There's something going down that wasn't here before
Keep your eyes screwed to the floor
No one's gonna save your life
There’s something going on that’s not quite right!

Blasted through the speakers of London’s Barbican Theatre in 2005 and sung by Colin Newman for British band Wire’s recording of the song “Strange” (1977), these lyrics accompany dancer Kate Coyne as she threads her left hand between her legs and twists around her spine to descend to the floor. Coyne here performs a solo for the prologue of *O*, Scottish choreographer Michael Clark’s reimagining of Igor Stravinsky’s *Apollon Musagète* (1928)—a work first presented by Clark in 1994 and shown again as part of his three-year Stravinsky Project, culminating in 2007 with the trilogy of *O, Mmm...* (his *Sacre du Printemps*) and *I Do* (his reimagining of *Les Noces*). The prologue itself, made up of dances to short songs by bands including Wire, Public Image Limited (PiL), and the Sex Pistols, became a mainstay of the Stravinsky evenings Clark presented in the early 1990s and 2000s across the UK and internationally. Various titled “OO” and “Part 1” and its constituent parts recombined across productions, this eruptive series of dances provides perhaps the sharpest frame for viewing Clark’s treatment of ballet, a form he renders suggestible to the lyrical perversions, rhythmic edges, and performances of rudiment vital not only to some of
Stravinsky’s ballet scores but also to punk and post-punk records of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Clark’s exposure of ballet to what Suzanne Cotter has called the “head-thumping, heart-pumping music” of Anglo-American punk and his use of that exposure to reshape ballet “from the outside through an almost sensory bombardment” is embodied in Coyne’s interplay with Wire’s dirge, driven by Newman’s looping lyrics and slow, concentrated guitar riffs. Coyne’s descent to the floor was preceded by a chain of silhouetted walks (torso opened to the front like Vaslav Nijinsky’s flattened poses for the Ballets Russes) and a sequence of développés, retirés, and an arabesque penché. Arriving on the floor, she departs from academic vocabulary and moves into a string of choreographic distortions where her body seemingly takes on the capacities of a Rubik’s Cube. Coyne lies on her back, side-on to the audience, and begins to fold into two positions that coalesce almost impossibly in one figure. She hugs her left leg to the side of her torso and rotates (with hand on foot) her lower leg upwards into a kind of warped attitude à la seconde. With her right hand she then pulls her right leg, fully straightened, diagonally across her body and towards the floor so that the triangular space between the right leg and arm creates a gap through which the warped attitude pokes upwards. It is as if the left-body-figure (earthbound, warped attitude) becomes a needle, threading through the loop created by the right-body-figure (triangular arm-leg-gap). Coyne holds this confusing position for a few beats, her repurposed form settling onto the floor as a new creature: half-crumpled, half-extended, and composed of anatomical knots.

Here Clark’s choreography has scrambled but not disposed of the classical forms that preceded it. There are retirés and épaulement in this tangle but the phrase, crucially, has body parts all in the wrong places. Even as I attempt to digest this thread-and-needle sequence into words, I am struck by just how difficult it is to describe Clark’s choreography while
preserving an impression of anatomical integrity. For in this sequence, Coyne has not
dislocated her joints or dissolved her movement into the liquid architectures characteristic of
some ballet innovators of Clark’s era including William Forsythe; instead she embodies
sharp, stable geometries. But in the choreographic knotted-ness, Clark and Coyne reorganize
the way anatomical zones sit in relation to one another and so turn the skeletal idiom of ballet
inside out. This structural deviation is only underscored at the close of the “Strange” floor
routine by the same lyric as that with which Coyne’s descent had begun: “there’s something
going on that’s not quite right, ah huh”.

[Insert Stanger- Fig 1 here]

It is in part for just this kind of academic infidelity, anatomical probing, and sensory
bombardment that Clark has long been hailed the enfant terrible of British ballet. From his
youthful absconsions from the Royal Ballet School (RBS) where he was a star student in the
1970s and eventual jettison of a contract with that company for a career in contemporary
dance, to his cross-breeding of ballet, punk, and queer clubbing cultures upon establishment
dance stages, to the skewed classical vocabularies at heart of his oeuvre, the vexed
relationships Clark has forged with ballet institutions mean that his work has been
consistently mythologized, by his critics and champions alike, as ballet gone wrong.

