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Composite Bodies of Dance: The Repertory of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Thomas F. DeFrantz

In 1993, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater achieved a remarkable milestone: the company operated with no budget deficit.¹ This circumstance, unique among major American dance companies, marked the successful efforts of several decades to balance a multimillion-dollar budget while performing a diverse repertory of modern dance that stretched across boundaries of dance technique. The achievement deserves scrutiny, at least in terms of its artistic and racial implications. Since its founding in 1958, the Ailey company has continually perpetuated its identity as an icon of African American performance, populated by a cohort of African diaspora artists and committed to a performance ethic that explores an explicitly black corporeality. Simultaneously, the company has presented a wide-ranging repertory of dances by a diverse roster of choreographers. In this dual undertaking, the company has expanded boundaries of the representational possibilities for black bodies on international stages, even as it has expanded performance possibilities for dance practice across idioms.

From its beginning, the Ailey company's mandate to perform new works by young choreographers as well as classic works from the modern dance repertory enabled a unique circumstance in which modern dancers and their audiences broadened both their artistic scope and their aesthetic palettes in varied programming, often in works created by choreographers who had never met or collaborated. The demands of a diverse repertory are not invisible, however, and the Ailey company has struggled at times to satisfy the needs of varied choreographic grammars. This essay explores the challenges and implications of a varied repertory for American modern dance artists in terms of dance techniques, critical reception, casting, and the strategies of style capable of producing recognizable black embodiment by the Ailey company from 1958 through 2005.² I suggest that the diverse repertory amplifies African American

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¹ Camille Hardy, "Recession-Proof Dance Leadership," *Dance Magazine* (October 1992): 52.

² While the first productions of the Ailey company in 1958 and 1959 featured only African American performers, Ailey integrated his group in 1960. Since that time, the company has always had a strong

strategies of versatility as survival, embeds “mastery of form” as a foundational ethic of dance training for its performers, and predicts a “deformation of mastery,” through the assemblage of dance techniques by its company members, toward an ultimate valuation of performance style. As conceived by literary theorist Houston Baker, the term “mastery of form” suggests discursive strategies that allow for articulations of African American subjectivity through the appropriation and reshaping of stereotypical representations, while “deformation of mastery” proposes methods that allow black people to reveal themselves to themselves through manipulation of established representational tropes.³ Through its repertory, the Ailey company stages composite bodies that reveal aesthetic affinities and political connections among disparate dance techniques and histories, laying bare ever-expanding possibilities for concert dance to connect with its audiences.

Claiming Ground: Repertory Programs in Modern Dance

Echoing the strict rhetorical divide between ballet and modern dance that permeated the first half of the twentieth century, early modern choreographers frequently separated their movement experiments from each other.⁴ Experiments in shared dance repertory did occur during this period, but these programs were typically created to fulfill specific fund-raising or consciousness-raising goals. For example, the April 1931 “First Negro Dance Recital in America,” organized by Edna Guy and Hemsley Winfield, brought together a group of African diaspora dance artists both to promote artistic kinship and to draw attention to the wealth of African and black modern dance practice happening at the time. Historian Ellen Graf notes that the ill-fated Dance Repertory Theatre of 1930 and 1931 emerged “in an attempt to reduce the financial burdens of performing in a Broadway house,” with a varied program that at times included works by Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Helen Tamiris, and Agnes de Mille.⁵ Each of these events succeeded in building audiences for modern dance, but none of them established an infrastructure of dancers and choreographers willing, or able, to consistently share resources.

If the situation was difficult for white artists, it was insurmountable for artists of color who aspired toward professional careers as dance company directors. By the 1950s, modern dance, which seemed to perceive itself as antiracist whether it actually was or was not,⁶ had supported the arrival of black artists as leading performers in works made for the companies of Graham, de Mille, and California-based choreogra-

majority of African diaspora artists, with some presence of Native, Asian, and European ancestry dancers. Here, the term “black embodiment” encompasses nonblack dancers within its possibilities.

³ See Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁴ The divide between modern dance and ballet has been widely documented and discussed. See Sali Ann Kriegsman, *Modern Dance in America: The Bennington Years* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981) for a depiction of individuality among the pioneers of modern dance.

⁵ See Ellen Graf, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928–1942* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

⁶ For an extended discussion of the racial politics of early modern dance, see Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), reviewed in this issue; and Mark Franko, *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

pher Lester Horton, as well as sustained employment in the always multiracial Katherine Dunham troupe. Still, except for Dunham's success, no company of African American artists enjoyed much more than one-night-only performance runs. Among artists of this generation, Alvin Ailey (1931–1989) created his American Dance Theater as a hopeful center of youthful artistic life in New York City that might offer enlarged possibilities for training and performance of its cohort of mostly African diaspora artists. Significantly, and consonant with the group-effort ethos that would become the foundation of his company operations, Ailey presented his company's first performance on 30 March 1958 on a shared bill with choreographer Ernest Parham at the 92nd Street Young Men's Hebrew Association.

Ailey's Gambit: A Repertory Company

From the early 1960s, Ailey designed his company operations to provide a welcoming professional home for a large group of African diaspora performers. He planned to include a school in which to train younger, preprofessional dancers in classes of jazz, ballet, and several modern dance idioms; he foresaw the need for an administrative office suite and staff to sustain company operations; for his company, he intended to install a resident choreographer and ballet master; and he hoped to acquire a repertory of "at least 12 ballets of varying textures—[with a] main emphasis [on the] hist[ory] of [the] Negro in this country."⁷ Clearly inspired by his own experiences at the Lester Horton School in Los Angeles, as well as his knowledge of Katherine Dunham's widely-noted School of Dance and Theater in New York, Ailey intended to create a multidisciplinary school open to artists claiming various ethnic identities. He sought to fill the void left by the closing of the original Horton and Dunham schools via a new institution that would emphasize shared resources and experiences to benefit a larger group of African diaspora dance artists and their audiences.

