BLACK DRAGON

Afro Asian Performance and the Martial Arts Imagination

ZACHARY F. PRICE

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AFRO ASIAN PERFORMANCE AND THE MARTIAL ARTS IMAGINATION

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For my father, Edwin Curmie Price Jr., (1940–2021),
a fearless dragon in his own right

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INTRODUCTION

The Crisis of Black Masculinity

In August 1969, a group of local Japanese martial arts masters in New York invited Ronald Duncan, a burgeoning Black[1] American practitioner of the Japanese martial art of *ninjutsu,* commonly translated as the "art of stealth," to exhibit his techniques as part of the second International Convention of Martial Arts hosted by *Black Belt* magazine at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel.[2] Eager to test and display their skills through competitions and demonstrations, practitioners from the US and Asia participated in the three-day event, which primarily consisted of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese martial arts. Duncan's performance surprised and impressed his audience. His virtuosity in the use of joint locks, kicks, strikes, and throwing techniques of ninjutsu was outstanding. But, it was Duncan's performative aesthetic use of ninjutsu daggers, blow darts, and *shuriken* (metal stars meant to be thrown at a person, as seen in Figure 0.2) that wowed the spectators in attendance, many of

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[1] I capitalize the "B" in Black when referring to people of the African diaspora in part because the focus of this project is on Black people and their lived experiences, but also to call attention to the fundamental problem in the lexicon that we use to talk about and describe the experiences of Afro-diasporic people, especially Black people in the Americas who are recursively relegated to a state of nonbeing or of a nonperson. Certainly this is not the case when we refer to other ethno-racial groups such as Asian, Latina/o, Euro-American, Caucasian, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Irish, Italian, and so forth. In this project I use the terms Black, Black American, and African American interchangeably.

[2] *Black Belt,* September 1969, 21–24.

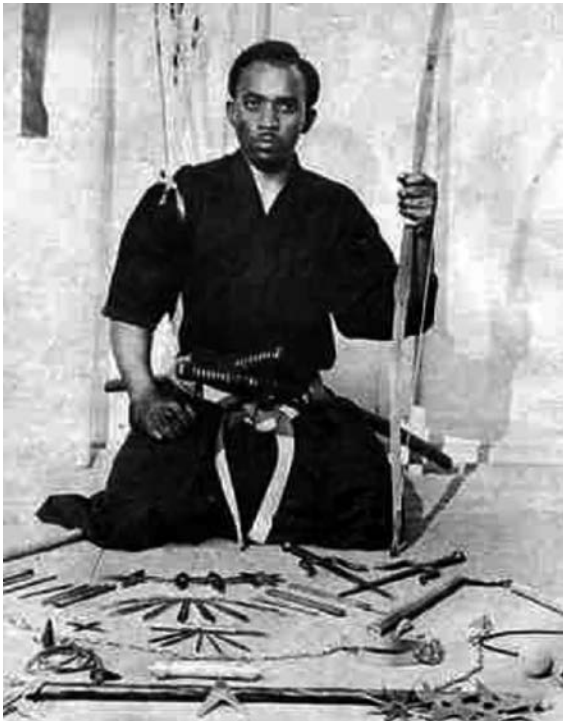

FIGURE 0.2. Ronald Duncan circa 1968 with an array of tools and weaponry

whom were martial arts practitioners of one capacity or another. Duncan's most impressive and signature demonstration technique was grabbing an arrow out of midair that was fired at him from a bow at close range. The technical and spectacular display of weaponry demonstrated Duncan's mastery not only of the objects that he used and the bodies of the performers that he demonstrated on but also of the secret knowledge of the unconventional and guerilla warfare of Japanese ninjutsu. Born in Panama in 1937, Duncan was a former US Marine who had trained in Marine Judo at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. Duncan subsequently relocated to New York and was introduced to koga-ryu ninjutsu, vis-à-vis a confluence of US and Asian teachers. Duncan learned boxing in Panama as a child, and his practice in judo at Lejeune gave him a solid foundation in throwing techniques as well as *ne waza* (the art of ground fighting). Duncan was small in stature and easily under six feet. Yet, with his quick movements, darting in and around his opponents as they tried to attack him, Duncan's demeanor commanded respect. Everything about him was martial, drawing on what could be defined as *budo seishin* (martial spirit).

While Duncan had been building a reputation as a master of ninjutsu, he was also pioneering a unique African American form of martial arts unsanctioned by the Japanese and Japanese American community, some of whom saw themselves as the gatekeepers of Japanese cultural practice. Duncan's performance angered some in the audience, most importantly the Hawaiian-born Japanese American promoter and organizer of the event, Mitoshi Uyehara, who was the founder and chief executive officer of *Black Belt.* Having founded the publication a decade earlier, Uyehara used the publication to present himself as an authority on martial arts both in the US and internationally. Aside from creating *Black Belt,* a periodical that also helped popularize Asian martial arts in America and helped propel the careers of individuals such as the revered Bruce Lee, Uyehara was also a practitioner of aikido.[3] While Uyehara had introduced Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to Bruce Lee, who was developing his own style of martial arts called *Jeet Kune Do* (way of the intercepting fist), Duncan's appearance in full ninjutsu regalia symbolizing his "way of the winds" school confounded Uyehara, who questioned the authenticity of a Black man demonstrating and claiming the knowledge of a Japanese cultural artefact.

