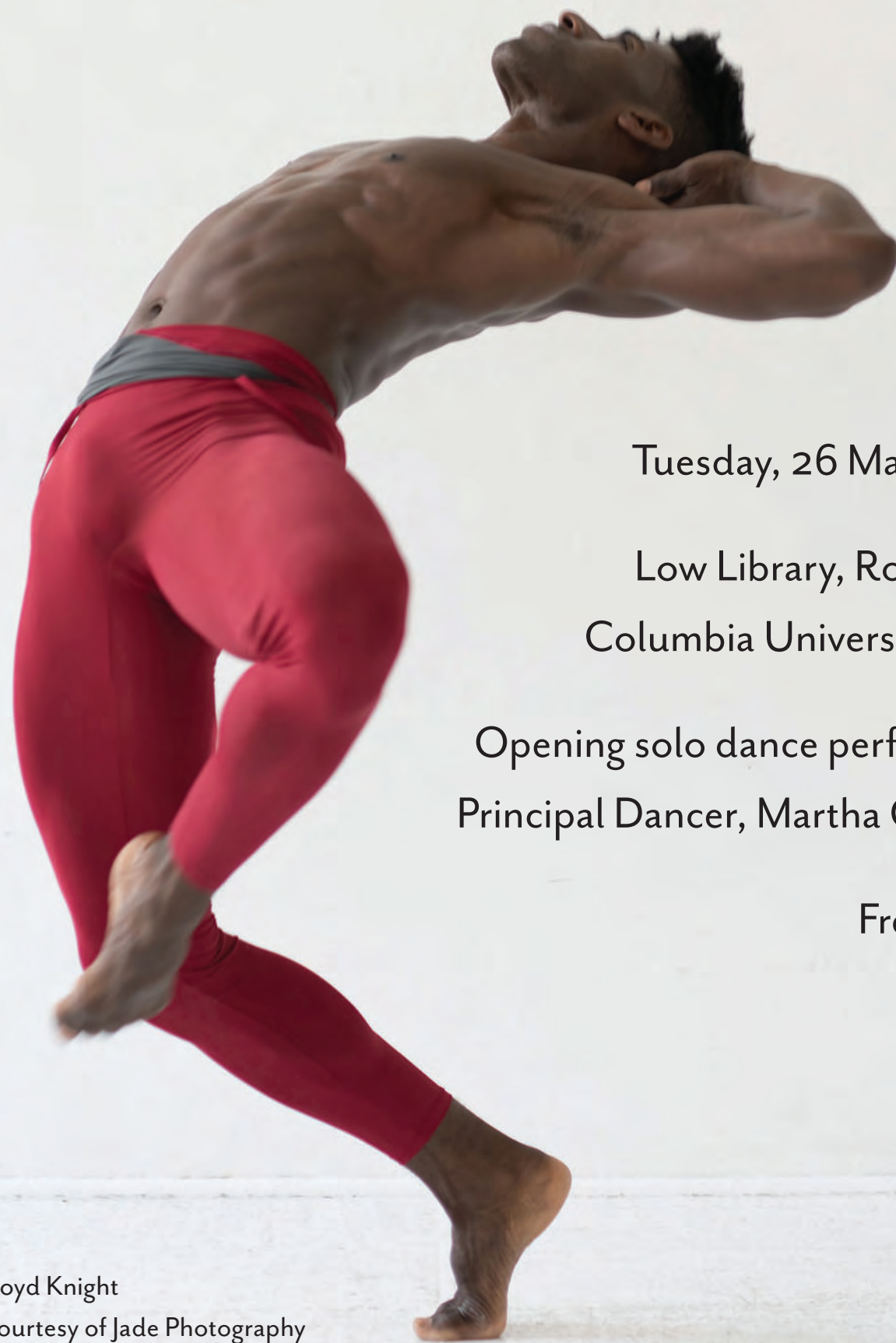


AGENTS OF CHANGE

A Symposium in Honor of
Marcellus Blount



Tuesday, 26 March 2019, 1:00–4:30 pm

Low Library, Rotunda and Faculty Room
Columbia University, Morningside Campus

Opening solo dance performance by Lloyd Knight
Principal Dancer, Martha Graham Dance Company

Free and open to the public

Lloyd Knight
Courtesy of Jade Photography

Committee on Equity and Diversity, Arts & Sciences Office of the Executive Vice President of Arts & Sciences
African American and African Diaspora Studies Department Department of English and Comparative Literature
Division of the Humanities Center for Jazz Studies Society of Fellows/ Heyman Center for the Humanities
Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality Department of Music



MARCELLUS BLOUNT spent thirty-three years as a member of the English and Comparative Literature Department of Columbia University. His career coincided with and was an integral part of the emergence of African American Studies at Columbia and in the nation.

He was born in New York City on January 4th 1960, the son of Lee Esther White Blount and Marcellus

Blount Sr. He was raised in Queens and Staten Island and graduated from New Drop High School. He earned a Bachelor of Arts from Williams College in 1980 and a Doctorate from Yale University in 1987. He has held fellowships at the Carter G. Woodson Institute at University of Virginia, the University of Pennsylvania where he was a Rockefeller Fellow, and Harvard University at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute. More recently, he was the Sterling Brown '22 Visiting Professor of English at Williams College. He joined the faculty of Columbia University in 1985 and spent almost his entire career there attaining the rank of Associate Professor. During that career he served as faculty fellow and the Director of the Institute of Research in African-American Studies (IRAAS) and the Director of the graduate program in African American Studies. He was an avid academic citizen, generously serving on innumerable departmental and IRAAS committees, and mentored generations of students.

A pioneer in black masculinity studies, his work explored the intersections of race, gender and sexuality in African American life and literature. He co-edited *Representing Black Men* and was completing two projects, "Listening for My Name: African American Men and the Politics of Friendship" and an autobiography.