Ailey imagined his company as a natural heir to the mostly-white lineage of earlier modern dance institutions that emanated from the charismatic leadership of Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, and Martha Graham. From the beginning, he positioned his aspirations in line with these choreographers, but thought to expand the possibilities of concert dance to engage with "an overlay of influences from film, ethnic dance, Broadway and Ballet."⁸ He also proposed a company whose strength would be in its repertory; a company that would not rely on a star system, but instead would allow all of its members to perform different types of roles from the repertory; and one that could appeal to a large general audience in a mission "to provide education in dance, to disseminate information with regard to the dance, to illuminate the history of American Modern Dance, and to entertain."⁹ In all of this, Ailey's ambitious plan incorporated programmatic innovations at the level of basic company structure that engaged technical versatility as a foundational ideology for the dancers of his company and school. Dancers would train

⁷ Alvin Ailey, uncatalogued handwritten note, ca. 1964, Alvin Ailey Dance Center Archives, New York (hereafter Ailey Archives).

⁸ Alvin Ailey et al., Looseleaf notes, Grant Proposal for Dance Theater Foundation, June 1965, 1, Ailey Archives.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

in techniques that had been developed along antithetical physical suppositions, and they would work with several choreographers in varying movement vocabularies. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater would present “new works by young choreographers” and “classic works from the modern dance repertory.”¹⁰ Ailey hoped to create a repository for modern dance classics that otherwise disappeared too quickly from the active repertory of any producing organization. Most importantly, though, Ailey also intended for his company to be inflected “black” at every turn—as evidenced by the dancers he hired, but also in a stated mission to present work that spoke to particular histories of African American life.

In these divergent goals, Ailey’s gambit presupposed the “composite body” described by cultural theorist Randy Martin, one capable of encompassing a variety of political ideologies simultaneously, and one that might reveal “how difference is associated among those assembled in the nation, rather than being forced to sort out one body from another.”¹¹ In performing work made for dancers with radically different personal and cultural identities, Ailey’s company confirmed intimations of association among choreographies and dance techniques. Ailey’s concept assumed interplay between compositional methodologies that could be revealed through shrewd programming that placed divergent work side by side in a single performance. In addition, by hiring a range of dancers with divergent technical dance backgrounds, Ailey sought to highlight the individually composite performance identities of his company members. Dancers were encouraged to bring their individual corporeal understanding of Graham technique, Southern African American social dance structures, ballet, Broadway-style tap dance, or liturgical dance to bear on the enterprise of concert dance, without necessarily concealing the core of these divergent grammars or smoothing over inflections in performance they inspired. This gesture of casting into corporeal diversity enhanced representational possibilities for African American artists, as it explicitly proved a variability of black corporeality in performance. Dancers in Ailey’s company were not expected to offer a unified look or foundational movement ethic to their audience; rather, they confirmed a composite nature of black corporeality that reached, ineffably, beyond boundaries of movement doctrines.

Reviving across Race

The most obvious difficulty facing Ailey’s concept involved revivals of work across the murky divide of race. In many instances, Ailey dancers would inhabit “white” roles, created for companies with no particular ideology of ethnic identity. Apparently, Ailey’s stated mission of education and entertainment sought to engage a heightened interest in the composite identity of concert dance as a realm, as well as the composite abilities of his dancers as interpreters of historical and newly-wrought work. In reviving work, the Ailey company would prove the abilities of its African diaspora dancers in various idioms, as well as the connections between these idioms underscored by shared programming. For example, in 1967 the company premiered Trinidadian choreographer Geoffrey Holder’s *Prodigal Prince* (1967, revived 1998)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹ Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 110.

alongside Sicilian American Paul Sanasardo's *Metallics* (1963, acquired 1967); the two works shared no discernible conceptions of race or ethnic representation, although African diaspora company members performed in both works simultaneously.¹² In this casting, Ailey dissembled proprietary notions of racial appropriateness that plagued African American artists in other performance arenas, including the legitimate stage.

Ailey delivered well on his impulse to stage revivals in the company's first fifteen years, in productions that included *Choros* by Katherine Dunham (1943, revived 1972 and 1987); *Rooms* by Anna Sokolow (1955, acquired 1964); and *Kinetic Molpai* by Ted Shawn (1935, revived 1972). Each of these works had been created before Ailey's company existed; they grew from radically divergent rationales for the creation of dance, separated by decades; and each work employed a choreographic grammar at odds with Ailey's own choreographic style, which he derived from his extensions of the Lester Horton dance technique. Brief analytic descriptions will enable a consideration of the implications of Ailey's radical revisionist gesture to stage these works by his own company.

Shawn's *Kinetic Molpai*, the oldest of the works revived in this era, explored geometric configurations executed by a group of men within an oblique narrative of their leader's death and transfiguration. Originally created for Shawn's all-white, all-male dance ensemble to a piano score by Jess Meeker, the work offered pictorial representations of men moving and posing together, often in sequential harmony. Danced with bared torsos and loose-fitting pants, the work utilized simple gestural motions arranged in sections defined as Fall, Rise, Leap, and Surge, to depict a blank, aestheticized machismo in a homosocial world defined by the male workers who inhabit it.

Dunham created *Choros* for the Broadway production of *Tropical Revue*, a wartime entertainment. She embedded classroom-style ballet steps within a Brazilian quadrille to tell a divertissement-styled story of a flirtation among two couples.¹³ The five-part work offered a theatrical version of social dance restructured by Dunham for the proscenium stage. Two couples leapt and posed in balletic postures, then danced in unison figures marked by complex footwork, multiple pirouettes, and fast-striding promenades. Throughout, basic quadrille figures were punctuated by complex rhythmic breaks; at one point all melody disappeared, and a drumming pattern led the four dancers into a series of clapping and low-to-the-ground stamping steps. In all, *Choros* expressed African American social dance hybridity as a theatrical assemblage of African and European dance forms.

