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# DIGGING THE AFRICANIST PRESENCE IN AMERICAN PERFORMANCE

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Dance and Other Contexts

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## INTRODUCTION

My aim in this work is to reach underground and excavate the subtextual Africanist components, correspondences, influences—presences, if you will—that are essentials in defining and shaping Euro-American endeavor in the United States. I will examine these elements in concert dance forms, daily life, and popular performance arenas from minstrelsy to hip hop. Issues of power and agency, as framed by ongoing racialized disparity, enter the discussion. I utilize performance studies methodologies as my research tools: *namely, observation, documentation, and analysis of live and taped performance; oral interviews and conversations; and critique of scholarly and popular texts on dance and culture.* Chapters 1, 2, and 3 examine Africanist aesthetic principles, their manifestation in European American popular culture and lifestyles, and their function as one of the sources of modernism and postmodernism in the visual arts. Chapter 4 is a discussion of these resonances as an integral component in the undergirding foundations and assumptions of postmodern dance, with references to its predecessor, modern dance. In Chapter 5 I investigate the Africanist presence in George Balanchine's Americanization of ballet. Chapter 6 is a reexamination of minstrelsy—that old repository of skewed economic, psychological, and aesthetic relationships between blacks and whites. The final chapter focuses on the sociopolitical and cultural issues of power and empowerment that arise in the contemporary performance arena, on stage and in life, as ethnicities clash in acknowledgment or denial of their differences. Hip hop culture enters the discussion due to its central role in the contemporary discourse on hegemony and privilege.

The term "Africanist" is used by contemporary African American scholars such as Joseph Holloway and Toni Morrison (and, in an earlier

generation, by anthropologist Melville Herskovits).<sup>1</sup> I use it here to signify African and African American resonances and presences, trends, and phenomena. It indicates the African influence, past and present, and those forms and forces that arose as products of the African diaspora, including traditions and genres such as blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, and hip hop. It denotes the considerable impact of African and African American culture on modern arts and letters; the wealth of African-based American dance forms that proliferate from ballroom and nightclub floors to popular and concert stages; and, finally, the pervasive African-rooted presence in everyday American lifestyles—from walking, talking, hairdos, and food preparation to acting “hip.” In sum, the term denotes concepts and practices that exist in Africa and the African diaspora and have their sources in concepts or practices from Africa. In turn, “Europeanist” is used to denote concepts and practices in Europe and the Americas that have their tap roots in concepts and practices from Europe. Although these two massive cultural constellations—European and African—are fused and interwoven in many aspects, they also manifest distinct, discrete, and somewhat opposing characteristics and lend themselves to discussion as binary opposites, if not separate streams.

Some readers may find the language of the discourse that follows a little dense and layered. It is dictated by and reflects the complexity, convolutions, and dimensions of the area of study. I have tried to avoid misrepresentation and reduction of the subject matter. Instead, I hope that in mirroring its intricacy I have made it visible. As I write this work, I assume the dual roles of cultural critic and dance historian. Throughout, I turn an Africanist eye on American performance and serve as the conduit for bringing together theories from different disciplines, connecting and focusing them through my vision as the performance studies scholar-as-archeologist, digging—and “digging”—the Africanist presence in our culture. I am not the first to take up these issues. I see myself not as the creator of virgin theory but the instigator of a fresh spin on what is already out there—a patchwork quiltmaker in culture theory. Yet, some of my “takes” have been firsts, and at least one of them—the discourse on Africanisms in the work of George Balanchine—has subsequently been picked up in the work of other dance writers.

My background and preparation for this work began long before I became a writer. My intellectual and philosophical perspectives are rooted secondarily in the European tradition of my formal education but primarily in the Southern Baptist tradition, which has spawned generations of African Americans who pledge allegiance to “the life of the mind” and “the struggle for freedom” (West in hooks and West 1991, 30). Bernice Reagon says that there is sweetness in struggle, that being a fighting warrior artist is a way to safeguard one’s sanity (1992). I thank

her for naming our mission. As an African American raised in the borough of Manhattan (a longtime seat of Creolized culture), educated and employed in European American universities, and having performed with European American modern dance and experimental theater groups stateside and abroad, I live equally in black and white worlds, as do many African Americans. With a firm foundation in both (and an understanding of the historical intertextuality between them), I base my research and conclusions on theoretical investigation tempered and tested by years of practical experience.<sup>2</sup> I have written dance and theater reviews and scholarly articles for two decades; attended innumerable dance, music, theater, and visual arts events; presented my research at scholarly convocations and public lectures; and conducted interviews and held conversations with performers, students, scholars, and lay people. My approach is, if you will, a Creolized one, since “traditional scientific method can’t tell you where you ought to go, unless where you ought to go is a continuation of where you were going in the past” (Asante 1987, 114).<sup>3</sup>

The postmodern choreographer Trisha Brown states in the film “Beyond The Mainstream” (1980) that her work is “silky, daring, kineshetic,” sometimes “slipping off the air” and then returning to something safe and predictable. As an ex-performer balancing my act between modernism and postmodernism—and as an African American scholar who is also a scholar who is African American—I recognize a bit of Brown’s approach in my own choreography for the page, as I slip on or off risky ideas and return to metaphorically toe or stomp the line with a bare, black foot. . . .

## NOTES

1. See Morrison (1992) and Holloway (1990). Herskovits used the term in an earlier generation (1958) in the anthropological sense or, as Sterling Stuckey pointed out (correspondence, March, 1995), in a way that suggested “vestigial remains,” or “survivals”—a usage that “falls short of conveying a sense of process.” My usage is intended to designate the vitality and energy of a lively aesthetic that is characterized by the privileging of process or experience over product or thingness. Morrison uses the term “Africanist presence,” which I have adopted.

2. To be clear, the terms “African,” and “European”—and, for that matter, “Asian,” “Latino,” “Native American,” and “Oceanic”—are grand, generalized markers indicating many different cultures and representing a complex variety of aesthetic, social, political, and religious configurations. I cite European and African, knowing full well that Asian, Latino, Native American, and Oceanic must also be accounted for in the American equation but knowing also that the nitty-gritty chasm in the United States runs along the black-white fault line, with all peoples of color heretofore obliged to buy into one “side” or the other.