Prof. Blount's first love and the inspiration for his most innovative scholarship was poetry. His article "The Preacherly Text: African American Poetry and Vernacular Performance" was published in *PMLA*, the journal of the Modern Language Association where he was a member of their Committee on the Literatures of People of Color. His essays can also be found in *Callaloo*, *American Literary History* and other scholarly journals.

Marcellus Blount is survived by his father, Marcellus Sr.; his sister, Valerie Blount; and his brother, Anthony Blount; as well as numerous aunts, uncles and cousins. He will be missed by his many friends, colleagues and students at Columbia and throughout the world.



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Schedule

1:00-1:15 p.m. Welcome
(Rotunda)

1:15 -1:30 p.m. Solo Dance Performance
(Rotunda)

1:30-1:45 p.m. Opening Remarks
(Faculty Room, Low Library, Room 207)

1:45-3:00 p.m. Panel
(Faculty Room)

3:00-4:15 p.m. Roundtable
(Faculty Room)

4:15-4:30 p.m. Closing remarks
(Faculty Room)

Maya Tolstoy (Interim Executive Vice President & Dean of the Faculty, Arts & Sciences)

Ellie M. Hisama (Member, Committee on Equity and Diversity, Arts & Sciences; Professor of Music & Executive Committee, IRWGS)

Lloyd Knight, Principal Dancer, Martha Graham Dance Company

Alan Stewart (Chair, Department of English & Comparative Literature)

Sarah Cole (Dean of Humanities; Department of English & Comparative Literature)

“A different kind of politics of liberation”: *Thinking about Marcellus Blount’s Work*

Chair: **Farah Jasmine Griffin** (Chair, African American and African Diaspora Studies Department; Department of English & Comparative Literature)

George Aumoithe (Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies, Princeton University)

Rebecca Pawel (Department of English & Comparative Literature)

Kendall Thomas (Center for the Study of Law and Culture, Law School)

“What it means to be free”:
Marcellus Blount’s Institution-Building Work

Chair: **Jean E. Howard** (George Delacorte Professor in the Humanities; Department of English & Comparative Literature)

Robert O’Meally (Center for Jazz Studies; Department of English & Comparative Literature)

James Shapiro (Department of English & Comparative Literature)

Zinga Fraser (Shirley Chisholm Project; Africana Studies & Women’s and Gender Studies Program, Brooklyn College, CUNY)

Richard Sacks (Department of English & Comparative Literature)

Jack Halberstam (Department of English & Comparative Literature & IRWGS)

Joseph Slaughter (Department of English & Comparative Literature)

Dennis A. Mitchell (Vice Provost for Faculty Advancement)

Tributes

For Marcellus

Words usually come to me easily; not this time. This time an insistent few emerge: Brother, Friend, Light, Joy, Life and Love. These come closest to expressing the depth of my gratitude, the depth of my loss.

Not only was he light, joy, life and love. He was, and continues to be loved.

By his students who brought him such joy, like a former undergraduate who, in the days following his death, wrote to me: “He was an incredible professor, revolutionary academic and all-around magnificent person. Rest in Power, Dr. Blount. Thank you for everything you taught me. Thank you thank you thank you.”

By his friends, work family, and colleagues around the nation:

Sharon Harris, Administrator at the Institute for Research in African American Studies (IRAAS), who once, when he was in Paris, managed to overnight mail him much needed medications, managed to get them to him across land and sea, and pass customs agents,—legally, and at a moment’s notice.

Shawn Mendoza, Assistant Director of IRAAS, who made sure he always had the most up to date technological gadgets and Apple Products – pedagogical necessities, all.

By colleagues who wrapped him in a family of life, love and laughter. Always laughter.

By our Barnard colleague, Monica Miller, who like many of us was warmly welcomed by Marcellus upon our arrival. Monica recalled: “Marcellus was so kind to me when I first arrived at BC/CU—he was such a light and a treasure. I can’t stop thinking about his wicked smile.”

By our shared dissertation advisor, Yale's Robert Stepto, who remembered him as "Marcellus. Marty. He is so special to all of us."

Professor of History and former director of the Institute for Research in African American Studies, Samuel K. Roberts eloquently expressed what so much of us feel: "Marcellus was always living in the fullest sense of the world, and I always felt that my life was a bit more enriched by any aspect of his that he shared."

As these words and many others I have not shared here explain, Marcellus modeled something that is all too rare: kindness, thoughtfulness, generosity, humor and an insistence on **LIVING**, even, perhaps especially, in the face of death.

Even now, when I close my eyes I see him dancing, in an azure or aubergine shirt (for blue and purple are hardly adequate to describe his colors). And, I hear the words of one of our beloved poets, Gwendolyn Brooks who in the "Second Sermon on the Warpland" tells us:

This is the urgency: Live!
And have your blooming in the noise of the whirlwind...
Conduct your blooming in the noise and
Whip of the whirlwind.

Marcellus Blount, pioneering scholar of black poetry, gender and sexuality studies and black masculinity. Marcellus Blount, who never denied the difficulties of the battles, both personal and political, that he and we face, but who as activist, artist, and intellectual, confronted them, indeed fought them, with courage, creativity, and a fierce faith that we stand on the right side of history, and that we will win.

—Farah Jasmine Griffin

As Associate Chair of Columbia's English Department at that time, I was in charge of the hiring process that resulted in the Department's appointment of Marcellus Blount as its first African American faculty member; I believe I was the first among many colleagues to read and endorse Marcellus's application. As I expected, Marcellus proved an excellent and much valued addition to our cohort, and I was privileged to consider him a friend, as well. One of my fondest memories is of a small New Year's Eve celebration at my apartment in the course of which, in response to my wife's and my request, each guest was to read aloud a small selection from a work he or she considered important to share. Marcellus read a passage from a text by James Baldwin that deeply touched everyone present. A person of extraordinary charm and deeply reflective sincerity, he enriched my life and the life of our shared profession. I miss him.

