CHAPTER 4 The Breathing Show: *Improvisation in the Work of Bill T. Jones*

During the late 1990s, critics, fans, and even Bill T. Jones himself began talking about the artist's move from explicitly political, identity-based works to an investigation of aesthetics and pure movement.[1] They talked about the more conventional makeup of Jones's ensemble, particularly the fact that Lawrence Goldhuber and Alexandra Beller, dancers whom the *New York Times* described as "imperfect" because "chubbier than the norm," were no longer in the company.[2] They discussed the fact that Jones rarely used text and was no longer confrontational. He danced to Beethoven and performed at Lincoln Center with the Chamber Music Society. In a 1997 interview with Richard Covington, Jones explained this shift in his work by stating: "It's not quite as sexy to talk about. What was being said in those earlier works was as important as how it was being danced. Here, I'm trying to think about how it's danced first, trusting that the political, social, all those things are in our bodies literally, and in the eyes of the beholder."[3]

This chapter traces the trajectory of Jones's career, from his rejection of contact improvisation, to his aggressive, politically charged works of the 1980s, to his controversial return to form. I discuss the role of improvisation across these shifts, paying particular attention to *The Breathing Show,* an unprecedented evening of solo performance by Jones, made in the twilight of his performing career. Jones began to work on *The Breathing Show* in 1998, when, at the age of forty-six, he found himself both embroiled in controversy surrounding his renewed interest in form and concerned about his legacy. The more he worked on the evening-length performance, the more important improvisation became, whether in the form of his banter with the audience or in his improvised talking solo *Floating the Tongue*. According to Jones, "It's curious and unsettling, but I feel *The Breathing Show* only began to come alive when I decided to speak and to allow myself to improvise."[4]

I discuss how improvisation "enlivened" *The Breathing Show* by analyzing the relationship between Jones's onstage presence and *Ghostcatching,* an installation that used motion-capture technology to present traces of Jones's prior improvisations. With *Ghostcatching,* Jones's improvisations became virtual, moving in a sense *beyond* the body. How then, if at all, does the work hold onto its social concerns and critical perspective on issues of identity? Does *Ghostcatching* represent Jones's most radical formalist turn? Can politics transpire in a virtual dance that allows neither sweat nor skin, primary markers of labor and race, to appear on stage? For Jones, these questions are bound with the issue of whether freedom consists in the ability to follow or to deviate from formal conventions—to affirm pure form or critique it. In more general terms: is pure form escape or constraint? And likewise with improvisation, as practiced in certain established avant-garde contexts: does it represent freedom or its absence? Jones suggests that both possibilities involve degrees of constraint and conformism, and *The Breathing Show* reflects on this tension explicitly. In this respect, Jones's point is perfectly in keeping with this book's broader critique of freedom as something that can be achieved or that consists in anything other than the struggle to realize it. Freedom, Jones seems to imply, consists in the perpetual readiness demanded by a critical stance toward oneself and the world in general.

Insisting on the Personal

As Jones prepared for a career as a professional dancer during the early 1970s, he worked diligently to acquire what he thought was foundational technique. He spent difficult hours in ballet classes, trying to emulate the clear articulation of highly trained bodies and mold his body into classical lines. It was a frustrating experience. Jones explains: "The mental and physical tortures of the dance studio offered no connection to any sense of lyric flight. . . . The ballet barre became the site of a battle between what I was and what I willed myself to be."[5] Improvisation, however, offered Jones a reprieve from this grueling attempt at self-transformation. According to Jones, in hidden moments during his first years at SUNY-Binghamton, he improvised alone in the studio, which allowed him to experience "the deep truth of movement."[6]

In addition to hidden moments of solo improvisation, contact improvisation offered Jones another alternative to the ballet barre. Although his conversations with Steve Paxton during the 1980s might suggest otherwise, Jones

was exhilarated by his first encounter with contact improvisation. It was the summer of 1973—a heady time for Jones, when life as a dancer seemed difficult but full of possibility. Having recently transferred from SUNY-Binghamton to SUNY-Brockport, Jones picked up a flyer on campus: "IF YOU LIKE TO ROCK AND ROLL OR LINDY HOP, DO AIKIDO, OR MAKE LOVE—COME ON DOWN AND JOIN US AT THE CONTACT IMPROVISATION WORKSHOP WITH LOIS WELK."[7] Jones was acquainted with Welk and had already begun to study improvisation with Richard Bull. According to Jones, "It was in an improvisation class taught by Richard Bull that I discovered that dance wasn't only about pointing my feet or making lines in space. It was about how I could solve problems."[8] So Jones convinced his partner, a white Jewish man named Arnie Zane, to attend the contact improvisation workshop with him. They were enlivened by the experience. As a sign of the times, Zane described his initial foray into contact improvisation as "better than tripping."[9]

In Welk's workshops, dancers learned the basic principles of contact improvisation: how to dance in physical contact with others, how to "share weight," and how to fall. According to Jones, "Suddenly, dancing was not only about trying to fly. Dancing was about listening, making sense out of an intensely personal exchange as private as lovemaking."[10] Jones explains that he was ready for an increased awareness of touch and everyday movement. Reminiscing about his initial exposure to contact improvisation, he explains: "Here I found the delicacy of two foreheads together, the contact point sliding across the eye sockets and down to the chin. Two throats then touching at a single point, then clavicles and shoulders, sternums and bellies. . . . Physical awareness was richer than ever before."[11]

Improvisation continued to be important for Jones, even as he became technically proficient and well-known as a choreographer. Returning to Binghamton after a brief excursion to San Francisco in the early 1970s, Jones, Zane, and Welk joined the dancer Jill Becker and the poet Ira Bruckner and moved into a wreck of a building, where they made work under the auspices of the American Dance Asylum. During this time, Jones choreographed several pieces: *Entrances* (1974), *Track Dance* (1974), and *Everybody Works/All Beasts Count* (1975), which garnered Jones's first grant as well as positive recognition from the *New York Times*. But despite his increasing success as a choreographer, Jones felt very much alone. Although the Dance Asylum was an exercise in countercultural communal living, it was not a substitute for

Jones's family. Jones explains: "Dance Asylum was a federation of artists, not a family. . . . A kind of heaviness would overtake me at times. I'd put on Mahalia Jackson, improvise in the studio, and find myself crying."[12] While improvisation initially offered Jones a reprieve from the demands of technical training, before long, it also offered Jones a way to connect to a sense of personal history, an emotional connection that fueled much of his later politicized work.