¹² Throughout this essay, the first year indicates a work's premiere by any company. The notation "revived" indicates the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater premiere. "Acquired" indicates that the work had not gone out of repertory by some other producing organization; the acquired date indicates the Ailey company premiere. Some works have been revived more than once; for my purposes, a revival has to have been out of the company repertory for at least seven years, a duration that likely necessitates a concentrated rehearsal process for a new cohort of dancers. Works with only one date were commissioned and premiered by the Ailey company.

¹³ *Choros* premiered in Chicago in January 1944, with costumes by John Pratt and music by Vadico Gogliano.



Figure 1. Aestheticized Machismo: Members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater ([from left]: Dudley Williams, Hector Mercado, Michihiko Oka, and Melvin Jones) in Ted Shawn's *Kinetic Molpai*, 1972. Photographer unknown; courtesy of Alvin Ailey Archives.

Anna Sokolow's *Rooms* painted a bleak portrait of postwar urban anxiety. In a series of character vignettes, eight urbanites, separated by imaginary boarding room walls, enacted hysterias of daily life. At times, the characters seemed to respond to each other, but never connected emotionally, during sections titled *Alone*, *Dream*, *Escape*, *Desire*, *Panic*, and *Daydream*. Originally created for Sokolow's own multi-ethnic company, and costumed by African American dancer Donald McKayle, the work traded in a jittery, individualized movement vocabulary that matched erratic rhythms in the jazz-inspired orchestral score by Kenyon Hopkins.

Taken together, these three works confirmed a pliant thematic vision of concert dance that suggested divergent locations of subjectivity for American modern dancers. *Choros* explored cultural constructions of dancing bodies at play, rendering its dancers as arbiters of historical legacies of hybridity, rhythmic motion, and rupture. *Rooms* explored a psychologically-based landscape of neurotic urban disconnection, rendering its dancers postindustrial laborers whose work as dancers echoed the difficulties of the city people they portrayed. *Kinetic Molpai* offered a series of sculptural positions in sequence that displayed its male dancers as moving sculptures, rendering its dancers objects of aesthetic desire. To perform these works, Ailey dancers obtained mastery of blank, sculptural machismo (Shawn), postcolonial suturing of dance techniques (Dunham), and dramatic projection of individualized hysterias through subtle, individualized movement (Sokolow). Ailey's intention—and achievement—in this revisionist gesture was to free the modern dancer from restrictions imposed by race, movement vocabulary, or choreographic genre.

Critics of these revivals noted how the works expanded possibilities of representation for the Ailey company, whose repertory had been built on works exploring “Negro heritage,” like Ailey’s own *Blues Suite* (1958).¹⁴ Of course, expansion, in and of itself, does not predict usefulness, and the Ailey company encountered resistance from audiences, presenters, and critics in these revivals. The Shawn work inspired “giggles” from its 1972 audience.¹⁵ Australian presenters resisted the bleak dynamic of the Sokolow work, concerned that it might deter an international audience more used to portrayals of upbeat, spontaneous “jazz dance” by African Americans on tour.¹⁶ The Dunham work, hailed by the *New York Times* as a “gem . . . unlike anything in the Ailey company’s repertory” produced speculation that the “strong Dunham lineage in the Ailey repertory” could be traced back to its very structural innovations.¹⁷ Predictably, the Dunham work remained in the Ailey repertory longest, no doubt because its compositional ideology resonated with many African American social practices—including social dance—that routinely tied together elements of various styles to produce an expressive new whole.

Reviving across Idiom

No less difficult than working across race and the political ideologies that its naming suggests, Ailey’s company continually acquired a broad range of works with varying theatrical scales and kinetic intentions. The company revived small works that explored aspects of mythology, including *Icarus* by Lucas Hoving (1964, revived 1969 and 1978); oblique, abstract works that explored qualities of motion, including *Journey* by Joyce Trisler (1958, acquired 1964 and revived 1979); lyrical balletic works that employed pointework, including *Lament* by Louis Johnson (1953, revived 1964 and 1985); as well as large-scale theatrical works that made use of extravagant costumes, sweeping musical scores, and visual effects, including *Carmina Burana* by John Butler (1959, revived 1973 and 1994). Despite the variety of their movement ideologies, these works recurred in the repertory across decades, and constitute a productive assemblage of performance material that satisfied cohorts of audiences and performers.

The fact that some revivals fared better than others in the repertory sheds light on the difficulty of working across idiom. Works emphatically at odds with the Horton and Dunham-based core technique of Ailey method tended to last in the repertory only a single season or two, as in the cases of *Time Out of Mind*, originally created by Brian MacDonald for the Joffrey Ballet (1962, revived 1971); José Limón’s classic *Missa Brevis* (1958, revived 1973), which drew on Limón’s extension of Humphrey technique; and Jerome Robbins’s jazz-inspired ballet *NY Export: Opus Jazz* (1958, revived 1993), acquired by Judith Jamison, who became Artistic Director of the company after Ailey’s death in 1989. Although each of these works had enjoyed critical and audience

¹⁴ Clive Barnes, “Ailey Dance Troupe Returns to London,” *New York Times* 24 March 1965: 38; Clive Barnes, “At the Ailey—Fun, Love and Sin,” *New York Times* 3 December 1972: D24.

¹⁵ Anna Kisselgoff, “Dance: Ailey Revives Shawn ‘Molpai,’” *New York Times* 18 November 1972: 43.

¹⁶ Jennifer Dunning, *Alvin Ailey: A Life In Dance* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), 181.

¹⁷ Anna Kisselgoff, “Dance: ‘Choros,’ Dunham Gem, Unveiled,” *New York Times* 27 November 1972: 42.

popularity in their original productions, Ailey company performances generated interest mostly as novelty revivals whose movement ideologies translated poorly across time. This perception also hovered around several revivals that honored Ailey's mentor Lester Horton, including *Liberian Suite* (1952, revived 1975) and *Sarong Paramarimbo* (1950, revived 1989).¹⁸ Each of these works inspired commentary that deemed it old-fashioned or of another time. While the works found limited currency in the Ailey repertory through time, their production amid the company's rising general fortunes confirmed the viability of Ailey's repertory gambit. If enough of the revivals could be deemed successful by dancers, audiences, and critics, there would be room for works that exposed the Ailey dancers to balletic fluidity (MacDonald), classically-shaped narrative modern dance (Limón), 1950s-era jazz ballet (Robbins), as well as the work of Ailey's most influential dance teacher (Horton).

