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### Re/making “beauty”

*Thomas F. DeFrantz*

What are the terms of “beauty” as an action that may be achieved in dance? How do African-American artists approach the performance of “beauty?” In a preliminary consideration of these questions, this paper offers a case-study analysis of two works by choreographer Donald Byrd: *The Harlem Nutcracker* (1996), a revision of the Petipa–Ivanov ballet set to Duke Ellington’s swing adaptation of Tchaikovsky’s score, and *Life Situations: Daydreams on Giselle* (1995), a postmodern version of the quint-essential Romantic ballet. Working through prisms of feminist and Africanist aesthetic theory, I suggest strategies to critique identity formation within dance performance as a function of aggressive irony, inversion, and the triumph of technical precision. Byrd’s choreography constructs “beauty” as a function of black Atlantic<sup>1</sup> performance practice, as an act that may be socially progressive in its intentions, and an action that may hold material consequences for its performers and audiences.

Certainly “beauty” may be considered a constituent element of ethnic identity for all populations. In addition, “beauty” attracts ideological qualities that may be of exceptional value to minoritarian artists who work to construct social solidarity around issues of ethnic identity. Through particular choreographies, African-American dancers confirm markers of identity consistent with approaches to social formations that include the production of “beauty.”

In order to construct an argument about African-American identity as it may be enabled through choreography, we must first review the history of African-American dance, and the emergence of black Atlantic theory. As Africans arrived in the United States via the Atlantic slave trade, music and dance remained foundational practices within emergent African-American cultures. An expansive range of performance practices connected African people in the new world, who found themselves living in diaspora, as they responded to the harshness of slavery and the potential of modern, hybridized life. For example, dances that echoed various spiritual practices

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became ring shouts<sup>2</sup> as well as cakewalks and aspects of Congo Square celebrations in New Orleans. Eventually, a wide array of dance emerged with a distinctly African-American ethos; dances tied by aspects of performance as well as social and situational contexts for dance.

African-Americans entered the concert dance arena in the United States in the 1930s. Recent scholarship indicates that while in the minority, African-American artists studied and performed concert dance alongside European Americans in the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Rampant racism limited the involvement of black Americans in artistic performance. By the 1940s, social tides turned, and African-American innovation in music and social dance appreciably influenced emergent modernist traditions, especially in the work of modern choreographers Katherine Dunham, Helen Tamiris, and ballet master George Balanchine.<sup>4</sup> Even as choreographers referred to these African-American dance practices as well as physical aspects of African-American corporeal identity in their creations, racist configurations regularly referred to black Americans as “unattractive” and “ugly” in everyday discourses.

Social upheavals in the 1960s allowed a reclamation of Africanist aesthetic practices in the United States, especially in the rise of neo-African dance forms studied on college campuses and in community centers nationwide. As civil rights legislation took effect, “Black is Beautiful” became a slogan of empowerment and ethnic destiny for millions of African-Americans who had been long stigmatized by race. Enlivened by the loosening of colonialist binds that placed ballet and classical arts above other performance traditions, African-Americans began to explore various Africanist popular music and dance traditions as worthwhile documents of American corporeal history. Black social dances and Africanist approaches to American concert performance began to take their place in the concert dance arena, most notably in works by choreographers including Alvin Ailey, Talley Beatty, Eleo Pomare, and Dianne McIntyre.

By the 1980s, cultural historians began to connect African diasporic performance traditions in academic work known as black Atlantic theory. This theory presumes an ontology of performance that reflects Africanist aesthetic and social concerns.<sup>5</sup> Although the majority of scholars creating this theory were British, their work inspired vigorous conversation in the American academy that has continued in the twenty-first century. Concerned largely with the articulation of modernity that precluded an African ontology of any import, these scholars exposed an epistemological fault line wherein “it is unproblematically assumed that the modernist consciousness which really matters belonged to Europe rather than to its formerly imperial and colonial subjects.”<sup>6</sup> The “problem” with modernism

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as it had been conceived had to do with the place of black consciousness within it. According to leading British cultural theorist Paul Gilroy, modernism, as it had been largely understood in the realm of cultural studies, offered a stark binary in which Africans figured either peripherally, along the margins, or “as the repressed, primitive counterpart to an undifferentiated modernist consciousness.”<sup>7</sup>

Black Atlantic theory sought to connect markers of cultural formation across various African diasporas, to suggest commonalities of corporeal practices that could accommodate shifts in idiom, geography, historical moment, and political sensibility. In terms of performance, black Atlantic theory offers a way to consider aesthetic commonalities in relationship to political circumstances surrounding black life and black identities in diaspora. This formulation of black corporeality holds an implicit concern with the material circumstances of black identity and its key features, which include the construction of “beauty.”