—Robert W. Hanning

My first encounter with Marcellus was in a dreary hallway at Columbia that was, like anything Marcellus touched, brought to life by the joyous sound of his laughter. I found myself in this dreary hallway, an awkward and comically overeager undergraduate, to see a professor whose name I can't remember, about a paper I've completely forgotten, or a project I can't recall, or maybe for some other insignificant reason. I don't remember now. In fact, I recall absolutely nothing about that day except the sound that rang in my ears and made me smile, and the kind face of the stranger whose laughter drew me all the way down the hall, in the opposite direction, away from where I should have been and into an office that was most definitely not the one I was scheduled to enter but that instantly made me forget where I was supposed to be.

Everyone who knew Marcellus, knows the music of his laughter and recognizes that kindness, the sort of kindness that makes you forget what you were doing or why you were doing it and that drowns out the noise of the meaningless things that distract you. Of course, Marcellus understood with clarity and wrote often about the raw unkindness of the world. He was committed to the ongoing work of social justice, to feminisms of various kinds, to fighting anti-blackness and racial and sexual injustice. But this work was always deeply entangled for him with a life of poetry, love, and human connection. It was shaped by the joy of sharing the things he loved with others and, by sheer force of personality, making them love those things, too.

Many years later (perhaps a good 20 years later, or more) I shared with Marcellus, who had become a colleague, this anecdote about our first meeting. He didn't remember a thing about it. And he laughed, of course. The same laugh. I believe he got a great deal of pleasure out of shaking the dreariness out of the universe and filling this big old world of ours with music and movement and joy.

—Laura Ciolkowski

When I arrived at Columbia in 1989 as Director of the then-named Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Marcellus was among the first to welcome me and offer his help. During those early years, long before the establishment of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies or the inclusion of sexuality studies as part of IRWAG's mission, Marcellus provided wise advice about how to expand our programming and loyally supported all our efforts. He was a wonderful colleague and friend.

—Martha Howell

I was dazzled by Marcellus when, as a student in Columbia College in 1989, I enrolled in his undergraduate seminar on American Literature. I wasn't always sure what was going on in that class, but I knew I wanted to stay around and figure it out. Marcellus had us all write our final papers on Mikhail Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel," not easy! One day we all came to class clamoring for an explanation of a new term we'd heard but didn't understand: "deconstruction." I remember how Marcellus playfully demurred, saying that wasn't something we needed to bother about. When we wouldn't relent, he turned around, wrote on the board for a minute, and then did a fast, enthralling reading of Wordsworth. He was so much fun, so smart, so cool.

—Victoria Rosner

In my earliest days at Columbia Marcellus was often the only man and the only person of color in the Executive Committee meetings of the Institute for Research on Women and Gender. I was always struck by how totally at ease he was: certain of himself, certain of his views, a graceful and engaged participant in all our intellectual work. Besides being a remarkable reader of poetry, Marcellus was a very good colleague. He had impeccable manners and a wicked sense of humor. When he settled in to talk with you about something serious, like a poem or a novel, he was piercingly insightful; but when he called you into his office just to fool around and gossip (he was very good at gossip), he was hilariously funny. He managed to retain a sense of gaiety and grace over the three decades that I knew him, even though he was struggling with illness nearly all that time. I admired his persistence, his sheer determination to continue living a meaningful life. He enjoyed dressing well and dancing and traveling to Paris, and he continued to do all of these things even when doing them was extremely difficult. I miss him; I am glad to have been his friend and colleague.

—Jean Howard

As a colleague, Marcellus gave me the courage to teach seminars on AIDS and Arts Activism, which we also developed as panels at the MLA and NeMLA. Marcellus and I shared a great love for dance; he spoke often of his days as a dancer. We were actively working on a seminar on Black Choreography when he passed. I'm still hoping to realize that course as a tribute to Marcellus, especially since there is such a vital link to the poetics of the body which was so important in his work.

Since I still live in Chelsea, I have many memories of Marcellus whenever I round another corner. He loved to "come down" to Chelsea. Any memory of Marcellus brings a smile since his humor was much deeper than the sardonic.

—Jonathon Appels



Marcellus and I began our careers at Columbia on the same day. We immediately became friends and allies – what he once called each other’s “significant otherists.” If I was the “feminist scholar of literature” who helped Marcellus to “understand” and find “a language for thinking about how the institution was as bereft of women as it was of African Americans,” he introduced me to African American Studies as a discipline and was my inspiration and ally as we confronted the challenges of intersectional politics and academic practice.

In April 1987, Marcellus was arrested for fulfilling this mandate. During a demonstration protesting the university’s failure to address issues of racial justice after 4 African American students were disciplined for participating in a brawl instigated by white fraternity members, Marcellus, the only black junior faculty member in Arts and Sciences, was arrested by the New York City police as he took notes and consulted with some of the black students whose mentor he’d become. He was taken to the precinct at 126th St. and denied access to the friends and supporters who’d followed him there. When he was finally released, I saw that something had broken, or that something that was already broken could no longer be camouflaged. His amazing smile was laced with pain; the charm and fluency with which he had negotiated the university’s color line turned brittle. He became understandably wary of the intersectional alliances he’d initiated. Even if, as many colleagues and students have testified, he managed to keep going, to radiate equanimity and hope instead of rage and despair, the photo above, taken on 22 April 1987, speaks volumes and reminds us of the price Marcellus paid for being young, gifted, and black.

—Susan Winnett

Marcellus Blount was my neighbor for a good long time. Our association went from lighthearted conversation through alliances on committee work – including searches, into theoretical discussions about the transformation of subjectivity with AIDS. I am sorry I cannot mourn him and celebrate him with departmental colleagues, I am speaking up for Maryse Conde abroad on the day chosen. The warmth of my feeling for Marcellus, not necessarily a publicly known fact, cannot be grasped in these few sentences.