3. Quoting Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, New York: Bantam Books, 1972, 275.

## UP FROM UNDER: THE AFRICANIST PRESENCE

Although many other massive movements of peoples have occurred analogous to the confrontation of Europeans and Africans in the New World, no clear statement exists of the variables that operate in such situations. Instead, a casual, anecdotal approach has been taken in which the encounter is seen from the viewpoint of the politically or economically superordinate people as against the subordinate, with the assumption that such subordination leads to cultural as well as political and economic dominance. *No case undercuts this model of acculturation so clearly as that of Afro-American peoples, because many of the most basic features of plantation and modern New World life have been obviously influenced by Afro-American cultural practices.*

John F. Szwed and Roger D. Abrahams 1977, 65; emphasis added

In a modern dance film, "Dance: Four Pioneers," which is screened in college dance department classrooms across the nation, the narrator states that the contributions of Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Hanya Holm, and Martha Graham are felt in American dance from Broadway to the concert stage. Just as those venues are infused with the work of the "four pioneers," so also they are steeped in Africanist influences. As dance critic Deborah Jowitt wrote, "There are looks in the air that dancers absorb willy nilly—the common movement currency of our day, so much a part of the creative framework that they're taken for granted, especially by those born to them" (1987, 3). Jowitt was referring to imitators of Trisha Brown, a popular post-Merce Cunningham, post-modern choreographer, but her statement applies only too well to the subject at hand. The Africanist presence in American culture has shaped a New World legacy that sets American culture apart from that of Western Europe. It is a potent, vital force that plays a significant role in de-

fining the American aesthetic. At the same time, it has suffered from sins of commission and omission; it has been "invisibilized," to coin a new word. Racial segregation and discrimination are the culprits in the systematic denial and exploitation of this powerful influence. We even doubt that we should look at it, in the context of our everyday lives. For example, in the mid-1980s a student in a course I teach, "Black Performance from Africa to the Americas," came up to me at the end of the first session and asked, "Should I take this class—I mean, since I'm white?" I looked at her and said, "Honey, you're taking it right now; you've been taking it all your life!"

It is improbable that the question would be posed today, now that the buzzword "multiculturalism" is bandied about in classrooms and curriculum meetings nationwide. But, as we hover on the brink of a new century, how far have we advanced in our willingness to acknowledge, assess, respect, and embrace the contributions of African-based cultures that make America the particular experience that it is? The student who asked me that question is not unique. As Americans—African, Native American, European, Latino, Asian, Oceanic—we are all part of that course, alone or together, whether we signed up for it or not, whether we like it or not. Some of us don't know it. Some do, but deny it.

My purpose here is not to valorize Africanisms by comparing them with Europeanist phenomena, but to show that the latter are dependent upon the former, and that, overtly and subliminally, these invisibilized influences significantly shape European American experience. A school of contemporary scholars, taking their lead from anthropologist Melville Herskovits, have examined Africanisms in African American culture. (It was Herskovits who advised Katherine Dunham to combine her dancer-choreographer persona with her anthropologist-scholar side and research Africanisms in Caribbean dance forms. He gave similar inspiration to folklorist Roger Abrahams in encouraging him to seek out African retentions in urban Philadelphia speech patterns; see Abrahams 1991.) Their focus is the African/African American connection. My attempt here is to take the next logical step and investigate the African American/European American connection, utilizing an Africanist perspective as my guide.

Influences, presences, correspondences, correlatives, cross-pollinations, and borrowings are part of the history of humankind. Art historians and scholars are concerned with distinguishing among these concepts to ascertain the degree and category of penetration and exchange. They designate two generic categories of borrowing: direct influences and broader affinities. Both exemplify the structuralist-poststructuralist principle of intertextuality. This theory (developed and utilized by Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Derrida, and oth-

ers) can be summed up in a phrase that is reductive and rather pat, but bears repeating: All texts are intertexts. That is, forces, trends, languages, movements, modes—texts, in other words—of previous and contemporary societies influence us, live within and around us, and form the threads through which we weave our "new" patterns. They are the anonymous, unauthored codes of the culture. The first implication is that there really is nothing new under the sun, only variations on prior remnants, formulas, and patterns that are assimilated and reconfigured in the present moment. Our American culture, like every culture, is a panoply of quotations from a wide spectrum of past and present conditioning forces. Two additional implications ensue: First, the multitudinous sources, anonymous and unauthored, of any given set of texts are so thoroughly interwoven that their origins are difficult, if not impossible, to sort out. Second, the fusion process is unconscious and automatic, not dissimilar to Jowitt's "looks in the air."

Both perspectives—Jowitt's and the poststructuralist—acknowledge that there are forces that rub up against other forces, and that the process is largely subliminal. I agree, without losing sight of the fact that there are other cultural borrowings that are calculated and intentional. In terms of the Africanist aesthetic in American culture, I disagree with the origins part of the intertextual argument. Although we do not need to and cannot reduce the intertextuality of the African American/European American equation to a laundry list of sources and influences, we desperately need to cut through the convoluted web of racism that denies acknowledgment of the Africanist part of the whole. Jowitt detected "Trisha Brownisms" as a particular, intertextual thread in postmodern dance; similarly, I detect the Africanist as a particular, pervasive presence that touches almost every aspect of American life. The peculiar binary relationship between black and white cultures in the Americas, fused but also separated, demands a reconfiguration of the discourse on intertextuality. Separate strands are indeed identifiable, and that is what I hope to show. In fact, to discern Trisha Brownisms or Africanisms in American culture expands, rather than refutes, intertextuality. The impact of the Africanist presence has come up from under in the current or postmodern era, but it is really nothing new. These influences have existed in European American life and culture since Africans and Europeans together set foot on American shores. Plantation-era contacts between the two groups forged and shaped a unique, Creolized, Afro-Euro-American culture. Africanist characteristics frequently stand out on the cultural landscape as markedly different from traditional Europeanist attributes. More fitting for qualitative than quantitative analysis, Africanisms shape processes or the way that something is done, not simply the product or the fact that it is done. Concomitantly, a theory of Af-

ricanisms parallels a theory of intertextuality, which seeks to deal with the how or the process-phenomenon of the living text, rather than the text as product.