Floating the Tongue was precisely this type of dance. The piece was originally created in 1978, and its title refers to a Buddhist meditation practice where one concentrates on the "simple" task of floating one's tongue within one's mouth. Jones created *Floating the Tongue* for a recital at New York's Kent School for Boys. Wanting to dispel the notion that dancers don't think while dancing, Jones created a challenging, four-part improvisation. To begin, Jones improvises until he arrives at a movement phrase that is set in his memory and repeatable. In a recent performance, Jones created a stationary sequence wherein a series of undulations ripples through isolated parts of his body: his head, his right shoulder, and then his hips. Jones then punctuates this sequential movement with clear lines and recognizable shapes. At one point, his arms form a wide T, extending out from his shoulders to the farthest reaches of the stage. A bit later, Jones slowly rises into a delicate relevé. The phrase ends as Jones extends his arms on a front diagonal. With eyes closed, he first brings his palms to his face and then brushes them slowly down the front of his body.

For the second iteration of the phrase, Jones describes each movement in as much detail as possible while dancing: "Slowly allow face to slide forward . . . right shoulder rolls forward, North position, and retrograde to the back . . . center the weight . . . and the ass reaches to the back . . . as the heels drop down to fifth position, arms extend in second."[13] Although one immediately sees the challenge of speaking while dancing, one also sees the abundance of movement at any moment during the phrase—far more than one can describe.

During the third iteration of the phrase, Jones continues to talk, but with minimal self-censorship or self-consciousness. He dances the sequence while continuously saying what he thinks and feels. Here, one begins to see the "emotional meaning" that lives in gestures of the body. As his physical undulations unfold, Jones exclaims: "Always saying something degrading about blacks like step and fetch it, like long-necked nigger. Why do I say that

. . . and front and back and front and back . . . Always . . . Trisha and the way she swings her hips . . . What does it mean to be an adult? To own property? . . . Open me up, oh lord, open my heart . . . I'm sweating."[14] As Barbara Browning explains, "The meanings of that embodied text are inevitably personal and political, difficult, and engaged with the world. "[15]

According to the score, the final iteration can develop in any direction, with Jones's conscious mind leading or following. According to Jones, "It [the final phase of the improvisation] has to have the contours like a good jazz riff. Even when you lose the melody, you can still feel it."[16] The dancer also has the option to stop moving entirely. As a result, this final sequence varies tremendously in timing and volume, with remarkable expressive range. Jones whispers and screams, repeats movements, and occasionally stands still. Guttural sounds frequently emerge, interrupted by recognizable words and phrases. With far looser strictures than the previous iterations, the task recedes, becoming less apparent than the actual dance that unfolds. As Jones performs *Floating the Tongue,* his improvisational skill emerges, as does his bold willingness to be publicly vulnerable. One never knows what will come out.

Floating the Tongue did far more than reveal the fact that dancers think. In his memoir, *Last Night on Earth,* Jones explains that the creation of *Floating the Tongue* drew upon memories of his mother. According to Jones, "My mother's praying was the first theater I ever saw—and the truest. "[17] *Floating the Tongue* allows Jones to enter a similar state of being, where he accesses layers of history as well as deep levels of meaning that exist within movement. Discussing a particularly moving performance in February 2000, Browning notes that Welk's presence in the audience provoked in Jones a host of associations and memories, most notably the death of Arnie Zane, who died of AIDS in 1988. Browning explains: "It [Zane's passing] tumbled out of Jones's mouth in painful fragments, amid a rush of other images and associations—some politically overdetermined, some excruciatingly personal. One had the sense of being witness to an extraordinary moment, in which poignant personal memories and political history were inextricably intertwined."[18]

Like much of Jones's later work, *Floating the Tongue* made some people uncomfortable. For example, Arlene Croce, the *New Yorker*'s longtime dance critic and one of Jones's most famous detractors, dismissively wrote that Jones had worked himself into a tizzy with *Floating the Tongue.* Jones

explains: "I was hurt by this. And offended. This 'tizzy' is something I have claimed as an inheritance. Perhaps in her experience it did not seem genuine, or perhaps it seemed too genuine—embarrassing, even—but for me it is an internal part of the strategy that allows me to make art."[19]

By introducing autobiography and emotional experience into his work via spoken improvisation, Jones ushered an important challenge to 1970s postmodern dance. As noted earlier, Jones believed in the utopian project of contact improvisation when he was a student during the early 1970s. According to Jones, contact improvisation "encouraged an unselfconscious, direct physical intimacy in which all differences—weight, size, psychological temperament, even gender and race—were negated in favor of cohesion—tissue to tissue, bone to bone, muscle to muscle."[20] But by 1983, as noted in the previous chapter, Jones no longer felt like a "contact person."[21]

This switch grew out of Jones's work with Arnie Zane. As the two men choreographed and performed together during the late 1970s and early 1980s, a productive tension arose between Zane's reluctance to include autobiographical material in their dances and Jones's desire to do so. Despite a great deal of criticism, Jones increasingly provided a place for the personal in his work. In retrospect, he explains: "We had to respond to the fact that I was a black man who used the word 'nigger' in the context of a work that had been a moment ago—we thought—purely about form, time, repetition, maybe the personalities of the dancers." Angry at repeatedly being reduced to a "black choreographer," Jones began to challenge notions of formal purity by exploring the politics of identity.

Alienated from the white avant-garde dance scene, Jones became inspired during the late 1970s and early 1980s by the artist Vito Acconci, who strove to aggravate his audience, whether by banging against pipes when people were in earshot or masturbating in art galleries. Jones employed a different strategy: he used improvised movement and language to challenge the racist assumptions of his audience and the New York dance world.[22] Knowing that his dancing body often appeared beautiful and seductive, Jones quickly realized that language could complicate matters in useful ways. According to Jones, by the early 1980s, he was no longer preoccupied with pleasing his audience: "With the Acconci strategy in place, I was able to deconstruct this identity. Deconstruction yielded solos that were confessional, often painful, taking unpleasant emotions and exposing them spontaneously in a fashion that was brutal on both the audience and me."[23]

In 1981, the American Dance Festival invited Jones to perform as part of its "Emerging Generations Program" in Durham, North Carolina. Jones performed an improvised solo based on a series of oppositional statements. He pronounced to the audience, "I love women." Then, "I hate women. I love white people. I hate white people. I'd like to kiss you. I'd like to tear your fucking heart out. Why didn't you leave us in Africa? I'm so thankful for the opportunity to be here."[24] In the *New York Times,* Jack Anderson reviewed the program, exclaiming that Jones's four-part *Social Intercourse* was the most "emotionally explosive" work of the evening. He claimed that the finale's tremendous "crescendo of rage made the evening an evocation of the frustration and anxieties of black Americans."[25] The solo shocked many people, and Jones wasn't invited back to the festival for ten years.

The Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company was founded in 1982 and immediately became known for the diversity of its members. Together, Jones and Zane produced a range of works that challenged the avant-garde. During the mid-1980s, they made works like *Fever Swamp, Holzer Duet . . . Truisms,* and *Freedom of Information,* while managing the demands of a well-known company with financial needs and international touring. But Zane became sick and, in 1985, was diagnosed with HIV. Jones also tested positive, but it was Zane who began to commute to New York City for chemotherapy. The couple found themselves amid a far-reaching AIDS epidemic. In his memoir, Jones explains: "Watching Arnie, I felt as though I was standing on the shore of a lake in which he was swimming. He would disappear for long periods of time, then, at completely unpredictable moments, he would come up for air. As the day wore on, he seemed to move farther and farther from shore and to surface less frequently."[26] Although Zane died in 1988, the company continues to be called the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company.

A Seemingly Formal Turn

Two years after Zane died of AIDS, Jones committed himself to making work that dealt explicitly with his identity. Regarding *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land* (1990), Jones states, "I reasoned that if my time was limited, that if I was to follow Arnie soon . . . I would speak in a voice that was decidedly African-American."[27] *Last Supper,* which includes a distillation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel and excerpts from Sojourner Truth's *Ain't I a Woman?* and LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman,* enabled Jones to

grapple with a series of social and political questions: "Was Uncle Tom a disgrace to his race? A romanticization of servitude? Is this high-minded, propagandistic literary work of any relevance to us today? What happened to the bold notion of liberty that fueled this novel?"[28] The piece ends with a half-hour section called *The Promised Land,* where a diverse cast culled from local communities fills the stage, gently disrobing to create a broad image of humanity. It was Jones's attempt to affirm a commonality that bravely embraced difference.

Between Jones's overtly political *Last Supper* and the discussions about formal purity that encircle his work of the late 1990s, a notorious controversy erupted over his 1994 piece *Still/Here.* For the piece, Jones journeyed around the country conducting movement workshops with terminally ill volunteers. According to Jones, "*Still/Here* I thought was going to be a work that nobody would find controversial—there was no controversy. It wasn't about my black rage. It was going to be unassailably about human experience, or so I thought."[29] The evening-length work that Jones choreographed for his dance company drew elements of its movement vocabulary from these workshops and incorporated sound and video of workshop participants. It was a poetic dance about survival, famously denounced by *New Yorker* critic Arlene Croce as "victim art."

Refusing on principle to see *Still/Here,* Croce proclaimed the piece "undiscussable" for the critic. In a particularly brutal passage, showing galling privilege and narrow vision, Croce explains:

> I can't review someone I feel sorry for or hopeless about. As a dance critic, I've learned to avoid dancers with obvious problems—overweight dancers (not fat dancers; Jackie Gleason was fat and was a good dancer), old dancers, dancers with sickled feet, or dancers with physical deformities who appear nightly in roles requiring beauty of line. In quite another category of undiscussability are those dancers I'm *forced* to feel sorry for because of the way they present themselves: as dissed blacks, abused women, or disfranchised homosexuals—as performers, in short, who make out of victimhood victim art.[30]

The *New Yorker* article incensed Jones and continues to weigh heavily on the production and reception of his work. To this day, he solemnly refuses to mention Croce by name. But Croce was not a lone "guardian" during the culture wars and identity politics of the 1990s. Jones and his company fre-

quently encountered protests and pickets in their tours around the country. After a while, Jones explains, "I had sort of had it. . . . This is not what I want to do. And so I began to think about leaving art or going more deeply into what I loved to begin with, which was movement."[31] By the late 1990s, Jones seemed to have traveled full circle with his renewed interest in form. The return, however, was not so simple.

One could argue that Jones's formal turn was overdetermined by a particular political moment that might eventually disappear, if it hasn't already. But this line of argument in no way loosens the bond between politics and form, shifting across cultures and historical periods but never disappearing. Jones's renewed interest in the "how" of dancing differs from a naive retreat into a land of imagined formal purity. Jones explains quite clearly: "I think it's impossible to perform any ritualized activity in a public sphere that is politically neutral. I think it's impossible. All art forms, including Merce Cunningham, who is my favorite choreographer, Merce claims that it's politically neutral, it's not. Trisha [Brown], who is a great teacher to me, who I love, thinks it's politically neutral, it's not."[32] As a black man dancing in a time and place where whiteness is largely invisible and so-called formal purity looks suspiciously like traditionally white aesthetics, Jones understands the naïveté, the exclusivity of imagining a formal realm free of politics.

In a recent interview at New York University, Jones asked an auditorium full of students, "Are we there yet?" Nudging the auditorium full of white students to realize the distance we have yet to travel in pursuit of such looking, Jones continues, "Why can't *I* be free?" Committed to blackness in all its variance and doubtful of our collective "there-ness" with respect to race-free looking, Jones nevertheless maintains his renewed interest in form. Pushing boundaries and asking questions even when the answers are unclear, Jones urges the students: "Can you see with two sets of eyes? Can you see the identity, and also see the form? What is at stake on that stage?" Recognizing that Jones's talk about pure movement never strays from an awareness of the stakes involved, one gets the sense that he doesn't want to retreat from the political. He just does not want to foreground it constantly, using the same vocabulary that he used in the 1980s and early 1990s. Caught in this bind, Jones calls for a complicated doubling: "Can you see with two sets of eyes?"[33]

The most radical aspect of Jones's call, and perhaps the easiest to miss, is that he genuinely seeks a sum larger than its parts. He rejects an either/or situation, where the viewer alternates between focusing on identity one mo-

ment and form the next. Either strand of Jones's vision, no matter how celebratory the discourse, is problematic in isolation. He asks: "When you look at my stage now, can you look with two sets of eyes? Do you see the sexual preference of the person, the race of the person, the gender of the person, and then, can you see what they're doing? And how the two come together to create a vision that is, that makes you want to look more carefully, want to dance, to want to touch one another."[34] In seeking an "ethics of transcultural performance," the dance scholar André Lepecki configures a similar choreographic task for the viewing audience. Claiming "laziness in seeing" as dance viewers' primary pathology when faced with a body from another culture, Lepecki calls for a delicate partnering between audience and dancer: "How can my audience body become a partner to those bodies dancing for me?"[35] Rather than brutally attempting to wipe out difference with an imagined formal purity, or remaining content in a distanced relationship of "respect" while reducing the other to his or her most obvious markers of alterity, Jones urges audiences to meet the performer as a partner. The difficulty, of course, as discussed earlier in relation to Roland Barthes, is to realize one's pursuit of pleasure without overwhelming the other.