### Where is “beauty” in African-American identity?

Surely identity, like performance, may be engaged by individuals as a moving target: contingent, porous, at times transparent or inconsequential. But all identities are not equivalent, and racial identities, in particular, support political narratives that hold material consequences for their inhabitants. Racial identities foreground historic convergences of power dynamics between groups of people. For example, for many North Americans a “black American” racial identity might suggest corporeal affiliation with the slave trade as well as various historical narratives of ancestral trauma, material lack, and political disenfranchisement. In a North American context, these assumptions correspond to visible black identity. As with gender, the visibility of race adds an overlay of presumptions and expectations that charge relationships, and accord special significance to whose identity is in question when, where, and by whom.

Because we bother to learn to see “black,” we learn to see it first as a racial identity, and only thereafter as a social or political condition. As art historian Richard Powell notes, blackness is less a porous and changeable identity marker of skin tone than “a metaphor for struggles against economic exploitation and cultural domination.”<sup>8</sup> For most black people, “black” is a visible racialized identity, seldom unmoored from social and political stigmas of, at least, minority status and historically contingent material lack. It may be argued that race no longer constructs an essentialized, totalizing or singular identity, but its contingencies emerge at particular moments with particular consequences for many, including the many African-Americans involved in concert dance.

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But black identity is by no means solely a catch-all metaphor for the miseries of exploitation and social oppression. In his 1993 study of black Atlantic cultural formations, Gilroy proposed that black identity is “lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self. Though it is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires.”<sup>9</sup> Gilroy’s work from this era details a global circulation of black diasporan identities rooted simultaneously in social forces exerted on black people, as well as, significantly, generative actions performed by black people. Ten years later, his articulation of a black Atlantic tradition as “an irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable, and asymmetrical cultural ensemble” resounds for dance theorists working on Africanist performance practice.<sup>10</sup>

Gilroy suggests contingencies of black identity that are ambivalent: simultaneously re-ductive and pro-ductive in terms of performance. As a reductive marker, this seemingly-coherent black identity leads quickly to stereotype. The recognition of blackness by audiences sets in motion a reductive chain of significations that overwhelms performance, and can only be overcome by the dancer’s force of will and technical elan. In its pro-ductive force, visible black identity can predict heightened mastery in “recognizably black” dance formats: jazz dance, hip hop, African dance, tap dance, and the like. Visible blackness may also predict “recognizably black” socio-political narratives of racial and gender oppression or economic and cultural domination. Ultimately, this productive black identity becomes similar to the stereotype as it cannibalistically reproduces itself as a signifier of an impossible fetish. To paraphrase Homi Bhabha, black identity becomes recognized by its eternal ambivalence as an object of colonial discourse.<sup>11</sup>

A discussion of how black identity might become manifest in dance performance will benefit from a consideration of how identity is perceived. The key concept here is not a flexible but recognizable “black identity” present in dance produced by black people in performance, but rather the act of recognition that allows blackness to become visible. This act of recognition coheres black identity to dancers in a flash of the visible for some and a flash of the spirit for others. Black identity here is born of action on the part of both the dancer and the audience member; for some its currency is visual recognition, while for others its presence arrives in something of Gilroy’s “practical activities” of gesture, bodily significations, and desires. I want to focus now on this latter action of recognition, as a currency passed between productive gestural efforts by the dancer that are received as spiritually effective by its audience.

