

Searching the Darkness: Molissa Fenley's *State of Darkness*

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Abstract

*In her description of material contained in the database "Stravinsky the Global Dancer," (Jordan and Lorraine Nicholas, 2003) Stephanie Jordan asserts that there has been "unrelenting global demand" by choreographers for Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, comprising a "formidable array of genres: the styles of American and European modern dance, physical theatre, Tanztheater and post-modern Butoh, as well as stylistic mixes incorporating ballet...contemporary as well as historical settings; and a range of ethnographic situations..." Jordan notes that there have been "over 80 uses of the score since 1990," fueled perhaps partly by the Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer reconstruction of *Sacre* for the Joffrey Ballet in 1987. The Joffrey *Sacre* inspired American choreographer Molissa Fenley to create what dance critic John Gruen called "a forty-minute miracle of endurance and exultation...a singular achievement within the canon of contemporary dance."*

*The purpose of my paper is to examine Molissa Fenley's piece, *State of Darkness*. Specifically, I will investigate the ways in which Fenley's version circumvents a stereotypically gendered reading of the *Chosen One*, discuss how critics and Fenley herself viewed *State of Darkness* as a turning point in her career, and look at how the movement vocabulary of the piece reflects Fenley's images, influences, and her understanding of "the open space of the world." Finally, I look carefully at the ways in which the soloists who have inherited Fenley's role (Boal, Foster, and Porretta) elicit uniquely different viewing experiences of the piece through their individually nuanced performances.*

American choreographer Molissa Fenley saw the Millicent Hodson/Kenneth Archer reconstruction of *Le Sacre du Printemps* for the Joffrey Ballet at City Center in New York in 1988. Immediately captivated by "the music and the staging of primitivism, the beautiful costumes, the oddity of the steps, the turned in and stomping vocabulary," (Fenley email 4/11/13) she went to Tower Records and bought the Detroit Symphony Orchestra recording as conducted by Antal Dorati on the recommendation of the sales clerk. Fenley immersed herself in the score, listening to it daily as she engaged in her warm-up series, until she found herself "inserting physical responses to the music... [building] a vocabulary" that responded to the emotional strain of the music. The 1988 piece that Fenley created, *State of Darkness*, was hailed as a "forty-minute miracle of endurance and exultation..." (John Gruen, *Dance Magazine*, May 1991); a "minimalistic solo marathon," (Marcia Siegel, "Pomo Retro Rite" in *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 61, No. 1 Spring 2008) and won a Bessie Award for choreography in 1988 and later a Bessie Award for performance when restaged on Peter Boal in 2000. In this paper I examine Fenley's piece, her choreographic influences, and explore questions raised by Fenley's

restaging of the work on other bodies, notably Peter Boal (1999) and Pacific Northwest Ballet's Jonathan Porretta (2007.)

Molissa Fenley was born Avril Molissa Fenley on November 15, 1954 in Las Vegas, Nevada, the youngest of three siblings. Her family moved to Ithaca, NY when she was nine months old, and then at age six to Ibadan, Nigeria where her father worked for USAID, the United States Agency for International Development. Fenley grew up in Nigeria and spent her last two years of high school in Spain before returning to the States in 1971 for college at Mills College in California. In an interview with Ann Murphy for the Oral History Project through the Dance Division of the New York Library for the Performing Arts, Fenley describes her background: "I consider myself sort of Nigerian in a way...I grew up in Ibadan, which is Yoruba...I just remember always feeling that I was surrounded by extreme physical beauty, not only of the land, but of the people. There was a sense that the human body was extremely strong, enduring, could withstand all sorts of punishment from disease to malnutrition...[I felt] an extraordinary sense of optimism in that the human body was the thing that carried around this soul" (Interview transcript, page 14). Fenley's time in Spain brought her an introduction to Flamenco dancing as well; her exposure to dance was both multi-faceted and multicultural, and highly atypical for most American women.

