a friend / with me.”<sup>536</sup>

He discloses:

I have two kids, and one of my favorite things to do is spend the end of my day, like right before the kids’ bedtime, watching the Yankees. So that time I have with my son is really, really important. This lyric is ‘at least I have a friend/ with me.’ And so this is sort of channeling that idea. So from here [left hand up as if it is a pitcher with a baseball glove, right hand with the ball in the glove preparing for a pitch], I take the baseball behind my back into my glove [now the body is in profile with the left leg in a passé]. Instead of the pitch, it goes all the way to point to my

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<sup>533</sup> Ibid.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid.

<sup>535</sup> Miranda, “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down),” *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 121.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid.



rifle, which gets held up over my head. So it's equating that sense of, 'that weapon is gonna save me.' And that idea is as important as my best friend by my side.<sup>537</sup>

Behind the group of five are four additional ensemble members in a horizontal line. They are also executing the choreography articulated above. However, they are doing so with a gun in their hand. When the group of five moves the baseball from the glove to point overhead to the rifle on the lyric "Weapon in my hand," the group of four lifts the rifle up in the air with both hands so that it is parallel to the ground.<sup>538</sup> The use of the prop here makes the gesture of pointing up overhead at a "gun" undeniably clear. While they predominantly are functioning as a tangible representation of Hamilton's consciousness, the collective ensemble body also elevates a sense of humanity for the group of soldiers that will follow his unprecedented plan of attack.

From the rifle gesture, the collective ensemble hints towards Hamilton's growing confidence and power as they bend their arms upwards to form a move that resembles flexing one's biceps on "a command."<sup>539</sup> Blankenbuehler elaborates, "[I]t's like the rank, my epaulets, the uniform, but also this musculature of being totally in charge."<sup>540</sup> They, then, turn inward to face one another behind Hamilton as he sings about Eliza and their unborn child. Blankenbuehler continues, "I always heard a heartbeat. So, it goes, '*boom, boom,*' And so, that's sort of reflected in the music; but for me, what I needed the cast to do was *feel* that heartbeat. So right away, we have a roll [backward of the shoulders], and it goes to a contraction [of the torso, with corresponding arm motion] that starts to point to my head as if all I'm thinking about is what's in my [heart]."<sup>541</sup> The collective ensemble then turns to face upstage—continuing the *feeling* of this

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<sup>537</sup> Blankenbuehler, "Hamilton' Choreographer Breaks Down His Moves."

<sup>538</sup> Miranda, "Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)," *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 121.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid.

<sup>540</sup> Blankenbuehler, "Hamilton' Choreographer Breaks Down His Moves."

<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

moment rather than the *seeing* of this moment. Their right arm extends from their head, diagonally upward as if pulling a thought out of one's mind. Once the arm is completely stretched, the wrist flicks downward, dropping the thought to the ground. Blankenbuehler suggests that this moment says, "the thing that's in the back of my head is ruling me."<sup>542</sup> Concurrently, Eliza is conveniently walking across the second-level balcony, helping to further the notion that Hamilton's thoughts and feelings for Eliza and his unborn child are reigning over his consciousness.

As the thought is dropped to the ground, the stop-time moment starts to fade; Hamilton and the soldiers reenter a space of real-time. The collective ensemble body of soldiers regains their own identity apart from Hamilton. Blankenbuehler's choreography transitions from heightened gesture to a more amplified, active hip-hop reminding the audience to view this collective ensemble of soldiers through their contemporary ensemble bodies. The past/present dialectic resurges as the collective ensemble body made up of diverse individual ensemble bodies cooperatively tells the story of the Battle of Yorktown using the embodied vocabulary of contemporary ambition, defiance, and revolution. Continuing with his demonstration Blankenbuehler illuminates, "When we were working on this...it was about saying how can we find a hip-hop step that feels like march?"<sup>543</sup> The resulting step begins with the initiation of a Running Man-style move before taking on a life of its own.