By invoking the spirit here, I do not make reference to the religious or the sentimental, even if we may all have witnessed performances by black

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Americans that refer to either or both of these categories. We may think of Ailey's *Revelations* as a quintessential example of this mode of work, as Ailey's dance coheres visible blackness to both North American slavery and social disenfranchisement as well as a non-confrontational, fundamentalist portrayal of historical black American religious practice. Rather, I make reference to the contingent presences of immaterial, animating, vital forces that allow human beings to recognize incorporeal actions. The spirit "flashes" in Africanist performance to momentarily confirm incorporeal action enabled by the performance, and not bounded by the performer's body. In the flash of the spirit we find what African art historian Robert Farris Thompson has described the motivating feature of successful Africanist performance.<sup>12</sup>

"Successful" performance here emerges in the communal recognition of excellence in action that culminates, at times, in a flash of the spirit. Performance "succeeds" as it is recognized to be Africanist through the enlivening flash of the spirit; this flash marks the performance in terms of its efficacy and its durability. Effectiveness of performance may be monitored by gathered audiences and performers through the recognized engagement with Africanist aesthetics and the flash of the spirit; performance that does not arrive at both aesthetic excellence and the intermittent or singular flash of the spirit will not likely be considered either successful or Africanist. The flash of the spirit constitutes a component aspect of performance engaged by African diaspora artists trained to engage its particular "improvisatory drive and brilliance."<sup>13</sup>

I intend to expand Thompson's paradigm of successful performance to encompass the revelation of "beauty." "Beauty" here is an action achieved through a parity of honesty of intention and accuracy of gesture. In this flash of the spirit, we may experience the contingent creation of "beauty," recognized as an animated black identity, revealed through dance performance.

### **Beauty through Africanist aesthetics**

To be clear, I intend to arrive at an articulation of "beauty" as an action recognized in dance by audiences through an engagement with Africanist aesthetics. I am inspired by Gilroy's argument that the "intensity of the slave experience" marked out blacks as the first truly modern people, "handling in the nineteenth century dilemmas and difficulties which would only become the substance of everyday life [in Europe] – for others – a century later."<sup>14</sup> One of those dilemmas involves the enunciation of "beauty" and its nature as a necessary aspect of everyday life in late-capitalist societies. From at least the nineteenth century forward, African-

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Americans engaged hybrid constructions of group and individual identity that allowed “beauty” to flourish in everyday traditions of song, dance, language, gesture, bodily signification, and desires. These traditions involved the effective transmission of information through action performed accurately, purposefully, and in the service of communication. As stated above, an ability to act “in the spirit” provided the overarching mark of achievement of Africanist aesthetic balance. This action became manifest as an ability to temporarily blur the boundaries of everyday communication, and incarnate the liminal space at the edge of consciousness; to release the flash of immaterial spirit into the space of performance. African-Americans engaged this action with great regularity in performances of religion, social ritual, and artistic expression.

“Beauty” as a necessary component of any ethnic group’s self-awareness, surely became manifest in various guises for African-Americans, including within the contexts of dance performance. But “beauty,” as a productive aspect of African-American performance practice, seldom arrived in any discourses of the West. Surely “beauty” exists as a contingent possibility for African-Americans that may be accessed through dance performance. I propose to discuss beauty in this paradigm as an action that may be released by way of successful Africanist performance, with that “success” tied to Africanist aesthetics and the “flash of the spirit.” To reiterate my main points, black identity is contingent, and its recognition cannot be based solely on the visual appearance of blackness. For audiences who appreciate Africanist artistry, “beauty” is produced in the sensorial recognition of dance gesture that enables a flash of the spirit.

### **“Beauty” as sensation, not visible identity**

To characterize beauty as an action recognized in dance performance, we must move beyond the realm of the visual as the dominant signifier of aesthetic meaning. An Africanist aesthetic achievement of “beauty,” as I explore it here, refers to the visual as only an aspect of the sensorial. To recognize “black beauty” in motion, we engage intuition born of an awareness of social and political circumstance as well as the perception of fullness of gestural execution and the manifestation of spirit.