At Mills College Fenley studied Graham and Humphrey technique and Louis Horst's methods of composition. After graduation, Fenley moved to New York City, dancing with other choreographers (notably Carol Conway and Andrew deGroat) before forming her own company in 1977. Writing about Fenley in 1980, dance scholar Sally Banes stated "Molissa Fenley's choreography bewilders the eye, entices the ear, and challenges both the memory and the intellect. Incessant, everchanging motion, saturated with polymorphous arm gestures, performed to a driving, repetitive, percussive beat, the dances are complex series of tensions between constancy and mutability, structure and disorder, abstraction and imagery, exoticism and familiarity, social and theatrical forms" (Banes, *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*, 259). Fenley described to Banes the evolution of her use of arm gestures: [After *Planets* (1978)] "I allowed the gestures to become more motional rather than stopped in space, gestural. I wanted to use the back as fully as I could, and to use the arms as more than simply extensions of the spine..." (261-262) Banes notes that in Fenley's work, "...the centrality of the arm movements to the motion of the rest of the body prevents one from seeing them as simply embellishments" (262). This holds true ten years later in Fenley's *State of Darkness*, where arm gestures are invocations, conjuring up images of ancestral spirits, animal essences, and emotional experiences.

A sense of ritual permeates Fenley's choreography. In an essay in *The Vision of Modern Dance*, edited by Jean Morrison Brown, Naomi Mindlin and Charles Woodford, Fenley states "The whole dance experience for me is extremely sacred and ritualistic, as well as all-consuming" (210). Her experiences in Nigeria left a lasting impression. In describing the dances she saw in Nigeria, Fenley told Ann Murphy "You would go for a while and the ceremony would be going on, and you would leave as the ceremony was continuing. My brother and I saw an enormous amount of dance...We learned very quickly that there was something extraordinarily beautiful about these rituals" (Oral History Project, page 20). Fenley also commented on the transformation that takes place, noting "Seeing so much Yoruba dance at an early age instilled this idea of dance taking

place over a long period of time, that there was something about the metabolic shift that was going to happen in the dancer doing something for so long, but also in the watcher, that there's this way of empathically involving oneself and witnessing something for so long that you and the dancer, in fact, go through these shifts of interest, non-interest, engagement, non-engagement, and what is at the end of that is that an hour has passed...and you've both been in the space at the same time, so how interesting that is, doer and watcher together." (Oral History Project, page 63). The sense of shared experience of watcher and doer, combined with the process of empathically witnessing movement permeates *State of Darkness*. We are mesmerized throughout, understanding those fluctuations in attention as part of a larger kinesthetic whole.

In Fenley's solo journey through her *State of Darkness*, we become witness to a series of transformations. Fenley described this process in conversation with Ann Murphy:

...this idea of Shamanic transformation had been set up very early on, particularly in *State of Darkness* in 1988, where I chose to choreograph as a solo the entire *Rite of Spring* and used the score as a thread of emotionality that takes a person through all sorts of transformations of visiting ancestral spirits and visiting animal spirits, visiting her own spirit, and again, going through extreme physical transformation and extreme physical expenditure.

But, *State of Darkness*, that physical expenditure had to do with just this extraordinary giving up of one's metabolic self to what was going to happen...(77)

In Ellen Bromberg's documentary film "The Re-Staging of *State of Darkness*," Fenley describes the origination of some of the movement motifs in the piece: "The imagery has a lot to do with going in and out of different animal forms, different spirit forms. There are moments that are extremely exotic; there are moments that are much more sort of pedestrian. The whole thing is like gathering in water and there's a whole 'farming' part to it... [another part] is a deer stopped in front of headlights..." In an email to me, Fenley explained that she worked intuitively from the score, rather than researching the original ballet's libretto. She wrote: "I could see from the CD that parts of the music were titled "The Bear Dance," or "The Ancestors," or "The Chosen One," etc., and so used those differentiations of characters to help in choreographing the vocabulary—there were dance phrases choreographed for being an ancestor, a spirit, an animal, a person..." (Fenley, email 4/11/13). In an unpublished essay by Richard Move, Fenley is quoted as saying "I knew that there was the possibility for one person to take on the varying states of the music. I experimented with changing who I was while dancing: sometimes in the spirit world, sometimes in the animal world, sometimes in the present plane, constantly shifting personas in the dance, exiting a sense of "self" and becoming something "other," and being transported" (*Rhythm Field: The Dance of Molissa Fenley*, Seagull Press, March 2014). This constant process of shape-shifting, and Fenley's remarkable ability to embody these transformations is one of the reasons *State of Darkness* is so compelling.