The African-European paradigm is the bottom line of American culture that greets and grounds every newly arrived immigrant, regardless of ethnicity and political, social, religious, or economic persuasion. (Native American presences and peoples are implied in this mix, but in a different degree, due to their specific history of enslavement and decimation. That is another story for another book.) Of course, American culture includes important, significant influences from many other cultures as well. But it is rooted in and defined by the pervasive cultural manifestations of peoples of (Central and West) African and European lineage. The cultural constructs of these broad but divergent groupings form the matrix, the scaffolding of American culture. Asian peoples from the many ethnicities represented by that continent and sub-continent are forced, gently or otherwise, to buy into this Afro-Euro polarity. As one writer said, people of color in America "spend too much energy understanding our lives in relation to whiteness" (Martinez 1994, 57). Every new wave of immigrants, be they from Europe or Asia, are automatic inheritors of both Africanisms and the anti-black racism that pervade American society and that are ineluctably assumed by newcomers in their process of Americanization. Similarly, every immigrant of African descent, regardless of ethnocultural background, is likely to be considered part of the black American underclass and is subject to racial segregation and discrimination solely on the basis of skin color. African immigrants are treated as African Americans for reasons of restriction, not in acknowledgment and celebration of the rich continuities that exist between African and African American traditions. Stories of the black business executive mowing his front lawn who is mistaken for the gardener, or the female African American party guest who is asked to bring another drink, are told every day, hundreds of times and in hundreds of variations. It may very well be true that "African Americans experience racism as such and that the suffering of other people of color results from national minority [status] rather than racial oppression" (paraphrased in Martinez 1994, 58).

The African presence in the New World has always posed questions for the dominant culture, not because it is a negligible quotient but precisely because of its potency. American society is permeated by Africanist attitudes, forms, and phenomena, from African agrarian practices, which were basic to the success of plantation agriculture, to such African American specifics as potato chips, peanut butter, revival meetings, and the Charleston. In spite of trivialization, concealment, or repression, cultural information is intertextual, not linear. Exchange and adaptation

are not a matter of jewels of wisdom from the dominant culture wafting down from places of power to enlighten the disenfranchized. Rather, cross-pollination is the closer model, and Creolization is the name of the game. But what is the game, and how is it played? The significant points are: What is the text? Who is doing the documentation? From whose perspective? By whose criteria? And what is being recorded? When the dominant culture oversees these processes, the results are almost predictable. If language is the exercise of power, and the act of naming is an act of empowerment, then what is not named, or mis-named, becomes an impotent backdrop for someone else's story. How else can one explain the focus of Hollywood films such as "Mississippi Burning," "Cry, Freedom," "Glory," or "Dances With Wolves?" In each case the thrust of the historical moment was skewed to highlight the dominant-culture male. The African or Native American perspective was represented as a byproduct of the white hero's coming of age. Historian Mary Helen Washington addressed this issue in a discussion about the television series, "I'll Fly Away," which is set in Mississippi at the beginning of the Civil Rights era and focuses on a European American family and their African American maid, Lily:

As strong and appealing as Lily is, I have continued to feel uneasy about the intent of this show, especially its focus on whites and its relegating black characters to the background. . . . Isn't it ironic that black people, who produced, directed, cast and starred in the original Civil Rights Movement, have become minor players in its dramatic reenactment? (Washington 1992, 35)

Displacement of ownership by the television and film industries is the tip of the iceberg, beneath whose cold waters lurk grosser magnitudes of denial.

Parallels exist in other cultural examples. A contemporary school of historical theory in France and Germany takes pains to exclude Jewish contributions from national memory in what stands as a signal example of how history is written and rewritten from the dominant perspective. In the eyes of contemporary historians Robert Faurisson and Michael Sturmer and philosopher Ernst Nolte, the Jewish Holocaust is either a fiction or an overblown historical footnote. Historian Pierre Nora omits the Dreyfus Affair, a key incident in modern French history, from his *lieux de mémoire*, a late 1980s nationally popular catalog of important events in French history.<sup>1</sup> Walter Rathenau, a German Jewish politician who was assassinated in the early 1920s, had this to say about growing up Jewish in pre-Nazi Germany: "Some time in the youth of every German Jew a moment comes when he realizes he is a second-class citizen" (quoted in Heilbut 1983, 10).

African Americans experience a similar feeling about growing up in the United States. It is extraordinary that the cultural legacy of these "second-class citizens," Jewish or African, exerted such a significant influence on the cultures of their oppressors. In South Africa oppression was so severe that the subjugated population was relegated to "homelands"—a witless irony in terminology—that were segregated from the dominant culture so as to invisibilize and marginalize this indigenous influence. For African and Jewish peoples these facts of history are our facts of life, and the memory of history is synonymous with the "memory of suffering."<sup>2</sup> Attempts to eradicate memory act as a roadblock to empowerment, perpetuate a language of silence, enforce a politics of denial, and reinforce past suffering into the present. Toni Morrison was right on the mark with her novel *Beloved*, which is all about this anguished historicity, and with her incisive comments in a magazine interview, "The Pain of Being Black," which poignantly discussed the permanence of American racism (Morrison 1989, 120-22). Unlike Germany after Hitler, the white American South was never humbled and brought to its knees for its institutionalized racism. On the contrary, black American suffering has been sugared over by the white American romance with the antebellum South, epitomized in works like *Gone With The Wind* and the idealization of the "Southern belle."<sup>3</sup> Slavery remains an unhealed and unacknowledged wound on the collective American body, and the black-white playing field remains uneven; in fact, it is a battleground.