Here, “beauty” is not manifest through stillness or the visual consumption of the dancer as an object in repose, or even within the codified postures of classical dance themselves. “Beauty” is an action that may be recognized through its performance. This proposition contradicts the most prevalent assumptions of “beauty” and dance, which converge around balletic lightness and verticality: concepts rooted in ideologies that are obviously racialized and gendered. In 2000, dance writer Sally Banes offered a

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discussion of Aristotle's attempts to equate slavery with an immorality embodied by certain physical postures as evidence that "ballet's verticality has an ethical dimension whose origins are sociopolitical."<sup>15</sup> In the same essay, she set out André Levinson's articulation of "beauty" in classical dance, which prized verticality, the proportion of the five classical positions, and the turnout of the body, especially the legs, as the bases for motion. Together, these restrictions and possibilities enable qualities of "equilibrium, symmetry, harmony, and unity of line." Banes notes how these possibilities are contingent, "because in ballet, [. . .] they are achieved, distributed, and found again in the flow of motion."<sup>16</sup> Banes continues to recount postmodern ballet choreographer Karole Armitage's concept of "A new kind of beauty for our time," one that, according to the choreographer, "demanded a kind of passion, because it had a troubled spot at the center." This "troubled spot" that Armitage and Banes refer to might be a place where Africanist and feminist aesthetics collude, a place to resist a politic of "beauty" as a commodity that may be consumed by a stationary beholder.

### **Differences in Africanist and feminist paradigms**

Africanist and feminist aesthetics must diverge at several crucial points. First, feminist aesthetics resist the totalizing paradigms that characterize analytic aesthetics, while Africanist aesthetics struggle to make sense of the egregiously under-theorized origins of black Atlantic hybridity. Feminist aesthetics are necessarily encountered within the social context that feminism struggles to overcome. In this paradox, its approaches may seem anti-theoretical and polemical. But feminist aesthetics seek to dismantle master narratives of universalism, to seek contingent theory that is, to quote Hilde Hein, "saturated with experience."<sup>17</sup> Africanist aesthetics seek to align aspects of divergent practices according to performance commonalities that are dispersed across genres, geographies, social locations, and configurations of participants and audiences. Africanist aesthetics attempt to suture palpable approaches to art-making to disparate forms; to tie complex rhythm, apart-playing,<sup>18</sup> percussive attack, ubiquitous flow, and an essential category of derisive performance to the analysis of performance including church orature, breakdancing, gospel singing, ragtime piano syncopations, carnival adornments, beatboxing, cakewalking, and strains of postmodern concert dancing. To construct a binary tension, feminist aesthetics dismantle, while Africanist aesthetics assemble.

More importantly, feminist aesthetics refer to an eternal past of masculine domination that is inseparable from experience in any historical era, while Africanist aesthetics arise from a totalizing historical moment that

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is the rupture of the middle passage – the forced enslavement of Africans brought to the “New World.” A prolonged but identifiable historical action produced Africanist aesthetic practices within the crucible of the slave trade; there is a real and fetishized pre-Africanist historical moment that of necessity gives way to contemporary black Atlantic cultural formations and black identities. Given the historical possibility to explore both pre- and post-Africanist aesthetics, it would seem probable that these paradigms would be fully enunciated by now. Ironically, I think it is fair to assess that feminist aesthetics have exposed the contingencies of gender identity in performance more fully than Africanist aesthetics have been able to account for the broad diversity of performance modalities recognized as “black.” Still, Africanists and feminists have many reasons to collaborate. As cultural theorists including Gilroy, Stuart Hall, and bell hooks have pointed out, gender is a modality through which race is lived, and by extension, Africanist aesthetic theory must be in unavoidable collaboration with feminist aesthetics.

### **Donald Byrd**

To offer a case study of feminist and Africanist aesthetic theory in action, I want to turn now to the work of Byrd. Born securely in the visibly black middle class of the 1950s, Byrd has participated in a concert dance tradition framed by the proscenium stage.<sup>19</sup> In all, Byrd’s choreographic project explores the expressive limits of classical ballet technique sutured to the weightiness of modern dance. His work tends to be highly kinetic – almost excessively so – in an effort to align compositional rigor with a patently discursive physicality. Highly literate in terms of dance compositions, his works always reference other dances, and he enjoys a choreographic game in which he challenges his audiences to recognize trace elements of other choreographies as they are played out in his own constructions, including his versions of *Giselle* from 1995 and *The Nutcracker* from 1996.

