Bill T. Jones has always put his personal life at the heart of his dances, so it is no surprise that in a 1994 cover story *Time* magazine identified him as a gay, black, HIV-positive choreographer. *Newsweek*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and the *New Yorker* described Jones similarly, and it is probably fair to say that every feature article written about him today speaks of him in these terms. If any element of Jones’s persona appears unambiguous, it is his identity. However this was not always the case, and it is worthwhile examining an early defining period in Jones’s career when identity was both, as he remarked at the time, “a pivotal idea in everything I do” and a problem to be worked out through his life and dances.¹

The years are the late 1970s and early 1980s when Jones, still in his twenties, was on the brink of fame. His work was gaining critical attention in New York, where it was seen in important downtown spaces like the Kitchen and Dance Theater Workshop. He was shocking audiences with solos that were explosively emotional and aggressive. At the same time he was creating dances with his partner and lover, Arnie Zane, that explored their relationship within a highly structured postmodern vocabulary. This body of solos and duets pushed Jones to the center of the postmodern stage and on to international celebrity.

The argument I would like to develop here is that Jones’s dances demonstrate a struggle for identity centered on questions of power and control manifested through concepts of masculinity. The issues involved fall into three categories, each a form of what I have chosen to call symbolic emasculation. The first is the per-
ception in a dominant white society that a black man is less than a man because he is not fully accorded a white man’s power. The second is the notion that a male dancer is less than a man because he occupies the feminized space of the concert stage, and the third the belief (in what Judith Butler refers to as “the epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality”) that a gay man is less than a man because he does not sexually reproduce. Jones’s response to these emasculating concepts ranged from direct refusal to subversion to apparent acquiescence. In some cases he simply turned his back on what a hegemonic society offered; in others he exploited identity stereotypes, enacting them with charm and force and then turning them against his audiences; in still others he confirmed racial and gender expectations for his own profit, a longstanding tactic of the oppressed. The point I would like to make is that in his art, Jones fought on whatever level he felt necessary to gain control of perceptions of his identity and to empower the “weak” masculinities that his race, profession, and sexual orientation would customarily have forced upon him. The hero of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* notes poignantly, “I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself.” Bill Jones insisted that people hear what he called himself.

Before delving into Jones’s identity struggles, it is necessary to describe in more detail the forms of symbolic emasculation that he confronted in his dances. The first centers on race and gender. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon’s classic study of black identity, Fanon asserts, “It is in his corporeality that the Negro is attacked. . . . It is as an actual being that he is a threat.” According to Fanon, this conflation of black corporeality with identity in the white imagination began with skin color and continued on the auction block, where the slave physically represented a unit of labor. It was furthered by the idea of the black man as primitive, less civilized than whites, and consequently the possessor of tremendous sexual powers developed in the freedom of the African jungle. “In relation to the Negro, everything takes place on the genital level,” Fanon writes. The Negro is viewed as a penis, as raw sexual instinct, “the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions.” In the black male, race and sexuality are united in an eroticized body, and behind the myth of the potent sexualized black male body, forged through slavery and colonialism, looms the specter of the white master. According to the historian Robert Staples, the slave was powerless and as such was denied most of the attributes of white masculinity. Not only was he forbidden any element of control, he had to be controlled. Therefore this uncivilized being who needed to be controlled must be unstable, out of control, and irresponsible. The only masculine attributes allowed the black man were physical strength and sexual prowess; however, these were seen negatively as dangerous and in need of constant surveillance and discipline. Consequently, although the black man may be physically and sexually potent, his masculinity is less than the white man’s in its relative powerlessness. Black writers and scholars have referred to this weakness as a form of emasculation, or feminization (in the sense of lack), because in patriarchy strength and weakness are gendered. For example, in an analysis of Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*, Donald Gibson notes that Washington was quick to assure white readers that black men were not interested in possessing the power of white men. In other words, blacks were content with being in the powerless position of women. Gibson writes, “The African American male is feminized in that he is not defined as a man in the terms in which the time defined ‘man.’”