Ghostcatching's *Cool Blue Lurchings*

In 1998 and 1999, the digital media artists Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar worked with Merce Cunningham to produce *Hand-drawn Spaces* and *Biped,* motion-capture pieces that met with critical acclaim. With motion capture, reflective sensors are placed on a moving body. Cameras surrounding the dancer then record the movements of each sensor in time and space, feeding this data into a computer for animators, in this case Kaiser and Eshkar, to choreograph and design. Cunningham, long interested in the type of formalism that Jones challenged throughout his career, didn't care whether Kaiser and Eshkar's technology captured his dancers' "identities." For example, in *Biped,* Cunningham taught movement sequences to two dancers, one male and one female. Their motion was then captured and drawn without sexual markings, enabling the combination of their phrases. In a sense, the dancers were merged. But if Cunningham attracted Kaiser and Eshkar with his abstract, linear movement, his focus on form and his willingness to experiment with technology, most famously with Life-Forms software, Bill T. Jones attracted the digital artists for different reasons. According to Kaiser, they were

intrigued by Jones's movement style, which they saw as more fluid and less angular than Cunningham's and thus more challenging to capture with their new technology. The other reason, however, had to do with Jones as an outspoken, politicized, gay, black choreographer. Kaiser explains, "We were also interested in working with Bill, not as a choreographer of a group, but as a choreographer of himself: of his own body, of his own identity."[36]

Presented with the opportunity to collaborate with accomplished digital media artists and motion-capture technology, Jones was eager to experiment, but not without reservations. Intrigued and impressed with Kaiser and Eshkar's previous work with Cunningham, but forthright in his concerns regarding the project, Jones clearly told his collaborators, "I do not want to be a disembodied, denatured, de-gendered series of lines moving in a void."[37] According to Kaiser, whereas Cunningham's *Hand-drawn Spaces* "reveled in the supposed freedom of abstracted motion, *Ghostcatching* would question it."[38]

After *Ghostcatching* premiered at the Cooper Union in January 1999, Jones, Kaiser, and Eshkar returned to the motion-capture studio to rework parts of the piece. A video version then appeared within Jones's tour of *The Breathing Show.*

As Ghostcatching *begins, blue light appears on stage, projected onto a giant screen. A hand-drawn outline of a rectangular box then emerges, followed by a sketchlike figure, the motion-captured Jones inside the box. The figure moves through a series of six positions, lettered A through F, while a voice calls out the letter with each shift of position. The figure, clearly male, clearly Jones, sculpts himself into linear movements—sharp lines—much like profiled figures within an Egyptian frieze.*

Before long, another Jones emerges and moves through the boundaries of the box to dance briefly around its borders before disappearing. While the figure on the inside continues to move through his sequence of lettered movements, a series of bodies appears, each one more fully drawn. They dance fluidly, occupying expanses of space outside of the box, leaving traces with their hands and feet. Much like the famous photographs of Picasso, lights seemingly attach to the figures' distal ends, enabling them to draw with their dancing. A leg gracefully arcs into arabesque, leaving a semi-circle of light in its wake. Another figure falls into a squat with arms raised, once again marking the pathways of his body.

Figure 5. Still from *Ghostcatching*, 1999, by Bill T. Jones, Paul Kaiser, and Shelley Eshkar. Image courtesy of Kaiser/Eshkar.

> *At one point, Jones hums a child's song that he sang earlier in the show: "Go Tell Aunt Rhody. Go Tell Aunt Rhody. Go Tell Aunt Rhody—the old grey goose is dead." Later, Jones sings an even more sinister and otherworldly song: "I'd fly away to the one I love." Figures appear and get caught, but traces remain. All the while we hear Jones's voice, deep, low, and strange.*
>
> *As the piece ends, seven sticklike figures emerge, resembling the original caged image. They move as though bound within a blue web, roped with blue wire. They lunge out with weighted force but are caught, resembling a group of people moving in a chain gang. Bound, they cannot get very far. At the end, confined, they remain blue and lurching.*

In *The Breathing Show,* the juxtaposition of live and digital bodies is immediately compelling. How do *Ghostcatching*'s blue figures relate to the real-life Jones, who has a casual relationship with the audience, taking time after his vigorously danced solos to wipe his brow with a towel, drink some water, and chat with the audience with all the confidence and style expected from him? Jones quite consciously inserted these improvised transitions into the evening's events. By contrasting the mediated figure in *Ghostcatching* and the live, improvising Jones, I do not mean to ignore the many ways that the live and the mediated imbricate each other. Nor do I mean to embrace the modernist trap of suggesting that the sweating, chatting Jones is simplistically more "real" or "authentic" than the digital body. To be sure, even Jones's casual persona is a performed character, sometimes enacted quite (self-)consciously. When discussing his early years dancing with Zane in Binghamton, Jones illustrates this type of performance by stating, "We had public personas like suits of clothes that we put on, or were somehow put on for us."[39] As much as any dancer in history, people expect things of Jones: dynamism, outspokenness, and politicization. Either in keeping with or against these expectations, he performs.