—Gayatri Spivak

For the last decade, one of the four of us has, at one point or another, held the front desk position at IRWGS. Each of us thought that our favorite story about Marcellus Blount, the story we thought of first and remembered best, was somehow too small or boring to share. But recently, while reminiscing about him, we all realized that we were telling each other the same story:

Very near the beginning of our tenures at IRWGS, Marcellus walked into the office. He said hi, and introduced himself. And we, eager new employees, were ready to direct him to whichever office or whichever meeting he must have been there for. Except...he didn't ask us about that. He asked us where we had been before this job, and why we came to Columbia. He was simply there to meet *us*. And after that, after that first meeting, he *remembered* us, too. Each of us he would greet by name, at meetings, talks, and holiday parties, years after we had moved on from IRWGS. He remembered that conversation we had about Coltrane, and he made jokes about our cats, and he followed up to ask how the panel we'd helped organize went. He was a distinguished senior faculty member who treated us, admin staff low in the academic hierarchy, as people worthy of knowing and of remembering.

That's how we all remembered him to each other: as someone who remembered other people. He was a person who treated everyone he met – and he went out of his way to meet new people – as important, and worthy of respect and kindness. It *is* a small story, but it shows just how much care he gave to even those small moments that build a person up.

—Khadija Belly, Tess Chalifour-Drahman, Jessica Lilien, Vina Tran

Marcellus could present an imposing figure. But he was warm and considerate, which I learned at our first meal together. He invited me to breakfast when I first arrived and over omelettes, he regaled me about his days as a young dancer. We would enjoy the occasional breakfast and his stories never failed to charm. His intelligence, personal charisma, and aesthetic commitments enriched all of us around him. When he guest lectured in my class, taking the students through Toni Morrison's *Sula*, his combination of intellectual rigor and elegant yet engaging style shaped the class discussion in the same way a personal conversation with him could open up your world to new possibilities. I miss Marcellus, including starting the day with those early breakfasts that were shaped by the joy he could inspire in being alive to all those new possibilities.

—Kevin Fellezs

Marcellus was a wonderfully supportive colleague, a co-conspirator on numerous projects, and a lovely neighbor. I so miss running into him in our building. Invariably, he'd just be going out to a concert, or a Yankee game, or just returning from the ballet, or an evening with friends, or a day with someone he was taking care of. Full of enthusiasm about summer plans in Provincetown, or Fire Island, or full of worry about a colleague, a student or a department matter, he'd always stop me from running to the next appointment—enticing me to chat, to tell him how I am, to take in the day.

When I heard him read from his stunning memoir, “Still Here,” I sent him a link to Paul Robeson’s famous rendition of the iconic “Partizanerlied” – the Yiddish ghetto song of survival with the refrain “Mir zaynen do” (“We are still here”). It’s the last email exchange we had. Marcellus responded “Wow! Thanks for being a wonderful colleague.” I wish he were still here.

—Marianne Hirsch

Marcellus and I shared a birthday. Both of us were delighted that it was C.L.R. James’s too. Marcellus and I would dress up, go to some fancy place, and take turns treating ourselves to a better meal than we would ever get used to, and we would laugh. We gossiped about the department (always good material there), about friends—and only about friends. He was incapable of being mean. Kindness was the element he lived in. We didn’t talk much about work, though I do remember an intense conversation about what was Shakespeare’s best sonnet, as the wine seemed magically to produce in him total recall. When he left for Rutgers, one of the jobs I set for myself (I was chairing—ugh) was to get him back. That success was one of my happiest, in fact one of my few. It was awful to watch him get sick, and amazing to watch him recover. We talked about boxing; he looked fabulous. And then one day, a voice called to me as my wife and I were crossing Claremont Avenue. I looked over and waved, but didn’t know who it was; Jane said “It’s Marcellus” and pulled on my elbow to cross back to him. We all hugged. The smile was still big. We made a plan to get together soon, and knew we never would. He lived with a grace that was remarkable, a grace that I didn’t know I believed in.

—David Kastan

Marcellus had rhythm. So many silent threads were woven together by his rhythm. His pause in thought was a silent beat, his words an elegant melody, his dancing a lesson in being.

—Patricia A. Dailey

ENGL GU4000something: Queer Poetics

Fall 1995

Professor Marcellus Blount

Class Notes 11/16

- Carnal knowledge flows into spiritual knowledge.
- Elegy as literary form: How has it been used to express or enact homoerotic desire to overcome, to expose loss.
- Lilacs: Pleasure of indirection and concealment.

Campo- Hemphill- Crane

Masculine lines of inheritance. T. cells lost. Contemporary queer poets excavating past memories, reconstructing parentage, ancestry, what it means to create one's parents and ancestors. Tradition of queer poetry fraught with pervasive intertextuality. A literary history as a strategy of remembrance so successful as a literary action, perhaps successful as political.

A POETICS OF DESIRE AT THE BASE OF A POLITICS OF FRIENDSHIP.

Thank you, Marcellus, for the manfish, for the ectoplasmic swirl of garments, and above all for the measured rise. xox, jodi

—Jodi Melamed

Professor Blount loved the Yankees. I was an unremarkable student in his class, so when I saw him, we mostly talked about baseball. Years later, he remembered me and our shared interest in the Yankees. In our last conversation, we stood in the IRAAS office and discussed C.C. Sabathia.

The spring after the 2009 World Series, Professor Blount brought a radio to the class final exam. He sat in the front of the room, put his headphones on, and tuned in to the game. Occasionally, I listen to baseball on the radio, too. When I do, I think of Professor Blount, in front of the classroom, listening to the game.

—Natalie Shibley

What I will remember most about Marcellus is his wicked smile. It belied a generosity of spirit, both personal and professional. When I was newly arrived on campus to teach classes on performance and black masculinity, which he was already doing, he welcomed a fellow traveler and shared all that he knew. My teaching was better because of his research—he took me in hand and guided me. I'm forever grateful. Personally, I have one major regret in my relationship with him: that I was never able to go to one of his dance parties, which I hear were legendary. I know he's still dancing now.