The male dancer too is a feminized presence on the concert stage. Tracing the decline of the male dancer in the bourgeois theater of the nineteenth century, Ramsey Burt argues that definitions of masculinity changed with the rise of the middle class. The space for expressing emotion was gradually narrowed for men, as was the possibility of male bodily display—clothing, for example, became more muted than it had been in the eighteenth century. To overtly display emotion or the body was considered effeminate, and the male dancer did both. He also was unable to represent the power and status of men in bourgeois society because he played a subordinate role to women, who ruled the dance stage.

As concepts of manliness narrowed in the nineteenth century,
homophobia increased as a means of regulating the behavior of men. “The mechanisms which limit the subversive potential of some representations of masculinity (which include disapproval of male dance) can be seen to serve the purpose of keeping out of sight anything which might disrupt the relations within which men work powerfully together in the interests of men,” But writes.10 He argues that although no direct link between homophobia and homosexuality in male dancing existed in the nineteenth century, when gay men conspicuously entered the dance field early in the twentieth century, the apparatus was in place to enforce heterosexual norms on the stage. However, although heterosexuality was compulsory, male dancers were, by their very choice of profession, suspect.

As for the third category of emasculation, the stereotype of the gay man as symbolically castrated (a male who does not sexually reproduce) has been so widely noted that it has achieved general recognition. Judith Butler enlarges on this notion, emphasizing a conflation of heterosexual fear of castration with fear of male homosexuality:

Castration is the figure for punishment, the fear of castration motivating the assumption of the masculine sex, the fear of not being castrated motivating the assumption of the feminine. Implicit in the figure of castration, which operates differentially to constitute the constraining force of gendered punishment, are at least two inarticulate figures of abject homosexuality, the feminized fag and the phallicized dyke; the Lacanian scheme presumes that the terror over occupying either of these positions is what compels the assumption of a sexed position within language, a sexed position that is sexed by virtue of its heterosexual positioning, and that is assumed through a move that excludes and abjures gay and lesbian possibilities.11

Jones himself echoes this fear within the context of race when in his autobiography he relates an incident that occurred at a college gay and lesbian club meeting he attended in the early 1970s. He explained to the group that “it was particularly hard for me to come out because blacks saw being gay as—and I chose my words very carefully—‘the ultimate emasculation of the black man.’”12

Certainly, such a viewpoint is understandable in terms of black and white power relations. If the black male is already weakened by a lack of power, and what power he has been accorded is based on sexual potency, he is likely to view the loss of that fragment of strength as an “ultimate emasculation.”

None of the issues described here were new when Jones began his career; other gay black male dancers had faced them as well, including Alvin Ailey, the country’s most influential black choreographer during the 1960s and 1970s. When Ailey started to perform professionally in the 1950s, he had little choice but to support the heterosexual norms imposed on the dance stage.13 Like most male dancers, he was concerned about potential accusations of effeminacy in his performance, and as a closeted gay man in a virulently homophobic time he may have been especially sensitive. Ailey’s solution was to emphasize the stereotype of the potent black male in both his dancing and choreography.14 He said he was attracted to the work of Gene Kelly because it seemed masculine, by which he implicitly meant heterosexual, and he aimed for a comparable masculinity in his own choreography.15 In addition to a Lester Horton-based modern dance vocabulary, Ailey stressed West African-derived movements such as pelvis thrusts, hip rotations, and torso articulation, as well as virtuosic jumps, turns, and kicks. His male dancers, often appearing bare chested, created a representation of masculinity that was athletic and sexual and that white critics read as emphatically masculine and therefore heterosexual. P. W. Manchester wrote that in Ailey’s dances “the men are men and the women are frankly delighted about it,” while Doris Hering giddily compared Ailey’s own performing style to “a caged lion full of lashing power.”16 Ailey promoted the stereotype of black heterosexual potency with male virtuosity and sexually charged movement often aimed at the women performers, perhaps accounting in part for Manchester’s remark. Hering’s reference to Ailey in terms of a wild jungle animal indicates that the notion of the black male as erotic primitive was also part of Ailey’s image of masculinity. To some extent Ailey was able to extend the boundaries of permissible representations of black men in works like Blues Suite (1958), in which he
included elements of anger and despair. However, such pieces did not make up the bulk of his repertory, and the possibilities open to him remained limited if he wished to dance and choreograph on prestigious white stages.