Embarking from an interest in problematizing this mythical “wrongness”, I make three claims
about Clark’s practice. First, I argue that a discursive construction of his work as perverted
ballet is detectable in writings of a conservative, homophobic 1980s and 90s British dance
press. I view this discourse through queer theoretical historicizations of “abnormality” as a
normative technology for the fabrication of social-sexual deviance. Second, I explore the
ways his “corruption” of classical form expertly excavates ballet’s already mutated life in
certain pedagogies of classical twistedness. In this respect, his work might be thought to
revitalize something of a long-standing wrongness in ballet as a technical and choreographic
culture. Finally, I argue that Clark’s departures from some balletic institutions are afforded by what Jasbir Puar terms “elite cosmopolitan” regimes of mobility. Guarantors for cultural agility and risk-taking bound up with whiteness, these privileges in Clark’s case are founded in his consecration by those very institutions of British ballet from which his work is reputed to deviate.

MICHAEL CLARK AND CONTEMPORARY (BRITISH) BALLET

Clark was born in Aberdeenshire in 1962 and after childhood practice in Scottish country dancing was taken as a pupil into the RBS. Rumours abound at this stage in standard rehearsals of his biography, pointing to his rebellion—represented, for instance, in his truancy to attend 1978’s Rock Against Racism march—against the establishment disciplines of that institution. At this time too, Clark’s rare sense for the lines and phrasing of ballet began to flourish, especially through his training with Richard Glasstone in the Cecchetti tradition taught at the RBS. In a 1978 school report, Glasstone praises Clark’s “remarkable natural facility for dancing, combined with an instinctive artistic understanding”, and ends with the message, “I sincerely hope he will prove to harness [his exceptional] potential and exploit it to the full”. The relationship between Clark’s abundant reserve of talent and the discipline with which he was expected to spend it is a point to which I shall return later. To continue with his shifting professional relationship to ballet: after abandoning his expected career as “Anthony Dowell’s successor” at The Royal Ballet and dancing instead for Richard Alston at Ballet Rambert, for Karole Armitage in New York, and taking in a summer school with Merce Cunningham and John Cage in 1981, Clark began to make his own work. He presented his first public concert at London’s Riverside Studios in 1982 and launched Michael Clark & Company in 1984.
Based ever since fairly consistently in London with inconsistent funding available from public sources and a network of private patrons, Clark has moved through periods of prominence, retirement, and return, settling in a position at what might be called the permanently skewed heart of the British dance establishment.\textsuperscript{13} Across his career, two hallmarks of the practice have remained resolute: his collaborations with artists “all operating”, according to Cotter, “within what were the marginalized spheres of intellectual, pop and club culture”, and his continued return to ballet as an idiom, repertoire, and artistic culture.\textsuperscript{14} Clark has said of his relationship to ballet: “I love the technique”, explaining that “rather than make a technique of my own, it’s much more interesting for me to use that as a basis and try to stretch it further”.\textsuperscript{15} Those two resolutions—the first to make ballet pervious to subcultural scenes in which he was involved as a young artist in the early 1980s metropolis (the queer London clubbing scenes of Thatcher’s Britain in particular) and the second to make work that stretches the ballet technique in which he trained—provide ways for understanding Clark’s practice as a kind of ballet that might, in the words of music journalist Don Watson, “truly warrant the word contemporary”.\textsuperscript{16}

Clark’s ballet is contemporary in the periodizing sense that it binds choreographic classicisms with his times via his connoisseurship of certain musical, fashion, and visual arts cultures that blossomed at the fringes of London’s performance and nightlife worlds in the late 1970s and the 1980s.\textsuperscript{17} Even if one now attends Michael Clark shows expecting to watch ballet danced to vintage punk (recordings by Wire, PiL, and David Bowie are forevermore historic sounds) and seeing ballet dressed in vintage fashions (costumes by Stevie Stewart and often inspired by Clark’s late friend and collaborator Leigh Bowery, all stage an archive of British design experiments of the 1980s), these vintage styles continue to bind Clark’s ballet with a historic landscape contemporary to his youth that is always still circulating through the (re)cycles of the pop cultural present. But what of this practice as ballet?
At the surface, Clark’s work is peppered with ballet vocabularies. *Tendus* and *petit allegro* formations pervade the lower-body movements and the upper body moves through *croisé, effacé*, and *écarté* alignments. Glasstone has written about Clark’s deeper grammatical dependence on ballet, defending the genetically classical aspects of the work even as its vocabularies are reshaped through exposure to its subcultural materials. Glasstone sees in Clark’s choreography a preservation of his schooling in Cecchetti, with its emphasis on “clarity, balance, harmony and continuity” and, to use Clark’s own words, its cultivation of a “line that goes from one movement to another, which is more important” than the vocabulary itself.18 Extending from this sympathy for the continuity of movement as a solvent for positions, Clark’s choreography maximizes his own qualities as a dancer of commanding phrasal fluency; when watching Clark dance, it is impossible to detect the seams along which he laces the steps. An idiomatic commitment to the in-betweens of steps, cultivated in Clark’s Cecchetti training, is manifest too in Coyne’s “Strange” solo. While the needle-and-thread sequence does not melt into the liquid architectures emergent from the kind of interest sustained by Forsythe in the connective tissue of *épaulement*, the sequence does depend on a knitting of seemingly incompatible structural elements into a singular breathing figure.19 Indeed, the trouble with which I disentangle Coyne’s positions in my analysis of them is couched in something Clark learnt from Cecchetti: that dancing can defy our attempts to keep track of positions.