Interrogating the history of The Running Man step in hip-hop practices, Carla Stalling Huntington argues:

What this dance signifies is running in place—working for centuries—and anger: muscle memory of anger in the body from past experiences and remembrance of them on the cellular level. This memory results in clenched fists and strained expression. Running in place makes you feel like you are doing something, but in reality one generates a lot of sweat and increases the heart rate, but one never

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<sup>542</sup> Ibid.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid.

moves, never progresses. Nothing appears to be changing outside the body, not the scene, not the circumstance. Feet are connecting with the past, being bodily mindful of it. The hands reaching forward with clenched fists expect more of the same in the future.<sup>544</sup>

Huntington's profound elucidation of *The Running Man* promotes pause when considering how it is momentarily employed as the propulsion of the Blankenbuehlerized hip-hop march step. Blankenbuehler's step decidedly keeps the hands in open blades rather than clenched fists. If the clenched fist suggests tension or distress in this step, the hand's opening eases such association. Moreover, as the step turns to the front and the open hands reach forward, there is an air of hope for the future. Similarly, regarding the feet, the step does progress, freeing the body from the repeated torment. The collective ensemble body begins *The Running Man* but actively resists its monotony in favor of change—change in the historical way of fighting a war, change in the contemporary way of narrativizing history.

“Marching” forward to the apron of the stage, the collective ensemble of soldiers enters their rank-and-file line to hear their orders. Chernow reports:

After nightfall on October 14, the allies fired several consecutive shells in the air that brilliantly illuminated the sky. Hamilton and his men then rose from their trenches and raced with fixed bayonets toward redoubt ten, springing across a quarter-mile of landscape pocked and rutted from exploding shells. For the sake of silence, surprise, and soldierly pride, they had unloaded their guns to take the position with bayonets alone.<sup>545</sup>

This illustration comes alive through the collective ensemble for the remainder of the number. When Hamilton sings, “Take the bullets out your gun!” they raise their arms overhead into fifth position with their hands in fists facing the sky.<sup>546</sup> Paused in this position, the audience is given

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<sup>544</sup> Huntington, 45.

<sup>545</sup> Chernow, 163.

<sup>546</sup> Miranda, “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down),” *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 121.

**Fifth position:** both arms are raised up over the head with a slight bend in the elbow and shifted forward slightly. The hands are typically open.

the opportunity to observe the line of individual ensemble bodies united along the front of the stage and receives them as a battalion of soldiers listening to their leader give them an unprecedented command. Concurrently the past/present collective ensemble of diverse bodies being asked to fight in an unconventional manner promotes a nuance that reminds the audience of the anomalous nature of their retelling and the need for such a contemporary change in sociopolitical philosophy. Maintaining the clenched fists, moving them down to the hips on “What?” signals a communal moment of tension before they release in optimism and disperse.

When Hercules Mulligan first enters the scene from upstage center, he is noticeably surrounded by a collective of male ensemble bodies. They initiate an intensified hip-hop choreography sequence that features movements similar to krumping. Guy Trebay’s article for the *New York Times* titled “The Clowning, Rump-Shaking,: How a dance called krumping took over an inner-city neighborhood” defines krumping as “equal parts break dance, pantomimed battle and demonic possession.”<sup>547</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance* (2 ed) defines krumping as:

a style of hip-hop that originated in California, drawing on elements of clowning (face painting, comic expressiveness), popping, and African dance. It is characterized by inventive, free style movement, often focusing on the chest and arms, and often involving some physical contact between the dancers suggestive of a ritual battle. It has become more aggressive in tone than its clowning origins.<sup>548</sup>

Blankenbuehler seizes on the aggressive, battle nature of this subgenre of hip-hop dance to both escalate to and engage in combat. At first, the use of the collective male ensemble connects this

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<sup>547</sup> Guy Trebay, “The Clowning, Rump-Shaking,: How a Dance Called Krumping Took Over an Inner-City Neighborhood,” *New York Times* (1923-Current File), June 19, 2005.

Krumping evolved from a dance called “clowning” arguably invented by Thomas Johnson, affectionately known as Tommy the Clown. Clowning is a milder version involving face make up and a more entertainment-oriented goal as opposed to a cathartic one.

<sup>548</sup> “Krumping,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

action with a sense of masculinity. Their movements emanate from the pelvis up the torso through bellicose arm gestures.