Fenley also felt the influence of *Sacre's* creators as she was choreographing. In John Gruen's May, 1991 *Dance Magazine* essay, Fenley noted:

I had some weird imaginings while I was working on the piece. At various times I was convinced that Nijinsky was in the studio the entire period—watching and giving

opinions about what he liked or didn't like. At other times I was convinced that Stravinsky was there, sort of giving a nod or a frown. So, in effect, there was nobody there physically, but there were people there spiritually that I thought about. I would say that the making of the ballet entailed the most visionary feelings I've ever had. I seemed literally to be possessed throughout the entire time I was creating it. (41)

In an email to me, Fenley elaborated on her experience: "Odd things would happen in the studio, it was in the winter and I like to work with no artificial light. And, in the shadows of the room, I would be sure that I was being visited by Nijinsky himself, who revealed that he had wished that he had choreographed the entire work as a solo, but hadn't been allowed to." When asked specifically about her sense of ancestral spirits informing the work, Fenley explained "In thinking about ancestral spirits, I'd have to simply say that I am always aware of nature and its continuation...It's a sense of our participation in the ongoing of time, where we are part of time passing; lives are lived and then gone and something else takes their place. So I can't say necessarily that there were particular moments in the work that I felt ancestral spirits so much as I'm aware of them all the time..." (Fenley email 4/11/13).

Critics note the animal imagery in addition to the human scale of the work. Renee E. D'Aoust wrote "It is impossible to describe Fenley's piece without reverting to animal descriptions. "State of Darkness" has different movement themes that could just as easily be thought of as different animals, yet the human is always present" ("Letter from Seattle, 7-12: Rites of Spring," *The Dance Insider*.) D'Aoust heralds the circling of the arms with bent elbows, as giving "the sensation of flight," comparing it to a later port de bras with "...the hands clutched into the body, the wings now broken." She describes Fenley's movement as analogous to "...bird bones, which are laced with air cavities, combining lightness and strength." Sharon McDaniel (*Palm Beach Post*) states that "Fenley hints at the original steps that the legendary Nijinsky designed for *Rite's* infamous 1913 ballet premiere," ("Fenley, Boal together make for a great night" January 7, 2001) without being specific. A close viewing of the piece evokes images of birds, deer, elands, gazelle and other creatures. Those familiar with the Joffrey revival may also superimpose memory images of storks, an eagle, and the pawing motion of the bearskin clad Ancestors.

Fenley notes that she was not guided by *Sacre's* narrative, although the references to the solo woman figure of the Chosen Maiden are unavoidable. Dance scholar Ann Daly writes "*State of Darkness* was not a narrative per se, but it did portray a woman—not unlike the Chosen One of the original *Sacre*—coming to grips with an unspeakable fate, her own or maybe her culture's" (*Critical Gestures: Writings on Dance and Culture* 112). In an email to me, Fenley explained that her intent was "to project the image of an ageless human being/animal, seen through a life's passage of young to old to spirit to back again" and that the effect she wanted was to show "this was a person undergoing the test—sometimes in the dance I felt like an old man, a young man, an old woman, a young deer, etc..." (Fenley email 4/11/13).

Central to Fenley's choreography and performance of *State of Darkness* is her choice of costume: simple black tights and a bare torso. Chosen to reveal the movements of the torso and abdominals, Fenley's "topless" costume received a lot of attention in the early press. Because her body was androgynous-looking (small breasted, clearly defined

abdominal, arm and back muscles) and her hair was short and spiky, Fenley presented a radically new vision of the Chosen Maiden. With an appearance that was neither traditionally feminine nor overtly masculine, Fenley's physique and strength, coupled with the visible demonstration of vulnerability provided a state of dissonance for the audience. In her comments to me, Fenley stated that she wanted "...the inner workings of the torso very visible, so that there was an empathic possibility for a watcher to share in the transmission of fear, excitement, exhaustion, exaltation—all clearly represented by the breath, the shuddering of torso and abdominals—[which would] not [be] seen easily when covered" (Fenley email 4/11/13). This physical vulnerability enhances the viewer's sensory and psychological empathy.

Ann Daly described the impact of Fenley's costume, declaring "In *State of Darkness*, Fenley wore only tights, leaving visible her breasts and rib cage, which registered her changing emotions through varying breath rhythms, from the initial quivering nervousness to, eventually, convulsions of terror and grief...Fenley's toplessness also showed off her impressive back..." (Daly 113) Allan Ulrich, in his piece "Some Rites to Remember" noted that the piece "...achieved a measure of notoriety when Fenley performed it topless," yet none of the later reviewers remarked on the costume choice when Fenley restaged it on Peter Boal (1999) or dancers from the Pacific Northwest Ballet in 2007.