—Monica L. Miller

A “work of mourning somewhat incomplete.” That is how Marcellus Blount described Paul Laurence Dunbar’s second elegy for Frederick Douglass. Marcellus read this elegy as a response to the poet’s sense of disappointment at the failed promises of emancipation after *Reconstruction*. Rereading Marcellus’s account of Dunbar’s elegies, I am struck by the sense of a repetition, not only of disappointment in a time of failed promises when the forces of racial inequality are again stalking the republic. I am struck also by a recurring sense of the insufficiency of lament and the poetry of consolation to serve the task of historical justice. Marcellus tried to teach us to live in their absence, and to allow the incompleteness of mourning—the failure to put the past behind—to become a source of liberation and of a relationship to those who have gone before. And now he is among them: those who have gone before. No more charming the hallway, no more leaning forward to make the speaker feel attended, no more dancing on the “landscape of speech and body/burned in verbal space.” Marcellus quoted those lines of Michael S. Harper’s own poem for Dunbar in his essay on African American elegy, as he defiantly and generously opened the tradition of which he was heir and loving critic. Let us leave the work of mourning him somewhat incomplete.

—Rosalind Morris

I knew him, always, as Professor Blount. Although I never took one of his classes, he was ever present in my time in graduate school at Columbia. I was his research assistant but most of all he was an enigmatic figure (among many) of the Institute for Research on African American Studies. I remember him at the holiday party dancing to Rihanna, almost blending into a group of grad students, tipsy on free booze. We were all grasping onto a rare moment of relief at this gathering that we anticipated all year long. For Professor Blount, it seemed, it was just another day at the office. Through him, I learned that rapture has its place in academic living. That does not mean it is welcome but that space can and must be made. Even in the suffocating confines of the academy, Professor Blount was always off to another exhibition, another tennis game, another dance. At his funeral, I couldn’t stop crying. I could say it was some expression of that rapture Professor Blount embodied, a kind of rapture that was troubled from the beginning. More honestly, I will say: it feels impossible for me to write this. But I had to try.

—Tiana Reid

Marcellus and I were colleagues and friends for over 30 years, despite backgrounds, lifestyles, periods of expertise, and even crazed baseball loyalties that could hardly have been more different. But with his dazzling modesty, as well as his astonishing generosity of spirit, Marcellus had an uncanny ability to bridge the widest of chasms.

One way he did that involved his embracing of the idea, to quote the opening of a Bart Giamatti speech about baseball, that life – like baseball – not only “breaks your heart, it is designed to break your heart.” But Marcellus also gravitated toward the impossible vision of Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* (a poem to which Marcellus introduced me and to which we kept returning together for 25 years) that if we can somehow, on some level, impossibly and simultaneously, embrace and relive the wounds of others, then perhaps there is hope that (and for this I quote a single verse of *Omeros* that is comprised of three separate voices from three separate sentences): “...in time too.’ / ‘We shall all heal.’ / The incurable...”

Marcellus embraced these ideas not only because of his own many wounds, but through his loving ability to close-read the lives of others. And I was reminded of this yet again 18 months ago when he introduced me, for what turned out to be a final time, to yet another corpus, the sonnets of Gwendolyn Brooks, among which is the first poem of “The Womanhood” which begins “People who have no children can be hard.” Here was another seemingly unbridgeable difference between us. But not so, since Marcellus inclusively and unconditionally understood, to quote the final lines of that sonnet, how to “make[] a sugar of / The malocclusions, the inconditions of love.” What a privilege and a blessing to have been his friend.

—Richard Sacks

I miss Marcellus terribly, and I wish I could be there to celebrate his memory and work, and to contribute to the chorus of affection that I know is filling Low Rotunda. Marcellus and I talked a lot after I arrived at Columbia, often in the recesses of Philosophy Hall, about the struggles of academic life and, in recent years, about how to juggle scholarship and activism. I knew him to be a thoughtful, generous soul. But it was when Marcellus moved into my building that I saw close-up his radical love of life and capacity to find joy in the smallest things. Since he did NOT cook, anything, ever, I’d sometimes bring him homemade bread and other little indulgences. His delight in these little acts of kindness — acts like the ones he so often bestowed on others — motivated me to do more. In the last weeks of his life, although I didn’t know how ill he was, we would meet on the street and he would share a recent joy: the thrill of walking into the park after his surgery, a recent televised Yankees game, his plans to go to the ballet.

I will say in closing that he often mentioned Bob O’Meally and Farah as his dear friends. And my heart goes out to them and others of you there whose lives were so entangled with his.

But Marcellus is with us. Sometimes when I taste some fresh warm bread or walk outside my building and smell the park, I feel as though **I feel** Marcellus’ joy. I think he would like that. I know I do.

—Christia Mercer

When I met with Marcellus to prepare for my oral exams he usually started by offering me a choice of tea or coffee, and asking “how are you?” with a wide smile. We talked about yoga, music, and how gentrification had transformed the Upper West Side (“I kind of miss the old West Side,” Marcellus said. “When it was seedy and Zabar’s was open late.”) And somehow these chats always gradually turned to the poets on my orals list and I ended up super-prepared for my exams. Marcellus moved to my neighborhood about five years ago, and we sometimes met up for lunch. He was working on his memoirs, and spoke with his characteristic modesty about the difficulty of arranging his life into a narrative. After talking about his writing process, he would rehearse the anecdotes he was trying to write down; funny, fascinating glimpses of a life in arts and letters.

He always made light of his illness. He did mention once that he had trouble reading unless he converted papers to very large fonts on his computer, but he insisted that he liked reading student work. Although I was away on fellowship in the Spring 2018 semester, he urged me to call and talk about my research, and said that he was bored because he was “officially” on medical leave and not teaching. The last time we spoke he told me about a new course he was preparing for September, and noted a recommendation I made for a novella I thought would fit with its theme. He seemed to be recovering so well that when I got an email a few weeks after our last conversation, with the heading MARCELLUS BLOUNT, it was like a gut-punch. Many people make either the personal or the scholarly political. Marcellus had the rare gift of also making the scholarly personal. And – like the trained dancer he was – he made it all look easy.