Byrd’s choreography consistently engages a recognizably black identity in its fierce deployment of Africanist aesthetic principles throughout, including: the percussive attack of the dancers as they repeatedly pierce the space above their heads with pointed feet; an antiphonal phrasing that constructs gestural responses to various movement calls; and the complex rhythm and apart-playing of dancers whose asymmetrical spatial alignments repeatedly challenge their audiences to choose a focal point. More important than these obvious compositional strategies, though, is the intense finish that Byrd encourages from the dancers. As if to coax all possible tension from the dancers’ taut performances, his movements are phrased to emphasize an unimpeachable mastery of physical technique

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in terms of, at least, flow, depth of spatial field, and rhythmic intensity. This performed “finish” contributes to the engagement of “beauty” as it might be aligned to an aesthetic of the cool.

### Giselle

Byrd’s fascinating three-act work *Life Situations: Daydreams on Giselle* offered a patently feminist re-articulation of the Romantic ballet, simultaneously concerned with an essentialized black identity in concert dance. In Byrd’s version Giselle is danced by a ferociously accomplished African-American woman, the lone black woman in the company of twelve dancers. As danced by Leonora Stapleton, Giselle finds herself constrained by her ties to the local multi-ethnic community, which included her black male partner (her Hilarion). Adventurous in spirit, she enters a relationship with a traveling white male “outsider” figure, against the admonitions of her friends. Giselle falls in love with her Albrecht, but he simply abandons her after their tryst, and she goes mad – for a time. In Byrd’s version, Giselle’s friends accost Albrecht, physically attack him, and beat him into submission. The first act ends with Giselle restored to her community, all the wiser for her poor choice of a lover, grouped defiantly with the others as they wave Albrecht along his way.

For Byrd, “beauty” often comes to be tied to the triumph of physical technique, or excellence in form. Form is tied to finish, with most jagged edges of movement smoothed into a seamless performance persona. The ruptures of Byrd’s rhythmic phrasing makes clear principles of percussive attack or complex meter, but without breaking an overall flow of movements performed to their physical ends. In pushing his dancers to work at the ends of physical possibilities, he forces them to respond in the physical crucible of the spirit. He extracts a “beauty” of dancing in the spirit by overloading physical challenges posed to his dancers. The dance proceeds as rife with Africanist aesthetic assemblage to arrive with an unavoidable honesty of intention and precise execution. Here, “beauty” is evoked in the spirit, born of the tension between the execution of balletic movements with a low-to-the-ground weighted stance.

The second act of Byrd’s *Giselle* features only four Wilis – Myrtha, Giselle, and two other women – and a hapless man who is the object of their evening’s fury. The man who dances in the second act is neither the Albrecht nor the Hilarion of the first act, suggesting that Byrd imagines some alternate reality for Giselle. The act is enveloped by ruthless, drag-show humor, as the Wilis are depicted as four automatons with black wigs, red turtlenecks, and filmy white Romantic-length tutus, who vogue-dance, and then sputter and dissemble through mechanical shoulder and neck

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isolations, then freeze as Myrtha repeatedly struts around the perimeter of stage in a quintessential diva promenade. The other Wilis answer with a volley of furious full-bodied gesticulations. The effect is hysterical, like classical ballet on speed. Again, Byrd flips the narrative script in this act, as he has Giselle plead passionately for the man's life, but when out-ranked by Myrtha and her minions, she ultimately joins into the rapacious plunder. As in the first act, the community proves to be more powerful than the individual's desire. The man dies, and the Wilis leave the stage together, triumphant in their completed task.

The third act of Byrd's work may be the "Daydream" of the entire evening's title. Four additional guest artist ballet dancers appear in this act, two men and two women who dance *en pointe*. They perform Byrd's postmodernist extensions of movement phrases derived from the original nineteenth-century choreography for *Giselle*. The opening gesture of Byrd's revision featured a solo man, clad simply in black, who paraphrases *Giselle's* introductory solo variation – augmented by Byrd's distinctive rhythmic and percussive emphases. As the guest artists work through extensions of balletic vocabulary, the modern-dance cast of the previous acts witnesses from the corners of the stage space, on rare occasion jumping into weighted unison passages with each other and the other dancers. Throughout this section, the ballet dancers suggest Balanchine's suture of classical technique and Africanist aesthetic devices of downward-directed weight, percussive attack, and flexible, rolling articulations of torso, necks, and hips uncommon in ballet.<sup>20</sup> The work ends as the ballet artists dance offstage, again shadowed by the modern dancers, leaving Stapleton – the sole black woman, who had danced the first two revised acts of the work as *Giselle* – standing center stage, trapped in a pool of light, somehow unable to dance, seeming to ruminate on her palpable absence from the classicism of the third act's abstraction.

