The Dance That Will Not Die

Refracting Imperial Whiteness through *The Dying Swan*

Julian B. Carter

Figure 1. Leading pole-dancer Elena Gibson performing as The Dying Swan *at the UK Professional Pole Dancing Championships. Telford, Shropshire, UK, 1 December 2013. (Screengrab by* TDR*; www.youtube .com/watch?v=FuHYZ1Sb2zE)*

When I was quite small I felt fiercely attracted to a perfume bottle I saw on a friend's big sister's vanity. The little milk-glass swan was capped by a tiny golden crown. Every time I went over I found an excuse to go into the room to fiddle with it, twisting the crown around and around, enjoying the dynamics of its alignment with the top of the swan's delicate head. One day when I picked it up I saw that the gold was flaking off to reveal a dull greyish-pink plastic, ugly as a Band-Aid. It had never occurred to me that the gold wasn't real.

I've continued to follow the trace of swans away from the regal elegance of the ancien régime into moments in contemporary mass cultural performance when the paint peels away. Once you start looking for them, swans show up everywhere. They glide through endless

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advertising spreads and fashion shoots; they decorate condolence cards, soap dispensers, and wedding invitations; they are featured in short stories, poetry, and black-velvet paintings; and they are sculpted in every imaginable medium from bronze to buttercream frosting. Swans are, in short, a paradoxically common signifier of the precious and the rare.

This blend of high and low culture is especially prominent in contemporary performances of the dance called *The Dying Swan*. Originally choreographed in 1905 by Michel Fokine as a short solo for the great ballerina Anna Pavlova, *The Dying Swan* has become one of the most widely reproduced dances in the Western world. One documentary goes so far as to claim that *The Dying Swan* is the single most performed piece of choreography in the history of Western classical dance (Blenheim Films 2012). Every ballet dancer knows its basic outline. First the dancer executes dozens of continuous, tiny scooting steps on pointe that create a trembling glide, like light reflecting off wavelets, while rippling her arms from shoulder to fingertips. These delicate movements give way to larger, more strenuous gestures. The dancer may beat her "wings" powerfully as though she is struggling to leave the ground. Eventually she sinks to the ground on one knee; arches backward for some final fluttering strokes of the weakening wings; and ultimately comes to rest bowed over her leg with her arms extended to cross over her ankle (see Pavlova 1925; Plisetskaya 1959; Zakharova 2015).

Poses from *The Dying Swan* are instantly recognizable to millions of people, including many who don't know its name or anything about classical ballet, and don't care. Like the milk-glass perfume bottle, it circulates as a popular signifier of elite culture, especially in its aestheticization of material delicacy or fragility. Also like the perfume bottle, its thematic reference to royal power is tarnished by the overexposure that is mass production; it's so common that it's become hard to see and easy to dismiss. This transparency has been compounded by the passage of time. Over the past 11 decades the larger context for performances of *The Dying Swan* has changed so drastically that the dance often circulates as little more than an empty outline, its familiar contours gesturing vaguely toward a pathos we are expected to recognize as significant.

Figure 2. Lil Buck/Charles Riley in the final pose from his famous hip hop Dying Swan. *Vail International Dance Festival, 9 August 2011. (Screengrab by* TDR*; www.youtube.com/watch ?v=JZumgHLSW10)*

This apparent emptiness may explain why critics and performance scholars have found almost nothing to say about *The Dying Swan*, while many dancers and dance-makers have been drawn to explore its potential.[1] Simple forms and empty containers create space for the imagination to work (see Colpitt 1990). They invite us to fill in

1. I am indebted to the exceptions, the dance historians who have documented *The Dying Swan*'s importance as a milestone in ballet modernism (Garafola [1989] 2010; Homans 2010) and as the cornerstone of Pavlova's "brand" (Fisher 2012). Bloggers and journalists have also commented on Charles Riley/Lil Buck's productive juxtaposition of hip hop and ballet (see for example Sommer 2011). This is a strikingly small body of literature relative to the ubiquity of the dance itself. To my knowledge no scholar has treated *The Dying Swan* to sustained close reading as a cultural text.

the gaps, to supplement what we're given with our own reflections—and while this kind of invitation is most often theorized in relation to spectatorship (see Rancière 2009), *The Dying Swan*'s enormous proliferation suggests that minimalism can stimulate the creative agency of makers as well as viewers. In the past decade Fokine's composition has served as template, source material, or inspiration for dozens of choreographers working in a range of contemporary movement idioms and performance contexts. Examples include hip hop swans by Charles Riley/Lil Buck (2011) and John Lennon da Silva (2011); a poignant drag version by Paul Ghiselin/Ida Nevasayneva (c. 1996); a melancholy modern dance using garbage bags as stage dressing by Enrico Labayan performed by Daiane Lopes da Silva (2009); a pole dance in pointe shoes by Elena Gibson (2013); a controversial stilt-walk choreographed by Peter Minshall and performed by Jha-whan Thomas (see Paul 2016); and an avant-garde blend of ballet and traditional South African dance by Mamela Nyamza (2009).[2] These deploy a range of techniques, engage diverse audiences, and emphasize disparate themes. Their variety is such that I find it helpful to think of them not as variants on one dance but as distinct dances manifesting varied and complex relations to a single generously imprecise form (see Midgelow 2007).

Figure 3. Jhar-whan Thomas performing "Raj Nijinsky in Drag as Pavlova," designer Peter Minshall's entry in the Carnival mas *(masquerade) contest. Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, 2 February 2015. (Photo by Maria Nunes)*

The sheer proliferation of contemporary swan-dances suggests that the simple form of *The Dying Swan* continues to speak to many dance-makers in terms they, and their audiences, find relevant. It also poses some interpretative challenges. How do we think through this flock of dances in a way that attends to its diversity while listening for its aggregate message in our contemporary cultural moment? How do we honor the reality that different choreographers enter the studio with different structural relations to this dance as a historical artifact, without discounting the affective and symbolic residue that clings to the artifact itself? I can find an exception to every generalization I've made about these dances. The mass of Dying Swans exist as an assemblage of strikingly distinct birds, each with its own qualities and its own diachronic and synchronic responses to others of its kind. No single swan embodies the entire flock in miniature, and the communicative effect of the flock as a whole isn't well described by a list of its component birds.

That is why I've come to consider *The Dying Swan* as a performance prism. Prisms are ordinary objects with magical qualities. You can pick one up and turn it in your hand. Each facet's flat face stares back at you as light flashes from its surface. The facet has its own integrity

2. For videos of these performances see VailValleyFoundation (2011 [for Lil Buck]); labayen dance (2011 [for Daiane Lopes da Silva]); Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo (2016 [for Paul Ghiselin/Ida Nevasayneva]); UKPPC (2013 [for Elena Gibson]); lafoncette (2016 [for Jhar-whan Thomas]); and superstarsdance (2009 [for Mamela Nyamza]).

or completeness; its outline, dimensions, and reflective sheen can be identified and considered without reference to those of additional facets around, before, beside, and behind it. Simultaneously, the prism as a whole has its own material unity and geometric consistency, and consequently an optical capacity distinct from anything its individual facets can do: it can bend white light until its apparent unity is fractured and its component wavelengths become visible. So to describe *The Dying Swan* as a performance prism is to suggest that one can view each dance as a self-contained communication while retaining awareness of the larger crystalline structure.