—Rebecca Pawel

When I first met Marcellus, sometime in the early 2000s, it was kind of confusing, because he greeted me with such a conspiratorial warmth, it was as if we'd been old friends for years. That sunny embrace in his "Hello!!!"

In the years since, his refrain to me was "let's play!" and "don't work so hard!" He was my summertime partner-in-crime, from Carnegie Hall recitals to roller derby and everything in between—including more mediocre Restaurant Week meals than I want to remember, except as the trace of our ongoing conversation. I find reminders of him everywhere in NYC, this city that he loved.

In the fall of 2016, a team of superheroes mobilized to find Marcellus when he fell ill and went missing in Paris and to bring him safely home. Joey Slaughter and I went to see him in the rehab center the weekend after the presidential election. Marcellus clearly knew *something* had happened, but not exactly what. He said things like, "It's still up in the air." "We'll have to see how it turns out." "We'll see what they decide." This was part of a broader confusion, a hard-fought battle to re-orient himself in space and time. It was terrifying to watch him put such a brave face on being so lost. But the fact that he hadn't yet grasped the news about Trump—that felt to me like a mercy, a grace period before Marcellus had to enter the new reality we were all reeling into. It was strangely comforting to be in that grace period with him for a while.

It seems to me that much of Marcellus's adult life was a grace period—and I don't mean confusion or denial, but instead a precious time, a mercy time, a hard-won time he didn't necessarily expect to have. It was in that grace period that he welcomed me, as a new old friend.

To be Marcellus's friend was many things, but chief among them was something like a state of grace—a favor freely given, undeserved and unearned, unwavering, *amazing*, bright shining as the sun.

—Jennifer Wenzel

I had recently earned my doctorate degree from the Theatre program at Columbia University, and on January 10, 2014 I received an e-mail from David Eppel, then chair of the Theatre Department at Williams College, inviting me for a Skype interview for the Creating Connections Consortium (C3) post-doctoral fellowship at Williams College. A few days later, I was in Professor Blount's office and we were talking about my prospects for jobs. I mentioned that I had a Skype interview coming up with Williams College. At the time, I had not remotely considered his connections with Williams. To my surprise, he got on the phone while I was sitting there and called someone he knew at Williams. He praised me to the skies, and I remember leaving his office thinking how could I not be hired

by Williams after that extraordinary recommendation. Several days after my Williams interview, I had another C-3 interview with Middlebury College. Several weeks later, Middlebury offered me the C-3 position. Although you could be interviewed by all the colleges participating in the C-3 initiative, the rule was that only one could offer you employment. Once I got to Middlebury, I discovered that Williams also wanted to offer me a job, but Middlebury negotiated for me. This is just one example of Marcellus Blount's generosity, for which I will be forever grateful.

—Nathaniel G. Nesmith

The Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty Advancement deeply mourns the loss of our friend, Marcellus Blount. Marcellus was a staunch supporter of the work of the Office, particularly the programs that comprise the Faculty Diversity Initiative, since its inception as the Office of the Vice Provost for Diversity Initiatives nearly 15 years ago.

Not only was Marcellus a supporter of diversity initiatives at Columbia, his spirited advocacy helped pave the way for the success of a number of groundbreaking changes at the University. In his unique way, measured yet bold, Marcellus perfected the art of thriving at Columbia while also challenging the boundaries of our venerable institution. Over the course of his 30+ years at Columbia, Marcellus became an institution himself, a stalwart proponent for diversity within the faculty body, student body and the curriculum. He was among the pioneering underrepresented faculty who pushed Columbia beyond its comfort zone to not only tolerate, but to embrace, ethnic studies and queer studies. The courage and optimism that he displayed, when others might have become jaded or defeated, were remarkable.

Marcellus served tirelessly as both a face for diversity-related initiatives at Columbia and as an invaluable, collaborative voice behind the scenes. We will miss that steady voice, his eternal optimism and his warm, collegial spirit terribly. Although Marcellus is no longer with us physically, his storied legacy will live on. We will do our part to honor that legacy through continued stewardship of the diversity initiatives that he helped to shape and held so dear.

—Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty Advancement, Columbia University

I first knew Marcellus Blount as the teacher of many of my friends, then as an acquaintance, then as a friend and finally as a colleague. By the time I arrived at Columbia as a faculty member (something Marcellus played a large part in making happen), Marcellus was already weakened by an infection and struggling a little with his sight and mobility. Nonetheless, he found time for dinners and breakfasts out, long chats, walks and even dancing. One memorable evening, my partner and I went with him to the Schomburg for one of their queer Fridays dances. It was a warm night and the streets were filled with people. I worried about Marcellus's stamina at one point and his ability to see well enough to find us again if we got

separated. I need not have worried. When we arrived at the Schomburg, he said, if we lose each other, look for me on the dance floor! I thought that was a little ambitious given the pace at which we had walked over to the venue. But, sure enough, after looking at one of the exhibits, we went back out to find Marcellus and there he was dancing away. We had to drag him out of there that night because WE were tired! Marcellus lived his life to the full, every day. Even when ailing, he had plans, even when sick he looked forward, even when tired, he engaged. Dancing, poetry, and queer masculinity were his passions, or at least those were the ones I knew about, and life in the shadow of an epidemic was for him a practice rooted in love and literature. I miss Marcellus as we all do and I admire the way he lived and even more so, the way he accepted his own impending death with grace and courage. The poetry of Essex Hemphill perhaps captures better than I can here the energy of Marcellus and his spirit, his restless curious nature and his quest for what Essex Hemphill calls “Better Days.”

Hemphill writes:

And I wonder
where stamina comes from
to search all night
until my footsteps ring
awake the sparrows,
and I go home, ghost walking,
driven indoors to rest
my hunter’s guise,
to love myself as fiercely
as I have in better days.

As we leave Marcellus to his ghost walking, we remember his fierceness, his pride, his stamina and his love.