It is interesting how Otherness defines itself in different times. Fifty or so years ago, blacks were expected to step off the sidewalk when crossing paths with whites. Now, it is often the case that white people cross over to the other side of the street when encountering young black men. The superiority syndrome thus shows its flip side of fear.

Were we to do justice to this fertile Africanist presence, we might begin with a reversal. What if we were to stand on our heads and assume that our American culture is African-rooted, so that the European elements could be regarded from an Africanist perspective? Revisionist thinking is basic to my investigation of American concert dance.<sup>4</sup> It is also the driving force behind dance anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku's signature essay, "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance" (1983, 24-33). The title implies an about-face. Feminist writer Jill Johnston suggests gender turnarounds as a way of unveiling the underlying sexual politics in performance (1991, 2). Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) examines the utter dependence of European American literature on the African American presence in order to define itself. Historian Eric Foner's Afrocentric perspective on the American Revolution reveals not a victory

for liberation and equality but an upheaval that engendered deteriorating conditions for African Americans and strengthened the institution of slavery (1990). Florida State University psychologist Naim Akbar offered the following example to explain the difference between an Afrocentric and a Eurocentric perspective: from a Eurocentric perspective, Europe is the Old World and America the New World; from an Afrocentric perspective, Africa is the Old World and Europe is the New World (1990). An Afrocentric perspective on the origins of Greek culture, known by scholars as the Ancient Model, considers the Egyptian and Semitic origins of ancient Greece; the Eurocentric, or Aryan, model minimized those influences in an effort to establish a "pure" Greece worthy to sire European culture (Bernal quoted in Morrison 1989, 7). These random examples show the multiplicity of revisionist approaches in contemporary historiography and cultural studies.

Reconceiving the traditional canon can also be described in visual terms. In sketch classes, students occasionally are assigned a reversal exercise that can stand as a metaphor for our scholarly reassessments. They must make a drawing that depicts only the negative spaces, the areas in and around the subject. The exercise shows, by the experiential process and its result, that subject-object and foreground-background are interdependent constructs. The dichotomy between subject and object blends into a dialogic relationship when seen from this amended perspective. Like photographers, scholars are beginning to see that the negative contains the positive, and the two are interrelated and inseparable. In our United States, European culture has assumed the role of the positive foreground, and Africanist culture is assigned the negative space, if any space at all. But, truth to tell, the two are conjugated, and the European heritage is no greater than the African influence in shaping American culture. As one writer stated, "looking for the roots of blues for a white [American] person is looking through your own roots" (Davis, quoted in Gonzales 1995, 25). Indeed, Americans black and white inherit the Africanist aesthetic.

By reexamining our perspective we can revise our understanding of performance values basic to each aesthetic approach. African-based cultural forms and practices in the Americas can be traced to Central and West African traditions and have signposts that differentiate them from European-based forms and practices. True, American culture is a fusion of African and European elements, but it is possible to tease apart some of the component strands and designate them as recognizably or predominantly African or European. Such an analysis is possible because European and African aesthetic principles differ markedly and occasionally represent opposing perspectives. For example, the diatonic scale of traditional European orchestral music is based upon a principle of me-

lodic and tonal resolution structured around seven basic notes. In contrast, African music is chromatic and polyphonic and, not unlike classical Indian music, characterized by microtonal shadings. Another example lies in African "dilemma" tales that illustrate a principle of contrariety, open endedness, or living with opposition, without the necessity of resolution or closure. These are stories that end with a question or call for a discussion, rather than a solution. They stand as a challenge to the linear concept of beginning-middle-end, or even the necessity of a happy ending. The Africanist aesthetic values repetition or, more precisely, repetition-as-intensification. To the Europeanist ear, the reprises may seem monotonous and superfluous; in the Africanist perspective each repeat is different than the one that went before, is shaped by the one that went before, and predicates the one that will follow. The repetition principle exemplifies the transcendent power of the Africanist worldview, for there is much repetition in traditional, quotidian African life: pounding grain, seeding ground, kneading bread, reaping the crop. In transferring repetition from the chores of daily life to the realm of creative expression, the Africanist aesthetic transforms the prosaic into the sublime and makes a spiritual and conceptual connection between the two. It is in the African-Asian-inflected postmodern era that repetition, in a Europeanist context, resonates as a value rather than a demerit.

In traditional European dance aesthetics, the torso must be held upright for correct, classic form; the erect spine is the center—the hierarchical ruler—from which all movement is generated. It functions as a single unit. The straight, uninflected torso indicates elegance or royalty and acts as the absolute monarch, dominating the dancing body. This vertically aligned spine is the first principle of Europeanist dance, with arm and leg movements emanating from it and returning to it. The ballet canon is organized around this center. In fact, this structural principle is a microcosm of the post-Renaissance, colonialist world view. Like the straight, centered spine of its dancing body, Europe posited itself as the center of the world, with everything else controlled and defined by it.

Africanist dance idioms show a democratic equality of body parts. The spine is just one of many possible movement centers; it rarely remains static. The Africanist dancing body is polycentric. One part of the body is played against another, and movements may simultaneously originate from more than one focal point (the head and the pelvis, for example). It is also polyrhythmic (different body parts moving to two or more rhythms simultaneously), and privileges flexible, bent-legged postures that reaffirm contact with the earth (sometimes called a "get-down" stance). The component and auxiliary parts of the torso—shoulders, chest, rib cage, waist, pelvis—can be independently moved or articulated in different directions (forward, backward, sideward, or in circles) and in

different rhythms. From an Africanist perspective, a pulled-up, aligned stance and static carriage indicate sterility and inflexibility, and the performer is encouraged to "dance with bended knees, lest you be taken for a corpse" (Thompson 1974, 9-10). In the classical Europeanist view, the movement exists to produce the (finished) work; in the Africanist view, the work exists to produce the movement. As assessed by Africanist aesthetic criteria, the Europeanist dancing body is rigid, aloof, cold, and one-dimensional. By Europeanist standards, the Africanist dancing body is vulgar, comic, uncontrolled, undisciplined, and, most of all, promiscuous. The presumption of promiscuity is allied with and leads directly to the sexually licentious stereotypes that the Europeanist perspective attributes to Africanist dance and, by extension, African peoples.

