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Black Dance and Dancers and the White Public: A Prolegomenon to Problems of Definition

Brenda Dixon

What conflicts arise when Black dance forms become public domain? Must the Black roots of a particular dance be reaffirmed publicly, even after that dance has become popular in the White world? What is the responsibility of the White or Black researcher, critic, or educator whose subject is Black dance? Must the Black choreographer make aesthetic/artistic adjustments when choreographing works targeted for White, rather than Black, audiences?

These questions form the opening paragraph of a report I authored, that appeared in the Fall 1984 issue of the *Dance Research Journal*, in which I attempted to summarize the issues raised at a one-day event Sally Banes, Julinda Lewis, and I organized on November 5, 1983, entitled "You've Taken My Blues and Gone: A Seminar on Black Dance in White America." Sponsored by the Dance Critics Association, the event took place at the Dance Theater Workshop/Bessie Schoenberg Theater in New York. I concluded the report by stating that further airing of the issues was necessary, and I here offer some thoughts, conclusions, and suggestions arrived at in the intervening years. My aim is to promote continuing dialogue, needed definitions, and heightened awareness in this area. I use the examples of choreographers Alvin Ailey and Arthur Mitchell to make observations regarding ways in

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which the White public might approach the work of Black choreographers and to illustrate the difficulties inherent in defining Black dance.

Among the reasons to address Black dance is that the phenomenon has not been defined. Clearly, we can address Black performance in traditional African and African-based, new-world forms, such as the danced religious ceremonies associated with Vodun, Santeria, and Macumba. However, the situation in the United States, in particular, and in concert dance, in general, is different. In using Black forms to create concert dance, we face a multi-layered example of syncretism. In using Black dancers to perform in White concert programs, we face the American cultural reflex of seeing Blacks as outsiders in any White context. Add to this the ever present and shifting influences of Black-on-White-on-Black in American society—a basic, although often unacknowledged factor—and the problem of defining Black dance becomes apparent.

I do not believe that Alvin Ailey and Arthur Mitchell regard their choreography as Black dance. Black influences are one of the many influences in their works. However, both the Dance Theater of Harlem (DTH) and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) are considered Black dance companies by the White public. This is not only because the majority of performers in both groups are Black but also because, in general terms, the White public considers that, *regardless of style, Black dance is what Black dancers do*. This point of view is one major source of friction between Black dancers/choreographers and the White public, and it is double-edged.

First, it means that the Ailey troupe and the DTH are relegated to a separate status that classifies them as different, somehow, from the New York City Ballet (NYCB), the Paul Taylor and Twyla Tharp companies, and other White companies, regardless of dance style. Commenting on the DTH in 1980, Arlene Croce observed that “subdivision is one way of holding on to the exclusivity of an art form, but amateurish distinctions can interest no one for long.” However, she went on to argue that “the Dance Theater of Harlem quite naturally occupies a category of its own: else there would be no reason for it to exist.” It is, she feels, “visibly evident” that “black classicists are classicists with a difference.” However,

. . . because the style [ballet] both isolates and neutralizes their color it's as if they'd shuffled their cards of identity. Either they're not exotic enough for some people or they're too exotic—the difference amounts to inadmissible deviation. Well, classical norms are set by classical dancers,

not their critics. The D.T.H. norm is there to be seen. The trouble is, not enough people are going to see it. (78)

I quote Croce at length in order to avoid misrepresenting her point of view. Although the entire article begs analysis, what is interesting in this portion is that, after ridiculing subdivisions, Croce places the DTH in what she perceives as a justifiable subdivision—namely, that of Black classicism. Despite the company's unquestionable mastery of European-based ballet, she would have us believe that it performs in a Black dance style.

America has learned that separate is, inherently, unequal. No dancer or choreographer wants a separate category created for his or her work.