The significance of all this to the problematic of a “contemporary ballet” is as follows. For Glasstone, Clark’s preservation of a Cecchetti grammar is that which makes his work more properly ballet than that of some of his (non-punk) contemporaries in major ballet institutions. Glasstone explains: “present-day ballet… partly because of the increased emphasis on high leg extensions… [eschews] the off-balance tilts found in Cecchetti’s work”.20 He goes on to claim that Clark’s “ability to sense a centre of balance which deviates
from the vertical”, restores on the contemporary British stage the historic, pedagogic spine of the “English style”—a conceit about national style already complicated by Clark’s investment of an imperial opera house genre with the vernaculars of anti-establishment pop culture and Scottish folk dance. Against the grain of an anti-colonial reading of “English” style that might be made through Clark’s work, Glasstone’s illumination of a Cecchetti grammar draws Clark closer to Frederick Ashton than, say, to Wayne McGregor. In other words, Clark’s deviation from the vertical shapes of the late-twentieth-century ballet produced by some of his contemporaries is the very thing that preserves the ballet identity of his post-punk dances. As the choreographer himself explained, he does not reject ballet but twists that Cecchettian grammar of stretch in which he is expertly versed. It is this same technical conversance, though, that exposed his work to the charge that inside the textures of his dances, enriched as they were with certain styles of queer living, something had gone wrong.

**ON “WRONGNESS” IN CLARK’S BALLET**

“Wrong” is an adjective that carries a set of meanings distinct to those of that more generic category of the pejorative: “bad”. Describing the state of degeneration in something that was once, or indeed should be, right, wrong has a distinct temporality, implying a trajectory away from the proper. Michel Foucault’s 1974–75 lectures on the abnormal as an invention of mid-nineteenth century psychiatry offer clarification. Foucault describes abnormality as “the appearance of a type of conduct that is not pathological in itself but that should not normally appear within the constellation in which it figures… a hitch or a scramble in the structures that contrasts with normal development”. This concept provides two ways of thinking through wrongness in Clark’s practice. First, the Foucauldian “abnormal” in this context hones the idea that the challenge of Clark’s ballet is not that it is
bad but that it represents a type of conduct that is improper. It is for this reason that Clark’s pristine capacity for the inheritance of ballet traditions is the axis around which anxiety about his wonky work so consistently turns. But also, when Foucault’s words are taken as part of his larger project on the disciplinary construction of regimes for naming sexual difference as an index of moral, physiological, and social degeneration, the abnormal as a category provides grounds for understanding charges of wrongness in Clark’s ballet as a discourse couched in unease about his deviations from proper social reproduction, and so too for understanding Clark’s ballet as a queer dissident classicism.

Early critics of Clark’s work developed a lexicon that pitted his proper pedigree—his exceptional facility as a ballet dancer—against his improper trajectory: the choreography with its openness to subcultural excess, the latter especially located in the entry onto his stage of performers and paraphernalia resident in queer, feminist, and punk performance.24 Mary Clark for instance, writes in The Guardian in 1984 that “what [Clark] dances is shocking only in that it is such a sinful waste of a good dancer” and Clement Crisp (writing in The Financial Times in 1985 and 1992) understands Clark as “a dancer of prodigious if ill-served gifts” whose “continuing clarity of… style” is “deform[ed] with… brutalisms… vulgarity and cross-dressing” as well as “dirty tricks” so that, in the end, he “remains no more than a hooligan”.25 These critiques suggest that because Clark has in his possession the ability to do ballet so right, his artistic transgressions are instances of a practice gone so wrong.

Reviewing a Clark show in 1983 for Country Life, James Monahan offers an exemplary framing of Clark’s work in relation to the “wrongness” of his practice of classical inheritance. It is worth citing Monahan at length, not only because he was in a unique position to formulate an opinion on Clark’s institutional “delinquency”, having been director of the RBS’s lower school at White Lodge during Clark’s studies, but also because he conflates
Clark’s balletic wrongness with an anti-reproductive sociality and so, by Foucauldian association, with sexual abnormality.