Deforming Mastery

Another problem that faced Ailey's dancers in revivals of work at odds with Horton and Dunham techniques involved the effort expended to construct performances of work that did not overwhelm the ideologies of the original. For example, the Robbins work *NY Export: Opus Jazz* traded on the physical novelty of turned-in legs, slumped shoulders, and a studied, casual indifference to the presence of weight: aspects at odds with the classical ballet technique that formed its choreographic base. When performed by Robbins's company in the 1950s, the work inspired audience approval for its "delightful distillation of our jazz fads and fancies."¹⁹ Unlike the majority of Robbins's dancers, Ailey dancers routinely embraced jazz aesthetics as much more than a "fad" or "fancy"; jazz could provide access to individual expression within a group dynamic, a flash of spiritual energy, or the possibility for spontaneous citation through movement. These aspects had not figured in Robbins's staging of the work. In its revival thirty-five years later, then, Ailey dancers made choices to honor its movement aesthetic at the expense of commonly-understood expressive possibilities related to jazz. A review of the Ailey revival noted that the dancers "approach the choreography here too carefully and too reverently. They strive for the precision that Mr. Robbins demands but do not quite achieve the freedom that experienced ballet dancers would find more easily" in the work.²⁰

At issue, then, may be what the dancers bring to the work as practitioners of Africanist aesthetic imperatives. We must note the high value that African American rhetorical practices place on a competitive "mastery of form" and attendant code-switching processes that allow for a simultaneous "deformation of mastery" in performance. To paraphrase literary theorist Houston Baker to my own ends, mastery of form suggests discursive strategies that allow for articulations of African American

¹⁸ Other works premiered by the Ailey company and based on Horton exercises include *Variations* by James Truitte (1960) and Ailey's own *Ode and Homage* (1958). More successful works from the Horton oeuvre include *Dedication to Jose Clemente* (1959, acquired 1961) and *The Beloved* (1948, revived 1960 and 1978), which has been performed by several companies, including the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

¹⁹ Howard Taubman, "Ballet: Rousing Success," *New York Times* 9 June 1958: 26.

²⁰ Anna Kisselgoff, "Ailey Troupe Takes Up A Robbins Challenge," *New York Times* 20 December 1993: C11.

subjectivity through the appropriation and reshaping of stereotypical representations of black people, as in the reclaiming of minstrelsy by black artists at the beginning of the twentieth century. Its corollary process, deformation of mastery, allows black people to reveal themselves to themselves through established representational structures, as in the radical compositional revisionings of bebop jazz in the 1940s. Mastery may be deformed through code shifting, revealing possibilities of expression that extend the original gesture.

But what of the dance revivals that allowed for little or no deformation of mastery? How could Ailey dancers fulfill Africanist aesthetic demands of “functionalism—becoming the thing that you dance”²¹ in work that denied individual revisioning of form in the pursuit of interpretive fullness? As the Robbins example suggests, the dancers could not always bring their unique abilities to bear on work of another era and idiom. To generalize broadly, revivals of works with the largest amounts of precise choreographic information fared poorest in the translation to Ailey company dancers.

Revivals of other works that suggested choreographic idiom but allowed for expansive interpretation proved far more successful in the repertory. John Butler’s balletic duet *After Eden* (1956, revived 1974 and 1989) allowed engagement with classical ballet technique within a blankly passionate, agonized tale of Adam and Eve after their fall from grace. Two Pearl Primus works based upon her anthropological research in West Africa, *Fanga* (1949, revived 1974) and *The Wedding* (1961, revived 1974), employed dance motions adapted from social situations that Primus had encountered, re-arranged for the stage to become choreography that veered the closest to traditional African dance that the Ailey company ever performed. Iconoclastic choreographer Rudy Perez’s two solos, *Countdown* and *Coverage II* (both 1966, revived 1977), both performed by dancer Clive Thompson, offered Ailey audiences a glimpse of postmodern literalness in work that explored stillness and everyday gesture in oblique theatrical depictions of socially-inscribed repression. *Countdown*, ironically set to selections from the “Songs of Auvergne” by Cantaloube, and *Coverage II*, set to an assembled score of random sounds including bagpipes, news announcements, and popular music, suggested a relationship between the Ailey company and the downtown New York dance scene that remained unmatched in the repertory. Most importantly, these three works, like other successful revivals presented by the company, allowed for performative interpretations of their form, such that individual dancers could engage their compositional ideologies from their unique kinetic vantage points, while still creating recognizable versions of the dances.

Whose Work to Revive?

As Ailey’s ecumenical project gained momentum, it raised inevitable issues of inclusion and exclusion. In the first decades of the Ailey company’s existence, its repertory was limited by circumstances: choreographers who were willing to work with the African American-inflected company, able to offer work that suited the dancers and Ailey’s core audience, and amenable to the difficult economic and time-restrictive situation of its work schedule were few and far between. Over time, though,

²¹ See Delores Cayou, *Modern Jazz Dance* (Palo Alto: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1971), 8.

the company's fortunes and reputation shifted; contributing to its repertory became a welcome prospect for many. For example, Lar Lubovitch emerged as an unexpected ally to the Ailey repertory, and contributed several works based in his trademark sensuous physicality: the duet *The Time Before The Time After (After The Time Before)* (1972, acquired 1977), *Les Noces* (1976, acquired 1979), *North Star* (1987, acquired 1990), *Fandango* (1990, acquired 1995), and *Cavalcade* (1981, acquired 1996). Surprisingly, the Lubovitch revivals drew on the repertory of an artist with his own company that performed them in some of the same venues as did Ailey's. In this, Ailey confirmed that his company held no proprietary claims on works, as he either invited comparisons with nearly-concurrent performances, or, perhaps more rightly, assumed that his core audience diverged neatly from that of the Lubovitch troupe.²²