The prism metaphor further suggests that *The Dying Swan* refracts a whiteness that runs through all the many manifestations of the form even while it is not necessarily noticeable on the surface of each facet. Like light entering a suncatcher, the cultural whiteness refracted through *The Dying Swan* is composed of multiple wavelengths. The historically white cultural components of the dance include music and costuming: almost all manifestations of *The Dying Swan* use the same score (the melancholy four-minute "Le Cygne," written in 1886 by French composer Camille Saint-Saëns) and many also feature the white classical tutu (the short disc-shaped skirt made of layers of tulle, feathers, or a combination of both). Both the sound and the substance work to embed the swans that deploy them in recognizably European elite cultural traditions—a fact that, as we'll see, contemporary dance makers deploy with varying degrees of criticality. And the cultural whiteness that *The Dying Swan* refracts is not only wrapped around the outside of the dancer's body; it is expressed via the movement itself, and derives both from the longer history of ballet and from specific aesthetic and conceptual influences on Fokine's composition in 1905.

Courtliness, Civilization, and Competition Dances

Ballet's codification and development in the absolutist court of the Sun King at the end of the 17th century, and its subsequent adoption by royal theatres in Russia, Italy, and eventually England, shapes its cultural meaning alongside its technical foundation (see Cowart 2008; Franko 2000). Every four-year-old who puts on a tiara to play ballerina princess is tapping into this tradition, which is replicated in many aspects of classical ballet culture and performance. For instance, its most famous stories are set in royal or ducal courts (*Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Giselle*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *La Bayadere*), while its performances have long been staged in palaces (those that survived the Second World War include the Palais Garnier, La Scala, Covent Garden, the Bolshoi, and the Mariinsky). Ballet's technical emphasis on clarity, lightness, and control memorialize the cultivated habitus of aristocrats maneuvering under the watchful eye of an absolutist ruler while the internal hierarchy of most ballet companies resonates with the political environment of their emergence (e.g., artistic directors' total lack of accountability to the rank-and-file dancers whose fortunes depend on their whims).

Thus while the particulars of the technique and norms for training and performance have all evolved over the past four centuries, ballet retains strong associations with the cultural apparatus of modern European empires (Homans 2010:xvi–xvii; van Wyk 2012). This association is alive not only in costuming, narratives, venues, and organizational culture but also in the basic physicality of the movement idiom. Classical ballet's characteristically vertical posture, its fascination with bodily uniformity and rank, its fondness for massed coordinated patterns, its impatience with the limitations of human flesh, its aspirations toward perfect economy of gesture, even its reliance on a squared-off, balanced stance as the home to which all movement returns—these are all consistent with the physical disciplines through which Enlightenment rulers transformed peasants into soldiers, armed individuals into professional armies (Foucault 1977; Franko 1998). Such were the bodies that built the global empires of the 18th century. They carried with them a cultural worldview and biopolitical orientation that treated all life as a political and economic resource and measured its usefulness on a hierarchical scale. The body of

classical ballet, in short, resembles the militaristic body with which it coevolved, and ballet traveled from Europe around the world in tracks laid down by invasion and conquest.[3]

At the end of the 19th century the history of imperial conquest was frequently and euphemistically reframed as the story of Western civilization's spread, a colonialist narrative that helped to inform *The Dying Swan*. In 1905 Michel Fokine and Anna Pavlova were up-and-coming young artists at the Russian Imperial Ballet when the famous American modern dancer Isadora Duncan visited St. Petersburg on tour. Duncan's work deliberately countered the artifice and technicality characteristic of 19th-century European ballet, and just as deliberately eschewed the primitivism that was becoming fashionable in both modern art and American popular culture at the turn of the 20th century (Daly [1995] 2010:7). In their place she drew on ancient Greek themes and imagery. Duncan danced barefoot and uncorseted in a simple tunic, her hair flowing so that she looked like a maenad on an ancient vase, and her work consistently represented a classical ideal of physical freedom guided by moral and spiritual discipline (Seidel 2016:173–74).

Through such devices Duncan's performance of Hellenism animated her era's dominant historical discourse of democratic civilization. Civilizationist history taught literally millions of modern whites to deemphasize the violence of imperial conquest and instead think of themselves as inheritors of a great tradition of freedom originating in Greece, expanding from Rome into Western Europe, and traveling to Africa and the Americas during the Age of Exploration.[4] For US Americans raised on this story, the closing of the Western frontier in 1893 and the rapid urbanization of the population raised troubling questions about the future of civilization once the "manifest destiny" of westward expansion had been achieved. Such questions dovetailed with those posed by the intertwined political, economic, demographic, and social changes of the second half of the 19th century. The legal emancipation and partial enfranchisement of previously enslaved people combined with waves of immigration from Asia and Southern and Eastern Europe to infuse the body politic with people whose values and cultural forms clashed with those of the "old stock" whites who claimed the nation as their racial property. Both racist and nativist sentiments of the day justified structures of political exclusion and social hierarchy on the grounds that people from cultures that had not evolved in synch with the modern Western democracies were arrested at earlier stages of the development of civilization and were therefore permanently incapable of self-governance. At the end of the 19th century many influential whites imagined modern civilization as the most recent manifestation of centuries of social, political, and technological progress toward freedom and justice for all—a grand achievement which they feared teetered on the brink of ruin because it offered too much freedom to the wrong sorts of people (Carter 2007).

This was the sociopolitical context in which Duncan rejected her fellow modern artists' fascination with "primitive" cultural forms and turned instead to archaic Hellenic references to express a historically white ideal of the body's freedom as a materialization of the soul's nobility

3. For instance: Louis XIV was not only the dancing king whose physical proficiency is memorialized in the step called the *royale*, the tidy vertical jump accented by a beat of the ankles. He was also the king who authorized the Black Codes articulating the terms of enslavement in France and its royal colonies (Roach 1998). Both facts contribute to ballet's meaning to those who were colonized and enslaved and to their descendants: from a postcolonial perspective, ballet is an imperial cultural import as alien as iambic pentameter, monotheism, or double-entry bookkeeping.

4. The civilizationist narrative is older than the Gilded Age version I'm interested in here (one of its most influential articulations is Keats's 1819 "Ode on a Grecian Urn"). The version that informed popular culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries explained human history as unfolding in sequential stages that reliably culminated in the achievements of industrial European and American societies.

(Seidel 2016:173–74; Francis 1994:38–39). Her bare legs and arms, her unbound torso in its Grecian tunic, and the continuous flow of her movement constituted an argument for unleashing the white body's vitality as the next stage of freedom's continuous expansion across thousands of years, from ancient Athens to the Pacific shore of the United States (Francis 1994). Dance historian Lynn Garafola has documented that *The Dying Swan*'s compositional simplicity, emotional directness, and open, fluid arms are direct reflections of Duncan's aesthetic and technique (Garafola 2009:39–42; see also Casey 2012:10). Thus Fokine's ballet repeats material elements deriving from the cultural politics of white civilizationism circa 1905, complete with its characteristic unquestioned conflation of freedom, democracy, and continuous unimpeded expansion. The particulars of these politics are no longer clearly reflected on the surface of the dance because the larger conceptual and material context has changed, yet the form itself preserves them so that looking through the prism of its performance can bring its white racial investments into view.