Monahan writes of Clark’s cult status on the contemporary dance fringe:

At the Royal Ballet School [Clark] is a memory evoking sighs of regret: so much natural talent and so little interest in making the most of it […] when he opted out of the tough disciplines of ballet and then rejected the lighter but still real disciplines of the Rambert in order to do his own thing. […] The difference was that five years ago he was being made to develop his gifts; he was adding to his capital; now he is living on that capital, or at least not adding to it at all. […] But what, in sum, he presents is ballet and water, an easy option, an unexacting use of high talent. To say this is to indict not so much his dancing as his choreography, for he dances his own inventions.26

Monahan articulates his critique in economic terms that position Clark’s practice as a disposal of his inheritance. By thinking about Clark’s talent for ballet as his capital, and his elite training at the RBS as that institution’s investment, Monahan laments what he sees as Clark’s improper expenditure rather than proper reproduction of the stock placed in him as a dancer bred to secure The Royal Ballet’s position as a world-class purveyor of ballet. Clark’s classical endowment is understood to have been squandered—wasted on pleasures and diluted with distractions—when it should have been secured in stable, reputable stock—presumably the repertoire acquired and held at Covent Garden or, at least at Rambert where he would dance the work of canonical and company-appointed choreographers.

To follow this line of thinking into Foucault’s broader study of the abnormal and its discursive uses: Monahan’s economic metaphors especially, when used to describe the wasteful practice of a young, gay dancer who spends his high ballet capital in improper places and with improper people, are not disconnected from historic discourses of sexuality.
that position queer people, and gay men in particular, as disruptions both in and of heredity. Not only does the journalistic unease about Clark’s disposal (or enfeeblement) of his inheritance via a practice that embraces “vulgarity and cross-dressing” draw upon linguistic formations structured by what Foucault terms the long-established “series composed of perversion-heredity-degenerescence [that] formed the solid nucleus of the new technologies of sex” in the nineteenth century.27 (In other words, this unease about Clark’s work functions through a historic imaginary where degeneracy in inheritance is positioned either as cause or effect of sexual perversion.) But also, fear about the disposal of inheritance itself is an anxiety that clings to historic associations of homosexuality with the dying out of the line.

Whether imposed by homophobic social mandates or cultivated by queer oppositional politics such as Lee Edleman’s appeal to “no future” which suggests “that queers might embrace their figural association with [reproductive futurism’s] end”, the construction of gayness as an anti-reproductive social-sexual relation is one way to explain the conservative dance press’s concern for the future of Clark’s ballet capital.28 Indeed, the caption beneath a portrait of Clark that accompanies Monahan’s article—““Michael Clark: ‘A loner, living on his capital’”—invests the critique of a wasted heritage with echoes of an anti-reproductive queer relationality.29 Clark is identified as an individual living peculiarly outside of an institutional milieu, a social status guaranteed by an expenditure and expiry of inheritance. This lexicon of wrongness both proposes that Clark is not going to reproduce ballet properly under the aegis of an institutional home and hints that such a refusal is inflected by his lifestyle as a gay man living outside the heteronormative family. In other words, Clark’s deviation from one institution interested in the security of social investment is mapped discursively onto his deviation from another, a mapping that illuminates the involvement of the ballet establishment in broader socioeconomic logics of reproductive futurism.30 But where in Clark’s work did a dissent from such logic inspire the alarmist conservatism of an
establishment ballet public? The aesthetic “abnormality” of this ballet can be traced in two areas: Clark’s placement of ballet within a constellation of arts in which it does not usually figure; and his choreography of “hitch or scramble in the structures” of classical form.

THE “WRONG” COLLABORATORS

While characterized as a “loner” by his former school director, Clark made work in the early 1980s that emerged from within a strong kinship group. Many of his earliest collaborators were drawn from a circle of friends who, according to Michael Bracewell, “comprised a tiny clique which stood on the furthest fringes—if not entirely outside—the better known subcultural groupings of punk and post-punk” London. These were young artists and filmmakers, musicians and DJs, party hosts and club celebrities who lived together in London in the early 1980s and whose prolific collaborations extended from the rooms of the flatshares and squats they inhabited, to the dancefloors of club nights they haunted, to the contemporary dance stages on which Clark found a home for his work. The artists in question include: filmmaker Cerith Wyn Evans; visual and makeup artist Trojan; performance artist and fashion designer Bowery; fashion design duo Bodymap (David Holah and Stevie Stewart); DJ and musician Jeffrey Hinton; and performance collective the Neo Naturists (Christine Binnie, Jennifer Binnie, Wilma Johnson, and Grayson Perry). Of this constellation, many would appear in Charles Atlas’s zeitgeist defining “anti-documentary” about Clark’s work and its social orbit: Hail the New Puritan (1985–6).