By 1980 Jones had far more options for dealing with racial and gender issues because of the marked social shifts that had taken place over the previous three decades. Born in 1952, Jones was an early beneficiary of the civil rights and gay liberation movements. He grew up with media coverage of the civil rights struggle flashing before him on television and in the daily press. While he was in high school, gay liberation erupted into public consciousness with the Stonewall rebellion of 1969. By the time he reached college, a year after Stonewall, there were not only civil rights organizations on campus but gay ones as well. However, although the times may have been more open to change in the performing arts than they had been for Ailey's generation and those before him, gender issues were only beginning to be addressed.

Typically, Jones's early solos combined movement and words, including song, in a marathon of activity. The words often formed a narrative, but the story was never simply related, it was always woven into and through the movement and given rhythm through repetition and phrasing. The stories Jones told were deeply personal, dealing primarily with his family history and with dreams. The dances for which Jones is best remembered are ones in which he confronted audiences in a highly aggressive manner. One of the earliest of these originally had been part of a larger work entitled *Everybody Works/All Beasts Count* (1975). When he auditioned the solo on its own for the Clark Center Dance Festival at City University of New York Mall, he relates that in a fit of nervousness he injected a clenched fist and an obscene raised finger accompanied by a mouthing curse, then shrugged and smiled. The judges accepted the dance on the condition he eliminate the offending material, which he did. However, in a 1977 video of the dance, recorded at an outdoor performance in New York, Jones alternated sections of ingratiating movement with menacing ones. He seduced the audience with smiles and amusing verbal asides and tore around the stage in virtuosic displays of Ailey-inspired modern dance. Then, suddenly, he switched to walking forward and pointing belligerently at the crowd. At one moment he mouthed a silent "motherfucker" at them. Throughout the dance he was dressed in a business suit; at the end he stripped to his underwear. By 1980, influenced by conceptual artist Vito Acconci's attacks on audiences, Jones had enlarged his own aggressive repertory. In a solo at the American Dance Festival in 1981 he created a dance based on oppositional statements that included, "I love women. I hate women. I love white people. I hate white people. I'd like to kiss you. I'd like to tear your fucking heart out. Why didn't you leave us in Africa? I'm so thankful for the opportunity to be here." The critical response to these dances was shock. Tobi Tobias, reporting in *New York* magazine, remembered none of the invitation in the *Everybody Works* solo nor any of the dance. She recalled only the violence. "The first time I laid eyes on Bill T. Jones, he was got up like a banker, in a sober business suit, haranguing the baffled summer-festival crowd at the Delacorte, like a soapbox orator. His performance was all words, and pure vitriol; he called it a dance. I couldn't see what it had to do with dancing, but I never forgot him." Her response was not unique. Robert Pierce wrote in the *Soho News*, "I've attended performances in which he brought such an intense aggressiveness to within inches of my chair that I felt physical defense alarms being triggered in my body."

It is important to note that Jones's audiences during these years were overwhelmingly white. He did not court black audiences, he rarely performed in black venues. His scene was the largely white one of the downtown postmodern avant-garde and the special events and festivals at which downtown choreographers were represented. When one looks at the names of the critics who reviewed Jones's performances in the 1970s and early 1980s, the list is a *Who's Who* of white critics writing at the time. The general readership black press seems to have been largely unaware of him, which is not surprising considering where he performed and how little he was known outside the dance community. The single dance mag-
azine that made a point of extensively covering African American performers was *Attitude*, founded in 1982. Two of the four reviews of Jones’s work that ran between 1982 and 1984 described him as a “postmodern” choreographer, apparently to set him apart from black dance makers who specialized in Ailey-style choreography or in African or Afro-Caribbean dance forms. Although many black choreographers were producing work during these years, few were doing it in a postmodern mode—Gus Solomons Jr., Donald Byrd, Blondell Cummings, and Bebe Miller were among the handful, and none of these combined movement, language, autobiography, and emotional ferocity in a way similar to Jones’s. One of Jones’s explanations for his interest in postmodernism was his social background, in which he had long been surrounded by whites. With the exception of his family, Jones’s world from the time he reached high school was largely white. He was one of the few blacks in his high school. Soon after reaching college he started his relationship with Zane and many of their friends were white. He has noted that a great deal of the encouragement he received in his early years of performing came from whites—his high school drama teacher, his dance teachers, and colleagues at college and beyond. Zane, of course, was also an influence. When Jones entered the downtown avant-garde, it was with sophisticated white dance audiences in mind.