Granting the shifting and performative nature of the self that Jones presents on stage, important distinctions nevertheless exist between his live and mediated forms as presented in *The Breathing Show.* Particularly interesting, and politically important, is the virtual figure's inability to sweat or lose its breath like the live and fleshy Jones. This juxtaposition exists at the very foundation of the *Ghostcatching* collaboration. When Jones joined Kaiser and Eshkar in the motion-capture studio, he had twenty-four markers affixed to his body as he danced in a studio full of lights, cameras, and screens. Doubtful whether the new technology could actually capture the subtle nuances of his quivers and undulations, Jones nevertheless began improvising. According to Paul Kaiser, "Six times he ran through the series, each improvisation freer and more fluid than the last. As his exuberance took over, the sweat poured out of him and some of the markers popped off of him."[40] Discussing the early limitations and frustrations in the motion-capture studio, Jones describes the space as being cold with a hard floor, less than ideal conditions for a dancer's body. More important, he echoes Kaiser in stating, "They hadn't really thought out the limitations of the sensors on my body. . . . Sure enough, once I began to sweat [the sensors] would pop off and then everything would stop. . . . And I said, 'I don't think your technology can ac-

tually capture what I do.'"[41] This is a profound claim, suggesting a moment from *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2*, where Foucault announces, "It is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them."[42] Sweat and the new technology repelled each other from the beginning of the *Ghostcatching* project. The material outpouring of Jones's work actually stopped the motion of production.

Jones was eventually impressed by the truth of the "dots swirling around on the computer screen," mesmerized by the fact that they presented his movement on a screen despite the absence of his "body." Nevertheless, there is very little trace, if any, of his labor, his improvisational exhaustion, once *Ghostcatching* becomes fully realized as a public work. Unlike the virtual image, unable to fatigue, the sweat of Jones's live dancing body creates exuberance, providing material evidence of his recent labor and physical exertion. While admittedly not all labor is sweated and not all sweat is labor, an undeniable gap emerges between the two figures, one digital and the other live. Making this gap visible has racialized, political ramifications of interest to Jones. Rather than bow graciously and then disappear behind the curtain, Jones talks with the audience, making audible his body's rapid pulse and need for breath.

In *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, Andrew Ross discusses various images of work on stage. In reference to jazz musicians, he argues that the "spectacle of work," visibly signified by sweat on the brow, contains multiple meanings that interrupt romantic images of the spontaneous, virtuoso master of leisure on stage: "It is the sweat of the vestigial minstrel clown, but is also the reminder of the sweat of slave labor . . . a comforting reminder to a white audience that labor exists, and is elsewhere, in a black body. But it is also a militant negation of the racist stereotype of the 'lazy' i.e. underemployed black male."[43] By contrast, Ross states that "in the 'cool' world of modern jazz ushered in by bebop, evidence of strenuous activity is supposed to be interpreted as a sign of mental and not physical labor."[44] And, of course, this shunning of the physical has its own racial history.

But Jones is a black male dancer, master of an art where beauty and virtuosity are tied inseparably to the physical. What now does one make of the unabashedly sweating Bill T. Jones, an iconic figure in the dance world known for his identity-centered work, placed up against his motion-captured image, dancing without sweat and skin? While the virtual motion-captured figure itself has no sweat or racial markings, its juxtaposition with the live
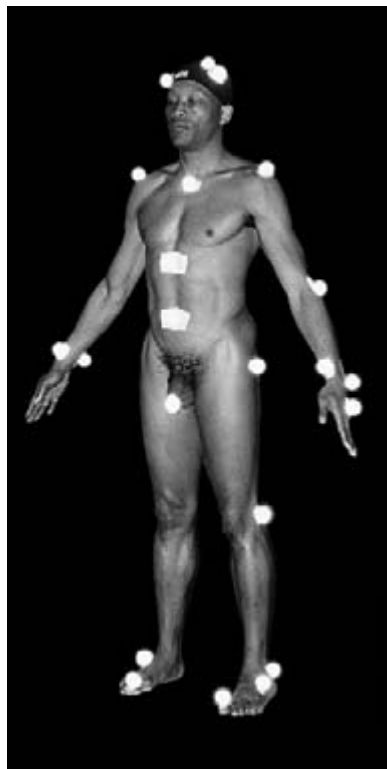
Figure 6. Bill T. Jones wearing motion-capture markers. Image courtesy of Kaiser/Eshkar.

improvising Jones invigorates their absence in a way that challenges any simple celebration or comfort that the audience might take in the slick, blue images. Not only does one remember Jones when one sees the virtual movement, but one hears his voice at various points, making it impossible to shut out remembrances of the fleshy body, black and working.

Automatons, Labor, and the Racialized Other

The absence of sweat in a virtual image of a black dancing body recalls a long history of relationships between imaging technologies and the working body. Francis Barker, a professor of literature at the University of Essex, has a dark view of man's fascination with automatons, claiming that notions of artificial man have haunted the individual throughout modernity: "It [the automaton]

Fig. 7. Step 3: Markers optically recorded and converted to digital 3D files. Image courtesy of Kaiser/Eshkar.

appears in our peripheral vision; in our dreams and nightmares; our psyches, in our films, and in our philosophy, and so on. And it appears not as the romantic 'other' of our normality, but as the question of the normative itself."[45] He argues that, historically, automatons have fundamentally challenged closely guarded notions of human authenticity. Considering *Ghostcatching*, dance scholar Kent DeSpain voices similar anxiety by asking: "How will we define what is human and what is not in an era of increasingly extensive and invasive biotechnology? Will what is imaginable on a computer become what is demanded on a stage, and will the dancers who try to fulfill that vision be forced to resort to more and more medical assistance to improve or repair their overtaxed bodies?"[46] DeSpain echoes Barker's claims regarding the anxiety brought on by automatons throughout modernity: how do we maintain our sense of the human in the face of increasingly sophisticated technological

mappings of and abstractions from the body? In addition, De Spain expresses the fear of failing, exhausted, "overtaxed" bodies, a condition common in both factory workers and dancers, albeit in different ways.