However, the men drop to the floor and slide outward as the collective female ensemble similarly krumps their way to the center of the stage. Momentarily separating the collective ensemble by gender reminds the audience that in this retelling, not only are they a racially diverse group of people telling the story of the founding fathers through a unified voice, but they are also varied in gender and linked through movement. When the dance break begins, the overall collective ensemble synchronously krumps and break-dances. Blankenbuehler deliberately sets up a juxtaposition just to break it, promoting the idea that the women fight just as aggressively and skillfully as the men. As Marcell explained, the number is not about equality for women, but it is a thread within the choreography that feeds into the past/present duality of *Hamilton*.

Reminiscing about the section of the dance break where the collective ensemble obtains and manipulates their weapons, Blankenbuehler disclosed:

They have become so good at their craft and the imitating of the British that they could spin on a dime and focus on a dime and kill anything that's in front of them. So, the turn is showing, like, how exceptional they have gotten at their skill. Where when you met them in "Right Hand Man," they couldn't even load their gun. And now they are better than the best thing that the Red Coats could do. And the Red Coats aren't kicking and bayonetting and guerilla warfaring. So, they're sloppy Americans doing dirty ass stuff, and at the same time, doing the best thing that the Red Coats could do.<sup>549</sup>

The collective ensemble body vehemently twirls their guns as if they belong to an exhibition drill team. They initiate a pencil turn, freezing in a shooting stance on the penultimate button of the dance break.<sup>550</sup> After about five counts of stillness, they spin on a dime to switch their angle before

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<sup>549</sup> Blankenbuehler, "Episode 217," *The Hamilcast*.

<sup>550</sup> **Pencil turn:** a stationary turn where the body is completely straight; the non-supporting leg remains down, close to the turning leg.

slowly laying down their gun and gently pushing it away from them. They begin to transition out of the climax of the battle, seemingly walking back to their camp or back home. Laurens observes, “Black and white soldiers wonder / alike if this really means freedom.”<sup>551</sup> The collective ensemble pauses in their tracks, looking diagonally upward. George Washington responds, “Not yet.”<sup>552</sup> On the downbeat following, the collective ensemble bodies collapse into a second position, grand plié with their torsos folded over toward the ground. Their hands go to their knees; one knee drops to the ground. The individual ensemble bodies—male, female, Black, White, Brown, et al.—convey exhaustion and anguish. They just fought for the very premise of freedom and equality, but justice is still out of reach. The past/present dialogue is palpable.

Melancholically, the company walks around the stage singing, “The world turned upside down.”<sup>553</sup> Their past/present bodies are exhausted from the never-ending fight for freedom and equality. Successively they bring on pieces of furniture, stylistically lifting them overhead and upside down. Soon, the entire company is either standing on furniture, the stairs, or the second-level balcony facing front. Blankenbuehler emphasizes, “When community ideas become bigger, more people face front.”<sup>554</sup> In spite of not fully emancipating all bodies residing in the United States during the American Revolution, there is an air of optimism as these diverse, contemporary individual bodies—ensemble and principal—stand in stillness, *showing* that despite this setback, they are free. Nevertheless, this doubleness points to the notion that there is still so much more fighting to do to reach ubiquitous equitability. The stillness of the company allows this dialectic to resonate as the audience bears witness to “black and Latino actors, young men and women from

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<sup>551</sup> Miranda, “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down),” *Hamilton: the Revolution*, 122.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid.

<sup>553</sup> Ibid.

<sup>554</sup> Blankenbuehler, “Episode 217,” *The Hamilcast*.

communities that have seen their freedom infringed for hundreds of years, win freedom for us all.”<sup>555</sup>

Overall, “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)” advocates a dual narrative regarding the fight for past/present freedoms. Although the collective ensemble’s costume and assumed role as soldiers situates them more so in the past, through the comprehension of their diverse individual ensemble bodies within the collective, the audience can perceive them as still being connected to the present. Blankenbuehler’s gradual increase from heightened gesture to an amplified hip-hop choreography score stimulates an elevated sense of humanity for these ambiguous soldiers but aggrandizes the contemporary subtext of the number. Although the “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)” could undoubtedly function as an act finale, the number’s dramaturgical position as being the fifth number from the end of Act I allows the narrative, subtext, and nuances of the number to continue resonating through “What Comes Next,” “Dear Theodosia,” “Tomorrow There’ll Be More of Us,” and “Non-Stop.” For the remainder of *Hamilton*, Blankenbuehler continues to impose and promote the past/present duality through the omniscient and omnipresent collective ensemble body and individual ensemble body, encouraging the reception of sociological metanarratives.