—Jack Halberstam



Biographies

Guest Artist

Lloyd Knight, Principal Dancer of the Martha Graham Dance Company, joined the Company in 2005 and performs lead roles in *Appalachian Spring*, *Embattled Garden*, *Errand into the Maze* and others. Born in England and raised in Miami, he trained at Miami Conservatory of Ballet and graduated from New World School of the Arts, under the direction of Daniel Lewis. There he worked with the choreographers Donald McKayle, Robert Battle, and Michael Uthoff. He received scholarships to The Alvin Ailey School and Dance Theatre of Harlem. *Dance Magazine* named him one of the “Top 25 Dancers to Watch” in 2010. Mr. Knight partnered Wendy Whelan in *Moon* and Misty Copeland in *At Summer’s Full*.

Speakers

George Aumoithe is postdoctoral research associate in the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies and history department at Princeton. He earned his Ph.D. in U.S. history from Columbia University. His dissertation *Strange Bedfellows: Public Health and Welfare Politics in the United States, 1965—2000* examines the political economy of Medicaid and hospital provision in New York City. His present research includes study of the deployment of underutilization ratios to justify “safety-net” hospital closures and analysis of disparate impact jurisprudence in hospital closure cases. He is editor of a forthcoming volume on structural racism in medico-legal history.

Dr. **Zinga A. Fraser** is an Assistant Professor in the Africana Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies at Brooklyn College and Visiting Professor at the Institute for Research and African American Studies at Columbia University. She is also the Director of the Shirley Chisholm Project on Brooklyn Women’s Activism at Brooklyn College. She is currently completing her book manuscript titled, *Sister Insider/ Sister Outsider: Shirley Chisholm and Barbara Jordan, Black Women’s Politics in the Post- Civil Rights Era*. She holds a doctorate in African American Studies from Northwestern University, and a Master of Arts from the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University. She also serves as Co-Chair of the IRAAS Alumni Council.

Farah Jasmine Griffin is William B. Ransford Professor of English and Comparative Literature and African-American Studies and Chair of the African-American and African Diaspora Studies Department. She is the author of *Who Set You Flowin?: The African American Migration Narrative* (Oxford, 1995), *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (Free Press, 2001), *Clawing At the Limits of Cool: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and the Greatest Jazz Collaboration Ever* (Thomas Dunne, 2008), and *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists and Progressive Politics During World War II* (Civitas Books, 2013).

Jack Halberstam is Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Director of the Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Columbia University. Halberstam is the author of *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Duke, 1995), *Female Masculinity* (Duke 1998), *In A Queer Time and Place* (NYU Press, 2005), *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke, 2011), *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Beacon, 2012) and *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Guide to Gender Variation* (California, 2018). Halberstam is completing a book now titled *Wild Things: Queerness After Nature*.

Ellie M. Hisama, Symposium Director, is Professor of Music at Columbia University. She is the author of *Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon* (Cambridge, 2001) and has published numerous essays on American and British musicians and artists. She served as Director of the Institute for Studies in American Music at Brooklyn College, and received major fellowships from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation/Andrew Mellon Foundation and the Ethyle R. Wolfe Institute for the Humanities. She is Founding Director of the workshop *For the Daughters of Harlem: Working in Sound*, a multi-year initiative that brings young women of color from local public schools to Columbia to create, record, and reflect upon their work in sound.

Jean E. Howard is George Delacorte Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University. She teaches and writes on Shakespeare and early modern theater, as well as on contemporary drama and feminism. She is co-editor of *The Norton Shakespeare*; author or co-author of five critical books and editor or co-editor of seven collections. She was Marcellus' colleague from 1987 to 2018.

Robert G. O'Meally is the Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, where he has served on the faculty for twenty-five years. A scholar whose work encompasses literature, music, and visual art, O'Meally is director of Columbia's Center for Jazz Studies. He is the author of *The Craft of Ralph Ellison*, *Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday*, *The Jazz Singers*, and *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey*. His edited volumes include *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, *Living With Music: Ralph Ellison's Essays on Jazz*, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (co-editor), and *History and Memory in African American Culture* (co-editor). For his production of a Smithsonian record set called *The Jazz Singers*, he was nominated for a Grammy Award. He has held Guggenheim and Cullman Fellowships, and is presently a fellow at Columbia's new Institute for Ideas and Imagination (Paris). His new books are *The Romare Bearden Reader* (Duke, 2019) and *Antagonistic Cooperation: Collage, Jazz, and American Fiction* (Columbia, 2020).

Rebecca Pawel graduated from Columbia College with a major in Spanish in 1999. She taught English and Spanish in public high schools in Brooklyn from 2000 until 2013 when returned to Columbia to pursue a PhD in English and Comparative Literature. She wrote her MA thesis about Langston Hughes's translation of Federico Garcia Lorca's *Romancero gitano* under the guidance of Marcellus Blount. She spent the 2017-2018 academic year in Madrid as a Fulbright scholar, doing archival research for her dissertation about African American writers in Spain.

Richard Sacks joined Columbia's Department of English and Comparative Literature in 1978, and he has also taught courses for the Departments of Classics and of Germanic Language and Literatures. His publications include *The Traditional Phrase in Homer: Two Studies in Form, Meaning and Interpretation*, as well as articles on Greek, Old English and Old Norse poetry and linguistics, and on technology issues in higher education. He has received include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, as well as a Distinguished Teaching Award from Columbia's School of General Studies.