Uyehara confronted Duncan after his performance, demanding to know how an African American acquired the knowledge he displayed that day. According to Duncan, "Mito says to me, 'Duncan, who taught you ninjustu? You're not Japanese. . . . Who taught you all of the weapons, the darts, the blowguns, and all of this?" Duncan refused to give up his sources, in part because the way of ninjustu is a secret knowledge. Duncan responded, "Who authorized you to ask me?" Enraged at Duncan's refusal to give up his source, Uyehara yelled, "You're nothing but bullshit! You're Mickey Mouse. You're not Japanese. What gives you the right to do this anyway?" Desperate to find out how a Black American had accessed what he considered to be Asian cultural property, Uyehara sought to bribe Duncan by giving him "carte blanche for ninjutsu" in *Black Belt* if Duncan complied.

While performing in exhibitions such as the ICMA afforded martial arts teachers the opportunity to reach local audiences and broaden markets, the circulation and proliferation of martial arts–dedicated media provided a global audience through which to secure a practitioner's position as a prominent teacher and entrepreneur. To be placed on the cover of a publication such as *Black Belt* was a legitimatization of skill and mastery within the martial arts world. It offered practitioners their street credibility and provided an international audience through which to promote their school and hence to secure their livelihood. But Duncan refused and as a result never appeared on the cover of the periodical or in its pages except for advertisements for his ninjutsu training videos. Through his performance and his refusal to give up his secrets to the most powerful martial arts authority in popular media, Duncan adhered to the "code of secrecy" that gave ninjutsu its foundation as well as its mysticism and, to an extent, criticism and skepticism. In so doing, Duncan also disrupted the notion that only Asian bodies, and in particular Asian men, were capable of such practices and were due deference by those who were not Asian.

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[3] The traditional Japanese martial art founded by Ueshiba Morihei at the beginning of the twentieth century. Like Ueshiba, who popularized his new martial art that he called aikido through *embukai* (public exhibitions), including a trip to Hawaii in 1961 that we can reasonably assume Uyehara attended, embukai also helped proselytize the martial arts across the country during the 1960s and well into the latter half of the twentieth century.

Duncan's practice of ninjutsu was representative of the way in which African American men practiced Asian martial arts beginning in the mid-twentieth century as a theater of Afro Asian performance that not only served to refigure their own subjectivity but also functioned as a contested form of racialized and gendered struggle, the remnants of which would impact theatrical and popular culture well into the twenty-first century. As I discussed in the preface, my experiences in the dojo in Cleveland and the martial art of aikido served as a form of rejuvenation for members of the community who were confronted with the social economic crisis of stagnation and blight of racism. While the conflict between Duncan and Uyehara at the ICMA in 1969 far preceded my encounter with Christopher Gray at the Cleveland Aikikai in the early '90s, both were emblematic of how the movements of aikido or ninjutsu provided a response to the stymying effects of what Cedric Robinson referred to as racial regimes.[4] From the cargo holds of slave ships, to the plantation, the US military occupation of Asia, to the prison cell of modern day mass incarceration, a core principle of racial oppression has been the confinement of bodies and social economic opportunity immobilization. The response has been to take on new forms of movement practices to create social economic mobility and opportunity. Soyica Diggs defines *Black movements* as "embodied actions (a change in position, place, posture, or orientation) that draw from the imagination and the past to advance political projects." We can think of these movements as varying pathways toward self-liberation such as the Underground Railroad, Black Power and Civil Rights movements, and the Black exodus out of the agricultural South to the industrial North that my grandmother took when she left West Helena, Arkansas, for Cleveland, Ohio. Contemporaneously, Duncan, who self-identified as African American, migrated from Panama to the continental US, and as I will discuss, Uyehara's life was informed by movement from ancestral Japan, to Hawaii, and to the US mainland.

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[4] Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theatre and Film Before World War II*, xii.

However, Black migration brought new possibilities of labor, style, and art such as blues, jazz, hip-hop, and of course martial arts. These movement practices provided a feeling of hope for marginalized people who were denied ownership of their identity and flesh, and reminded them that one's body could be claimed as their own.[5] Duncan and the Black martial artists like him changed their position and their posture, and engaged in a form of recuperative self-fashioning designed to repair the loss of "personhood," a la John Locke, and, in their eyes, manhood, by exercising control of their bodies and other bodies through martial arts. This was no easy matter, for these mid-twentieth century Black bodies were haunted by a heritage and practice of bodily death and dismemberment, lynching and castration, quite fresh in US collective memory.[6] Martial arts afforded an opportunity to (re)claim possession over one's body (and hence, representation), and develop a "repertoire, *style*" that exercised agency and challenged master narratives. As Stuart Hall noted, Black people "have used the body—as if it were, and it often was, the only cultural capital we had. We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation."[7] Black people achieved this new cultural capital through "mastery" of acts, gestures, and routines that were a part of Asian martial performative traditions, through what I refer to as "racial kinesthesia." The feeling of the invincible warrior is the body of imagination (a body of fantasy)—that becomes actualized through kinetics and corporeal discipline. The title of this book, *Black Dragon,* draws upon the auspicious and even untamable qualities of the dragon found in Asian mythology whose amorphous imagery proliferates throughout folklore and martial arts practice.

Racial Kinesthesia

While the term *kinesiology* may refer to the study of the anatomy, physiology, and mechanics of body movement as well as the evaluation and treatment

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[5] Colbert, *Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics,* 5.

[6] Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body,* 168. As Harvey Young notes in his discussion on the spectacle of lynching, there were "more than three thousand black men, women, and children who were lynched across the United States between 1880 and 1930," and it would not be an overstatement to say that tens of thousands more African Americans suffered extra judicial violence during the period of de jure Jim Crow or de facto racism that continues into the present.

[7] Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," 109.