In short, cultural legacies of imperial whiteness travel through ballet in general; *The Dying Swan* refracts these in historically specific ways, enhanced by the transparency of the minimalist container and the way swans repeat and double ballet's persistent association with royalty. You don't need special historical knowledge to recognize *The Dying Swan* as ballet, or ballet as a materialization of privileged forms of whiteness. It is also relevant that *The Dying Swan* has long been a migratory dance. Several dance historians have detailed Anna Pavlova's remarkable touring career, which spanned the globe between 1907 and 1930; she brought a powerful vision of artistic possibility with her and inspired dancers around the world to devote themselves to ballet (see Gard 2006:87, 98; Casey 2013). Jennifer Fisher has suggested that Pavlova, through her "swan brand," exported and promoted a vision of white civilization as purity, innocence, and missionary self-sacrifice (2012:58; see also Dyer 1997:127). Her personal charismatic influence as ballet's ambassador, expressed through *The Dying Swan*'s simple, memorable form, may also have contributed to the synechdochical use of swan dances to signify ballet in general for millions of people (see McLean 2008). Contemporary dancers embodying the swan thus intersect with and comment on the legacies of the civilizing mission. *The Dying Swan* has become part of the cultural vocabulary in many outposts of empire. Swans die in Brazil, Australia, Trinidad, and South Africa as well as Canada and the United States: a quick video search returns 282,000 results from every continent but Antarctica.

In all these different places *The Dying Swan* serves as a performance prism refracting the particularity of lived experiences of, perspectives on, and relations to elite forms of white European civilization as these are manifested and remembered in our present moment. The different dances register different angles of power and privilege, different geometrical relations to whiteness as an occupying force, and to the gendered expression of that force. Each dance *reflects* its local distribution of vulnerability, its specific relations with elite European civilization's characteristic aesthetics and necropolitics, and the ways these have changed and persisted over time. Collectively, these dances *refract* imperial domination.

This may explain why *The Dying Swan* is often performed in competitions. Beyond its convenience as a short solo in the public domain, its associations with elite white power structures support contestants in their situational assertion of the right to reign. Just as team sports mimic and repeat the clash of armies, competition performances can memorialize the contest for glory and gold that fueled imperial expansion. Perhaps such dances repackage cultural conquest as mass entertainment. At a minimum they dramatize the large-scale processes of judgment by which some lives and some ways of life are valued over others. The enormous popularity of dance contests also highlights the intimacy between *The Dying Swan*'s capacity to index elite culture and its active circulation in the lowbrow context of reality TV. Contests show us both what dance-makers think will fly to the top, and how judges and audiences receive their claims. The swans that die on competition stages thus manifest both historical legacies and local experiences of colonial vulnerability and aspiration with particular clarity.

I concentrate on three such performances, but before I turn to these particular *Dying Swans*, a further note on interpretative method is in order. The conditions under which contemporary swans die onstage are also those under which I write about them. Like dancers, scholars contend with diminishing and unequally distributed resources and we too are encouraged to react with aspirational competition. Scholars perform our right to the spotlight in part through our canny choice of culturally and critically significant subject matter. Some of the glory of our subjects' success can accrue to us, so we tend to look for that potential shine and are encouraged to move past work that doesn't promise to reflect well on us. In short, a number of forces converge to bring academics into line with the broader cultural tendency to respond to dance with evaluation at the front of our attention: Is it any good? Does it deserve our attention?

These are not the concerns that drive this article. Describing the competitive context in which a performance takes place is different from deploying evaluation as an analytic attitude. I am more interested in the rhetorical functioning of Dying Swan dances, the communications they make and the strategies on which they rely for persuasive effect (LaVigne 2010). I'm not asking whether these performances meet any particular set of aesthetic or conceptual standards; I am letting their persuasive strategies teach me what standards shape them, whose perspectives they record, which histories of suffering and persistence they celebrate, and which they occlude. All of these dances bend the elite whiteness that flows through *The Dying Swan* in ways that highlight the particularity of each angle of perception. Therefore I treat all the dances I study as equivalent cultural texts and ask them to bear similar critical weight, even as I recognize that they are conceived and executed with varying degrees of awareness of and sophistication about the political legacies of racialized vulnerability they perform.

Facet I: This Swan Is Not a Stripper

Let's begin by turning the prism to catch an amateur video of champion Elena Gibson performing *The Dying Swan* at a 2013 pole-dance competition held in the UK. Gibson's dance reflects the peculiar cultural logics by which the performance of fragility can align white women with dominant power structures, and highlights the significance of disavowal in such performances. Wikipedia tells me that a serious car accident forced the white Canadian dancer to retire from ballet just as her career was getting established. In the process of reconditioning Gibson discovered pole dance and became the first Miss Pole Dance World Champion in 2005. Her winning routine was performed in the persona of the Black Swan, a character from the classical ballet *Swan Lake* as recirculated through Darren Aronofsky's 2010 movie *Black Swan*; but Gibson's title was subsequently rescinded on the grounds that removing her tutu was a form of stripping (Wikipedia 2016). Several years later Gibson—by then a senior practitioner and highly respected teacher—performed *The Dying Swan* in a guest appearance at the UK Professional Pole Championships (UKPPC 2013). This time she kept her tutu on.

Gibson's use of balletic imagery and movement seems calculated to elevate both the performer and the performance to a higher cultural status than they might otherwise achieve: her choice of competition materials supports her claim to a title, while proposing that pole dance can become fine art.[5] But not just any ballet will do. Like the milk-glass perfume bottle,

5. This is not a stupid claim. Mixing ballet and pole dance could imaginably generate some interesting aesthetic friction: physics requires Gibson to make shapes with her legs and feet that abrade the classical vocabulary and could be developed, while her tutu's flexible disc provides a potentially interesting geometric counterpoint to the immobile line of the pole. The concept also has potential in that foregrounding the current cultural dissonance between the sexual resonances of ballet and pole dancing might stimulate useful reflection on the erotics of class polarization. But Gibson's composition doesn't fully engage the creative potential of its hybrid technique. Instead, it assembles signifiers of elite Anglo-European culture in a way that seems intended to bolster pole dancing's status, making a claim that it should be received with the respect given to forms of self-expression classified as "art."

