

Blackness Bubbles: Figure, Form, Movement

by Adam Cottrel

bubble

n.

1. a thin film of liquid inflated with air intransitive

v.

2. to flow with a gurgling sound

— Merriam-Webster Dictionary



"Blackness Bubbles" is a response to two dances performed at the first *liquid blackness* symposium on April 11, 2014 at the Mammal Gallery in Atlanta, Georgia—*Heart of Palm*, a piece commissioned for the event to choreographer Jerylann Warner and an excerpt from T. Lang Dance's forthcoming production *Post Up*.¹ My interest in dance pivots on reading movement as form, which raises the more general question of the role of form in thinking about blackness as aesthetics. Seen through the lens of "liquid blackness," aesthetics describes forces that produce affects and intensities for which liquidity may be the mode of production. The conceptual value in rendering blackness as an aesthetic concept, as Alessandra Raengo phrases it, is the possibility to provide "a deliberate pressure point that [...] might help us think about the multiplicity of blackness [...] and the many things that it does: blackness queers, blackness mobilizes, blackness multiplies".² To help us think movement as form and to account for how the two dances performed blackness as a site of liquidity necessitates an additional qualifier: blackness *bubbles*. I offer the linguistic interplay of *bubble*, which is both a noun signifying a thin, translucent shield of liquid ungrounded, suspended in air as well as a verb signifying its drifting flow. This essay makes two suggestions about the contribution dance offers to "liquid blackness": movement is the aesthetic form of dance, and, read with "liquid blackness," this form "ceases to be representative and becomes real" through the affective athleticism of the dancer's body.³ The value derived from these suggestions is found in how we are able to read liquidity through a specific embodied form—movement—in order to more fully articulate the aesthetic and figural ramifications of blackness.

To better appreciate how dance contributes to black liquidity we must think seriously about forms of movement and, equally, movement as form. Form provides an important addition to the discourse of "liquid blackness" because it attends to the aesthetic specificity of the artistic text, object, or performance, producing forces of affect and intensity.

Form also provides the ground for a theory of blackness divorced from explicit representations of race. Eugenie Brinkema persuasively articulates the importance of textual specificity for affective aesthetics: "Reading affects as having forms involves de-privileging models of expressivity and interiority in favor of treating affects as structures that work through formal means, as consisting in their formal dimensions (as line, light, color, rhythm, and so on) of passionate structures."⁴ Form, in this sense, questions how we understand liquidity as an aesthetic category because its affective and intensive quality is not predicated on the "myth of asignifying affective immediacy."⁵ In other words, if "liquid blackness" is to provide the ground for a radical reformulation of both aesthetics and blackness its potential must be grounded in form. For dance, movement is the form allowing us to deliver specificity to a reading of black liquidity.

The twin play dance offers between movement as form and forms of movement importantly grounds this discussion in the dancer's body. Through collective movement in *Heart of Palm* and the hip-hop inspired movement of *Post Up*, dance allows us to read the affective and intensive qualities of "liquid blackness" embodied by the dancer. Dance requires an effervescent conception of the body, a body moved and moving because, as Erin Manning writes, "continuity of movement subverts any idea of a stable body [...]. Any positionality in this process is not a stopping but a quality of movement: the body never stops."⁶ If we follow Manning's point as a call to think dance's form as constant and continuous movement, we understand the dancer as a site for forces to play out, as a body that bubbles, shifts, and floats drawing attention to the productive tension between consistency and movement. What remains consistent, i.e. the form that allows us to read dance for black liquidity, is the bubbling movement of the body that subverts the idea of a stable body. For Manning, the body's movement is an explicit subversion of an "imprisonment of the self as self-same."⁷ Reading movement as form in dance for liquidity lends us the critical acumen to specify "liquid

blackness" as the active exercise of self-variation which complicates calcified and preconceived notions of blackness.

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Constant and continuous movement emphasizes the dancer's body as a site of destabilization where forces converge relegating representation to an afterthought. Reading these performances as a comment about how the moving body can stage the idea of destabilization echoes Gilles Deleuze's notion of a body without organs. In privileging the body as a site where forces affect and offer potential for difference, Deleuze writes, "the body does not have organs, but thresholds and levels [...] which no longer determines within itself representative elements, but allotropic variations."⁸ Deleuze's "allotropic variations" suggests the complexity liquidity affords blackness because it is never a single, stable, or solitary. Blackness, to echo Raengo, is always multiple: in its affects, intensities, images, and actions. The dancer's moving body troubles representation by producing sensations through dramatizing the forces acting on it. Blackness bubbles in the fluctuation of a material body producing immaterial sensations we read through this form embodying liquidity.

The bubbling of blackness between bodies affected by intensive forces is dramatized in these two dance performances. *Heart of Palm* and *Post Up* enact—in fact, they act-out—the variation of movement as a material reality of "liquid blackness" in order to demonstrate the destabilization of bodies by forces. For *Heart of Palm*, we find this explicitly in how the dancers embellish their bodies through movements that oscillate between synchronization and disorganization, proximity and distance, contact and rejection. *Heart of Palm* chooses to stage the liquidity of blackness as

forms of movement amongst a multiplicity of bodies responding and responsive to each other. The excerpt from *Post Up* suggests an entirely different production of black liquidity. For this performance, the dancer's body rode the wave of the music's force more literally, ebbing, flowing, and posing in rhythm with the beat of the bass. These performances demonstrate how the dancers bubble under and over the action of forces upon the body. Blackness, as the dancers' bodies perform it here, is liquid to the degree that movement is a form that can be read through dance. Put another way, what I have argued is how dance does not simply bring forth movement, but how movement brings forth the form of liquidity in dance.

¹*Heart of Palm*. Choreographed by Jerylann Warner. Performed by Gathering Wild Dance Company; *Post Up* (an excerpt). Choreographed by T. Lang Dance. Performed by Indya Childs.

²Alessandra Raengo, "blackness, aesthetics, liquidity," *liquid blackness* 1, no. 2 (April 2014): 17.

³Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 40.

⁴Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 37.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press), 24.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 39.