In Bromberg's film, *The Re-Staging of State of Darkness*, Fenley and Boal discuss the female to male shift and its effect on the dance. Boal remarks: "Molissa has one approach to the dance as a woman, but I have always found Molissa on stage as a mix of femininity and masculinity; there's a very boyish quality to her...if you look at her back, at the muscles in her back—this is not a woman's back—this is a human's back." Fenley adds "There's so many moments in it that are encompassing a female energy; there's moments in it that are very male, and moments that are just animal magnetism. I danced it just wearing a pair of tights so you would see a male-female in one person." This male-female duality is further reinforced by the delicacy of many of the gestures and the stamina and endurance required to perform a 34 minute solo of contrasting dynamics: Fenley's performance combines these multiple components in truly breath-taking ways.

Dance critics and scholars have offered various interpretations of meaning for Fenley's *State of Darkness*, many of which reference the original ballet's libretto. Ann Daly writes "Instead of a community careening toward its unknown but inevitable fate, Fenley alone enacts the anguish of sacrifice and the promise of redemption" (112) adding that "*State of Darkness* was an incantation: a rather desperate act of faith in the future of humankind" (112). In reviewing two performers from the Pacific Northwest Ballet in *State of Darkness*, Dance Insider writer Renee E. D'Aoust says "Molissa Fenley doesn't concern herself with un-doing Nijinsky. Fenley places just one dancer onstage. Instead of an ensemble, we see a physically actualized dialogue of soloist and musical score..." and wonders briefly if "...this maiden might dance herself to death..." but decides "Fenley wouldn't succumb to such sentimental weakness. She insists that our individual lives matter. The dancer withstands the force of the ritual, withstands the forces of darkness in our culture...Choreographer and interpreter show that no matter life's curves, it is possible to breathe..." (July 2007). D'Aoust's optimism is reflected in comments Fenley made to Ann Daly about the impulse to create *State of Darkness*: "It's time now that we need a humanist point of view, because we're living in a 'state of darkness.' It's time we

have to be vulnerable and giving” (Daly 112). Daly and others point out that *State of Darkness* was created when the AIDS epidemic was at its height, and applaud its “overtly emotional,” expression. They see in *State of Darkness* movements that “elegantly reveal[ing] a way to negotiate our earth-bound lives,” (D’Aoust) and offer that, while abstract, “it allowed Boal to be emotionally expressive” (Caitlin Sims, *Dance Europe*, Oct/Nov 1999).

In writing about Fenley’s work in 1980, Sally Banes foresaw this shift in American modern dance toward expression and virtuosity, stating “Molissa Fenley is one of a second generation of postmodern choreographers, who has reinstalled a new virtuosity in dance performance. Yet it is a nonillusionistic virtuosity that builds on the achievements of a previous generation, presenting dancers in a ritual of technical brilliance that seems to coax the spectator to join in. In the 1980s, art no longer frames real life; it turns toward something better...Fenley’s dances turn matters of community, drive, and vivacity into energy” (267-268).

In 1999, Molissa Fenley began working with New York City Ballet dancer Peter Boal to set *State of Darkness* on him for a Lincoln Center Out of Doors performance. None of the problems that made the reconstruction of Nijinsky’s original *Sacre du Printemps* were present: the choreographer herself was teaching the dance, there was ample video footage and documentation; the dance was in no way “lost.” Yet, in viewing the performance footage of Boal and Pacific Northwest Ballet dancer Jonathan Porretta I was struck by how different the piece looked, and began wondering about how we determine authenticity, and what questions arise when we compare “original” pieces and their casts to restagings, reconstructions, and/or re-visionings.

One question revolves around what the essence of a composition is. Is the choreography the essence of the dance, its “text,” so to speak? Do we define choreography by the steps, gestures, and movements of the dancer(s)? Or by the music, the libretto, the images conveyed? If the essence of the piece resides in the movement itself, is a restaging “after Petipa” sufficiently authentic, assuming the steps have been handed down from dancer to dancer, with the hope that the majority of the text survives its translation from body to body? What do we do with the fact that some choreographers are adamant about preserving the sanctity of the steps, timing, and body attitude, while others (notably Balanchine) preferred to rework the choreography to best suit the talents of the current dancer(s)? Since the advent of video-recording and systems of dance notation, the task of preserving a dance is easier than when individual bodies and memories were the primary source/method, but even video-recordings aren’t perfect. What exactly are we re-staging?