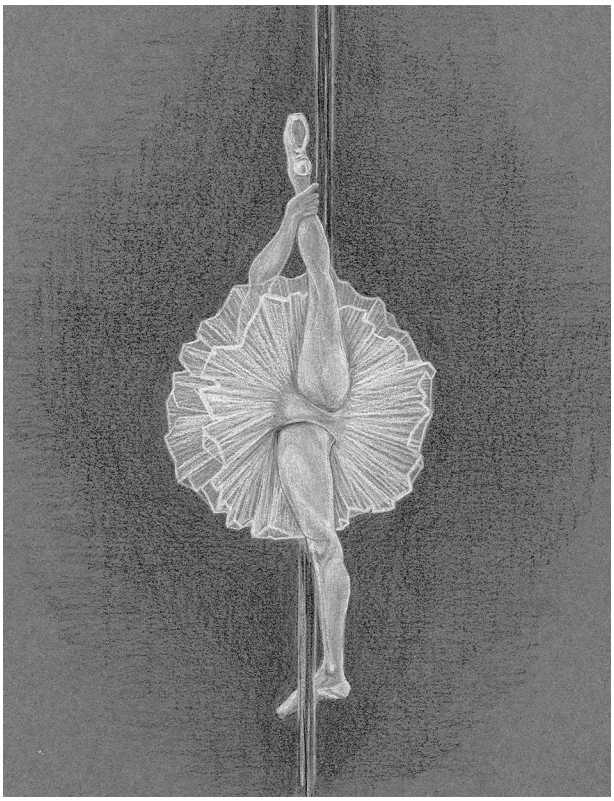

Figure 4. Elena Gibson, a competition pole-dance champion, pictured rotating around the pole. (Illustration by Julian B. Carter)

Gibson's swan materializes normative gender at the intersection of "high" and "low" forms of white culture. The perfume bottle with its little golden crown promises that the dream of royal romance is available at your local drugstore; the pole-dancing swan trades on a similar vision of elite femininity made accessible to the masses. This transaction does not proceed smoothly. Gibson's performance collides with the fact that for centuries elite white femininity has been defined by its rarified *in*accessibility—specifically, by the performance of sexual containment, which for women typically entailed the evacuation of erotic agency in favor of the social status that came from being the exclusive sexual property of powerful men. The key element here is exclusivity. One of the mandatory qualifications for the performance of ladyhood is that no one can mistake you for being a tramp. Yet pole dance is tightly linked in the popular imagination to overt erotic display and, through it, to relatively easy sexual availability. The force of this persistent association can be measured by the force with which pole dance's promoters reject it (as we can see in the Miss Pole Dance World Championship's feverish vigilance against tutu-peeling). Indeed Gibson's dance performs, on a social level, the psychic relation Freud described as disavowal, a splitting whereby it is possible simultaneously to register what one knows and to repudiate that knowledge.

Disavowal is a psychic technique for accommodating an unbearable reality, or, put differently, for preserving a fantasy that helps hold reality at bay. Freud ([1927] 1976) originally described disavowal in relation to fetishism, which he construed as one masculine response to the revelation of genital difference: I take his insight to be that some men's erotic investment in their own penises is threatened by the existence of nonphallic sexual capacity, a threat to which some people respond by refusing to recognize difference and/or by displacing their erotic investment in the phallus onto some other body part or object. Fittingly one of the ways disavowal shows up in this dance is in the repeated display of Gibson's thoroughly desexualized genital area, smoothed by her leotard into a featureless white field. I'm not suggesting a literal Freudian reading focusing on castration anxiety. Instead, I'm borrowing from Freud to underscore how Gibson's deployment of ballet disavows the sexual connotations of pole-dance performance. Ballet functions as a fig leaf, simultaneously emphasizing and concealing pole dance's déclassé erotic connotations. Toe shoes, tutu, and classical music allow Gibson to insist that we should receive her as a lady and an artist even while she is spreading her legs for a crowd.[6]

6. This particular disavowal operates in straight-up ballet performance too, of course, which underscores the traditional importance of restrained sexuality to the performance of elite femininity, and points toward the complex

Yet balletic signifiers of elite culture, with its expectations for white women's sexual inaccessibility and constrained erotic agency, aren't quite enough on their own to compensate for pole dance's déclassé reputation: Gibson was stripped of her first title because her equally balletic Black Swan routine, which mobilized visual references to the title character from the Aronofsky film of the same name, was received as sexually suggestive. It is not incidental that swans, like humans in white-dominant contexts, are routinely imagined to be white. The Black Swan in *Swan Lake* is the sole exception. The adjective summarizes her character, identifying her as active, designing, and sexually voracious to differentiate her from the gentle, pliable, White Swan (see McLean 2008; Osterweis 2014:72–73). The White Swan is a perpetually innocent victim; the Black Swan is a very bad girl. So when Gibson switched from performing the Black Swan to performing the Dying Swan, she mobilized racialized signifiers of vulnerability to underscore the claim to asexuality that bolsters her aspiration to elite status. The whiteness of the Dying Swan works to disavow pole dance's erotic connotations.

Beyond costuming referents, the particulars of the Dying Swan form facilitate an additional disavowal of Gibson's physical power. Ballet performance norms typically dictate the appearance of effortlessness, but the core of the disavowal I have in mind is in the dance's structure more than its technique. Gibson's composition borrows from Fokine to frame the pole dance proper with choreographic elements that emphasize feminine delicacy. Beginning on pointe with the tiny scooting steps called *bourrées*, Gibson trembles and flutters her way to the pole. At the end of the routine, she sinks to the floor, one leg stretched out in front of her, and bows her head and body along it in the classic pose that represents the swan's final submission to mortality. These balletic gestures bookend her pole dance, literally bracketing the display of athletic strength with performances of delicate fragility. This bracketing is repeated in the personal narrative with which she frames her work: recall that she retired from ballet due to injuries sustained in a serious car accident. Gibson thus surrounds her pole dance with aesthetic and narrative devices that emphasize her physical vulnerability.

Figure 5. Elena Gibson sinking to the ground at the conclusion of her Dying Swan *performance. UK Professional Pole Dancing Championships. Telford, Shropshire, UK, 1 December 2013. (Screengrab by* TDR*; www.youtube.com /watch?v=FuHYZ1Sb2zE)*

Gibson's performances take place in the context of competitions—that is, in situations intended to produce a hierarchy of pride and prestige, with winners separated from losers (see Foster 2014). The question then arises: How and when does a display of weakness constitute a competitive bid for power? Those of us who read "The White Man's Burden" (1899) in school remember Rudyard Kipling's description of the putatively thankless chore of bringing civilization to the savages, for their own good and at Europe's expense. Exhorting whites to take up their racial responsibility for empire, he specified that the colonizing nations must "send forth the best ye breed"—which is to say, Kipling's paean to imperialism conflated dominant forms

sexual history of ballet (Garafola 2001). In other words, Gibson's *Dying Swan* reflects an attachment to a femininity defined simultaneously by the performance of erotic availability and its refusal.

of whiteness with noble self-sacrifice. Written with the express purpose of generating support for the US invasion of the Philippines only a few years before Fokine's composition, Kipling's poem underscores the extent to which the displacement of vulnerability was commonly and effectively deployed to justify imperial violence at the end of the 19th century: such accounts make it appear that white colonizers suffered and died while the people of color they attacked flourished. Sara Ahmed tells us that similar displacements circulated 80 years earlier as part of the larger justification of British colonial rule in India (2010:125). In such representations the invading white army is imagined as transferring its physical and moral vitality to the bodies and spirits of the conquered. Thus the internal mythology of empire holds that to conquer is simultaneously to represent the best elements of your race, and to be weakened to the point of death.