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<sup>555</sup> McCarter, *Hamilton the Revolution*, 113.

The ensemble is seen wearing these jackets throughout the first act. However, this is the first time they *all* have the formal, full-sleeved coats on.

## 5.6 Conclusion: The World Is Wide Enough

*Hamilton*'s position as a cultural phenomenon, now extending beyond the Broadway stage and into the living rooms of those with access to a subscription to Disney+, creates an urgency in interrogating the possibilities of its effects on audiences and the industry. In the six years since it opened at The Public, critics, enthusiasts, academics, and scholars alike have written and analyzed Miranda's text and style. However, like much of musical theatre history, the significance of the ensemble has been left out of the vast majority of these conversations. The production has taken to new heights of subverting traditional musical theatre practices in order to comment on and critique larger questions regarding sociocultural/socioeconomic/sociopolitical institutions and practices—particularly within the United States. Susan Leigh Foster writes, "If the choreography helps viewers to contemplate where they have come from and where they might be going, it serves not so much as a repository of knowledge but as an orienting tool for determining and affirming a system of beliefs."<sup>556</sup> Blankenbuehler's choreography ubiquitously positions the individual and collective ensemble as a way to help viewers contemplate the journey and future of society in the United States.

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<sup>556</sup> Foster, *Choreographing Empathy*, 184.



## 6.0 Conclusion: Blankenbuehler and the Ensemble (Body)

Andy Blankenbuehler's choreographic vocabulary for *In the Heights*, *Bring it On: the Musical*, and *Hamilton* uniquely revolves around heightened-gesture as a given. He makes pedestrian, everyday movements look interesting while giving precedence to the communication of ideas to an audience. Although Blankenbuehler blends ballet, jazz, Robbins, Fosse, hip-hop, and other typical "musical theatre" dance styles with his use of pedestrian movement and gesture, he prioritizes narrative over virtuosity. Only when he needs virtuosic moments to draw focus or convey specific emotions, concepts, or subtext does he activate them—for example, the stunts in *Bring it On: the Musical*. His Blankenbuehlerized dance, drawing from anything and everything, has opened up a vast physical dictionary from which he can tell stories.

Perhaps more important than his distinctive Blankenbuehlerized dance is how he advanced the potential for the ensemble and the ensemble body to function as vital elements within a production. His emphasis on how characters must communicate real-life through dance, the notion that the dance must come out of the text rather than be something decorative or accessorized onto the text, has elevated the possibility for that dancing character to function more broadly. What happens when we understand a chorus body to be an ensemble body—a dramaturgical body, bringing to the stage its lived experiences alongside the scripted conceptions of a generalized background character? How can this ensemble body walking in a heightened, pantomimic way inform the viewer about the psychology of the principal character onstage? How can a group of ensemble bodies engaging in individualized movements shed light on their socioeconomic positionality?

Historically, the dancing body, the chorus body, and the chorus have morphed and developed in concert with transitions in sociocultural thought and praxis. In the twenty-first century where conversations regarding racism, sexism, and equitability are coming to the forefront of our sociocultural/sociopolitical consciousness, Blankenbuehler's shift toward the recognition of the individuality and embodied knowledge within the chorus/ensemble has created a link between a production and the audience that promotes sociological metanarratives beyond the show itself. In her piece "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics," Janet Wolff posits: "the body operates as a symbol of society across cultures, and the rituals, rules, and boundaries concerning bodily behavior can be understood as the functioning of social rules and hierarchies."<sup>557</sup> Whether the ensemble body is presenting the community of (staged) Washington Heights, marginalized students of Jackson High School, or (non) citizens of the Caribbean, it becomes a microcosmic metaphor for society, historically or contemporarily.