I want to suggest here that the aggressiveness of Jones’s solo was in part calculated to assault these viewers’ complicit expectations of the eroticized black male dancer and in the process to transform his identity from passive “feminized” object to active “masculinized” subject. He made his attack on two fronts, that of the black male and that of the male dancer. In a 1984 interview Jones explained, “There is something about the spectators saying, in effect, ‘Perform for us. Show us your body.’ So it made me extremely aggressive, and maybe that was my desire to impose masculine control—I also assumed it was racial.” Feminist theory has long taught that in patriarchy a menacing expression of anger belongs to an active subject and thus is seen as masculine. Jones’s aggressive words and gestures toward the audience contested the stereotype of the male dancer as weak and effeminate. Jones actually frightened spectators. What could be less like the befeathered ballet prince or the ineffective poseurs that constituted Martha Graham’s gallery of heroes? In his relationship to the audience Jones may have been inspired by the work of Vito Acconci, but for his actual modus operandi he took a page from the book of black nationalism. He was the dangerous black man made familiar by the Black Panthers, Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, and a host of other angry young black men of the 1960s. It was not these men’s politics Jones borrowed but their attitude. His dances disrupted stereotypes of the passive obedient black male and in the process took on some of the power of white patriarchy in which anger gains respect. At the same time Jones challenged the prevailing image of the black dancer as an eroticized primitive by abruptly alternating between passive aestheticized object and active pugnacious subject.

However, while Jones’s rage dispelled some stereotypes, it reinforced another, that of the uncontrolled black man, violent and dangerous to whites. Robert Staples argues that because blacks are denied access to the power available to whites, they challenge this powerlessness through anger, reinforcing the stereotype of being out of control. This gives a false feeling of power, which in fact serves as an excuse for further white oppression.23 Nevertheless, Jones may have felt that the negative aspects of performing rage were a small price to pay for gaining an active voice. Linked with seduction, anger also became part of a technique of reversal that Jones used in his dances as a tool for disruption and control. This technique was a central element in his early dances and as such needs to be explored in some detail.

One of the important ways in which Jones employed reversal may best be understood through elements of gaze theory. Making a necessary distinction between *look* and *gaze*, Jones sought to control the way in which an audience looked at him, but in doing so he also reached beyond the specific to Lacan’s transcendental ideal of the ever-present, all-powerful gaze associated with patriarchy and the phallus.24 That is to say, Jones challenged not only the specific way in which he was observed as a performer but perceptions of power and weakness embedded in patriarchal society.
Jones was preoccupied with spectatorship and surveillance from the earliest days of his career. "They’re watching," he says at the end of *Io*, a 1981 solo. Or they are pointedly not watching, as in the case of a woman who walked out of the same solo and whose exit Jones commented on in an improvised section of the dance. In his autobiography *Jones* expresses his anxiety at being observed with section titles that read: "They Are Watching Me,” "What Are They Thinking about Me?” "What Did They Say?” "What Did They See?” He explains his conflicted feelings at being an object of attention: "I found myself easily seduced by a set of eyes, learned what it is to engage the expectations and needs of spectators. It made me want to please. Or spit.”

Conflicts caused by differing ways of being seen can account for Jones’s ambivalence. Gaze theory contends that the male is the active bearer of the gaze, not the passive recipient of it, an idea which also pertains to the look. But one of the essential ingredients of the performer’s profession is to be looked at. In much of gay male culture too, being the recipient of a look does not hold the stigma it allegedly does among heterosexual males. In addition, black males tend to be the recipient of the white gaze of patriarchal power, which defines them according to generally negative stereotypes and places them in a feminized passive space as patriarchy also does homosexuality and performance. In his dances Jones attempted to gain control of the gaze and in this way to become the active (“masculinized”) subject. On the one hand he knowingly seduced audiences with black stereotypes, inviting their look, fulfilling their fantasies. He pulled off his shirt to reveal the beauty of a well-muscled body (“You just know what they’re all thinking, ‘Oh, I bet you have a dick down to your knees’”). He danced a segment in the African jazz style associated with black dance (“You’re allowed to wiggle your hips in public”). He used his velvet voice to lull the audience with intimacies. Then he turned on them, jolting the crowd with enraged diatribes or mortifying individuals in the audience by singling them out for negative comment. In a 1979 review Marcia B. Siegel conveyed some of the discomfiture that resulted from Jones’s whiplash tactics: “You think you’re watching him go over the brink of rage or physical control or sanity—and the next minute you could swear he’s looking you straight in the eye and telling you the most intimate or loving or shameless things.”