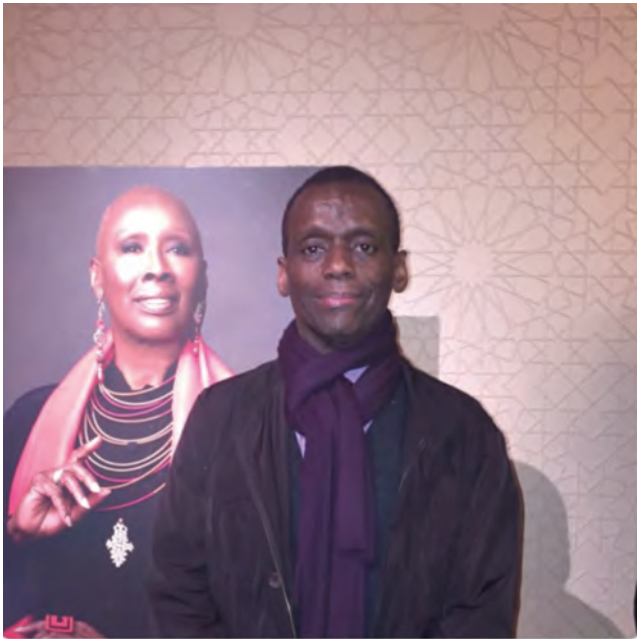
James Shapiro joined Columbia's English Department in 1985 (at the same time as Marcellus). He mostly teaches and writes about Shakespeare, and advises productions of the plays in the US and UK.

Joseph Slaughter is Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. His honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship, Public Voices Fellowship, and Lenfest Distinguished Faculty Award. His book *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (Fordham, 2007), which explores the cooperative narrative logics of international human rights law and the Bildungsroman, was awarded the 2008 René Wellek prize for comparative literature and cultural theory. His essay, "Enabling Fictions and Novel Subjects: The Bildungsroman and International Human Rights Law," was honored as one of the two best articles published in *PMLA* in 2006-7. He was elected to serve as President of the American Comparative Literature Association in 2016.

Kendall Thomas is the Nash Professor of Law and Director of the Center for the Study of Law and Culture at Columbia. He was a contributor to Blount and Cunningham, *Representing Black Men* (Routledge, 1996).



Photos / Memories



Photograph of Judith Jamison by Andrew Eccles, with Marcellus Blount
December 2015

(L-R) Marcellus Blount, Carla Shedd, Saidiya Hartman, Samuel K. Roberts, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Steven Gregory, Obery Hendricks Jr., Josef Sorett, Diedra Harris-Kelley
IRAAS Graduation Reception, May 2015





Shawn Mendoza, Marcellus Blount
*IRAAS Graduation Reception,
May 2015*

Harry McInnis, Diedra Harris-Kelley, Dr. Jarvis McInnis, Marcellus Blount
*IRAAS Graduation Reception,
May 2015*



Marcellus Blount, Elegance Bratton



Marcellus Blount (right) with English Department Intern Erica Bryant

Marcellus Blount
IRAAS Graduation Reception, May 2015



Administration

Ellie M. Hisama, Symposium Director; Program Booklet Editor
Farah Jasmine Griffin, Symposium Advisor
Kristen Barnes, Symposium Coordinator
Orion Morrison-Worrell, Program Booklet Designer & Assistant Editor
Elliott Cairns, Poster and Program Cover Designer
Rogério Shieh-Barbosa, Event Photographer

Acknowledgments

Agents of Change: A Symposium in Honor of Marcellus Blount is organized by the Committee on Equity and Diversity in Arts & Sciences.

We are thankful to all of the speakers for their participation and to those who penned memorial tributes.

We would like to extend our gratitude to the following sponsors for making the symposium and performance possible.

Office of the Executive Vice President of Arts & Sciences
African American and African Diaspora Studies Department
Department of English and Comparative Literature
Division of the Humanities
Society of Fellows/Heyman Center for the Humanities
Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality
Center for Jazz Studies
Department of Music

We are grateful to the following people for their generous support of *Agents of Change*:

Maya Tolstoy
Sarah Cole
Eileen Gillooly
Jack Halberstam
Reinhold Martin
Dennis A. Mitchell
Robert O'Meally
Ana María Ochoa
Alan Stewart

For their advice and encouragement throughout the planning process, we wish to thank:

Susan Drange
Allie Emmerich
Lynn Garafola
Gina Gibney
Katie Glasner
Doug Gray
Virginia Johnson
Laura Kaufman
Carolyn Keen
Alastair Macaulay
Matthew D. Morrison
Rose Razaghian
Jennifer Way Rawe
Tricia Tolliver

We appreciate the kind assistance of:

Khadija Belly
Emily Bloom
Adina Berrios Brooks
Dylan DelGiudice
Angel Garcia
Ryan Grubbs
Sharon Harris
Shana Lassiter
Jenny Lee
Jessica Lilien
Yulanda C. Mckenzie
Beth Pratt
Pamela Rodman
Audrey Rosenblatt
Kazue Tomiyama
Allison Zhao

Many hands contributed to the work of organizing this symposium and performance. We are most grateful to Farah Jasmine Griffin, William B. Ransford Professor of English and Comparative Literature and African-American Studies and Chair of the African-American and African Diaspora Studies Department, for her institution-building advice in shaping this event in honor of our beloved colleague, Marcellus Blount. We thank Kristen Barnes, Assistant Director, Faculty Development & Diversity, Office of the Executive Vice President for Arts & Sciences, for her extraordinary work in managing and coordinating countless aspects of the symposium and performance; Orion Morrison-Worrell for his fantastic work preparing and editing the program booklet; Elliott Cairns for his inspired design for the beautiful poster which also serves as the program book cover; Rogério Shieh-Barbosa for his excellent work as event photographer; and Alice McCrum, whose wonderful article “Marcellus Blount Loved to Dance” helped to bring about this celebration. A special thanks to the incomparable Sharon Harris, who answered our many questions with grace and good humor.

Our heartfelt thanks go to Lloyd Knight, Principal Dancer of the Martha Graham Dance Company, for performing at the symposium; to Daniel Callahan, for his advice that led to the performance; and to Jade Young, for allowing us to use her exquisite photograph of Lloyd Knight aloft.

—Ellie M. Hisama

For the Arts & Sciences Committee on Equity and Diversity Laura Kaufman (chair),
Frank Guridy, Ellie M. Hisama, Kathryn Johnston, Shamus Khan,
Pablo Piccato, Valerie Purdie-Greenaway, Avinoam Shalem, Gareth Williams