Blankenbuehler's emphasis on the ensemble as the lens for a piece positions the individual ensemble bodies within the generalized group of supporting characters as each being important for an audience to encounter and understand a show. The audience receives information either implicitly or explicitly through his augmentation of their significance. For *In the Heights* the audience gains access to a complex social world by bearing witness to the individual ensemble bodies communicating the effects of, response to, and resistance towards processes of gentrification and homogenization. Enjoying spectacular high-flying cheerleading stunts, during *Bring it On: the Musical*, enacted by White virtuosic cheerleading ensemble bodies juxtaposed to hip-hopping ensemble bodies of color circulates a more nuanced dialogue regarding economic

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<sup>557</sup> Janet Wolff, "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 83.

disparities concerning race and the practices of cheerleading and hip-hop. Uniting the diverse individual ensemble bodies as a collective voice in *Hamilton* promotes a narrative of inclusivity and ubiquity linking the past and the present to reflect the production's overall concept of revolutionizing Broadway and historiography. Following a production of *Hamilton* President Barack Obama spoke:

“Part of what’s so powerful about this performance is it reminds us of the vital, crazy, kinetic energy that’s at the heart of America—that people who have a vision and a set of ideals can transform the world. [...] Every single step of progress that we’ve made has been based on this notion that people can come together, and ideas can move like electricity through them, and a world can change.”<sup>558</sup>

The bringing together of people through kinetic energy, through Blankenbuehler’s choreography of the individual and collective ensemble bodies, creates a theatrical and social environment that can inspire change.<sup>559</sup>

Dance and choreography’s ability to frame the ensemble (body) functioning as the lens of a piece can similarly impact how the audience reads the group or the individual enacting the movement. In today’s world, ballet renders a highbrow aura as it distances itself from quotidian gesticulation. Giving precedence to athleticism and virtuosity, incorporating ballet into the piece of theatre frames the ensemble (body) in a way that aggrandize the skill over the individual executing said skill. Theatrical jazz dance—albeit appropriated and somewhat distant from its Black American roots—can promote a quality of sensuality, permissiveness, and expressivity. Hip-hop conjures histories of resistance to oppressive forces on minoritarian groups while pointing

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<sup>558</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: the Revolution: Being the Complete Libretto of the Broadway Musical, with a True Account of Its Creation, and Concise Remarks on Hip-Hop, the Power of Stories, and the New America*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., ed. Lin-Manuel, Miranda, and Jeremy McCarter (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 284.

<sup>559</sup> As was discussed in Chapter Four, there is certainly debate over how revolutionary the show as a whole actually is; but there is no question that the work of the ensemble is fundamental to its success.

to notions of ambition and futurity. Blankenbuehlerized dance—combining these genres and more—elevates a sense of humanity suggesting recognizable gesture and emotion. Blankenbuehler activates his syncretic dance style in a way that shapes the ensemble (body) according to what mood, idea, subtext, nuance, a show calls for in any given moment.

### 6.1 *Bandstand: Beyond Miranda and Hip-hop*

*In the Heights*, *Bring it On: the Musical*, and *Hamilton* have these things in common: Andy Blankenbuehler, Lin-Manuel Miranda, hip-hop, and a dynamic ensemble.<sup>560</sup> These commonalities beg the question, would the ensemble body, or the ensemble as the lens, be possible without one or more of these ingredients? There is no question that Miranda has written space for the ensemble to function as a fundamental component in each of his pieces.<sup>561</sup> Hip-hop has allowed for a dismantling of hierarchical structures regarding dance aesthetics and functions. When I first began creating this project, I actually thought that it was, in fact, hip-hop that made the ensemble in these productions different. It was until Blankenbuehler himself told me he does not claim to “do hip-hop” and prefers to assert that he employs a hybrid-genre of dance that I began to push further into my investigation of why his choreography and the ensemble feel unconventional, feel more affective. In an interview for *Playbill*, he emphasized:

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<sup>560</sup> Although he was not discussed in this project, Alex Lacamoire was also a part of these three productions serving as the orchestrator.