Deborah Jowitt, dance critic for the *Village Voice*, recalled the first Jones performance she saw in 1977: “‘You want some?’ he asked us softly, stroking his body, then cursed us out.” With these abrupt shifts Jones attempted to wrest control of the gaze by forcing the audience to abandon preconceived notions of identity and to see him, and through him the black male dancer, in unaccustomed, more “masculine,” ways.

Jones also used reversal to look back at the audience, in effect changing places with viewers and thereby gaining control of the look. In his discussion of Isaac Julien’s 1989 film, *Looking for Langston*, Kobena Mercer describes a process similar to the one Jones used: “Here the key issue is the motif of the direct look, whereby the black (gay) subject looks back, whether as character or as auteur, and thereby turns around the question to ask the audience who or what they are looking for.” This direct look “draws the viewer into a space that problematizes simplistic conceptions of identity.” In his solos Jones often commented on the audience to the audience, for example, speaking directly to the spectators about the woman who had left his performance and of the audience’s laughter at her exit, or pointing menacingly at an individual viewer, or, in Jowitt’s words, “cursing us out.” In these ways he made it clear he was observing the spectators, in short, transforming them from subject to object. This reversal, as Mercer notes, makes simplistic conceptions of identity more difficult to maintain.

Jones used reversal in yet another way to challenge stereotypical assumptions and control the ways in which he was perceived: he alternated extreme tension and emotion, that element of out-of-control maniacal danger, with postmodern cool. Although his anger made the deepest impression on viewers, it was only part of his solos, and often a small part, especially in dances made after 1980. Less commented upon was the detached approach and formal complexity of much of his material. In long sections of solos such as *Sisyphus* (1980) and *Io* (1981) Jones, instead of “working himself into a tizzy” as Arlene Croce dismissively described his
more violent moments, focused on complex dance constructions and an unemotional performance style. His smooth masklike face was neutral in expression, as was his voice. He most often spoke as if he were simply thinking out loud. The steps Jones chose eschewed familiar virtuosity as well as the movements centering on hips and pelvis that had come to epitomize black dance. Instead he offered task-oriented abstract movement that made no overt attempt to be read as sexual. He did not invite the look, he stuck to the cool business of postmodernism while reminding viewers through his verbal narratives of the pain of black experience. This aspect of Jones’s dances offered a different way of challenging stereotypes by focusing attention on the dancer’s conceptualizing abilities and self-discipline rather than his body and emotions. In this sense one might say Jones appropriated white masculine control over the space of rational thought. Not that he was the first to do this—women dancers had long preceded him. First-generation postmoderns such as Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown had led the way in the 1960s by rejecting the intuitive emotional position women dancers had traditionally occupied. By 1980 many women choreographers were routinely referred to as brainy and intellectual. However, few black male choreographers had made the leap into formalist postmodernism. By producing these kinds of works, Jones was not only co-opting a white male-dominated space, he was also asserting his right to membership in the predominately white avant-garde. That he was aware of his unusual position at the time is reflected in his frequent, often ironic references to himself as “the black postmodernist.”

Jones’s performance of gender in his early work at once supported and challenged stereotypes of the emasculated black man and the feminized male dancer. There is no doubt, however, that he explicitly attempted to meet these issues head-on in his work. Jones was less clear about dancing sexual identity during his early career, and it is the confusion we meet in this category that I would now like to address.