The group’s styles of working and partying constituted a kind of domestic counterpublic. Holah, for instance, recalls that the Camden council flats shared by many of the artists from around 1980 held “a household of never-ending creativity” and Hinton similarly explains: “we actually did live on top of each other and that brought these creative
connections together”.34 This rich ground for collaboration was at this time secured by a set of economic conditions peculiar to the arts funding and housing landscape of London that was the legacy of both a pre-Thatcher Labour government and the political activism of local squatters’ movements.35 Hinton explains that “a lot of us were living in squats and on the dole at the time, [which] made a huge difference”, a situation echoed both in Perry’s recollection that “we got a full grant and the dole, and squatting was relatively easy” and by Riverside programmer David Gothard, who recalls how Clark was able set up base in “an old dressing room [at Riverside] which was the focus of his living there—and I mean living”.36 The combination of (relatively) available state welfare and public funding for the arts, of housing activism and the coming together of a “volatile, self-destructive and intensely creative subcultural group” allowed for a blurring of boundaries between Clark’s domestic, social, and artistic spheres in the first half of the 1980s: a blurring that set the scene for the incursion of underground influences (what one journalist would call “the gritty nether regions of popular culture”) into his classically informed dances, performed as they were by brilliant dance technicians (including notably Ellen van Schuylenburch, Matthew Hawkins, Julie Hood, and Leslie Bryant) as well as so-called “non-dancers”.37

Clark’s early company works were not only styled by the sounds and visions of his “intensely creative” kinship group but also branded by what Perry has fondly referred to as “the in-between bits”: skits and interludes performed by some of the artists named above, who laced themselves around the “pure dance” sections performed by Clark and the company dancers.38 Performances of Parts I–IV (1983) included Wyn Evans rolling his film—displayed on a television monitor—around the stage and on one occasion into an explosive crash in the orchestra pit.39 In Pure Pre-Scenes (1987) and Because We Must (1987), Bowery played Chopin preludes at a piano and appeared dressed as a teapot sporting a giant phallus, and Holah “did a choreographed cooking piece” with miso soup.40 In Mmm... (1992),
Bowery appeared again as a towering, fur-skirted shaman while Clark’s mother, Bessie Clark, “gave birth” to Clark on stage aided by Bowery-as-midwife. The artists whose appearance in these early works caused some of the greatest consternation, though, were the Neo Naturists, whose practice embraced nude body-painted performances of faux rituals, unrehearsed exuberant dances, and gastronomy.

[Insert Stanger-Fig 2 here]

As part of an evening titled The Artless Dodge (the same one reviewed by Monahan for Country Life), the Neo Naturists presented their club work Sexist Crabs (1983), during which Johnson and the Binnie sisters had their bodies painted live on stage by Perry, and seafood was taped to the performers’ bodies (including Clark’s) and handed out to the Riverside audience. Monahan described Clark’s collaborators thus: “one thin man… and three fat women whose nakedness [is] hideously enhanced by the transparent tape… which adds unbeautiful bulges to [their] abundant protuberances… they are horrid”. The accommodation of these protruding performers into a setting where their kind of bodily creations would not usually figure was fortified on February 9, 1986 when they danced with Clark onstage at the Royal Opera House for a gala in aid of Sadler’s Wells. Joining a program including choreographies by Ashton, Kenneth MacMillan, and Marius Petipa, appearing as body-painted cheerleaders chanting the mantra “money money money”, and wearing for their curtain call gowns “borrowed” from Covent Garden’s costume department, the Neo Naturists quite literally inserted their bodies into spaces and materials usually reserved for those of Clark’s exclusive pedigree. To be sure, it is these sorts of in-between bits to which Crisp refers when he laments the distortion of Clark’s impeccable (anatomical and cultural) line with “dirty tricks”.