<sup>561</sup> Blankenbuehler also thanks *In the Heights* and *Hamilton* director Tommy Kail for allowing him to use the ensemble as much as he does in these productions.

See Andy Blankenbuehler, “*Hamilton* Choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler on the Broadway Q&A,” interviewed by Danny George, *Playbill* and The Growing Studio, YouTube video, 1:02:35, June 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnP7GvN9MhI>.

I believe in the power of a Broadway ensemble; that is my core mission. That's why I started choreographing when I did because I thought dance could be more integral and the ensemble could be more integral. And so, I use the ensemble in a way that always pushes through the principal, always pushes through the narrative. And so, the narrative of the principal's storyline is buffered up by the way we hold them in the show.<sup>562</sup>

Blankenbuehler has developed a philosophy and technique regarding the ensemble—and as, I argue, consequently the ensemble body—in his work on these musicals that he has carried with him elsewhere, beyond *Miranda* and beyond hip-hop.

Perhaps the most notable production Blankenbuehler has taken on post-*Hamilton* was *Bandstand* (2017). Set in the late 1940s, post-World War II, *Bandstand* tells the story of a young veteran who pursues his career as a musician. The story navigates the challenges of love, loss, and post-traumatic stress. A prominent component of the production is the swing band. Music by Richard Oberacker, with book and lyrics by Oberacker and Robert Taylor, hip-hop is unquestionably absent from this production. What is not absent, however, is a dynamic ensemble and a hybrid-dance genre choreography score that places emphasis on ideas over virtuosity.

Blankenbuehler developed and fine-tuned his choreography style during *In the Heights*, *Bring it On: the Musical*, and *Hamilton*, but it was alive and well in *Bandstand*. Even though he was able to bring his beloved 50s and 60s jazz dance genre to the forefront of the dance vocabulary, the ensemble and thusly the ensemble body still function in similar ways. Blankenbuehler emphasizes, “We must tell stories about people, and we must tell honest stories about people...We must be believable. We must tell the truth...We need realism and the ability to heighten realism.”<sup>563</sup> His emphasis on the ensemble as the fundamental link between the audience and the narrative is

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<sup>562</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler, “*Hamilton* Choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler on the Broadway Q&A,” interviewed by Danny George, *Playbill* and The Growing Studio, YouTube video, 1:02:35, June 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnP7GvN9MhI>.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid.

not lost when he shifts from Miranda's hip-hop centered pieces to a more traditional musical theatre music and movement score.

In *Bandstand* Blankenbuehler uses the ensemble (bodies) to convey and cope with alcoholism, mental illness, and post-traumatic stress. His favorite moment in the show is what he calls "the piano push" and it happened by complete accident. During their rehearsal process the piano was originally set to come onstage using an automated device; when that device was cut, he needed to find a way to get the piano to center stage. The stage directions for this moment, now written into the libretto, read: "SERVICEMEN surround [Donny's] piano, seeming to push him forward in his composition as he spins out a melody that is gradually overtaken by the sound of the full orchestra in his imagination."<sup>564</sup> As the character Donny—who is gravely suffering from survivor's guilt—sits down at the piano to compose a melody to the words of a poem his late-best friend's widow wrote, the figment of soldiers surround him. They slowly labor to push him and the piano to center stage while he plays. When he begins to make progress with his composition the soldier maintaining the lowest, most hunched over posture suddenly sprints off the stage. One by one others break off taking on their own, individual styles of energetically separating from the piano, either exiting or running around the stage as Donny, at least momentarily, imagines the release of his emotional pain. Commenting on this moment, Blankenbuehler discloses:

Choreography has to be honest. Like, in *Bandstand* you quickly learn if this person's a believable vet they're not doing a grand jeté...what soldiers do is they sprint. They run. And so, to see these wounded ghosts actually go back to where they were before it all happened with that sense of speed, it just was an uplifting moment in the theatre that was really, really visceral. And there's no dance step...about any of it.<sup>565</sup>

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<sup>564</sup> Richard Oberacker and Robert Taylor, *Bandstand: the New American Musical* (New York, NY: Samuel French, 2018), 69.