In discussing the history of automatons, scholars frequently note the famous creations of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries: Jacques de Vaucanson's gilt-brass duck that not only quacked and waddled like a real duck but above all made its internal digestive processes visible; or *The Musician,* by Pierre Jaquet-Droz, which amazed audiences in 1773 with its mechanical woman who played a miniature clavichord by pressing her fingers upon the keys. Allen Feldman has recently added to this rich scholarship on reproductions of everyday life by conducting an insightful archaeology linking automatons, labor, and the senses. In his essay "The Human Touch: Towards a Historical Anthropology and Dream Analysis of Self-Acting Instruments," dance and labor bear a relationship from the very first sentence, which describes Father Athanasius Kircher's seventeenth-century diagram of an automated water organ. On the right side of the organ, automatons made to look like blacksmiths are hard at work with their hands; on the left side, grotesque figures dance a dance of death.[47]

While figures resembling humans initially thrilled people, mechanized figures performing human tasks fascinated them even more. A model that could play the piano realistically, or a miniature piano that could play a real piece of music without any figure whatsoever, pleased and intrigued people, with a twinge of the anxiety noted by Barker. By the eighteenth century, which Feldman takes to be the classical age for automaton design, mechanized figures became increasingly miniaturized, so that by the nineteenth century they made their way from the courts and exhibit halls of Europe to the domestic space of the bourgeois parlor. They became decorous, household curios. Given the remarkable shifts that came with the age of mechanical reproduction, these "curios" also created metaphors for real workers in the factory, thus collapsing factory, worker, and product into one. In short, automatons provided the spectacle of mechanical labor, complete except for the individual. Feldman suggests that by teaching its audience how to play with machines, the automaton relieved the pressure or burden of labor, making it an aesthetic product of consumption.

During the nineteenth century, anxiety about fatigue and economic production arose. Of course, Karl Marx is the most famous chronicler and theorist of these nineteenth-century changes. In volume 1 of *Das Kapital,* first

published in 1867, Marx discusses the many changes in labor brought about by the machine. He explains the ironic fact that "the most powerful instrument for reducing labor-time suffers a dialectical inversion and becomes the most unfailing means of turning the whole lifetime of the worker and his family into labor-time at capital's disposal for its own valorization."[48] Machines had the capacity to increase a worker's productivity while also eliminating the backbreaking nature of manual labor. Marx cites the cotton gin (1793), which enabled a worker to go from separating and cleaning one pound of cotton per day to one hundred pounds, presumably without the same strain. But, Marx argues, instead of relieving workers, these machines made it possible for anyone and everyone, including women and children, to join the workforce and enabled the workday to be stretched beyond natural limits. This, he notes, is the gruesome paradox of capitalism in the age of machines: "It creates, on the one hand, new conditions which permit capital to give free rein to this tendency, and on the other hand, new incentives which whet its insatiable appetite for the labor of others."[49] And since the machine does not fatigue, it could seemingly go on producing forever were it not for the limits of its human operators, which become pushed to extremes.

Still trying to figure out why people in this age of industrial production derided by Marx were so fascinated by indefatigable mechanical automatons, Feldman notes that the utopian image of automatons appeared mainly in the privacy and security of the middle class, far from the concrete class tensions and the physical stress of the factory floor.[50] According to Anson Rabinach, "The production ideologies of the nineteenth century understood the physical limits of the laboring body, particularly the body under the stress and strain of industrial mass production, as a moral horizon that set the practical limits of civilizational progress."[51] If capital was the way to progress, fatigue provided an obstacle. This is precisely the problem noted by Marx. In addition, Feldman argues that fatigue and exhaustion in the factory were linked not only to broad social breakdown but also to "the uncontrollable and involuntary release of irrational behavior and sexual drives that were antithetical to the public morality of the work ethic and the private morality of bourgeois decorum."[52] The bourgeoisie feared the activities that the working class engaged in to let off steam, activities like sex and alcohol consumption that supposedly represented a fall into the realm of mere instinct. According to Feldman, the automatons offered a perfect view of labor that had no need for these "uncontrollable" behaviors. Feldman also proposes that automa-

tons in some instances appeared to the working class as images of moral up-lift: figures that work unceasingly, without the need to rest or recuperate.[53] The fact that automatons were immune to the usual fatigues of labor implied that the mere humans who were not were somehow guilty of moral faltering.

Furthermore, the technology of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century automatons was often aestheticized precisely by images of the colonial subject. According to Feldman:

> There were the Swiss automata that depicted anthropomorphic, ape-like, Negroid fiddlers, or the automated, moving, and musical elephant mounted by a brown skinned Hindu mahout. There was a whole series of Orientalist automata: soothsayers magicians, and conjurers such as the Chinese magician sitting in a temple or a music box showing a magician in Persian dress flanked by two monkey musicians in Asiatic costume playing cellos and violin. There were the Arab tightrope dancer with black musicians playing drums; the Indian snake charmer who played clockwork music through a flute; the Negro dressed in slave garb; another Negroid narghile smoker, dressed in Egyptian costume, with exaggerated lips drinking a cup of coffee; an automaton of a westernized Negro being shaved; and that of a black crossbowman wearing nothing but a loin cloth made of palm leaves.[54]

Interestingly, the Industrial Revolution did not end man's fascination with automata. Instead, graphic images and photographic recordings emerged to map the body in detail, with labor figuring into the equation ever more explicitly. During the 1860s, Étienne-Jules Marey, professor of the "natural history of organized bodies" at the Collège de France, began investigating the movement of bodies. "'From the invisible atom to the celestial body lost in space,' he wrote, 'everything is subject to motion.'"[55] Initially, he used a graphing device with one end attached to a moving object and the other attached to a stylus that inscribed the moving object's fluctuations onto strips of paper covered with soot. Since the object needed to be attached to the graphing tool, these graphing devices were limited in what they could record.[56]

Later, having seen Eadward Muybridge's photographs of galloping horses in an 1878 issue of the journal *La Nature,* Marey began corresponding with Muybridge and embarked on his own photographic studies.[57] Marey sought new photographic methods to capture the principles underlying movement, as opposed to merely representing it. With these experiments in mind, people of-

ten cite Marey as the earliest and most direct precursor to the motion-capture technology used by Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar in their collaboration with Bill T. Jones. While the recent digital work done in 1999 is clearly much more sophisticated than Marey's work, the two started from similar places, and the visual images from both processes are strikingly similar.

Although Marey developed a wide range of techniques in seeking movement's underlying principles, the one most related to the recent work with motion capture was called chronophotography. Here, Marey clothed his subject entirely in black with the exception of thin white bands or bright metal buttons strategically attached to the body.[58] Marey would then photograph the moving figure against a black interior, thereby capturing only the movements of the strips, making visible what he considered the essential components of movement. Marey went on to replace the strips and buttons with tiny lights to create photographic images with greater precision. Used to study the movements of soldiers and patients in Parisian hospitals, Marey's techniques captured movement without the distractions caused by the exterior of a subject's body. Marey aimed to reveal the invisible movement behind or beyond the visible moving body, a desire that we hear echoed and complicated in Jones's recent return to form.