Ramsay Burt connects the kinds of readings offered by Crisp and Monahan with the homophobic echoes of ideas about artistic degradation, arguing that “the dildos, the Nazi
salutes, all the ingenious obscenities devised… by Bowery [and others] degraded and betrayed a tradition that reinforced a value system which oppressed and abjected gay sexualities”.45 Burt makes an important point and one that can be expanded. Clark’s camp rota of non-dancer cameos became fodder for an outraged conservative dance press because of the way these cameos queered ballet while exposing the form’s cultures of social violence. The appearance in Clark’s work of obscenities (explosions, phalluses, fascist imagery, childbirth, nudity, fishy smells, the mention of money) certainly makes ballet permeable to what Jack Halberstam has termed an especially queer “combination of terror and eros, the forgotten and the forbidden”.46 However, the simple appearance of fleshy bodies not disciplined by ballet alongside the streamlined muscularity of highly trained dancers is also that which so revolted Clark’s detractors. To return to Monahan, the problem with the “horrid” Neo Naturists was in part their unnatural pairing with the celestial Clark: “the combination was not nice—it was beauty and the beasts with the sexes changed”.47 Reflecting on Monahan’s perverse impression of a perverted theatrical world, I suggest that more than degrading ballet by placing it alongside “the forgotten and the forbidden” of popular culture, Clark’s work with the wrong collaborators disrupted ballet’s technical illusion of effortlessness by exposing the regimes through which “ballet bodies” are always selected and formed.

The encroachment onto the stage of the kinds of bodies not usually figured in a constellation of classical vocabulary, training, and artists, and the abjection of these very bodies by ballet’s critical discourse, puts on display the anti-universal politics of privilege sublimated in this form’s aesthetic appeals to universal beauty. Richard Dyer writes about this paradox that “classical ballet yearns towards the potentials of the human body, all human bodies, stripped of the specifics of class, gender and sexuality” and “yet there is also something distinctively white about ballet in Great Britain”.48 Dyer’s insightful hint at the
way in which ballet’s universal body is always and invisibly racialized as white is essential for understanding ballet’s perpetuation and concealment of its racisms inside images of a transhistorical, human grace. This is a point to which I shall return at the end of this chapter in relation to whiteness and Clark’s insider status as ballet dissident. For now, though, Dyer’s reflection illuminates the ways in which Clark in the 1980s punctured ballet’s tranquil dream-world of universal humanity. This puncture is delivered in his willingness to ground that world in the specific and unruly embodiments of working-class, feminist, and queer performance, acts where “improper” bodies seize the stage.

**BODY PARTS IN THE “WRONG” PLACES**

Ballet is “degraded” in Clark’s work, according to Burt, not just through obscene collaborations but also by his exploration of “balletically derived movements that ‘looked wrong’ because they referred inescapably to sex”.49 Such an observation is animated especially in the slow-motion prowl that opens the post-punk prologue of *Mmm…*. Moving to the industrial drones and scuzzy baritone of Iggy Pop’s “Mass Production” (1977), dancers walk from the corners of the stage, their legs extending in *tendu* from a thrusting-out pelvis: a protrusion that drives all movement, lowers the center of gravity to the genitals, and sculpts an erotic body out of a balletic walk.50 Burt, Stephanie Jordan, and Jann Parry have all written insightfully about this pelvis-centred idiom that was to run through Clark’s choreography.51 Thinking through Clark’s remark that this position evokes the idea of “your brains being between your legs”, I position his pelvic ballet as just one part of a twisted idiom where body parts appear where they should not be, for misplaced anatomies appear at all levels of Clark’s theatrical machinery.52 Promotional images for *New Puritans* (1984), for instance, show Van Schuylenburch in a Trojan makeup look.53 Painted with a second face
off-set to the right of her anatomical features, her face looks as if it is sliding, Picasso style, around her skull. And a role performed by Clark in *Mmm*... sees his torso plunged inside a toilet (head emergent from the ring), which frames his delicate execution of a courtly *réverence* in a performance of scatological grace mid-way through Stravinsky’s *Sacre*.

[Insert Stanger-Fig 3 here]

Perhaps the sharpest realization of Clark’s tendency to misplace body parts comes in his Chosen Maiden solo for *Mmm*.... Performed to date by women and by men, the Maiden’s solo utilizes inverted position and constrained breath to twist the possibilities of human locomotion. The dancer arrives from behind white rotating doors at the back of the stage, dressed in oversized knickers and sporting a small black “Hitler” moustache and glittering panel over the bridge of their nose. After a frenetic opening phrase, they come to stillness. Bent double and hanging, their torso is folded over the waist with each hand grasping the opposite shoulder, then elbow. Here the Maiden seems to become something other than human, cocooned like an insect. The dancer slowly turns their toes inwards to make a knock-kneed *plié*; everything is folded in as if to cramp the organs, before the position is released into an upright version of itself. In a sustained pursuit of distortion, the dancer pushes their arms behind the axis of the spine, introducing visible strain to the neck and chest and a jutted-out ribcage inflated further by a slow, struggled breath. The dancer’s facial expression at this point is intensely focused: teeth gritted; staring eyes fixing the space before they move on with the solo. The dance is full of these kinds of inversions. A pose is shown one way, and then, with imperceptible transition, turned inside out or twisted back-to-front: the work of a dancer morphing species.