This mythology contains an important element of class misinformation alongside its racism. The foot soldiers of European empires might have been white, but they did not necessarily hold other credentials for membership in the category of "best ye breed." (This is one of the ways that ballet dancers generally differ from infantrymen.) So returning to the proposition that the Dying Swan form refracts imperial whiteness into its component parts allows us to view Gibson's composition as manifesting a particular aspirational relation to membership in elite European cultural categories. Her *Dying Swan* performs the continuing authority and relevance of the racialized class hierarchy that invests ballerinas with disproportionate cultural value while marginalizing peelers. Her dance also points to a larger erotic investment both in class hierarchy and in female powerlessness. The sexual connotations of pole dance do not simply disappear when the dancer adds visual signifiers of elite status. Instead, they are disavowed and displaced to the performance of vulnerability in a move that reflects a larger cultural disavowal and displacement of the economic value historically generated by colonized people, as well as by the white laboring classes who carry out much of the work of colonial exploitation and settlement. This move may also reflect a disavowed erotic investment in displaced forms of the physical vulnerability created by and inseparable from economic precarity (see Miéville 2015:2; Butler 2015:12). Gibson's dance therefore materializes a particular relation to imperial whiteness, notably the defensive aspiration of a cousin from the colonies attempting to claim membership in the ruling race and class by embodying allegiance to a genteel cultural aesthetic.

Edge Play

In short, Gibson's *Dying Swan* combines the performance of asexual femininity with signifiers of physical vulnerability in a bid to elevate the cultural status of her movement idiom. Her dance resonates powerfully with historical performances of gendered violence in which the presumption of white women's physical frailty and defenselessness against rape were mobilized to justify white men's power in the form of rigid military control, and sometimes massacre, of entire colonized populations.[7] Such justifications displace vulnerability and suffering from the people being subjugated to a subgroup of the subjugators. This race-based psychic and political distortion is no less unjust because it coexists with real misogyny among the colonizers. So while Gibson's bid to elevate the cultural status of pole dance doesn't address race directly, her performance of fragile feminine asexuality has everything to do with the construction of black masculinity as its threatening opposite.

While European colonial displacements of vulnerability onto white women no longer circulate through the same aesthetic conventions that they did a century ago, they continue to inform the global mass-mediated imagination. Turning the prism slightly shows us an edge

7. Indeed, Pavlova's initial rise to stardom exemplifies one version of this reward structure; she was perceived as interestingly fragile in contrast to the robust strength of the reigning ballerina in St. Petersburg, Mathilde Kschessinska (Homans 2010:291–92).

between facets, where a different dance repeats Gibson's emphasis on the high cultural value of feminine delicacy but also brings the significance of race into view. In 2013 Greenpeace activists in Zurich staged a protest against Russian energy company Gazprom that draws on *The Dying Swan* to mobilize viewers against Arctic drilling; a video of this performance was later released on the Greenpeace website under the title "The Art of Arctic Destruction" (Greenpeace Schweiz 2013). Against a golden background a white woman in a white tutu embodies Art by performing swan arms in a sea of white fog. As she bends and sways, she brings her head and arms below the surface of the fog and emerges besmirched with a dark liquid that quickly engulfs her. The image of the dying swan is used here to call attention to the global significance of environmental degradation; its explicit enframement as capital-A Art underscores the preciousness and vulnerability of both human and nonhuman forms of life, and reminds viewers of the high stakes of actions undertaken without adequate regard for our shared mortality.

The genius move here is the use of the dying swan form's innate hybridity to forge a cross-species affective connection, specifically to get human viewers emotionally involved in mourning birds killed by oil spills. This dying swan is intended to stimulate viewers to attach more value to life than to oil, and so to take action to protect those precious fragile beings. Regrettably, the video's designers chose to communicate pathos and urgent danger through the literal sullying of the dancer's optical whiteness by an ugly, spreading dark stain (molasses, standing in for crude oil). It is hard to escape the implication that the worst thing that can happen for humanity—indeed, for the life of the planet—is for a white woman to be touched by blackness.

I'm not suggesting that this is the video's intended takeaway. Instead, its designers activated a signifying chain "left over" from a colonial discourse that both opposed nature to culture and was racist in intent; in contrast, the video conflates protecting nature with protecting culture (in particular, an art form that represents the achievements of white European urban civilization). Its core goal is not to promote racism. A charitable person might even suggest that its aims serve the poorest and most vulnerable human residents of island nations as well as sea birds. Nevertheless the video presumes an audience that will reliably interpret its visual vocabulary, its mobilization of widely shared references to elite white femininity, as indicating an urgent need to protect what is precious, threatened, and defenseless. This interpretation depends on viewers' ability to understand that the presence of blackness connotes the danger that whiteness will be contaminated.

The Greenpeace video, then, draws on a racially freighted visual system with the intention of mobilizing viewers to take action to protect white fragility. It thus refracts imperialism's characteristic displacement of danger and suffering from the brown and black bodies of the colonized onto the white bodies of the colonizers, and especially onto the bodies of elite white women. Where Gibson's pole dance underscores the cultural capital associated with feminine weakness, "The Art of Arctic Destruction" documents not only the historical importance of white feminine weakness to many colonial justifications for violence against subjugated populations, but also the simplicity with which color relations informed the imperial imagination and continue to circulate in visual culture.[8] At the most basic level the Greenpeace video depicts blackness spreading over and eventually obscuring a white figure on a golden field. It emphasizes the persistent use of whiteness to index vulnerability, blackness to index violent threat. This *Dying Swan* therefore reflects systemic racial hierarchy and racialized necropolitics even though it believes its intention is firmly directed elsewhere.

8. And then there's the sheer mindfuck of the fact that the substance used to portray the oil in the video is molasses—historically inseparable from the transatlantic slave trade and the capital investment in white domination at the expense of black life (Greenpeace Schweiz 2013; Dunn 1972).

Facet 2: Drumming the Swan

While "The Art of Arctic Destruction" disavows its own mobilization of racist imagery, other swan performances engage this aspect of the dance's colonial legacies directly and explicitly. Mamela Nyamza is a South African choreographer who treats dance as a form of activism and whose work has often engaged contemporary sexual and racial politics. Her *Dying Swan* won an FNB Vita Dance Umbrella Award in 2000 and gained a global viewing audience in the semifinals of the short-lived 2009 *International Superstars of Dance* reality TV show. Nyamza's swan is performed in a plain white leotard and practice tutu over bare legs and feet, to a recorded version of the usual score augmented by live drummers on the stage with her. In this way Nyamza shifts theatrical embellishment from the visual to the aural dimension, from the crystals and feathers of the classical costume to the musical environment within which she dances—a sensory transfer that simultaneously redistributes aesthetic references from imperial whiteness to associations with indigenous blackness.[9]

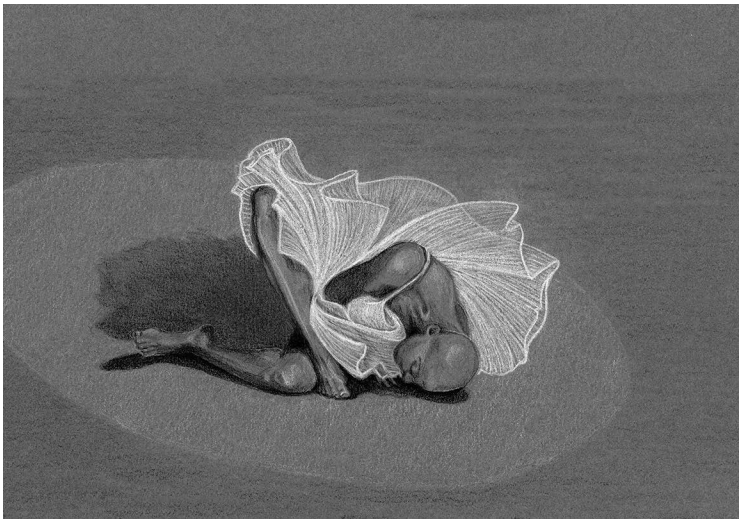

Figure 6. Mamela Nyamza's swan suffers as it dies. (Illustration by Julian B. Carter)