<sup>565</sup> Andy Blankenbuehler and Sarah L. Kaufman, "Fresh Steps," Symphony Space and Words on Dance, New York City, NY, October 21, 2019.

Throughout *Bandstand* there are many similar moments that use the ensemble (bodies) to suggest profound connotations.

In contrast is the number “Nobody” which opens the second act of the production. Audiences observe the leading characters of the swing band individually prepare for a performance where they will raise money to travel to New York and participate in a swing band competition. In the surround, individual male ensemble bodies face upstage and move through various Fosse-style poses or moves that add a touch of angst and anticipation into the scene. However, following the initial moments of preparation for the lead characters, the overall collective ensemble enters and moves through a series of dance sequences. The ensemble transitions between individual movement scores as well as small and large group movement scores. They activate the 1950s and 1960s jazz of which Blankenbuehler was more accustomed prior to *In the Heights*. Acknowledging the use of more codified dance Blankenbuehler suggests, “the only reason [the servicemen] are doing a pirouette is if they are excited about something...[demonstrates jazz pirouette followed by a few finger snaps] and the band is playing, the pirouette informs how I feel about the band.”<sup>566</sup> The confidence of the lead characters increases as they closely approach their performance; as Blankenbuehler suggests, this air of confidence is given to the audience through the enthusiasm emanating from the ensemble. There is no question that the dance functions in a variety of ways to serve the number; but, what about the ensemble themselves?

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**Grand jeté:** a big leap where the dancer takes off from the ground on one foot to land on the other; one leg is stretched forward and the other is stretched backward, behind the body.

**Pirouette:** a turn or spin on one foot, often completed with the non-supporting leg bent with the foot touching the supporting leg.

<sup>566</sup> Blankenbuehler, “Fresh Steps.”

Certainly, in *Bandstand* the notion of “ensemble” is established as Blankenbuehler choreographs individual scores throughout and elevates individual voices within the collective. However, what of the ensemble *body*? Although the ensemble *body* can be seen in moments like “the piano push,” it is arguably less present or even absent for the majority of “Nobody.” When “Nobody” switches from narrating preparation to showing performance the stage directions read: “*We see their various vignettes ultimately coalesce onto the stage of the Pavilion Nightclub. DANCING COUPLES take to the dance floor and mingle at tables in front of the BAND as they blast an instrumental break*”). Correspondingly, the dance and ensemble, in part, transition to function as social and atmospheric elements. Nevertheless, the number is exceedingly presentational and spectacle driven supporting the swing band’s need for virtuosic swing and jazz dancers. Blankenbuehler does choreograph a few solo moments; but for the most part, the choreography is synchronized. In contrast to *Hamilton*, this synchronicity is uniform, there is little to no wavering in interpretation of a dance movement. Aside from a divide along patriarchal gender lines, there is relatively no distinguishing between ensemble members. So, how does it affect our understanding of Blankenbuehler’s work and the possibilities of the ensemble (body)?

All in all, the ensemble continues to serve a myriad of functions as articulated throughout this project. For “Nobody,” the audience receives the vital information from the athletically and synchronistically dancing ensemble that the swing band is celebrated and spectacular. But, the more dance is codified, uniformed, and distanced from heightened gesture, the more the ensemble seemingly becomes invariable. While the genre of hip-hop, or even Blankenbuehlerized hip-hop, indisputably brings with it a sense of unicity, it does not seem to be the defining factor regarding the ensemble body’s fruition. Rather, the use of stylized, pedestrian movement—at least lightly up to interpretation by the individuals in the ensemble—suggests an elevated sense of humanity



allowing for the enhanced visibility of the ensemble body. Even though the ensemble *body* is not as ubiquitous in *Bandstand* as it was in the productions associated with Lin-Manuel Miranda, Blankenbuehler continues to ensure the ensemble serves as a lens by which the audience views the piece and the dance serves as a framing device for the ensemble.