While the contortions devised by Clark inspire descriptions of his work as that which “makes ballet movements look distorted”, ballet most broadly is already a culture of bodily distortion, putting as it does joints, muscles, and limbs into positions of unusual stress. It is possible, then, that Clark’s practice simply elongates the extant anatomical wrongness of the
form. This idea is contoured in the specific kinetic stretchiness of the Cecchetti method, which already twists the ballet body around. Glasstone makes the case that to understand what it is that Clark found to be of such value in these classic exercises... it is necessary to look beneath the surface, to find the universal principles on which Cecchetti’s work was based, and to realise that their validity transcends the specific stylistic boundaries of classical/romantic ballet.

Those Cecchetti principles to which Glasstone refers, discussed earlier as carrying an emphasis on phrasal continuity, can be traced in both Coyne’s “Strange” movements and the Chosen Maiden’s sacrificial dance. None of these phrases preserves ballet vocabulary in any robust way. But each enacts its contortions through a preservation of a stretchy bodily grammar that dissolves coherent form by privileging the in-betweens of movement and presenting the dancer as shape-shifter. In short, Clark does not abandon ballet but elevates its existing grammatical twistedness, perverting a classical practice of image-setting by putting into motion a classical technique of moving.

CONCLUSION: AUTHORIZED DISSIDENCE

A thought running through this chapter is that Clark’s “capital” in ballet has opened his work to charges of a multivalent deviancy: as youthful institutional delinquency, as an anti-reproductive relation to his elite inheritance, as his corruption of ballet with “the gritty nether regions” of popular culture, or as bodily distortion through choreographic twist. What that capital also secures though, is permission—granted by establishment institutions—to stretch the edges of ballet. Clark’s career has been punctuated with invitations from ballet companies seeking to capitalize on the currency of contemporaneity; his works have been commissioned by the Paris Opéra Ballet (1984/5), Scottish Ballet (1985), London Festival Ballet (1986),
and even The Royal Ballet (1994). And the excursions he has taken into contemporary arts are afforded by the economic security of institutional homes (at Riverside and the Barbican) and the recognition of a ballet public always invested in his successes and failures. This point is rendered in another review of the 1980s, this time by Nicholas Dromgoole for the *Sunday Telegraph*. Dromgoole explains of Michael Clark & Company dancers that they actually are *dancers*, excellently trained, technically proficient, well proportioned, good looking […]. They have also […danced] in recognized dance companies […] and therefore… deserve our respect. Respect because… they have worked through [ballet] and rejected [it] from inside knowledge, as opposed to merely standing on the outside, without any proven ability at all, hurling ill-informed abuse at their betters.

Dromgoole here draws a discursive perimeter around the field of classical ballet, classing Michael Clark & Company as insiders who are uniquely entitled to mess with tradition. The implication is that the only artists permitted to interrogate the field of ballet are those who have already been granted entry to it.

This point has implications for queer readings of Clark’s work, including my own, which suggest in Burt’s words that “queer dancing… makes space for new and sometimes subversive pleasures, breaking down or blurring boundaries of straight discourse”. In the light of criticism like Dromgoole’s, which should remind us that certain kinds of bodies, cultural capital, and material resources are required for gaining entry to a field like ballet, the *limitations* of queer dissidence when understood expansively as *anti-normative practice* are brought to the fore. How might one receive the institutional support necessary for a consistent deviation from traditions of ballet (as Clark has) without having first acquired the expertise in those traditions for which permission to resist them is granted? Writing more broadly of the subject-less turn in
queer theory that can mask the need to ask such questions about the material—
including pointedly the racial—affordances involved in sustained oppositional practice,
Puar puts it well when she states that “material, cultural, and social capital… delimit
‘access’ to queerness, suggesting that queerness can be an elite cosmopolitan
formulation contingent upon various regimes of mobility”.61 From the perspective of
Puar’s critique of the universalisms bound up in queer theory’s subject-less turn, we
may return to Dromgoole’s review, which paradoxically authorizes Clark’s dissidence.
For this critic, Clark’s capital (not so much his natural gift as his technical pedigree and
that of his company, grounded in white establishment institutions) secures his
entitlement to queer ballet in public, granting him mobility to travel in and out of the
field, to deviate from its disciplines, to commit acts of perversion on his inheritance,
and to propose new subversive pleasures.62