The visual similarities between Marey's motion-capture experiments and those of Kaiser/Eshkar with Jones are striking. And although a century stands between early experiments with chronophotography and recent work with motion capture, Paul Kaiser's aims resemble Marey's attempt to capture movement without the "distractions" of the subject's fleshy, or visible, body. When asked by Kent De Spain whether we were moving into an era of posthuman dance, Kaiser responded by distancing his motion-capture works from dance. He claimed that these works were more about drawing, unable to replace the "ecstasy and the immediacy of live dancers."[59] Kaiser went on to say that with motion capture's ability to abstract dance from its physical basis, "it's moving away [from the physical basis of the performer] . . . and I think that might clean out our eyes in many ways. I think that in looking at performers on the stage we are seduced by the charisma of the body rather than by the beauty of the movement."[60]

The beauty of human movement fascinated Marey, Kaiser, and Eshkar, especially when abstracted from bodily "distractions." It is problematic, however, that Kaiser so easily links bodily distractions with "charisma." As I have already stated, Jones's labor as well as his skin have been "ghosted,"

Fig. 8. Georges Demeny dressed in black in preparation for geometric chronophotography, 1884. Image courtesy of Marta Braun.
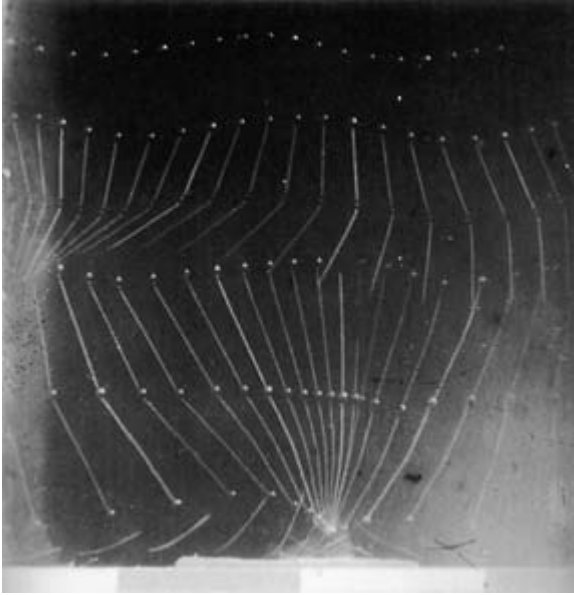
Fig 9. Exposure showing Marey's motion-capture suit markers.

two things clearly bound together but also bound with Jones's so-called charisma. As part of Arlene Croce's ongoing feud with Jones, Croce accused him in 1995 of having let his "charisma" get the better of him, blinding him to the pitfalls of identity-centered work. Regarding what she calls the "permissiveness" of art in the 1960s and the "invidious logic at work in the campaigns of the multiculturalists, the moral guardians, and the minority groups," Croce remarks, "Jones, caught up in his own charisma, didn't seem to hear the trap being sprung."[61] According to Marey, and Kaiser one hundred years later, race and labor had to be removed in order to "clean our eyes out" and get at the "beauty of pure movement."

Tight Places and Images of Confinement

Of course, Jones didn't want to be a "a disembodied, denatured, de-gendered series of lines moving in a void."[62] He wanted to challenge the so-called freedom of abstracted movement, the imagined pure neutrality of form. By strategically revealing his sweat and skin throughout *The Breathing Show,* he uniquely challenges previous mechanized commodifications of the body. In

addition, his pointed banter with the audience forces so-called abstraction into a consideration of race and politics. Early in *The Breathing Show,* having danced for several minutes to music by Franz Schubert, Jones exclaims, "Anyway, this is where I'm supposed to swing into this thing about why I'm dancing to this dead European man's music."[63] There's laughter, and Jones, promising that it won't be "one of those evenings," discusses a painter friend who introduced Jones to Schubert's music. Having engaged with the music deeply for a choreographic project not long afterward, Jones claims, "I realized that I was a romantic—that was my problem." Laughter emerges from the audience. "When Arnie and I came to the scene in the late seventies, it was certainly not a romantic scene and I didn't know what to do. . . . But now I have come out as a Romantic." Applause and laughter erupt, given the loaded phrase "come out" used triumphantly and with a twist. But really, this discussion is all about Jones's supposed controversial turn to form. Jones then wonders aloud about the place of black Americans during Schubert's time: "Just to play with myself, I started to think: What would I have been like in 1830? What would I have been dancing like? I certainly wouldn't be here. . . . What would it have sounded like?"

And with that, instead of the Schubert recordings blasting through the speakers, Jones sings "Go Tell Aunt Rhody," the children's song he later sings in *Ghostcatching*—a sonic reference to racism and slavery in America, linking the live Jones with his virtual image. Jones punctuates the verses with stomping, undulating, quite musical phrases of movement. Some of his steps are narrative, seeming to illustrate or interpret the lyrics. In other cases, they insert music into the breaks, referencing vernacular styles. Meanwhile, the dancing affects the sound of the voice as we hear Jones's need for breath and as we hear the stomps and leaps manifest in the juttings of his voice. He finishes the song not vocally, but with arms outstretched, head back, and mouth open. The final Schubert dance then begins, having been punctuated by a different sound, a live sound from the dancing Jones, danced and sung in resonance with a black radical tradition emerging out of slavery.

Following *The Breathing Show*'s 1999 premiere in Iowa City, Jones toured the piece through Europe. At that time, he was worried about the show's quality and continued to rework its contents for the looming New York showing. In his journal entries from that time, Jones writes: "I use improvisation because it catches me at my most animal, most un-self-conscious and most bold. . . . Here is my truest contribution to contemporary dance."[64]

In keeping with this realization, Jones discovered that improvised breaks, when he could sing and chat and reveal his personality, were essential to the piece. Only with these improvised moments did the piece begin to "come alive." On tour, Jones inserted *Floating the Tongue* into the program, suggesting that his improvised journey of 1978—intensely personal and political—still plays a vital part in his dance investigations. With *Floating the Tongue* appearing on the heels of *Ghostcatching*, the result was a challenging juxtaposition, vitally questioning the freedom of digital abstraction from the body.