Following Ailey's desire to honor his African American colleagues, the company also became a repository for works by choreographers without companies of their own, including Talley Beatty, Ulysses Dove, and Donald McKayle. Works by these artists fulfilled Ailey's intention to honor legacies of African American dance artistry by creating a performance site for work that he and his core audiences admired as it explored aspects of African American corporeality. Alongside Ailey and Jamison, these three choreographers provided the bulk of works performed by the company, in either revivals of older work, acquisition of recent work made for other companies, or commissions of new work. Performances of six works by Beatty, seven by McKayle, and six by Dove allowed several cohorts of Ailey dancers to hone skills distinctive to each choreographer's oeuvre: technical facility in exceedingly-packed movement phrases that stress kinetic agility (Beatty); narrative storytelling of historical black subjects in dramatic, humanistic scenarios (McKayle); and oblique depictions of culturally-inscribed violence contained by harshly-wrought gestures of excessive force (Dove).²³ Despite the difference in choreographic idioms, these works were recognized by audiences as studies of black life in provocative variety.

Reviving Dunham: The Singular Composite

The most extravagant revival Ailey engineered during his lifetime had to be the 1987 evening-length presentation of *The Magic of Katherine Dunham*. Conceived by Ailey and staged and overseen by Dunham herself, the three-act work provided a sampling of Dunham's incredibly diverse dance theater artistry, ranging from her early *L'Ag'Ya* (1938), the theatrical version of a Martinique fighting dance she had witnessed during her research in the Caribbean, through *Afrique* (1950), one of the last works she made for the Broadway stage. The production featured reconstructed sets

²² Although the Ailey company has not released statistics on the ethnic identification of its audiences over the years, many critics have commented on its large number of African, Asian, Latino, and Native members.

²³ The works referred to include six by Beatty: *Congo Tango Palace* and *Tocatta* (both 1960, acquired 1964), *The Road of the Phoebe Snow* (1958, revived 1964), *Come and Get the Beauty of it Hot* (1960, acquired 1964, revived 1978), *The Black Belt* (1968), and *The Stack-Up* (1982, revived 1997); seven by McKayle: *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder* (1959, revived 1972 and 1980), *District Storyville* (1962, revived 1979 and 1991), *Blood Memories* (1976), *Collage* (1984), *Games* (1951, revived 1990), *Angelitos Negros* (1974, revived 1991), and *Donald McKayle's Danger Run* (1999); and six by Dove: *Inside (Between Love . . . and Love)* (1980), *Night Shade* (1984), *Bad Blood* (1984, acquired 1986), *Vespers* (1986, acquired 1987), *Episodes* (1989, revived 1998), and *Urban Folk Dance* (1990, acquired 1995).



Figure 2. Theatricalized Social Dance Hybridity: (from left): Members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (Clover Mathis, Donna Wood, Thea Nerissa Barnes, and Michihiko Oka) in Katherine Dunham's *Choros*, 1973. Photo: Rosemary Winckley, courtesy of Alvin Ailey Archives.

and costumes based on original designs by John Pratt, who had been Dunham's husband, and an ambitious line-up of some seventeen individual works, including *Nanigo* (1938), *Plantation Dances* (1938), *Barrelhouse* (1938), *Los Indios* (1939), *Cakewalk* (1940), *Flaming Youth* (1944), *Choros* (1944), and *Shango* (1945). Although lavishly produced, the production failed to garner strong responses from audiences or company dancers, in some part due to each group being unfamiliar with the presentation of an entire evening of one choreographer's work.²⁴ By the time of the Dunham evening, Ailey's mixed repertory project had prepared audiences and dancers for choreographic diversity across idioms, rather than across the creative imagination of a single artist. In one analysis, no matter how extraordinarily diverse Dunham's creative palette, the evening bore political resemblance to the totalizing individualistic efforts of choreographers like Martha Graham, whose company performed only her own work.

Daring as a programming choice, the Dunham evening honored dance as a realm of African American endeavor, a site of memory that underscored differences of cultural history, dance technique, spectatorship, theatricality, and musicianship. In each of these areas, the Dunham evening suggested times forgotten or lost: the dance traditions of Island nations, reflected through classical ballet alongside Dunham's own movement innovations, that invited audiences to view—at times passively—spectacular

²⁴ See Vève Clark, "Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro-Caribbean Dance: Katherine Dunham's Choreography, 1938–1987," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, ed. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 188–204.

costumes and settings enlivened by a large cohort of musicians. A success as a project of revival, the evening situated Ailey's company as supremely able to master the form of Dunham's work. But, as with the Jerome Robbins revival, critique of the evening centered on an unusual performance timidity: ". . . we see the dancers being a bit too careful. . . . Today's dancers tend to be 'cool.' Miss Dunham's were 'hot.'"²⁵ From this perspective, the Ailey dancers failed to deform their mastery of Dunham's technique so that their individual energies could permeate the performance.²⁶

Making New Work within the Composite Space

While revivals and acquisitions of completed work aided Ailey's desire to sustain a modern dance repertory group, the commissioning of new work by both young and established choreographers stood as equally important to his company plan. Of course, over more than forty-five years of operations, commissioned works varied in quality of experience for dancers and audiences, and the Ailey company has staged its fair share of unrewarding works, including Margo Sappington's widely disparaged *Medusa* of 1978.²⁷ Notable, however, is the sustained commitment to commissions that has brought forth vital experiments in movement vocabularies and choreographic themes. In 1969, for example, Ailey commissioned four world-premiere works by four choreographers: *Poème* by Pauline Koner, *Scrum* by Robert Schwartz, *Panambi* by Michael Smuin, and *Threnody* by Richard Wagner. As if in accord with Ailey's concern about the vulnerability of concert dance, only the Koner work lasted more than a season of performances.