The origin of conflict here is the clash between Europeanist and Africanist views regarding the relationship of body/mind/spirit, and it merits some discussion. On the one hand, Africanist religions are geocentric (earth-centered) and based on the beneficence of polytheistic forces, or attributes, whose identifying characteristics represent particular facets of the human personality.<sup>5</sup> Deities make contact with humans when they are embodied by their followers in danced ceremonies.<sup>6</sup> Thus, dance and the dancing body are manifestations of the mind-spirit. On the other hand, Christian (particularly Protestant) thought separates mind-spirit from body; the body is regarded as the site of original sin and must be controlled in order for the spirit to be ascendant, or even for daily work to be accomplished efficiently. The Christian philosophy and its theocentric (God-centered) practice is predicated upon a paternalistic, monotheistic belief system (as the Native Americans characterized it, worship of the "great white father") wherein the deity does not physically enter the human body but resides above it in an ethereal, heavenly paradise. This separation and hierarchy is replicated in the separation of mind from body, with the former the master of the latter—just as the supreme deity is master of the human entity. Thus, those peoples whose traditions invite and celebrate embodied deities are in direct opposition to the Christian, particularly Protestant, ethic of body/mind/spirit separation. Specifically, black bodies become the target and screen upon which the dominant culture projects its collective fantasies—the ideals of a nation built on an ethic of somatic denial that designates African peoples as its hated or loved "primitives," the trope of its frustrations.<sup>7</sup>

These few examples, generalized as they are, will help lead us to the specifics of the Africanist aesthetic, its far-reaching presence and unacknowledged potency in American life. In spite of the politics of exclusion, Africanisms are inextricably dreadlocked into the weave of the American fabric and, like that hairdo, cannot be undone without cutting off both black and white strands at the root and diminishing the potential

quality of life for us all. Let us examine some important characteristics of the Africanist aesthetic as they are played out in performance.

## NOTES

1. See Kramer (1987). Alfred Dreyfus (1859–1935) was a Jewish captain in the French army who was framed, tried, and convicted as a traitor (1894) by military court martial in spite of his protests of innocence at a time when the French military was infused with anti-Semitism. Despite clear, new evidence that pointed to high-ranking French officers as the actual perpetrators (1898), a second court martial reindicted Dreyfus. He was finally exonerated by presidential pardon and a supreme court of appeals decision (1906). This extended affair attracted world attention, involved the protest of writer Émile Zola, and coalesced and empowered the French left wing.

2. For a discussion of “memory of suffering” in another context, see Welch (1985, 35–46).

3. Major issues that beg examination include the cult of the “Lost Cause,” largely the construct of white Southern women; the force of those racist white Northerners who disregarded the failures of Reconstruction and, equally, ignored the significant black contribution to the Union’s cause; and the oppositional icons of “mammy” and “belle.” All have evidenced an enduring national appeal. See Clinton (1995).

4. That is, ballet, modern, and postmodern dance, performed in concert halls, lofts, or alternative, experimental spaces and considered “dance as art” by the establishment’s connoisseurs of taste, as opposed to the popular entertainment and vernacular dances of the culture.

The terms “revise,” “revision,” and “revisionist” are used in their currently coined designations, as in “revising the canon,” and indicate reassessment, re-appraisal, or reevaluation of traditionally sanctioned viewpoints.

5. African religions have generally eluded Europeanist comprehension. The deities are not objects (trees, rocks), animals (snakes), or people (although people, as ancestors and heroes, may become deities). Instead, they are the attitudinal aspects or driving forces—the sub-inter-super-texts—that shape people, animals, or things. They are processes, not products. The error lies in attempts to define the Africanist through a Europeanist terminology and frame of reference.

6. I consciously use the term “embodied” rather than “possessed.” The process is learned and culturally conditioned and is characterized by heightened control and a deepened level of perception. The intelligent, quasi-omniscient spirit-force is embodied in the practitioner. The word “possession” designates an Africanist experience in Europeanist terminology. It is biased toward the European perspective, which could see only chaos and confusion in witnessing the powerful, rhythmic movement and physical transformation brought on by danced religions.

7. I use the word “trope” to mean a constellation of images and ideas that takes on a meaning and implication beyond its literal designation and carries the force of a cultural imperative.

## FIRST PREMISES OF AN AFRICANIST AESTHETIC

What are some of the signposts of the Africanist aesthetic, and how is it manifested in European American culture? In word, text, performing and visual arts, and everyday life, it is a standard that values process. How a thing is done—the movement of the action—is as important as getting it done, the static fact of the result or product. Even language (the written and, especially, the spoken word) is conceived as a mobile concept, a shaker and mover, with the power to effect change. Honoring this tradition, Paul Carter Harrison uses the Bantu term, *Nommo* (which can be roughly translated as “the power of the word”), for the title of his book on African American drama and its cathartic, catalyzing effect (1972). Words are verbal movement, and the gesture is a physical manifestation of *Nommo*.

Physical and verbal movement—thus, traditional West African gods are dancing deities in danced religions. Each one has its own chants, rhythms, gestures, and steps. These sacred principles were brought to the New World in Middle Passage<sup>1</sup> and through them African Americans changed the face, shape, and sound of Christianity. As Africanist scholar Sheila Walker has pointed out, the existence of these danced religions is an acknowledgment that the universe is a dynamic process-in-motion, not a static entity (1993).

Physical and verbal movement—according to sociolinguist Thomas Kochman, action words are positive-value indicators in the African American vocabulary (“swinging,” “dig,” “bopping,” “jamming,” and so on), while unfavorable words are likely to indicate passivity or immobility (“square,” “lame,” “stiff,” “a drag,” “hung up,” “put down,” “strung out,” “busted,” and so on) (1972, 160–69). These words and phrases are fat with irony, multiple meanings, and innuendo, three interrelated at-

tributes of the Africanist aesthetic that have been worked, reworked, and brought into high relief because of the need of diasporan African peoples to simultaneously conceal and reveal, disguise and display themselves in alien, if not hostile, New World environments.