Equally important are *Ghostcatching*'s images of confinement, indexing the historical criminalization of black mobility. In an interview with Kent De-Spain, Paul Kaiser refers to the figures that emerge as "spawns," a term also used by Jones. These spawns break free only to get reabsorbed by the initial figure. According to Kaiser, "It's all about the notion of breaking free from your own representation, and being caught up in it again."[65] The piece suggests the impossibility of breaking free—from one's own representation but also from real confining spaces. The fact that the figure always gets "caught up in it again" troubles any simple celebration of freedom and mobility. As the piece progresses, the spawns that move with any sense of space and freedom end up frozen amid their blue traces.

Perhaps the blue traces and boundaries surrounding Bill T. Jones and his virtual spawns can be better explained through the idea of "tight spaces," which Houston Baker developed in *Turning South Again*. As I explained in my introduction, Baker uses the phrase to raise the questions "Who moves? Who doesn't?" Historically, the black man hasn't been able to move (to say nothing of the black woman). Mobility for African American men has been criminalized, most viciously under the Southern slave system but in a host of other situations as well. Describing black slaves' legal status in the American South, Baker references the legal scholar and jurist Leon Higginbotham, who explains that blacks were forbidden from leaving their owners' plantations without certification, thereby destroying their freedom of mobility. Beyond that, their ability to resist was seriously diminished by the fact that they were liable to be severely punished (if not killed outright) for challenging a Christian in any way and were also of course prohibited from carrying arms.[66] Baker argues that while modernism was exemplified by Walter Benjamin's publicly mobile flâneur, a "mobile, observant, multiply personalitied city wanderer," this modernity was denied to the black masses. Baker goes on to

argue, "The identity dilemma for the black majority is not captured by the declarative 'one ever feels his two-ness,' but rather by the interrogative 'how do I break these all-too-real chains binding me?' "[67]

In *Last Night on Earth*, Jones laments: "I think that even those of us who have no notion of what the auction block was can still feel it, as if the memory of it is handed down to us through our mother's milk. . . . It is there with me when I dance before you on a stage."[68] When seen in the context of this history, *Ghostcatching*'s blue images of confinement ring all the more forcefully. As for the absence of skin, in discussing the prohibition of mobility under slavery, Baker notes: "The body's natural 'color' was converted into a legalized marker of oppression. There was, in the total institution called slavery, an *epidermalization* of oppression. Skin color—in combination with facial features and hair texture—became southern grounds for maintenance of the ideological and economic project of White Supremacy."[69] While one's various identity claims—racial, ethnic, class, religious, gender, sexuality, place, generation—by no means fit tidily along clear color lines, *racism* is nevertheless largely a visual pathology.

Unlike Jones, Paul Gilroy likely would embrace *Ghostcatching* as further evidence that we have already moved to a point where vision-based race thinking is out of date. His controversial book *Against Race*, published in 2000, has infuriated many scholars with its call to eliminate liberal race-based thinking in the hopes of a humanism that would manage to move beyond the color line. Most relevant to *Ghostcatching* is Gilroy's claim that new technologies, particularly in the medical field, have begun to transform what he calls "the old, modern representational economies that reproduced 'race' subdermally and epidermally."[70] He argues that advancements in molecular biology, which show that race is genetically virtually insignificant, as well as the development of imaging technologies such as ultrasound and electromagnetic radiation, have enabled new forms of scrutiny regarding the human body. Gilroy asks: "Have you, has your body, your child's body, ever been scanned? Do you recognize its changing optic density? If so, perhaps you could consider that development another compelling sign that we have begun to let the old visual signatures of 'race' go."[71]

A few pages later, engaging head-on with what Baker describes as the historical epidermalization of oppression whereby skin color became the grounds for white supremacy, Gilroy claims: "Today skin is no longer privileged as the threshold of either identity or particularity. There are good rea-

sons to suppose that the line between inside and out now falls elsewhere. The boundaries of 'race' have moved across the threshold of the skin. They are cellular and molecular, not dermal. If 'race' is to endure, it will be in a new form, estranged from the scales respectively associated with political anatomy and epidermalization."[72]

While motion capture is undoubtedly part of a range of new technologies that enable new mappings and forms of scrutiny regarding the body, these advancements in technology have done little if anything to alter the general public's conception of the human body. We are a long way from realizing a utopian humanism in these increasingly fluid borders. It is in this context that Bill T. Jones stood in front of students at NYU, asking, "Are we past a point of racial looking? Why can't *I* be free?"[73] At the same talk, Jones told the students that the first thing he did upon entering the packed auditorium, without even thinking, was to look around to count the number of black faces in the audience. One could say that Jones was speaking from a tight place, especially regarding his supposed turn to form. He wants to foreground the how of dance, and yet he constantly reminds us of the stakes involved. He seems frustrated with the onus of always foregrounding the political, and yet he is a black man dancing. At one moment, he professes an interest in turns and pointed feet, while a moment later he sings "We Shall Overcome." It is from this tight place that Jones calls for his doubling: "Can you see with two sets of eyes?" It is also from this tight place that Jones, together with Kaiser and Eshkar, created *Ghostcatching*, which, especially when shown as part of *The Breathing Sho*w, challenges the "freedom" and beauty of motion abstracted from bodily "distractions."

Ghostcatching within *The Breathing Show* ushers both a warning and a call to dance audiences, especially important as motion capture and other digital abstractions from the body become more prevalent. It would be a great loss to reduce Bill T. Jones to a black choreographer, a gay choreographer, or whatever mark of difference one chooses. André Lepecki refers to such reduction as a prison, built out of guilt and a lack of imagination.[74] With movement that comes from many places—from laborers, Trisha, Arnie, his mother—Jones moves between constructions of difference, neither stable nor essential.

That being said, Jones makes clear the fact that we are not in a world beyond difference, outside of history. Back at the beginning of his career, he broke from the utopian claims of contact improvisation and other postmod-

ern experiments invested in the notion of "pure" movement. He forced audiences to realize the limits and blind spots of claims that movement could ever be mere exercises with nothing at stake. Similarly today, even as he becomes increasingly interested in the how of dance, Jones points to the limits of motion-capture technology and asks us not to embrace its liberatory potential too quickly. To Bill T. Jones, form is never neutral and removed from politics. He urges audiences to view dance doubly. And finally, however beautiful the resulting movement may be, Jones suggests that the act of "cleaning out one's eyes" by wiping away markers of difference could easily become a brutal hygiene.