In an effort to enlarge the composite capacities of dance theater creation, Ailey company commissioning operations have nurtured women choreographers of any ethnicity, as well as African American choreographers without regard to gender or sexuality. Viewing the company itself as an obvious source of budding choreographers, Ailey frequently encouraged company members to create choreography, and, at least in the case of Ulysses Dove, some continued to achieve international acclaim. Other affiliated Ailey artists who have made dances include Kelvin Rotardier (*Child of the Earth* and *The Changeling*, both 1970, and *Tell It Like It Is*, 1988); John Parks (*Black Unionism*, 1970, and *Nubian Lady*, 1972); Miguel Godreau (*Paz*, 1970); Marlene Furtick (*How Long Have It Been?*, 1973); and Judith Jamison (*Divining*, 1984). Under Jamison's artistic direction, the company has continued to encourage its own members, including Dwight Rhoden (*Frames*, 1992, and *Chocolate Sessions*, 2000); Earl Mosley (*Days Past, Not Forgotten*, 1997); Troy Powell (*Ascension*, 1998); and Lisa Johnson (*Restricted*, 1998). In addition to providing new repertory, this policy had drawn attention to the needs of dancers facing the often-difficult transition from performance to other careers, as well as the responsibility of the company to smooth that shift in creative ways. In 1994 Jamison developed the "Women's Choreography Initiative" for the Ailey company and produced several of her own new works through this project, as

²⁵ Anna Kisselgoff, "Dance: Alvin Ailey Company Salutes Dunham," *New York Times* 4 December 1987: C3.

²⁶ In all, the Dunham evening was extremely expensive and disruptive to Ailey company operations. See Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 379–81 for an extended account.

²⁷ See Anna Kisselgoff, "Margo Sappington 'Medusa' Given Premiere at the Ailey," *New York Times* 3 December 1978: 101.

well as Brenda Way's *Scissors, Paper, Stone* and Elisa Monte's *Mnemonic Verses*, both in 1994, and Lynn Taylor Corbett's *Prayers from the Edge* and Francesca Harper's *Apex*, both in 2002. Regrettably, only the Corbett work lasted more than a single season of performances.

At times, Ailey invited elder dance celebrities to make work for his company, presumably as a way to both honor their experience and to connect younger dancers to their distinctive stylistic nuances. Famed dancers Janet Collins (*Canticle of the Elements*, 1974), John Jones (*Nocturne*, 1974), and Carmen de Lavallade (*Sweet Bitter Love*, 2000) each made small works that relied mostly on their performers' personality rather than any strict choreographic structure. In placing these veteran dancers in the studio with younger interpreters, the Ailey company enabled dancers to connect corporeally across generations—a fact that may be more important than the work produced by the commissions.

The most anticipated commissions for the company came from master African American choreographers, including Beatty, McKayle, and Ailey himself, along with Louis Johnson (*Fontessa and Friends*, 1981, revived 1992), Billy Wilson (*Concerto in F*, 1981, and *The Winter in Lisbon*, 1992), Bill T. Jones (*Fever Swamp*, 1983, revived 1999), Garth Fagan (*Jukebox for Alvin*, 1993), and Jawolle Willa Jo Zollar (*B Flat Avenue C Sharp Street*, 1999). Although the Zollar commission disappointed some audiences and critics, her 1988 work *Shelter* inspired another grand experiment in repertory. Originally made for Zollar's all-female company, the Urban Bush Women, this searing indictment of homeless life was acquired for the women of Ailey in 1992, then subsequently coached and revived by a cast of male dancers in 1995. The shift in tonality from a "woman's piece" to a work that could encompass men invited audiences to consider the mutability of gender in dance performance.²⁸

Ailey's strategy of commissions allowed emerging choreographers an opera house-scaled performance platform from which to explore, and Louis Falco's controversial *Caravan* (1976, revived 2001), which included a dance on oversized platform shoes and a score of reworked Duke Ellington standards set to a pulsating disco beat, surely fulfilled this conceit. In recent years, Donald Byrd has enjoyed a relationship with the company that produced his works *Shards* (1988), *Dance at the Gym* (1991, revived 2001), *A Folk Dance* (1992), *Fin de Siècle* (1997), and *Burlesque* (2002, acquired 2004); while Alonzo King's *Following the Subtle Current Upstream* (2000) and *Heart Song* (2003), along with Ronald K. Brown's *Grace* (1999), enjoyed wide acclaim at their respective premieres, and have remained in the repertory ever since. Works by these younger artists imagine the composite bodies of Ailey dancers as a starting point for their movement inventions. For example, Byrd often sutures the weighty stance of modern dance to the upward-directed leaping and fully-extended limbs of classical ballet technique; King explores the spontaneous interior kinetic impulses of the dancer through phantasmagoric extensions of ballet technique; whereas Brown places neo-African movement ideologies that focus on the release of energy alongside social stances common to urban black nightclubs.

²⁸ Bill T. Jones engaged a similar logic of gender revision when he added a single woman to the six-person cast of his originally all-male *Fever Swamp* (1983) for its revival by the Ailey company in 1999.



Figure 3. Staging Ethnic Diversity: Carmen de Lavallade (*center*) and members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Glen Tetley's *Mountainway Chant*, 1962. Photographer unknown; courtesy of Alvin Ailey Archives.

Commissioning Ideologies

From the beginning, choreographers commissioned by the Ailey company have enjoyed a unique opportunity to create work for an expert ensemble of mostly African diaspora artists that would be seen by audiences around the world. For example, among the company's first commissions, Glen Tetley's *Mountainway Chant* (1962) was expressly created for a thirteen-week engagement in Southeast Asia and Australia sponsored by President Kennedy's Special International Program for Cultural Presentations. Tetley used the opportunity to create a theatrical enactment of a Native American ceremony, staged to emphasize the dramatic abilities of soloist Carmen de Lavallade, cast here as a tribal maiden. As de Lavallade danced on a small circular platform decorated with plumed staves, other company members outfitted in heavy animal-skin costumes oversaw an obscure ritual ostensibly based on Navaho traditions. The work served as both an evocation of ethnic diversity in America and as an exotic spectacle, as it allowed fair-skinned de Lavallade to suggest the composite body of African and Native American heritage. Whatever its merits, though, the work was never shown in the US.