Figure 7. Mamela Nyamza adapting the ballet vocabulary for her own ends at the International Superstars of Dance *competition. Filmed in Los Angeles; aired 5 January 2009. (Screengrab by* TDR*; www.youtube.com/watch?v=AswRJtS9_eg)*

To begin with, Nyamza reduces her swan costume to its trademark visual whiteness. Its only ornamentation is the short tulle skirt that evokes ballet and through that evocation activates the cultural lineage of racial whiteness. Nyamza's use of color here echoes and reverses the Greenpeace swan's: by layering whiteness over black skin she creates a visual invocation of ballet, and by extension white European high culture, as an external imposition on or colonial appropriation of her black

9. This transfer also shifts the nature of the relationship between the dancer and the many people whose work surrounds and supports the moment of performance: from the invisible hands of the costume makers who stitch each bead or sequin or feather to its foundation to the visible hands of the drummers who share the stage with her. Nyamza's swan affirms rather than disavows the collaborative aspects of performance presentation.

African body. That external whiteness clings closely to her skin while Nyamza moves in relation to the gentle but insistent patter of the drums. They deepen the music's melancholic drama, providing the recorded classical score with a sonic ground and pulse that underscore the dance as an enactment of African bodily vitality in the face of imperialism's encroaching mortal danger.

Here again the swan motif carries with it persistent connotations of royal power and consequential vulnerability, but deployed from a woke postcolonial perspective. Nyamza's choreography avoids recycling the performance of fragile white femininity integral to the Fokine ballet and echoed in Gibson's pole dance and the Greenpeace video. Instead she draws on both African and European movement vocabularies in a way that interrupts the lingering colonialist association of vulnerability with whiteness. Nyamza's *Dying Swan* begins by declaring its inversion of Fokine's choreography, the dancer kneeling on the floor bowed forward in a pose similar to the one that more commonly concludes the dance. She omits the usual opening sequence of bourrées and rippling swan arms entirely, replacing that vertical full-body tremble with a series of spinal undulations that gradually unfold her torso and lift her weight until she can extend one leg behind her. Rotating this leg to the side in a gestural pathway recognizable as a balletic *rond de jambe en dedans*, she lifts and shakes it as though shaking water off a wing; the drum patters like raindrops. Right from the beginning Nyamza shakes off ballet in favor of highlighting the birdness, the animality, of the swan. For the next minute and 45 seconds she uses her head, torso, and limbs to execute small percussive gestures that register a kind of strutting pride. When she extends her legs, it's to cover ground, display her strength, or make herself appear larger. Periodically she punctuates or supplements her flow with a return to the purposeful flutter of hands or feet that echoes and illustrates the quick patter of the drums.

Figure 8. Mamela Nyamza's Dying Swan *is emphatically avian, although more angular than the classical ballet swan.* International Superstars of Dance*, 5 January 2009. (Screengrab by* TDR*; www.youtube.com/watch?v=AswRJtS9_eg)*

In its emphatically avian quality, Nyamza's swan echoes Asadata Dafora's 1932 work *Awassa Astrige*. Currently in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's repertory, *Awassa Astrige* is heralded in a 2014 press release as one of the first compositions to have presented African movement vocabulary on a Western concert dance stage (Ailey 2014).

Though I've been unable to locate unambiguous documentation of Pavlova's influence on Dafora or Dafora's influence on Nyamza, the probability of direct and deliberate connections between them is high. Dafora was an international sophisticate who traveled extensively in European artistic circles before the First World War, and it is difficult to imagine how he could have avoided knowing of Pavlova's enormously successful performances. Susan Manning tells us that Dafora performed in a 1937 New York "Negro Dance Evening," organized by Katherine Dunham, for which choreographer Clarence Yates recruited many of the dancers. Yates had studied ballet with Fokine, and cotaught a workshop in Harlem "for dancers interested in techniques other than jazz" (2004:95). It is pertinent to the present discussion that the leftist

and black press received this concert as an intentional combination of Africanist movement with social critique (93). Though this tells us little about Dafora's compositional influences or motivations in 1932, it does establish his connection to a critically alert transatlantic black dance community interested in exploring the intersection of African and European classical forms, including dancers who certainly were familiar with Fokine's *Dying Swan*.

A similar transatlantic community of black dance artists may have supported Mamela Nyamza's access to Dafora's legacy at the opposite end of the 20th century. *Awassa Astrige* was revived in the 1970s by Charles Moore, one of Dafora's students, who brought it to the Ailey repertory (DeFrantz 2002:149–50; Robertson 1979:D21). Nyamza studied at the Ailey School in New York in 1998 (Sassen 2015). Her dance, then, reflects the swan's migration from Europe to South Africa via a West African choreographer working in New York.

The Ailey troupe followed the conventional staging of *Awassa Astrige*, which is usually performed by a bare-chested black man, hips encircled with ostrich plumes, who ripples his arms, pumps his chest, and preens in a display of naughty elegance. Like Nyamza's swan, Dafora's ostrich dances to drums in a deliberate performance of African-ness. But while Nyamza's dance resonates with Dafora's, there are also some significant differences between them. Whereas Nyamza barely shows us the classical swan arms, preferring instead a more angular "wing," Dafora employs them prominently and to great effect, combining the gesture with a bold but soft walk so that its fluid muscularity comes to the fore. Also unlike Nyamza's swan, the ostrich does not die. Dafora's bird speaks back to Fokine's swan from a position of pride, refusing to stage the subaltern's expected submission to death. Dafora used the ostrich to stage majestic African masculinity; Nyamza uses the swan to stage contemporary African women's vulnerability to overwhelming violence. Dafora's ostrich stalks offstage with his head held high; Nyamza's swan perishes, shaking on the floor.

The contrast underscores the important fact that the performance of indigenous black African-ness in white-dominant venues is a deliberate creative and political choice, made in particular cultural contexts that shape the meaning of the performance. In 1930s New York, Dafora's display of physical dignity refracted then-dominant racial constructions of black men as degraded, violent, and bestial on the one hand and as emasculated and dependent on the other, as well as imperial constructions of Africans as conquered and enslaved people. *Awassa Astrige* counters these racist fantasies simply by empowering the ostrich to exit regally, in full possession of his power. Nyamza's dance refracts different racialized gender politics. As she reroutes the swan through the ostrich, and ballet technique through African movement traditions, she develops a choreographic claim about the fragility and suffering of black female life in the postcolonial present.

This performance reflects a drastically different relation to the intersecting realities of gender, race, and class than we see in Elena Gibson's pole dance. Nyamza is not simply using the swan form to assimilate the cultural capital of ballet; instead, she invokes the swan's fragility in order to displace the implicit claim that white feminine weakness is the vulnerability that matters most, the suffering that should tug at our hearts. Where Gibson relates to European high culture as an aesthetic canon to be emulated, Nyamza relates to it as a political claim to be refuted; and while both use *The Dying Swan* as a competition piece, Nyamza also frames it as part of the inherited reality of domination. That is, she treats international competition as an occasion to expose and explore the real and consequential historical contests between nations and peoples. Dying, her swan refracts the racist colonial imagination that treats black bodies in general as infinitely disposable in their animal otherness, and black women's bodies in particular as insensible to pain (Hoffman et al. 2016).