In the context of a conference celebrating the 100 year anniversary of the *Rite of Spring* and the astonishing afterlife it has had “through its restless reinvention as a dance spectacle,” (Alex Ross, *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2012) and the questions raised about the “...meticulous, though inevitably speculative reconstruction of the 1913 staging...” (Ross) and its authenticity, I watched the two re-stagings of Fenley’s *State of Darkness* with curiosity. Is *State of Darkness*, as performed by Peter Boal a different piece, or merely a different interpretation? Can the same piece mean something different and/or affect audiences differently if the steps, music, costume and choreographic structure are identical? Does the performance change the composition? Is a Bach cello suite played by Yo Yo Ma a different piece than the same cello suite played by

Rostropovich? Does it matter if the work's original creator is involved in the re-staging? What is the essence of Molissa Fenley's *State of Darkness*, and how do different performances of it affect our perception of its essence?

When examining the performance footage of Molissa Fenley, Peter Boal, and Jonathan Porretta in *State of Darkness* I saw clear differences in their use of time, weight, space and flow effort (Laban categories of movement description) and in their use of breath support and torso shaping. While the steps and gestures remained the same (or very similar, given different body types, genders, and affinities), subtle changes in movement initiation, phrasing, and body connectivity created very different experiences of the movement. I would like to briefly note each dancer's general characteristics within the categories of time, weight, space and flow effort, highlighting how small changes in one aspect may communicate entirely different meanings to an audience. I would also like to focus on how these individual differences in performance are especially noticeable in the final moment of the piece, and argue that our interpretation of what the piece is about is heavily influenced by these differences.

Fenley's movement dynamics were often in what Laban labeled Passion Drive: attention to weight (strong to delicate), time (sudden to sustained), and flow (bound to free). What is less evident in Fenley's performance is attention to the space around her—the “what” she is doing is more important than the “where” of it. Fenley's versatility and breadth across all categories of movement dynamics is especially noteworthy. She embodied extremes in all effort matrices: from incredibly bound flow movements to unfettered free flow, in her manipulation of time to create unexpected rhythms and accents to foreshadow, reinforce, or echo the music in constantly surprising ways, and in her accessing of strength and lightness. While her portrayal of each element was captivating, the dynamic performance range across a thirty four minute piece is remarkable.

Peter Boal by comparison exemplifies what Laban deemed Vision Drive: attention to space, time, and flow but little commitment to weight. Irmgard Bartenieff describes the Weightless/Vision Drive as a state where “Time and Space reinforce each other to mental alertness, a consciousness of precision in time and place...Flow can take that awareness ‘where it will’ into the almost disembodied state of the Vision Drive” (*Body Movement: Coping with the Environment*, 62). Boal describes becoming “lost” in the movement (Bromberg documentary) and there's a sense that his effort is directed at overcoming gravity. Movements that in Fenley's performance were strongly weighted became more about shape and direction in space; accents were correct rhythmically but had less surprise and urgency than in Fenley's embodiment.

Boal's lines in space, elevation on leaps, and genuine commitment to the movement won him praise from the critics and a Bessie Award for performance. *Palm Beach Post* critic Sharon McDaniel raved about his “powerhouse performance,” his “tremendous technique and stamina,” and his ability to get into “the work's emotional current,” noting that “Boal covered the stage with the same powerful grand jetes and turns that cause his appearances as principal dancer with the New York City Ballet to be sold out” (January 7, 2001). This is different from what I see when watching Fenley...

Jonathan Porretta captures some of the same strong weight qualities as Fenley: his movement is strongly grounded and his leg and arm gestures are forceful. Like Boal, he demonstrates clarity of forms in space, and he exudes more of a sense of free flow than

either Fenley or Boal. In movements such as attitude turns we see the shape of the position, and the impression is of implosive phrasing: movements that begin with quickness and strength which then release into lightness and/or indulgence. Porretta's performance has more of a Spell Drive quality to it—space and weight are emphasized, bolstered by flow's on-goingness. Time is less noticeable—the moments of sustainment draw our attention to the shape form or the inner experience of the dancer and his indulging in flow—so there's more a feeling of spellbound intensity.