Jones has never been a choreographer whose art and life could be separated, and this was especially the case in the late 1970s and early 1980s when his work dealt specifically with events from his past and with his relationships with his family and friends. In 1980 Jones and Arnie Zane had been living together as lovers for nearly a decade, yet Jones rarely mentioned Zane in his solos. When Jones broached the subject of desire, it was almost exclusively in terms of heterosexuality. For instance, in an untitled solo from 1980 Jones began a section with the words, “You glow so beautifully, may I touch it?” while his hand glided over his genitals. He then hid his face with his hand and said, “What about the children?” The dance consisted of accumulations of movement with spoken phrases and bits of song which eventually resolved themselves into suggestions of meaning. There were references to the black body in the song “Jump down, turn around, pick a bale o’ cotton; jump down, turn around, pick a bale o’ hay. Me and my body going to pick a bale o’ cotton.” Jones went through a segment of quick semaphoric gestures in which he touched his eyes and circled his genitals. He referred to someone named Adam and a woman, Marie. At another point he said, “Yes, Marie, look out!” He sang “I Believe,” he held his hands in prayer. He said, “Yes, Adam.”

The dance suggests a situation in which a sweet-talking man tries to win a woman’s sexual favors. There’s a warning to the woman and there is her belief that heaven will take care of her. Read against the background of Jones’s life and the autobiographical nature of his work, the dance builds associations with Jones’s mother’s devout prayers, her years of pregnancy and the birth of her many children, his sisters’ unwanted teenage pregnancies and those of other young girls in the migrant camps the family inhabited. The dance speaks of sex and gender within implicitly racial terms, and the sex is heterosexual. A tale of sexual incest in Io also is heterosexual, as is a reference to a girl with whom Jones was involved sexually in high school but did not marry. None of the solos of these years that are recorded on video or that critics speak about or that Jones speaks of in his autobiography or in interviews refer explicitly to same-sex desire.

His duets with Zane reveal the clearest references to homoeroticism, but these are never explicit; they are coded or left open
to interpretation.34 Jones and Zane further suppressed eroticism in their work with a neutral postmodern performance style that Jones called “matter-of-fact” and stage personas that focused on a tough streetwise attitude. However, within a regime of compulsory heterosexuality the simple fact that two men dance on stage in choreography that regularly takes the shape of extended duets is in itself a homoerotic cue, even if the men’s gestures and movement do little to indicate desire. Critical response to the two men’s dances in the early 1980s indicates that the duets were often read in this way.

Two typical examples of the work Jones and Zane were doing together at the time were Blauvelt Mountain (1980) and Valley Cottage (1981), the dances that put their partnership on the vanguard map. Blauvelt Mountain was divided into two parts.35 In the first, “A Fiction,” Jones and Zane drew on accumulation techniques as well as contact improvisation. The men went through various sequences of accumulated activity, the speed of the movement gradually increasing, while at the same time they improvised word associations. At the end of the section Zane caught Jones in a flying leap followed by a blackout. The second section, “An Interview,” began with the men walking around the stage singing a Swiss-German harvest round. Then Zane gradually tore down a wall that stretched across the back of the stage and re-erected it down the center. He wore heavy gloves to change the position of the cinder blocks that made up the wall, walking back and forth at a natural pace, as if doing a job, his shoes making a regular, staccato rhythm. In the meantime Jones, who was barefoot, did a frenetic improvised solo, jumping back and forth over the wall as it grew down the center of the stage. There was no contact between the two during this section. The dance ended when the wall was finished. Valley Cottage stressed cooperation and bodily contact more than Blauvelt Mountain; for example, one man’s hand occasionally rested briefly on the other’s shoulder. The dance also included a repeated powerful image of black and white hands forcefully clasped, the rest of the men’s bodies made invisible by vertical screens. The pose was like a stop-action frame in a film, reinforced by a halt in the music.

However, if such gestures could be cues for homosexual desire, they could also be ones for racial harmony, a theme Jones often mentioned in conjunction with their work and that tended to deflect the focus from sexuality.

Blauvelt Mountain made oblique references to the two men’s life together—they had learned the Swiss song from a friend, they lived briefly in Blauvelt, a town north of Manhattan—but it was not a narrative of their relationship. Neither was Valley Cottage (named for the village in which they eventually settled), despite its more intimate atmosphere. However, in a broader sense the dances were about their relationship both in terms of race and gender, and critics appear to have understood this. Like Jones and Zane themselves, critics spoke in coded terms of desire, while referring more directly to the toughness, and by implication the heterosexual masculinity, of the men’s stage personas. They used words like pugnacious to describe Zane’s performance style, and Jones’s as having a look of “leashed hostility.” Yet they also described the men’s relationship on stage in terms of camaraderie.
affection, tenderness, and intimacy. They also invariably mentioned that Zane was white and Jones black, a reference to race in the context of gender that was left unexplored but that must have evoked a host of assumptions, associations, and questions for the reviewers’ predominately white readers.