Joan Frosch, an eminent dance ethnographer and filmmaker who specializes in African experimental choreography and global artistic exchange, describes Nyamza's *Dying Swan* as "a brilliant reinvention" and "a raw look at the stuttering vulnerability of life" (2012). But the *International Superstars of Dance* contest can't accommodate such a radical revision of Fokine's

classic work. The Argentinean judge, in particular, articulates her resistance in telling terms: Maria Pogee is a white woman in her 70s with a background in late-20th-century Hollywood go-go and theatrical jazz. She justifies the low score she grants Nyamza by explaining "I'm used to the real *Swan Lake*—more of the ballerina type" (superstarsdance 2009). These words suggest her fundamental inability to understand the performance beyond Nyamza's evident failure to be, or aspire to be, white: a "real" performance of swan-ness presumably aligns itself with elite Euro-American artistic practice and the affiliated normative signifiers of feminine delicacy. Yet lack of verisimilitude is a counterintuitive charge to level at any dance, particularly one that features a vigorous human pretending to be a moribund bird. Or perhaps by "real" Pogee means "conventional," but this makes no sense either, as no *Dying Swan* can ever be a conventional *Swan Lake*; they are different ballets, created by different choreographers decades apart in different countries and set to music by different composers. It seems most likely that the judge's understanding of "reality" is called into question by Nyamza's full-body collision with conventional racial, gendered, and aesthetic expectations. As Frosch observes, the judges "could not wrap their heads around a black artist, not only dancing, but daring to appropriate a ballet archetype for her own interpretation" (2012).

Facet 3: True Artistry, or the Certificate of White Tears

The Argentinean judge Maria Pogee's definition of artistic merit privileges imperialism's aesthetic legacy and devalues the racially subordinated body's perspective on vulnerability as well as its techniques of expressive communication. Another turn of the prism reveals another set of judges performing a related resistance to John Lennon da Silva's 2011 presentation of a *Dying Swan* on *Se Ela Dança Eu Danço*, a Brazilian reality show similar to *So You Think You Can Dance*. Like other televised competitions, *Se Ela Dança Eu Danço* generates a narrative structure to guide audience response, in this instance with a highly edited conversation between judges and contestant that creates dramatic tension by situating da Silva as an artistic outsider.

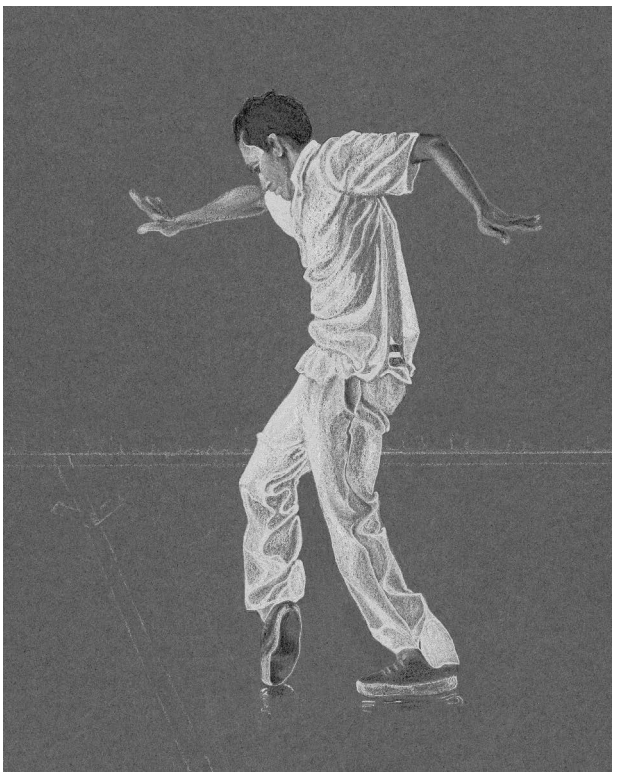

Figure 9. John Lennon da Silva, pictured here in the all-white garb he sometimes wears for his hip hop Dying Swan*, echoes the turn-out of the ballet he uses as inspiration. (Illustration by Julian B. Carter)*

Da Silva is a brown-skinned young man wearing baggy pants and a T-shirt in which his skinny chest seems lost. He shows no surprise when the expensively coiffed blonde celebrity judge raises her eyebrows in disdain as she asks if he's planning to perform "looking...like *that*?" He explains that these are the clothes he always wears. Another judge—an older white man with weighty art-world credentials and a reputation as "el Lupus Mal," or "big bad wolf," of this show—leans forward to ask, rather

condescendingly, whether da Silva knows that the dance he says he's going to do "is performed by a ballerina, on pointe" (eudanconosbt 2011). Their skepticism about da Silva's qualifications to dance *The Dying Swan* testifies to the scope and reach of the form's continued associations with elite white women and reminds us that black and brown men (though appreciated as entertainers) are frequently treated as interlopers in the palace of fine arts. The TV segment's little theatre of judgment rehearses sedimented histories of race and class hierarchy.

Figure 10. John Lennon Da Silva's swan struts as well as ripples. Competing on Se Ela Dança Eu Danço*, 10 February 2011. (Screengrab by* TDR*; www .youtube.com/watch?v=MceKWv9V-Yw)*

Thus, even before the music begins, da Silva's social vulnerability is onstage and onscreen, foregrounded as the subject matter of his dance. For the next few minutes da Silva ripples his slender arms, passing waves of musical energy through his uncannily hyperextended elbows while he glides across the stage by turning his sneakered feet in and out. He snakes his torso forward and back, pops his neck, punctuates locked poses with fingers that twitch and flicker. Every so often the camera cuts to one of the judges' faces (the blonde eyebrows register surprise). As the music crests da Silva pours his length out on the floor, somersaults, then folds his legs under him to rise halfway with his arms outstretched cruciform—on his knees, hands grasping at the air—before crumpling backward like a marionette. Like he's been shot.

This conclusion marries the performance of physical vulnerability to the social vulnerability established by da Silva's interview with his judges. Da Silva stages his death through gestures drawn not from ballet tradition but from African American street dance, and his final pose duplicates the performance of murder in innumerable action movies. The effect is to underscore how poor black and brown men serve the cultural function of signifying urban violence, even while they are frequently its victims—as though their deaths were in some perverse sense confirming evidence of the threat they are presumed to pose. Da Silva's movement vocabulary and presentation work to align him with a racialized urban underclass, such that his embodiment winds up serving the same communicative function as the molasses in the Greenpeace video: it links the signifiers of brown-skinned masculinity to the threat of mortal violence. Da Silva's dance refracts both the real vulnerability of his life in the favelas, and the imagined threat posed by bodies like his in spaces that are normally reserved for the absent white "ballerina, on pointe." This contradiction points toward the impossible bind confronting a body that is always held accountable for its own mortality.

The Brazilian judges may or may not see any of this in the dance; they don't offer substantive interpretation. Instead, they call da Silva a "true artist," and applaud until the blonde notices that the big bad wolf isn't weighing in. She looks more closely: "Why, you're crying," she says, and the camera zooms in to confirm that his face is wet with tears. We watch a few seconds in which he appears to struggle for self-mastery, until, still wordlessly weeping, he gets up and leaves the set; and the camera follows him to his dressing room until he shuts the door.