In 1978, Ailey commissioned a work from choreographer and activist Eleo Pomare. A decade earlier, Pomare had been an outspoken critic of Ailey's integrationist aesthetic interests that seemed to minimize the need for political mobilization by black

dancers and audiences.²⁹ Active in the Black Arts Movement as well as the New York City Dancemobile project, which brought modern dance to black communities on the back of a flatbed truck, Pomare may have seemed an unlikely choice to make a work for an international, opera-house dance audience.³⁰ Nevertheless, he seized the opportunity to create an explicitly political historical work about the wages of racism titled *Blood Burning Moon*. Set to an assembled jazz score by Yusef Lateef, Duke Ellington, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, the work drew its libretto from a short story by Jean Toomer first published in the 1923 opus *Cane*. Similar in theme to Katherine Dunham's *Southland* of 1951,³¹ *Blood Burning Moon* explored the social consequences of a black woman laborer involved with two men, one a white overseer and the other a black canefield worker. When the overseer is killed by the fieldhand in a fight over the woman, a white lynch mob surges forth to hang the black man. Stark in tone, and overtly critical of inequitable racialized justice systems at work in the US, the dance also called into question the wages of beauty, labor and gender division, and, of course, race.

Where *Blood Burning Moon* laid bare divisions of race and sexuality, another more controversial work undermined the stability of concert dance choreography divided by idiom. In 1985, Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane created *How to Walk an Elephant*, a deconstruction of movement ideas from George Balanchine's celebrated *Serenade* (1934).³² Titled in ironic reference to the seeming domination of ballet as high modernist expression—the elephant in need of a walk—the Jones-Zane work visually referenced sections of Balanchine's groupings and patterns, at times with direct quotation of movement sequences. Set to experimental player-piano music by Conlon Nancarrow, the work for twelve dancers inspired heated debate among dance aficionados offended by its loopy, irreverent tone.³³

None of these three commissioned works lasted beyond their first season of performances, surely in some part because their successes were heavily mitigated by incomplete and fragmentary conceptual, theatrical, and kinetic ideas. As examples of the range of work that Ailey commissioned, however, they confirm an array of material that embraced, respectively, performing an ethnic Other, confronting a history of institutionalized racism with potent theatrical venom, and the irreverence of cultural appropriation embodied by African diaspora modern dancers inhabiting gestures of a Euro-American ballet classic. The fact that Ailey's company performed this repertory for an ever-expanding international audience also confirms an assessment

²⁹ See Ric Estrada, "3 Leading Negro Artists and How They Feel About Dance in the Community: Eleo Pomare, Pearl Primus and Arthur Mitchell," *Dance Magazine* (November 1968): 45–48.

³⁰ The Dancemobile project, founded by Pomare in 1967, demands scholarly documentation.

³¹ For an overview of the Dunham work, see Constance Valis Hill, "Katherine Dunham's *Southland*: Protest in the Face of Repression," in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 289–316.

³² Balanchine's work, first performed by students of the School of American Ballet, explored neoclassic movements through shifting arrangements of ballerinas and cavaliers.

³³ Anna Kisselgoff, "The Dance: Alvin Ailey Performs 'Elephant,'" *New York Times* 7 December 1985: 14. Kisselgoff termed the work "not so much offensive as it is pointless. At best, it is a misguided homage to Balanchine; at worst, an exploitation of his legacy." See also, Anna Kisselgoff, "Experimental Works Are Not Necessarily Built to Last," *New York Times* 21 December 1986: H19.

of the company's rising stature and artistic stability, whether its repertory commissions were deemed repeatable or not.

The Demands of, and Reactions to, Repertory

To achieve the technical demands of dances with varied themes, movement idioms, historical legacies, and artistic intentions that the repertory required, Ailey reversed the rhetorical trend separating modern dance from ballet to predict the necessity for ballet training for all of his company's dancers. The presumption that all members of a modern dance company would acquire a basic technique in ballet had little precedent in American concert dance before the 1950s. By the 1960s an ever-expanding group of professional dance artists sought a pliant relationship between specific modern dance techniques and ballet. Dunham, Graham, and Humphrey (through her protégé Limón) each allowed ballet technique to influence his or her modern work, and increasing numbers of dancers studied several techniques to elevate their own kinesthetic awareness as well as to increase employment opportunities in the dance marketplace. When Ailey himself choreographed works for the Joffrey Ballet, the Harkness Ballet, and American Ballet Theatre in the 1960s,³⁴ he came to appreciate the power and line that ballet training afforded its devotees. By 1970, he required ballet as a basic technique taught to his company and at his school.

As a choreographer, Ailey gravitated toward the qualities of balance and sculptural abstraction that the balletic line offered. He also came to admire the muscular flexibility that ballet training afforded his dancers, and encouraged changes in the tone of his own choreography to accommodate advanced ballet technique. For example, in "Fix Me, Jesus" of his *Revelations*, movements that had little obvious reference to ballet adagio in the 1960s came to be performed in the 1970s as explorations of line amplitude and tensility. In the "Sinner Man" section of the same work, advanced ballet training allowed for multiple pirouettes and precise body-line placement in a series of leaps across the floor. These shifts in the tone of the dance placed *Revelations* in kinetic dialogue with other ballet-based works in the repertory, including Todd Bolender's *The Still Point* (1954, revived 1980).

Certainly, ballet technique smoothed over differences between varied movement idioms represented in the Ailey company's repertory. Motions that had been born from a feral manipulation of gestural attack, or a rhythmic release of the torso, for example, could not be accommodated by ballet technique. More than this, the political ideology of ballet as a presentational idiom developed to display the body and its movement possibilities to a motionless audience frequently was at odds with work that hoped to express the spirit or soul of a community in motion. Ballet never stood alone as a technique: no matter the work at hand, ballet technique had to be sutured to other technical approaches in order to enhance Ailey company performances.