Similarly, in Africanist visual arts, motion concepts are privileged to such a degree that art historian and Africanist Robert Farris Thompson can justifiably speak of "African art in motion." In his book of the same title he identified a constellation of essential attributes in West African aesthetics that he termed "canons of fine form" (1974, 5-45). Due to geographical and chronological continuities and retentions, these characteristics persist, even in diasporan Africanist cultures. Middle Passage and subsequent wrenching experiences of the African diaspora stripped African peoples of their societal organization, but not of their cultural systems.<sup>1</sup> They were desocietized but not decultured, to borrow the terminology of folklorists John Szwed and Roger Abrahams (1977, 66). The overriding principle of Thompson's canons is that of balance, coolness, or "the aesthetic of the cool." It is "an all-embracing, positive attribute which combines notions of composure, silence, vitality, healing and social purification" (1974, 43).

A good way to understand the Africanist aesthetic is to isolate specific aspects of that principle for the purposes of discussion, apply them to a specific Africanist example, and discuss that example in light of the Europeanist aesthetic. Thompson, Susan Vogel and Kariamu Welsh Asante, among others, have investigated the Africanist aesthetic and described its primary characteristics.<sup>2</sup> Borrowing from these sources, I have designated five Africanist elements that occur in many forms of European American concert dance, including ballet. It is important to note that these traits work together and are separated and categorized only for the sake of discussion. They indicate processes, tendencies, and attitudes; they are "intratextual," so to speak, and do not appear as separate entities in practice. To show their interactive nature, I use the dance routine of Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker to illustrate each attribute. An African American novelty dancer who attained enormous popularity in the Swing Era of the 1920s and 1930s, Tucker's cabaret routine clearly demonstrates Africanist principles, as described in Marshall and Jean Stearns' book, *Jazz Dance* (1979, 236-38). Other Africanist dances could have served as my example, for they share subtextual characteristics with Tucker's dance, even though their form and function may differ considerably.

Ballet, the academic dance form of Europe, offers the most dramatic contrast to Africanist dance aesthetics. It has been regarded as the repository of European values and is characterized by aesthetician Rayner Heppenstall as a reflection of "what is thought most significant in the

culture of the West. . . one epitome of the total history of the West" (quoted in Cohen 1982, 131). For these reasons, I use ballet as the quintessential European referent in elucidating the five principles that follow.

### EMBRACING THE CONFLICT

In a broad sense, the Africanist aesthetic can be understood as a precept of contrariety, or an encounter of opposites. The conflict inherent in and implied by difference, discord, and irregularity is encompassed, rather than erased or necessarily resolved. That this principle is basic to the Africanist world view is manifested in the importance of the crossroads as a symbol in Africanist cultures worldwide. The crossroads is the locus of the "coincidence of opposites" (Deren 1991, 100n). Thus, Africanist art forms deal in paradox as a matter of course, with irony following close behind. Contrariety is expressed in African dilemma tales, in music or vocal work that sounds cacophonous or grating to the untrained ear, and in dance that seems unsophisticated to eyes schooled in a different aesthetic. This principle is reflected in the others and they, in turn, are reflected in it. Embracing the conflict is embedded in the final principle, the aesthetic of the cool, since coolness results from the juxtaposition of detachment with intensity. Both precepts—and all the other aesthetic principles—are manifested as simultaneously ludic and tragic (frequently even self-mockingly so, as in the blues), in an attitude and style that is uncharacteristic of Europeanist endeavor. These opposites would be difficult to pair and to leave unresolved in European academic aesthetics, but there is room for their encounter in Africanist aesthetics, "academic" or otherwise. A routine performed by Tucker in Harlem nightclubs such as Connie's Inn and the Cotton Club demonstrates this concept:

Tucker had at the same time a disengaged and a menacing air, like a sleeping volcano. . . .

When Snake Hips slithered on stage, the audience quieted down immediately. Nobody snickered at him, in spite of the mounting tension, no matter how nervous or embarrassed one might be. The glaring eyes burning in the pock-marked face looked directly at and through the audience, with dreamy and impartial hostility. Snake Hips seemed to be coiled, ready to strike.

Tucker's act usually consisted of five parts. He came slipping on with a sliding, forward step and just a hint of hip movement. The combination was part of a routine known in Harlem as Spanking the Baby, and in a strange but logical fashion, established the theme of his dance. Using shock tactics, he then went directly into the basic Snake Hips movements, which he paced superbly, starting out innocently enough, with one knee crossing over behind the other, while the toe of one foot touched the arch of the other. At first, it looked simultaneously pigeon-toed and knock-kneed. (Stearns and Stearns 1979, 236)

The conflicts are paired opposites: awkward and smooth, detached and threatening, innocent and seductive. Perhaps the most significant conflict resides in the routine's deep subtext, in the ironic playing out of power postures by the otherwise disenfranchised black, male (dancing) body.

### POLYCENTRISM/POLYRHYTHM

From the Africanist standpoint, movement may emanate from any part of the body, and two or more centers may operate simultaneously. Polycentrism runs counter to academic European aesthetics, where the ideal is to initiate movement from one locus—the nobly lifted, upper center of the aligned torso, well above the pelvis. Africanist movement is also polyrhythmic. For example, the feet may maintain one rhythm while the arms, head, or torso dance to different drums. This democracy of body parts stands in sharp contrast to the erect body dictated by the straight, centered spine. Again, we turn to "Snake Hips" in *Jazz Dance*:

The fact that the pelvis and the whole torso were becoming increasingly involved in the movement was unavoidably clear. As he progressed, Tucker's footwork became flatter, rooted more firmly to the floor, while his hips described wider and wider circles, until he seemed to be throwing his hips alternately out of joint to the melodic accents of the music. (236)

From a "get-down" posture that centers the movement in the legs and feet, Tucker adds the pelvis as another center, illustrating polycentrism. On top of the crossover step, described above, he interpolates a pelvic rhythm, exemplifying the simplest level of polyrhythm. To repeat, these are interactive principles. Embracing contrasted rhythms, coupled with a shifting center, demonstrate the next characteristic, high-affect juxtaposition.