In its revitalization of late-twentieth-century British ballet through a collision of
Cecchettian stretch with the hedonisms of an underground club culture, Clark’s daring to do
ballet “wrong” is afforded by a nexus of institutional capital and investments based in the
establishment dance cultures against which his work has so often grated. The broader picture
revealed in Clark’s authorized dissidence, I suggest, is that such guarantors in the field of
ballet have been (and continue to be) in the possession of very few artists and are distributed
according to logics of social entitlement that conceal inequities in bodily, economic, and
racial position. Given Clark’s position as an artistically and institutionally gifted artist now
authorized to dissent, perhaps Halberstam’s depiction of failure is an apt way to end, as he
explains “the concept of practicing failure… prompts us to discover our inner dweeb, to be
underachievers, to fall short… to avoid mastery” and that “all losers are the heirs of those
who lost before them”.63 Failure by this definition is not Clark’s practice. By embracing his
mastery of classical ballet as a means through which to twist its institutions and so by forging
a theatre of wrongness that has survived the will of its detractors, Clark positions his ballet as heir to “his betters”, or, to those who won before him.64

Image Credits:

[Stanger Fig 1]: Kate Coyne performing the prologue to the *Stravinsky Project*, Michael Clark Company, Lincoln Center, New York, 2008. [Credit line: Stephanie Berger © 2018]

[Stanger Fig 2]: The Neo Naturists (Christine Binnie, Jennifer Binnie, Wilma Johnson, and Grayson Perry) and Michael Clark performing *Sexist Crabs* as part of *The Artless Dodge*, Michael Clark with the Neo Naturists Cabaret & Friends, Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, November 5, 1983. [Credit line: Photo: Chris Harris, Courtesy Bolton & Quinn and Michael Clark Company.]

[Stanger Fig 3]: Amy Hollingsworth rehearsing the Chosen Maiden solo in *Mmm…*, Barbican Theatre, London, 2006. [Credit line: Photo © Hugo Glendinning, 2006.]

Notes

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Clark has been choreographer-in-residence at Riverside Studios and at the Barbican and has received financial support from Arts Council England. In October 2006, Christie’s auction house held The Michael Clark Company Benefit Sale, with works donated by artists including Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas and Elizabeth Peyton. See Ismene Brown, “Bad Boy with Good Friends”, *The Telegraph*, October 14 2006.


Watson, “No.1 With a Ballet”,

Following Fredric Jameson, I use the term “periodization” to refer to a common situation grounded in historical time and space that does not give way to a homogenizing and thus unhelpfully stabilized view of history. Fredric Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s”, *Social Text* 9/10, *The 60s without Apology* (Spring–Summer, 1984), 178–209, 178. For elaboration on the fault lines between British punk, post punk, and new romanticism as negotiated by Clark and his collaborators in early 1980s London, see Michael Bracewell, “An Evening of Fun in the Metropolis of Your Dreams: Michael Clark, London and the Art of Subcultural Lifestyle, 1975–90”, in *Michael Clark*, ed. Cotter and Violette, 93–94.
18 Glasstone, “Michael Clark’s use of Ballet Technique”, 64. (Clark citation originally published as an interview with Clark and Alistair Macaulay for Dance Theatre Journal, 1984). For research references relating to the Cecchetti method, see note nine of this chapter.


21 Glasstone, “Michael Clark’s use of Ballet Technique”, 67. The geocultural complexities of a so-called “English” style for British ballet are implied as early as 1957 in de Valois’s “The English Ballet”.

22 See note fifteen to this chapter.


Monahan, “A Natural Goes Flat”, 1574.

For more on the association of the nuclear family and biological reproduction with economic investment and social security, see Jack Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 89.


Perry, “Grayson Perry”, 112.
Evans, “Cerith Wyn Evans”.

Holah, “David Holah and Stevie Stewart”, 56.


Monahan, “A Natural Goes Flat”, 1574.


Monahan, “A Natural Goes Flat”, 1574.

Dyer elaborates the paradox: “in Britain, classical ballet is, at one and the same time, elitist and popular, patriarchal and woman-centred, heterosexist and part of gay male culture, universal and distinctly white. It is all of this at once”. Dyer, “A Bit of Uplift: Classical Ballet”, in *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), 12.


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Glasstone, “Michael Clark’s use of Ballet Technique”, 64.

Now the English National Ballet.


Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 121.

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