## **6.2 Beyond Blankenbuehler: Stephanie Klemons and Collaboration**

Just as there is far more to analyze of Blankenbuehler's work, there are conversations to be had regarding his collaborators, especially when considering how his methodology is influencing the industry. He frequently references his collaborators as opening him up to more possibilities and helping him when he feels trapped in linear thought. One such collaborator is longtime associate Stephanie Klemons. Klemons is, without a doubt, an under-discussed voice in this project. Not only is she actively responsible for much of the work that Blankenbuehler stages, but it is her job to take his work and continue to teach it to new performers. Blankenbuehler and Klemons have developed an unbelievably tight-knit partnership. He frequently praises how she finishes his thoughts, elaborates on what he really means when he dictates what a move is to look like, and she pushes him to do better and consider all voices as he works. I had the honor of sitting in on callback auditions for a work in progress called *Only Gold* and can emphatically assert that this is an accurate sentiment about their relationship. Klemons was acting as a Rolodex of Blankenbuehler movements and meanings, remembering when he forgot, translating when he was unclear. It is unsurprising that she has recently been billed as his co-choreographer for a production called *Fly* (2020) at La Jolla Playhouse.

Prior to *Fly* at La Jolla Playhouse, Klemons was hired as the choreographer for the Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera's 2019 summer production of *Rock of Ages*. Once again I was privileged to observe her at work. In comparing my experiences witnessing Klemons assisting Blankenbuehler and Klemons flying solo, I noted several similarities. They both work in the rehearsal space with the performers to fill in gaps of action or develop interesting transitions. They choreograph select individuals in the ensemble and allow others to improvise, embracing their natural instincts. For example, both Blankenbuehler and Klemons will suggest an emotion or a plot point for the ensemble to inform, creating space for the individual ensemble body to implement its embodied voice. Klemons informed me that she is "far more interested in authenticity" than staging dance.<sup>567</sup> She emphasized that in her own work she takes the heart of a moment or concept and encourages the individuals in the ensemble to help that moment grow. Even when she is teaching new cast members of *Hamilton* the choreography, she takes the overall structure of the piece, but ensures that there is space for the individual to own their character. Klemons firmly advocated that "the ensemble reflects the choreographer's soul."<sup>568</sup> These brief interactions with Klemons point to Blankenbuehler's propagating influence.<sup>569</sup> Future studies would consider how the ensemble, ensemble body, and choreography are shifting and developing in light of the work of Blankenbuehler, Klemons, and their associates, performers, and students. How are their methodologies influencing other choreographers, directors, and creators? How might the epistemology regarding the ensemble body serve practitioners and scholars alike?

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<sup>567</sup> Stephanie Klemons, interviewed by Amanda Olmstead, July 20, 2019.

<sup>568</sup> Ibid.

<sup>569</sup> Several ensemble members who have worked with Blankenbuehler can also be seen on social media teaching dance classes using his distinctive movement style. They all employ language to suggest emotions, feelings, or ideas in a way similar to Blankenbuehler and Klemons.

Theorizing about and around Andy Blankenbuehler's work afforded me the opportunity to philosophize about the ensemble body and curate a methodology for analyzing how the ensemble/ensemble body actively contributes to a production. How can admiring and the ensemble body provide agency, voice, and respect to performers? Susan Leigh Foster argues, "By inviting viewers into a specific experience of what the body is, they also enable us to contemplate how the body is grounded, its function in remembering, its affinity with cultural values, its participation in the construction of gender and sexuality, and the ways in which it is assimilating technologies so as to change the very definition of the human."<sup>570</sup> The body is unquestionably integral to past, present, and future musical theatre productions. Attaching the body within the ensemble to its social moorings strengthens the potential for the audience to receive complex layers of a production. The ensemble (body) can be the lens by which audiences gain clarity and productions permeate affect. In honoring the profound potential of the ensemble body to reveal a principal character's psychology, tell a piece of the story, express an unspoken aspect of the libretto, transition to another scene, allow characters to express themselves, present ideas metaphorically or abstractly, perform spectacle, connect the audience to an identifiable human experience, and activate a show's sociological metanarrative, we can amplify the reflective embodied voices of the unique individuals who tell the story.

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<sup>570</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London: Routledge, 2011), 218.

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