### HIGH-AFFECT JUXTAPOSITION

Mood, attitude, or movement breaks that omit the transitions and connective links valued in the European academic aesthetic are the keynote of this principle. For example, a driving mood may overlap and coexist with a light and humorous tone, or imitative and abstract movements may be juxtaposed. The result may be surprise, irony, comedy, innuendo, double entendre, and, finally, exhilaration. All traditions use contrast in the arts, but Africanist high-affect juxtaposition is heightened beyond the contrast that is within the range of accepted standards in the Europeanist academic canon. In those terms, Africanist contrasts may be considered naive and extreme, poorly paced, flashy and loud, lowly and

ludicrous, or just plain bad taste. On the one hand, I recall the complaint by the young Anatole Broyard (1950, 56) about the "inauthenticity" of a black jazz singer who moved without transition from singing the ballad "Strange Fruit" to crooning a love song: "A moment ago a lynching, and now a supplication to his 'baby,'—all in the same universe of discourse, all in a day's work. *A real American juxtaposition*" (emphasis added). Indeed, it is a real African American juxtaposition, and one that Broyard found rather disturbing. On the other hand, dance writer and enthusiast Arnold Haskell saw beyond the Europeanist aesthetic and gave an Africanist-based reading to these juxtapositions when he wrote, in the 1920s, that African Americans "blend the impossible and create beauty" (1977, 204). "Snake Hips" demonstrates this principle, in part, through his choice of costume, a sequined girdle supporting a seductive tassel:

Then followed a pantomime to a Charleston rhythm: Tucker clapped four times and waved twice with each hand in turn, holding the elbow of the waving hand and rocking slightly with the beat. The over-all effect was suddenly childish, effeminate, and perhaps tongue-in-cheek. The next movement was known among dancers as the Belly Roll, and consisted of a series of waves rolling from pelvis to chest—a standard part of a Shake dancer's routine, which Tucker varied by coming to a stop, transfixing the audience with a baleful, hypnotic stare, and twirling his long tassel in time with the music. (236-7)

Tucker shifts unpredictably from childish and effeminate to challenging and "macho" movements, disregarding Europeanist standards for consistency in characterization. In addition, with no preparation or transition, he changes from light, almost cheerleader-like hand and arm gestures to weighted, sensual undulations centered in the lower torso. A third high-affect juxtaposition occurs with the "break," described above. Tucker cuts off the movement in the middle of a Belly Roll, comes to a break, or full stop, and shifts the mood and rhythm of his intricately structured routine.

### EPHEBISM

Emanating from the ancient Greek word for youth (*ephebe*), this principle encompasses attributes such as power, vitality, flexibility, drive, and attack. Attack implies speed, sharpness, and force. Intensity is also a characteristic of ephedism, but it is a kinesthetic intensity that recognizes feeling as sensation, rather than emotion. Thompson (1974, 7) describes it as "the phrasing of every note and step with consummate vitality," with response to rhythm and a sense of swing as inherent attributes. The torso is flexible and articulate: "The concept of vital aliveness leads to the interpretation of the parts of the body as independent

instruments of percussive force" (9). Old people dancing with youthful vitality are valued examples of ephebism in Africanist cultures. Moving with suppleness and flexibility is more important than maintaining torso alignment. Rhythmic speed, sharpness (as in sudden or abrupt changes in dynamics), force, and attack, meanwhile, are comparatively muted concepts in the classical European ballet tradition and are dictated and circumscribed by the requisites of the ballet form. Conversely, Africanist ephebic energy takes lead and primacy over form. (Choreographer George Balanchine's Americanization of ballet offers an Afro-Euro-American sense of speed and timing that sets it apart from traditional European ballet.) The percussive force of independent body parts, with rhythm as a principal value, is not part of the European ballet aesthetic:

Tucker raised his right arm to his eyes, at first as if embarrassed (a feeling that many in the audience shared), and then, as if racked with sobs, he went into the Tremble, which shook him savagely and rapidly from head to foot. As he turned his back to the audience to display the overall trembling more effectively, Tucker looked like a murderously naughty boy. (237)

Tucker's Tremble is an excellent example of ephebism. This movement articulates the separated segments of the torso, one against the other, in a broken yet continuous movement sequence. It can only be accomplished with a totally flexible torso which will allow the tremor-like reverberations to ripple non-stop through the body. The movement is also percussive, forceful, and intense in its attack. It racks his body. An additional fillip of ephebism is demonstrated in Tucker's "naughty boy" self-presentation.

### THE AESTHETIC OF THE COOL

As Thompson so eloquently explains, this characteristic is all-embracing. It lives in the other concepts, and they reside in it. It is an attitude (in the sense that African Americans use that word) that combines composure with vitality. Its prime components are aesthetic visibility and lucidity (dancing the movements with clarity, presenting the self with clarity), and luminosity, or brilliance. The picture is completed by facial composure, the actualized "mask of the cool." "The cool" contains all of the other principles. It is seen in the asymmetrical walk of African American males, which shows an attitude of carelessness cultivated with a calculated aesthetic clarity. It resides in the disinterested (in the philosophical sense, as opposed to uninterested), detached, mask-like face of the drummer or dancer whose body and energy may be working fast, hard, and hot, but whose face remains cool. Conversely, it may also be expressed as a brilliant smile, a laugh, a grimace, a verbal expression

that seems to come out of nowhere to break, intercept, or punctuate the established mood by momentarily displaying its opposite and, thus, mediating a balance. It is through such oppositions, asymmetries, and radical juxtapositions that the cool aesthetic manifests luminosity or brilliance. From them emanate an Africanist understanding and interpretation of concepts such as line and form. The aloofness, *sangfroid*, and detachment of some styles of European academic dance are one kind of cool, but they represent a completely different principle from the Africanist cool. The European attitude suggests centeredness, control, linearity, directness; the Africanist mode suggests asymmetricality (that plays with falling off center), looseness (implying flexibility and vitality), and indirectness of approach. "Hot," its opposite, is the indispensable complement of the Africanist cool. Hot illuminates cool; cool illuminates hot. It is in the embracing of these opposites, in being and playing the paradoxes, from inside-out and outside-in, and in their high-affect juxtaposition that the aesthetic of the cool exists. This precept, the essence of all of the other principles, can be characterized as "soul force," which Gay and Baber describe as "energy, . . . fiber, . . . spirit and flair" (1987, 11). As Lerone Bennett stated in speaking of the concept of "soul," so also can it be said about the cool: "It is, above all, of the *spirit* rather than the letter" (quoted in Gay and Baber, 11).