This final image resounded with a poignancy born of asymmetrical race relations in American dance, which have never produced an African-American prima ballerina in a majority-white company. For many audience members, Stapleton seemed to be barred, by virtue of her visible racial identity, from participating in the third act's choreographic innovations. As a black woman with obvious facility in ballet, she would seem to be an inevitable presence in the "jazzy" pointe-shoe variations. But, as though dancing *Giselle* at all had depleted her usefulness to the evening as a whole, Stapleton was forced to the sidelines, a hungry witness to her own displacement in a post-colonial ballet built, ironically, around her presence on stage. As the final curtain falls on Byrd's *Giselle*, "beauty" cannot be accessed by its principal dancer because she is not allowed to dance (Figure 17).



*Figure 17* *Life Situations: Daydreams on Giselle* by Donald Byrd (1995), dancers: Elizabeth Parkinson and Fabrice Lemire. © Photo by Julie Lemberger. Permission kindly granted by Julie Lemberger.

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Byrd's revisioning of *The Nutcracker* begins from a startling narrative inversion: on Christmas Eve in a mythic Harlem brownstone, Clara, a recently widowed grandmother, waits alone for her family and friends to arrive. She remembers her husband, who appears as a ghost, and the large nutcracker that he had given her before he died. As in the many earlier versions of the story, Clara's family arrives for a long sequence of pantomime and social dancing. In a second scene, as everyone else sleeps, Clara has a mild stroke, and faces Death, who appears with his army of rat minions. The Nutcracker comes to life to defend her. But when he begins to lose the battle with death, Clara rallies herself and beats death away. She uncovers the Nutcracker, who is, of course, the ghost of her husband, and together they are transported to a magical Nightclub for Act II (Figure 18). After enjoying a long series of divertissements, Death reappears to show Clara vignettes from her life. She weakens, and the scene returns to her home on Christmas morning. Clara's daughter finds her lying on the living room floor, and family members rush to help make her comfortable. As the children begin opening Christmas presents, Death returns, unnoticed by all but Clara. This time he reveals himself to be Clara's husband, and she takes his arm to leave with him. As the curtain falls, Clara and her husband are joined together in death, seemingly happy among the unaware Christmas celebrants.

Here, Byrd's feminist project enlivens Clara's centrality, allowing her a physical resilience, in her fight with death, as well as an age-based authority in the scenario, as the family matriarch. Byrd's generational adjustment re/makes Clara from an ostensible subject of the ballet as a dreamy-eyed young girl, to an undisguised initiator of the work's actions. Byrd reconciles Clara's seemingly divergent desires suggested by her roles as mother and woman, allowing her to both celebrate with her family as its matriarch, and then party with her husband in a nightclub. In all, Clara's journey is configured as personal, and cultural, as well as allegorical.

Choreographically, Byrd employs his signature kinetic attack and slyly ironic movement juxtapositions to engage the story. The second act divertissements feature humorous African-American versions of various "national" dances set to the Duke Ellington–Billy Strayhorn arrangement of the Tchaikovsky score. For example, Byrd recasts the "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy" as an Orientalist dragon-lady attended by two cavorting, minstrel-era clowns in a scene of patently stereotyped gendered stage identities. In this acidly humorous section we notice both a capitulation to gendered and raced identities on the theatrical stage, as well as a teasing



Figure 18 *The Harlem Nutcracker* by Donald Byrd (1996), dancers: Eleanor McCoy and Gus Solomon jr. © Photo by Susan Kuklin. Permission kindly granted by Susan Kuklin.

of the *divertissement* format, the whole framed by an undercurrent of kinetic danger. The fairy's brash ferocity pushes against the sinuous undulations of the musical score, even as her precision is at odds with the slap-happy trembling of her two male attendants. The overall effect is both provocative and derisive, engaged with Africanist and feminist aesthetics on the levels of choreography and narrative impact.