Another lens for looking at movement is how the body parts create pathways in space, and how the body navigates these modes of shape change. Boal and Fenley differed sharply in the pathways of their gestures and in the sense of how movement impulses travel through their bodies: Fenley's gestures and movement initiations were often three-dimensional, carving and spiraling from her core through her body and out into space, while Boal's tended to utilize two-dimensional arcing actions from the global joints (shoulders and knees) or emphasize peripheral pathways (pointed toe leading the body, or fingers cutting through space). Porretta, like Boal, often established a position by arcing his leg or arm to the end point, and both favored peripheral pathways of limbs in contrast to Fenley's internal spiraling and transverse pathways. A Certified Laban Movement Analyst colleague of mine described Fenley's actions as "stirring the space between center of her body and the edge of her kinesphere," rather than simply revealing/tracing the edges of her kinesphere.

All three dancers are beautiful performers who command the stage as soloists. Each has his or her individual strengths and movement affinities, and each provides us with a different sense of the movement based on individual "Patterns of Total Body Connectivity," a phrase developed by Peggy Hackney. Hackney suggests looking at which main patterns of connection are organizing the dancer's movement: Breath, Core-Distal Connectivity, Head-Tail Connectivity, Upper-Lower Connectivity, Body-Half Connectivity, and Cross-Lateral Connectivity. (Hackney adds other points of organization, but for this paper these six are the most relevant.) From this lens, we see Fenley's performance as clearly embodying breath; her gestures radiate from her center, movement travels from her head to her tail with sinuous ease, there's a sense of conversation from her upper to lower body, often spiraling from deep in the pelvis to extend out through her fingers or head; many of her movements require that one side of the body remain stable while the other side is mobile, and finally, her Cross-Lateral connectivity is apparent in her three-dimensional movement and ability to spiral. We are drawn into the inner experience of this dancer and react kinesthetically to her movement.

Boal displays a strong sense of vertical alignment. He moves efficiently from his navel center, he is well balanced and controlled. There's a feeling that his breath is not supporting him as fully as it could—his sternum rarely yields or softens. His head-tail connection is apparent; core to distal patterning is less evident. There's less sense of three-dimensional shape flow support, the lengthening and shortening, widening and narrowing, and bulging and hollowing so present in Fenley's body. Boal's focus is often down and/or internal until the end. With Boal we are aware of the stamina and endurance required for this piece.

Porretta demonstrates a solid head-tail and upper-lower connectivity. His sternum and torso visibly yield and soften, and we experience his breath rising and sinking, widening and narrowing. Porretta has several ecstatic moments where he flings his head

back or dissolves into ooey-goey shape flow—this quality of indulgence is pleasurable to watch, but his tendency to release into lightness and free flow can appear “precious” when his wrists flip or his gaze releases upwards. The internal spiraling that Fenley expresses so beautifully is less visible; in watching Porretta I am aware of how the frequent homolateral movement motifs in the choreography can appear wooden if not supported by internal spirals.

The difference in each dancer’s approach to the movement creates a distinctly different impression at the end of the piece. After a moment of intense inner struggle, hands clenched in fists, arms pressing sideways against invisible bonds, the dancer steps forward into the light. Fenley describes the moment as “At the last crash of the music, where in the *Rite of Spring* scenario, the Chosen One is killed by the falling of the ax, this modern woman steps out into the light: intact, strong, and alive” (Fenley, email 4/11/13). Renee D’Aoust calls it “...a virtuosic step forward...” and Stephanie Jordan declares “At the end, as she moved from darkness into light, to stand, gazing boldly at the audience, the orchestra allowed her Chosen One to become superhuman. Her version was a celebration of human power and perhaps too of Nijinsky’s individual achievement” (Jordan, “The Demons in a Database: Interrogating ‘Stravinsky the Global Dancer’” *The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, Vol. 22, No. 1 Summer, 2004 p. 69). Fenley’s steady gaze, confident advancing, and visible rootedness support this interpretation, yet an examination of the same ending performed by Boal and Porretta carries a different sensation.

Boal steps forward and looks upward. His shoulders sag, his chin advances and his stance suggests he has given up, and is hoping for help from above. He is a survivor, but just barely. We feel his exhaustion and celebrate his tenacity. We sense the enormity of his struggle and find something inspiring in his endurance; the mood is not victorious. Porretta is less visibly exhausted than Boal; he advances his left body half forward and brings the right to match it. His manner is more pugnacious and muscular—he’s a fighter who has gone all nine rounds and has won the bout. ..

Fenley, Boal, and Porretta dance the same steps, to the same music, wearing the same costume. Are all three dances Fenley’s *State of Darkness*? Which version is the authentic one, or all they all the real piece in different ways? What is the essence of our dance “texts,” and how do we preserve them for future generations?

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