Figure 11. John Lennon Da Silva's swan dies like a man being shot in an action movie. Competing on Se Ela Dança Eu Danço*, 10 Feb 2011. (Screengrab by* TDR*; www.youtube.com/watch?v=MceKWv9V-Yw)*

This sequence is, of course, part of the contest performance, and is especially interesting here for the way it reflects the displacement of vulnerability from racialized bodies to white emotions. In the context of the TV show the judge's tears certify da Silva as a "good enough" swan, a "good enough" artist to capture the poignancy of our common mortality. The swan form invests a death with social significance. Weeping tells us that da Silva's death constitutes a meaningful loss. Beyond that we don't get to find out why the judge is crying. But whatever is going on for him personally, on the level of the cultural text his tears have the effect of diverting attention away from the aesthetic impact and critical potential of da Silva's embodied enactment of his own murder and toward the white judge's reaction to that scene (see DiAngelo 2011; Carter 2007; Halttunen 1995).

Da Silva's translation alters the imperial story in a way that says hey, white lives aren't the only ones that matter; my death deserves notice too. His performance enacts the agility and fearlessness that some other brown and black bodies enact through explicitly political movements toward racial justice. It thus reflects the extrahuman flexibility and grace demanded of men of color in relation to systems that deny their vulnerability and fear their power, while it refracts the transnational spread of contemporary movement idioms that express (among other things) resistance to white elite cultural dominance. But da Silva's *Dying Swan* is embedded within the larger performance of the reality TV contest, which reflects a different racial perspective on vulnerability. *Se Ela Dança Eu Danço* tells viewing audiences that what matters about a poor brown man's performance of his own murder is that a powerful white man weeps (DiAngelo 2011). The judge remains the arbiter of Real Culture, and his tears simultaneously certify da Silva's artistry and appropriate the young performer's social vulnerability. Da Silva's composition is thereby both rewarded and recuperated as a stimulus for sentiment instead of critique.

Oddly, the transfer of vulnerability from the "murdered" brown body on the stage to the white judge is an opportunity for a feel-good moment in TV land. The judge's tears reassure us that true merit will be recognized even when it shows up with brown skin and baggy pants. Watching, we are invited to imagine that the underdog can triumph; that prejudice is simply a

product of ignorance and dissolves when presented with better information; and further, that art's function is to reverse and compensate for systemic injustice. The *Dying Swan* that wins this episode of *Se Ela Dança Eu Danço* thus reflects the magical power of white tears while it refracts the systemic disavowal and displacement of vulnerability that structure so much conversation about race and class in postcolonial societies.

The Dance That Does Not Die

Imperial history flows through bodies in many different ways. Its violence isn't necessarily graphic, and when its mortal stakes are visible, they aren't always attributed to imperial aggression or colonial occupation in any direct way. This is not surprising. There are many cultural sites in which domination is outsourced, denied, minimized, naturalized, sentimentalized, or misattributed: these are industry-standard techniques of power's self-justification, not evidence of its absence. Fragility is a luxury that often depends on brutal force taking place elsewhere. Displays of delicacy, weakness, and helplessness may index domination, pointing to the disavowed exercise of power by the performance of its absence.

The performance prism of *The Dying Swan* makes racial disavowal visible in the same way that a faceted crystal allows us to see rainbows on the ceiling: it breaks dominant whiteness into its component wavelengths. And just as a spot of vivid emerald dancing on the wall needs some comparison and context for us to understand green as a persistent element of the sunlight we ordinarily perceive as neutral in regard to color, we have to hold our attention open to a range of different dances called *The Dying Swan* to see the many variants of the post/colonial experience that they collectively refract. Attended to in this way, the performance prism of *The Dying Swan* makes visible the cultural persistence and reach of imperial legacies.

In their different idioms Gibson, Nyamza, and da Silva embody a few of the many ways traces of European domination appear and reappear in contemporary dance. Their performances materialize the memory of imperial power relations preserved and transmitted through technical training, popular culture, and public display. Inevitably, therefore, they index some of the different forms of vulnerability experienced by people positioned differently in relation to both past and current systems for distributing recognition and the resources that sustain life. As competition entries, these performances are especially effective at dramatizing the dialectic of vulnerability and victory in the ongoing dance of cultural domination. Their shared mobilization of ballet's historical association with white elites demonstrates that displays combining references to fragility and power are widely understood as strategies for enhancing competitive status. At the same time, their varying reception underscores the persistent racial hierarchy that holds some vulnerable bodies with much greater tenderness than others.

My point is not that *The Dying Swan* is a racist dance, or that ballet is bad. Rather, I'm gesturing toward the affective dimension of postcolonial racism and the way racialized relations of domination permeate mundane mass cultural forms, such as TV dance contests, that do not understand themselves to be in conversation with the historical legacies of imperialism. Dance contests condense and reflect larger tendencies to respond to creativity with evaluative judgment, to harness expressive capacity for profit, and to pit people against one another. This particular dance is especially suited to competition because it is simultaneously agonistic and ambiguous: one dancer embodies both the swan's vulnerability and death's victory, and there is no way to isolate death's domination from the life that struggles against it.

Perhaps this is one of the ways that *The Dying Swan* resonates with current postcolonial conditions, defined equally by the inescapable facts of a globally shared history of conquest and the imperative need for collective struggle against its legacies. What does it mean to use one's mortal body to enact the will to transform the conditions of our mortality? We're enfolded in death by virtue of our mortal being; we can't get out of dying except by being already dead. Similarly, none of us can wish ourselves out of the postcolonial condition, brimming as it is with the cultural legacies of militant whiteness.

Struggling with history is as futile and necessary as struggling with death. We cannot live without our resistance, even while we know that we will eventually succumb. In the political sphere we might call this kind of entanglement "complicity." The desire to reject complicity with whiteness is understandable for any number of reasons and is bolstered by the political and analytic stance, powerfully articulated by Noel Ignatiev (1997) and David Roediger ([1991] 2007), that whiteness has no cultural content besides the drive for domination. In this view, loyalty to humanity requires that one oppose whiteness and seek its abolition. I hear the call to revolution. But culture is messy stuff, and the call for cultural and political purity has proven itself dangerous again and again. One of the problems with framing white culture as domination is that this analysis glosses over the complexity and creativity of possible responses to cultural forms that reflect our shared and violent past. How do we know what, precisely, constitutes a whiteness that should be abolished?

These performances demonstrate that contemporary performances of *The Dying Swan* index both the haughtiness of imperial elites and the struggle of the conquered. It informs creative production across the spectrum of artistic value from the most rarified and elite cultural forms to the most trivial, and it is used both to reproduce and to contest the legacies of conquest it records. Does resistance to fascism demand that we stop dancing, or ban creative forms that reflect the history of oppression? If so, the revolution isn't heading anywhere I want to go. Complicity with imperial histories isn't optional; it's the real condition in which we live. That doesn't mean that we must cooperate with it. There is a reason that the dance is about death, and that that content is indissolubly linked to the hierarchy of cultural forms: both are enormous, too big to resist, and yet it is imperative to push back anyway.

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