If critics did not refer directly to Zane and Jones’s sexual relationship, neither, to judge from interviews, did they, although they lived openly together. In what appears to have been a silent agreement between interviewers and dancers, the subject was not raised. Even Burt Supree, a gay man writing in 1981 for the reputedly radical Village Voice, did not report a single comment about how the men’s relationship affected their dances. He noted that they shared a house because he interviewed them there, but that was all. Other interviewers were even more circumspect, giving the impression that the two simply worked together. By 1984, however, a sea change had occurred. Gay liberation had made great strides, and increasing numbers of men and women were emerging from the closet. The AIDS epidemic was also receiving a great deal of attention, and political art was now at the heart of the avant-garde. Another interview in the Voice, this one by Amanda Smith, entitled “Making the Personal Political,” included the choreographers Johanna Boyce, Tom Keegan and Davidson Lloyd (a gay couple), and Jones and Zane. Jones is quoted as saying, “Our work has tried to present us as two loving persons who have been able to love each other above race, class, all of these divisions. That becomes a political statement, that we are saying to any audience that views us, ‘This is a viable lifestyle. This is a viable approach to the world.’”

Such a statement is a marked change from the early 1980s when Jones and Zane were not actively promoting their sexual relationship as an element of their dance. It was there for those who read between the lines, and many did, but it was rarely stated overtly by them or the press.

In his dancing of sexual identity, Jones appears to have attempted to occupy polar positions at the same time. While delivering coded messages of same-sex desire in his duets with Arnie Zane, Jones was performing violent solos that linked him to the hyperheterosexual attitudes associated with black nationalists. He also was describing heterosexual liaisons in his solos. Jones speaks at length in his autobiography of his heterosexual relationships in high school. At the same time he hardly mentions same-sex desire while he was growing up. It was, he said, falling in love with Arnie that set the course of his sexuality. Yet here too he stressed that in their relationship he was the one who penetrated—he was, in other words, the one who retained an element of masculine power. This translated into his perception of his dancing as well. “Sometimes when I step onstage,” he wrote, “I carry in front of me an invisible phallus. And this phallus is to me what the spear was to the Watusis. It is my virility, my right to be, and the assurance that I will always be. I am in search of the dance in which the phallus is forgiven for being a thing that must penetrate, deflower. This dance will be selfish and self-interested, and yet, fulfilled by filling.”

In his interview with Amanda Smith in 1984 Jones spoke of his “obsessions,” which also centered on potency and procreation: “I was making dances when I was worried about making babies. I come from a family of twelve. Most people in my family average at least three children. I had none.” Contrary to his statement, those obsessions did in fact make their way into his dances in numerous references to potency, pregnancy, and childbirth. And Jones actually did become a father in 1981, after a brief affair with a Detroit woman while he was an artist-in-residence in the Midwest. He and Zane tried to adopt the child but were refused.

To say simply that Jones was bisexual and reflected this orientation in his dance is not an altogether convincing explanation for his opposing representations of sexuality. For instance, it does not account for the directness with which he spoke and danced of heterosexual desire in his work and the absence of the direct reference to same-sex desire. One might argue that Jones’s insistence on heterosexuality was as much a mask to hide homosexuality as were Alley’s macho representations of the black man—but then how does one account for the duets? These dances may not have been overtly homoerotic, but they were implicitly so and taken as such by a number of viewers. I want to advance another possibility that might explain Jones’s simultaneous occupation of polar positions.
That is, that he appropriated some of the power of heterosexual masculinity for the gay black concert dancer. One is reminded of Ellison’s Invisible Man stealing electricity from New York’s Monopolized Light & Power as a metaphor for co-opting white power to make black identity visible. “Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form,” Ellison’s hero says.41