Throughout Tucker's routine he strikes a balance between the sexual heat implied in his pelvic movements and the cool (or "disengaged" yet "menacing") attitude of his face. The sinister and the seductive are also juggled and balanced. Luminosity and brilliance come through in his direct relationship to the audience and the choreography, and visibility is demonstrated in the fact that he dances not as a character but presents heightened aspects of himself. He manipulates the interface between character and self and is the watcher as well as the watched, playing at seduction while also seducing, all the while shading his routine with innuendo. (This presentation of self as character is a forerunner of and intertextual model for the self-reflexive performance theater of our own postmodern era.) These are valued traits in the Africanist aesthetic landscape and, in their interactive totality, manifest the cool.

The Africanist aesthetic goes beyond Europeanist thinking about form and content. It has had a profound influence on postmodernism because of its ability to communicate in the subjunctive (rather than the indicative or declarative) mood and, thus, to privilege process over product—the doing, not the done, or, as performance theorist Richard Schechner states, *getting there*, rather than *getting there* (1973, 131). Schechner's examination of postmodern performance (1982, 95-106) suggests the following contrastive look at Europeanist and Africanist traditions as paired opposites: linear focus against a multiplicity of signals;

narrative form against self-referential clusters of information; upward progression (toward resolution) against circularity (including repetition); cause-effect against continua; and, finally, product against process. Experimental theater and postmodern dance constructed their identities around a return to the subjunctive, the experiential-experimental mode, in contrast to the Europeanist post-Renaissance, "high" art perspective that privileges product (the dance) over process (dancing). An interesting anecdote highlights the difference:

"Revelations" [Alvin Ailey's most famous choreography] has never been notated or copyrighted. Its survival and its aesthetic integrity are entirely a matter of the oral tradition linking the generations of dancers who have performed it. Only one other company—a small group in Mexico—has ever been given permission to stage the work. By way of explanation, Dudley Williams, an Ailey dancer since 1964, said, "It's very personal to us. Why would you want to do it?" The costume designer, Ves Harper, said, "'Revelations' was the result of a kind of intellectual process which produced a behavior pattern that was not necessarily intellectual." He added, "I'm not sure that it can be taught. It has to be lived." (n.a., *New Yorker* 1992, 5)

In an era when the American concert dance world is obsessed with documentation, preservation, and reconstruction of American modern dance "classics," this statement stands out like a voice from another planet. It is, actually, a highly informed voice from another aesthetic, a descendent of the same process-oriented perspective that created homes out of mud and water and paintings in the sand. "Revelations" is a wonderful example of fusion between Africanist and Europeanist movement vocabularies and was made to be performed on proscenium concert stages. One could counter that the Europeanist-inflected conventions inherent in the dance make it an excellent candidate for notation. However, the intent and attitude (that of a "lived experience," so to speak) expressed in the *New Yorker* extract oblige us to regard and value equally the Africanist roots of the work—a necessity if its integrity is to be maintained.

In a 1979 Sunday *New York Times* feature article, George Balanchine, the Americanizer of ballet, stated something about reviving dances that is in a slightly different vein but nevertheless complements the Ailey company statements:

I want to make new ballets. I'm not interested in reviving my works. If you made a borscht, you'd use fresh ingredients. If you were asked to write a book twice, you'd use new words. People say, what about posterity? What do you preserve, I ask? A tape? What counts is now. . . . Choreography is like cooking or gardening, not like painting, because painting stays. Dancing disintegrates, like a garden. It's life. I'm connected to what is part of life. (Hodgson 1979, D17)

A similar processual aesthetic informs postmodern performance. Where does it come from? Well, how long have Africans and Europeans influenced one another on American soil? Richard Schechner, a European American, has said that he feels more kinship to the African American August Wilson's play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, than to Victorian European Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*—that is, more of a brotherhood, in mindset and lifestyle, with aspects of his African-American-inflected present than with aspects of his European-rooted past (1992).

According to Cornel West:

And the fact that when you look closely at jazz, or the blues, for example, we see a sense of the tragic, a profound sense of the tragic linked to human agency. So that it does not wallow in a cynicism or a paralyzing pessimism, but it also is realistic enough not to project excessive utopia. It's a matter of responding in an improvisational, undogmatic, creative way to circumstances, in such a way that people still survive and thrive. This is a great tradition intellectually, in fact, it has had tremendous impact on the way in which Americans as a whole respond to the human condition, respond to their circumstances. (hooks and West 1991, 34)

This talent for balancing the ludic and the tragic (which was placed in high relief during the era of blackface minstrelsy, and will be discussed in Chapter 6) will be modified and finessed by European Americans to fit their aesthetic needs as they utilize the Africanist aesthetic in forms ranging from American ballet to mainstream pop music. No longer can we afford to address European and Asian sources of modern and postmodern performance without also acknowledging this forceful, substantial Africanist presence.

These five premises will serve as the orientation and reference point for discussion in the chapters that follow.

## NOTES

1. The term, Middle Passage, formally denotes the longest part of the Atlantic Ocean journey traveled by slave ships and their human cargo. In current usage, it means the journey traveled by Africans from freedom to slavery.
2. See Thompson (1974); Vogel (1986); and Welsh Asante (1986). For a more general discussion of Africanisms in America, see also Gay and Baber (1987); and Pasteur and Toldson (1982).