### **Socially progressive possibilities of “black beauty” in concert dance**

Byrd's project to re/make classical ballets proposes an obviously politicized gesture to align Euro-Western dance classicism, and its unavoidable connotations of proportion, formalism, and “beauty,” with Africanist aesthetics. Among other works, he created versions of Balanchine's *Prodigal Son* and *La Valse*, before he disbanded his company due to economic crises in 2002,

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he had begun work on an Africanist *Sleeping Beauty*. His project to rethink these classical works troubled longstanding assumptions separating dance traditions, with a hybridity that marked his work as Africanist, and within that paradigm, often “beautiful.” These works present vistas of movement that enable a-temporal flashes of the spirit in their very structure. In this, I find Byrd’s vision of “beauty” to be unique and engaged in a progressive aesthetic politics, one that retrieves “black beauty” from the realm of racial dispossession. I can say this only because I believe in the possibility of an aesthetic politics that might construct “black beauty” as a process to be fulfilled by dance performance on the concert stage. Here, “beauty” is not an idea contained by the metaphor of classical allusion, rather it is an action, addressed in concert with others, capable of charging the air with spirit in the moment of its emergence.

### Notes

- 1 P. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- 2 See S. Stuckey, ‘Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance’, in T. DeFrantz (ed.), *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, Madison, WI: Wisconsin University Press, 2004.
- 3 See S. Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004 and J. Perpener, *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, Springfield, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001.
- 4 Ibid. See also B. Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996 and J. Perpener, *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era*, New York: Macmillan, 2000.
- 5 Prominent among these cultural theorists are Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, and Kobena Mercer. See P. Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*, London: Serpent’s Tail, 1993; Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*; S. Hall, ‘New Ethnicities’, in K.H. Chen, D. Morley (eds), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 441–9; and K. Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, New York and London: Routledge, 1994.
- 6 Gilroy, *Small Acts*, p. 155.
- 7 Ibid., p. 157.
- 8 R. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1997, p. 10.
- 9 Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, p. 102.
- 10 Ibid., p. 198.
- 11 H. Bhabha, ‘The Other Question’, in P. Mongia (ed.), *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, London: Arnold, 1997, p. 38.
- 12 R.F. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, New York: First Vintage Book, 1983. Thompson’s inventory of “guiding principles” of Africanist performance have been frequently recounted, but bear repeating here. They include dominance of a percussive performance style; multiple and

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complex rhythmic meter; overlapping call and response in singing; an inner pulse control that retains a rhythmic common denominator; suspended accentuation patterning that allows for cross-rhythms; and the performance of songs and dances of social allusion.

- 13 Ibid., p. xiii.
- 14 Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, p. 221.
- 15 S. Banes, "'A New Kind of Beauty": From Classicism to Karole Armitage's Early Ballets', in P. Zeglin Brand (ed.), *Beauty Matters*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000, p. 267.
- 16 Ibid., p. 268.
- 17 H. Hein, 'The Role of Feminist Aesthetics in Feminist Theory', in C. Korsmeyer, P. Zeglin Brand (eds), *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, p. 450.
- 18 The concept of apart-playing and dancing refers to the tendency in African forms to allow each artist a unique contribution to the whole. Strict unison is seldom desired; rather, dancers and musicians "unite music and dance, but play apart." See R.F. Thompson, 'An Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance', *African Forum*, 1966, vol. 2, no. 2, p. 93.
- 19 The "official" biography Byrd circulates stresses his studies at Tufts and Yale Universities, the Cambridge School of Ballet, the London School of Contemporary Dance, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center, and with Mia Slavinska. He danced, briefly, with Twyla Tharp, Karole Armitage, and Gus Solomons Jr. before he founded his company Donald Byrd/The Group in 1978 with a commitment to the idea that "dance can change and enrich the lives of many people." Prolific, he has created over eighty works for his own company and others including a 1998 production of *Carmina Burana* for the New York City Opera. In 2002 Byrd dissolved his own company and assumed artistic directorship of the Spectrum Dance Theater of Seattle, Washington.
- 20 Brenda Dixon Gottschild has argued that Balanchine works such as *Agon* (1957) and *The Four Temperaments* (1946) employ Africanist principles in their choreographic structure. See B. Dixon Gottschild, 'Stripping the Emperor', in *Digging the Africanist Presence*, pp. 59–79.