Beginning with an element as basic as performance style, Jones adopted a conventionally masculine persona. Compare, for example, his style with that of Mark Morris where feminine cues abound—from gestures such as touching or tossing back the hair to the luscious contrapposto he often gives abstract movement. Jones’s movement, by comparison, tends to be blunter, less embellished, more squared, and directly forceful, cues in Western patriarchal society that are read as masculine and hence heterosexual. This assumption of heteromaleic posture and body language helped efface perceptions of effeminacy in the male dancer.42 So did solos that included tales of heterosexual liaisons and attitudes of rage and violence. Even as these elements lessened perceptions of emasculation in the male dancer, they reinforced images of the potent black man, accruing what may be a weak form of power but power nevertheless. Just as in the black community may be loathe to give up white engendered stereotypes, even though those stereotypes prove to be false positives, the black gay man may be equally loathe to demystify the myths. By co-opting masculine heterosexual power, diminished as it may be for the black man, black gay men still reap whatever benefits are available. When Jones performed before white audiences as an enraged black man, he fulfilled white stereotypes that were racially negative but which were professionally and sexually positive in that they were stereotypes of heterosexual masculinity. The solos thus gained critical attention for Jones in a way they may not have if he had continued to ingratiate himself, reinforcing stereotypes of emasculation. This assumption of heterosexual power spilled over into the duets in which Jones and Zane were viewed as feisty streetwise performers whose movement was tough and matter-of-fact—a far cry from the aestheticallyized display of modern dance and the sexual baggage that went with it.

In Jones’s case fear of the “feminized fag” of castration did not lead to compulsory heterosexuality or masked homosexuality but to a raiding of heterosexual power to counter the emasculating effects of racial and gender stereotypes. In his battle to control the perception of his own identity Jones often manipulated the myths of a dominant society to his advantage. He used his body as a lure, even as he challenged the fantasies that centered upon it. At the same time Jones’s refusal to be locked into any prescribed role served to disrupt an abundance of preconceived notions of race and gender. When in the mid-1980s Jones openly avowed the identity we know him by today—a weak identity in the context of emasculating patriarchy—he was able to do so while relinquishing little of the power he had accrued.

NOTES

5. Ibid., 153.
6. Ibid.
12. Bill T. Jones and Peggy Gillespie, Last Night on Earth (New York: Pan-
For an insightful discussion of masculine sexuality and difference within the black community, see Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).


14. Ailey was not alone in using this stereotype of black masculinity; it was a common representation on the dance stage. Rather, he choreographed developed it, especially in terms of virtuosic display, and made it a central component of his work.


18. After taking several classes at the Ailey studio, Jones had rejected Ailey's lush, dazzling technique for postmodernism, an emotionally cool form based in vernacular movement. However, he sometimes used Ailey-style dance as a tool to beguile audiences before turning on them. It served as one way to contrast the old with the new, the ingratiating with the confrontational.


24. Gaze theory, which deals with concepts of objectification and power, was developed in conjunction with cinema, where the observed did not look back. I therefore am expanding the use of gaze theory concepts to account for a human agent as the recipient of the gaze and for this agent's attempt to reverse the power of the patriarchal gaze as well as that of the specific look. For a review of gaze theory in relation to queer theory, see Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman, “Reviewing Queer Viewing: The Gaze Revisited,” in Paul Burston and Colin Richardson, eds., *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 13–56.


26. Ibid., 151.


28. Ibid.


34. Because both Zane and Jones created the duets, it is difficult to say who set the tone of the dances, but since Jones was by far the more experienced choreographer, he may have had a controlling role in the work. At the least, however, the two men agreed on what they would perform and how. Zane had spent most of his early career pursuing photography; it was when Jones persuaded him to study contact improvisation so they could perform together that Zane began to dance professionally. The two formed the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company in 1982.

35. *Blaeuwe Mountain* and *Valley Cottage* were part of a trilogy that had begun in 1979 with *Monkey Run Road*.


37. One notable exception was a group dance Jones choreographed called *Social Intercourse: Pilgrim's Progress* (1981) in which the performers at one point rushed about the stage in gender-blind kissing. In the piece Jones appeared with three other dancers, while Zane acted as administrator. Arlene Croce wrote in a *New Yorker* review that "gay-love" was among the issues dealt with in the work. Croce's remark is one of the few made during the late 1970s and early 1980s that directly mentioned homosexuality in connection with Jones's choreography (Croce, "Names and Places," 96).


42. I don’t want to imply that Jones consciously assumes this kind of comportment and movement. It is part of what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus* and Judith Butler *performativity*, an unconscious but learned set of body techniques rather than a conscious role playing.