Secondly, most Black dancers in otherwise all-White companies are perceived of and treated as "different." (This is not always the case, Carolyn Adams's years as a Paul Taylor dancer being one of the most refreshing exceptions.) I think of the extraordinarily gifted Mel Tomlinson, underused at NYCB, initially dancing the roles to which his mentor, Arthur Mitchell, had been circumscribed over two decades earlier in the same company. And I cite my experience as a young modern dancer: After auditioning for a major modern dance choreographer, I was told that I could not be used because my skin color would "destroy the unity of the [all-White] corps" in a dance which had no racial or social connotations. In the popular dance arena, this is the reason that Blacks were excluded from the Rockettes, even though a range of both skin and hair colors were represented among the white "hoofers" of that group.

Thus, although Black dance remains undefined, Black dancers are defined and delimited by the White consensus that Black dance and Black dancers are synonymous. Published statements by choreographers ranging from Mitchell to Rod Rodgers indicate that these people see themselves as *artists who happen to be Black, rather than Black artists*. Printed statements by White reviewers—and not only Croce—suggest that the White viewpoint is the reverse. This seemingly subtle distinction has created unfortunate pigeonholing and stereotyping of the work of Blacks in dance.

In returning to the issue of defining Black dance, another point of contention arises in the area of public domain. Black dance, music, language, and lifestyles have become general means of expression in American popular culture. American culture is syncretistic, with many cultural strains as part of this fusion, but undeniably the two main strains are Black (rooted in West African traditions) and White (rooted in Western European traditions). Tap

dance, jazz dance, and disco (or, formerly, ballroom) social dances are examples of the Black/White American fusion. All of these styles have passed, in greater or lesser degree, to the concert stage. Pearl Primus has repeatedly made a plea that, despite the difficulties such a task would entail, dance researchers should work to document, define, and analyze Black dance and the Black-rooted parts of American dance. There are reasons beyond the scholarly for promoting such understanding. Due to the persistence of racial oppression socially, politically, and economically in the United States, the issue of definition becomes a crucial matter of identity and legal rights. Historically, rather than reaping benefits from the public domain, Blacks have been shortchanged both financially and in the area of public recognition for their contributions to mainstream American culture.

Ironically, one of the reasons that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's contribution is belittled is that the AAADT is so popular. A vocabulary of Ailey signature movements has, in two decades, become public domain. (This is true also of West African dance forms which, for years, have been taught in dance studios as a motley, derivative, and bastardized new form, often termed "primitive" or "Afro" dance.) White and Black dancers alike have appropriated Black elements of Ailey's fusion style, both in patent and subliminal ways. The double irony is that Ailey's choreography is itself a fusion of Black forms, modern dance, and ballet. (This tradition dates back to the beginnings of concert dance by Black choreographers. Katherine Dunham's pioneering fusion of Caribbean forms with concert forms was the original model.) Only certain parts of certain Ailey works may be appropriately classified as Black dance.

Different circumstances shaped tap dance, which is a fusion of Black modes, English clog, and Irish jig. But the elements which justify its being classified as a Black dance form are its characteristics of syncopation, polyrhythm, and improvisation, and the fact that the form evolved to what it is today, and was in its heyday, through decades of development by Black artists in segregated Black communities.

Any serious attempt to *study* Black dance demands a study of African and new-world Black cultures. Any attempt to *evaluate* Black dance—or the Black dance elements in fused forms—on the concert stage demands that the phenomena to be evaluated be examined in the context of their Black origins as well as in the context of a White, Western frame of reference. There are many fine works on African and new-world, African-based cultures which

can give the researcher or the layperson an appropriate frame of reference. I recommend the work of authors such as Harold Courlander, Melville Herskovits, Joanne Kealiinohomoku, Judith Lynne Hanna, Drid Williams, Robert Farris Thompson, Vévé Clark, Karen Kramer, Maya Deren, Katherine Dunham, Judith Gleason, John Szwed, Robert Abrams, Errol Hill, Marshall Stearns, Janheinz Jahn, Katrina Hazzard Gordon, Zora Neale Hurston, Gregory Tate, and Amiri Baraka. Many of the scholars of Black aesthetics are White, but, to paraphrase James Hatch, it is a strength for a cultural group to have spheres of interest and power among positive forces in other cultures, and a reinforcement of the group's prospects for survival and cultural continuity.

For example, in terms of evaluating the many dances choreographed by Ailey, Rodgers, and other Black choreographers to vocalized Black ballads, it would be a contextual error to base an evaluation of the choreography on the modern dance principles articulated by Louis Horst. The roots of this genre of Black dance, epitomized by a work such as Ailey's "Love Songs," a solo song cycle created for dancer Dudley Williams in 1972, lie in a Black tradition of song-as-survival, here applied to choreography.

To understand this aesthetic requires some research into Black music and culture, since little has been said about its permutations in Black-inspired dance forms. For decades, jazz musicians have used the Scottish-based ballad form as a prime vehicle for creative expression, ranging from the direct, upbeat versions by swing-era big bands, through complex inversions by the likes of Charlie Parker, to the third-stream, Miles Davis-influenced renditions of later decades and the jazz-pop-fusion pyrotechnics of contemporary musicians such as Keith Jarrett and Al Jarreau. Contemporary music critics, including Stephen Holden and Gregory Tate, have addressed the Black ballad form. According to Holden, it "equates erotic love with divine insight" (23). According to Tate, it represents "the transference of religious rapture onto songs of romance, bespeaking an unshakable faith in the black pop lovesong as a form of salvation" (75, 78).

It behooves the White critic, educator, or researcher in dance, then, to be aware of this tradition and to recognize its legacy in Black ballad dances, reflecting particular Black aesthetic/cultural principles, rather than principles from another cultural context.

Another example of a possible contextual misconception is the printed opinion of some White critics that the Ailey approach to making dances is dense and overchoreographed. Here, too, I recommend a culture-specific look at the choreography in his Black-

inspired works in terms of the African-based, Black aesthetic. Although Ailey's work can be considered a syncretistic fusion of Black styles, jazz dance (already a fusion), modern dance, and ballet, some of his works, such as "Phases" (1980), seem to be highly *informed* by a Black aesthetic. This dance genre is based on clusters of movement by the equivalent of polyrhythms, call-and-response, and multiple meter, which are signatures of African-based music. A person knowledgeable about these features of Black performance, is unlikely to evaluate/perceive a Black-inspired Ailey work as a weak exercise in choreographic principles from another frame of reference. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to compare the density of such a dance with the density synesthetically described by Robert Farris Thompson in his comparisons of the counterpointed, percussive composition of African fabric to similar structure in Black performance modes.

It would appear that the reason for Ailey's remaining one of the least appreciated yet most deserving of American choreographers has to do with the misappropriation of critical frames of reference as well as the great popularity—or public domain—of his works. Anna Kisselgoff is one of the few White American critics who perceives Ailey's work to have major significance: "In his own brand of third-stream idiom, Mr. Ailey has made a little noticed but genuine contribution toward the extension of the dance vocabulary" (18).

At the November 1983 DCA seminar on Black dance, Madeleine Gutman observed that

what we, as critics, are trying to do is to find a multilingual perception in looking at dance, based on the fact that dance is not one language, but many languages. As an example, I still look at African art through the eyes of Picasso, because that is the way I was brought up; it's a problem for me. *It means that I am always "translating," in this regard. I'm seeing it from a distance, with a Western, selected gathering of certain attitudes.* (Emphasis added)

Pauline Tish confessed that, after attending the Black Dance America Conference and Symposium at BAM, she realized that

a lot of people, including myself, had not really looked at Black dance as if it were "up there" and for us to really see. *I don't think people really see it the way they see other things that they're more accustomed to. And my reaction to that was after the conference I looked at things very differently, and I was seeing minimal structure in the pieces Charles Moore did outdoors there in Brooklyn. . . . I don't think people notice [things like] that [in Black dance].* (Emphasis added)

Craig Bromberg made a valuable contribution by suggesting that one should "not . . . think of any kind of aesthetic as an ideal that is transcendent of history."

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez remarked that "Europeans and North Americans, obsessed by the contemplation of their own culture, insist on interpreting Latin America with the same measure." And he expressed a concern that "the interpretation of our reality within foreign schemas will only make us still more unknown, still less free, and still more isolated." In a shrinking, global world community we cannot afford the luxury of ethnocentrism. If need be, we must metaphorically walk across hot coals to loosen, in the words of Adam Smith, "the invisible limitations placed on us by our assumptions" (12).

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