Not surprisingly, the most balletic works in the repertory, including Ailey's own *The River* (1970 by the American Ballet Theatre, acquired by Ailey Company, 1981),

³⁴ For a complete analysis of works Ailey made for these ballet companies, see Thomas F. DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 136–59.

suffered most in the shift from ballet company to modern dance repertory. As performed by ballet dancers, sections of *The River* shimmer with a directness of focus and lightness of weight that allow the work to flow vibrantly. But in many instances, performances of this work by the Ailey company replace a lightness of the feet with a textured grasp of the floor that significantly alters the shape of its steps. In this case, balletic choreography landed ineffectively on the Ailey dancers, who deformed its aesthetic intentions without notable gain.

Ailey Style

Indeed, dance pedagogies may be equivalent in their ultimate intention to train dancers in a particular grammar of motion, but each technique fits differently on each body it trains. Specialized techniques, including ballet and the Graham technique, discipline the body toward a particularized silhouette and deployment of weight, speed, focus, rhythm, and body line. While a large cohort of Ailey company dancers have been extremely well trained in several dance idioms, some dancers struggle mightily with the demands of varied repertory. When in kinetic doubt, these dancers have relied on a performance style that connects different movement grammars whether they are related or not. At the present time, an almost palpable Ailey company style of performance mitigates differences in choreographic grammar so that audiences can recognize the dancers inside the dance, regardless of the idiom of dance being performed.

All dancers in the Ailey company are expected to be able to perform the company's repertory within the prevailing Ailey style of the day.³⁵ This style is elusive to define, and, most importantly, shifts regularly according to the company's membership. At times the company has been imbued with a deep, emotional humanism; an ebullient, youthful optimism; or a chilly, technical precision. None of these characterizations by critics and audiences of the company's style has lasted longer than a decade. But because the company members train in several dance techniques (including at least Horton, Dunham, Graham, and ballet) and achieve differing levels of mastery in these techniques, the mitigating element of a performance style necessarily links the dance artists together.

Some dance aficionados have disparaged the relative importance of style over technique in Ailey company performances.³⁶ Certainly, a unified performance style emphasizes common denominators of rhythmic attack and physical approach to movement, whether dance gestures originally possessed these similarities or not. But at times, specific movement idioms may be too easily blurred, and Ailey company performances may distill particular gestures into an approximation that suits the stylistic tendency of the day. When this happens, the varied repertory may become diffused and relieved of its specificity, even as it is smoothed into a manageable whole.

³⁵ The Ailey company has grown steadily in size, from six dancers in the late 1950s to a company of thirty in 2005.

³⁶ Among countless articles in this vein, see Anna Kisselgoff, "Has Ailey Really Gone Commercial?," *New York Times* 17 December 1978: D26; Robert J. Pierce, "They Certainly Are Physical," *Soho Weekly News* 16 December 1976; Arlene Croce, "Dreams That Money Can Buy," in *Afterimages* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 281–87.

But what happens if we think of the Ailey style as a foundational technique? What if the style/technique offers a means to connect the diverse array of composite bodies that form the company and allows them to produce a recognizably black embodiment across movement idioms? In this proposition, the elusive style provides the mortar between seemingly disparate blocks of movement ideology. In some respects, the Ailey style may offer its own deformation of mastery for the entire cohort of Ailey dancers, as it shifts the emphases of particular movement idioms toward a performance endorsed by the group and its core audience.

Ailey's Contribution to the Repertory

At times, Ailey's own contribution to his company's repertory became contingent upon either the casting needs of guest choreographers, or the need to fill a programmatic void left by the expressive limits of guest artist work in a particular season. For example, in 1972 Ailey created a fifteen-minute idyll titled *The Lark Ascending*. Set to Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Romance for Violin and Orchestra*, the work referred to a fluidity and suppleness of line long absent from Ailey's own choreographic palette, even as it offered its dancers a formidable challenge of sustained lyricism. In context with other works in the Ailey repertory that year, including revivals of Donald McKayle's weighty chain-gang drama *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder* (1959, revived 1972 and 1980) and Brian MacDonald's tribal mating-ritual ballet *Time Out of Mind* (1962, revived 1971), Ailey's dance offered its performers an engagement with movement as it might express emotional valences of naïveté or innocence.

Two years later, Ailey made *The Mooche*, a strange, moody suite ostensibly celebrating four African American women entertainers, which emerged as one of Ailey's most spectacular dance theater works, handily able to anchor the company's ambitious 1976 Duke Ellington Festival. Originally created in 1974 for a troupe of preprofessional students from the Ailey school for a television special,³⁷ the work was revised and expanded for the stage a year later. Its depiction of considerable glamour, outfitted with chic 1920s costumes by Randy Barcelo and an extravagant art deco setting of mirrored panels and neon lighting designed by Rouben Ter-Arutunian, allowed the work to function as a much-needed spectacle, commensurate with those common to the stages of ballet companies.

While Ailey may have been partially inspired to make these two works in response to his company's repertory needs, each of them achieved success and survived in the company repertory through 2005. Judith Jamison has continued the gesture of choreographing in order to diversify the repertory, and in the process made unexpected works. For example, *Hymn* (1993), a text-based work for the full company and guest artist Anna Deavere Smith, featured Smith embodying the words of dancers based on interviews she conducted. *Double Exposure* (2000), a technologically-innovative work for five dancers, employed live video feed from tiny cameras worn by the dancers projected onto a huge screen at the back of the stage. (See the back cover of this issue.)

Of course, performances of Ailey's most famous choreography, *Revelations* (1960), fulfill the company's need for a perennial signature work. Unlike any other work in

³⁷ The program *Ailey Celebrates Ellington* was broadcast by CBS on Thanksgiving Day, 28 November 1974.



Figure 4. Spectacular African American Celebrity: Sarita Allen (*center*) and members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Alvin Ailey's *The Mooche*, 1976.
Photo: Bill Hilton, courtesy of Alvin Ailey Archives.

the repertory, *Revelations* has enjoyed continuous production since its premiere, and its performance is regarded as an essential offering by the Ailey company in any part of the world.³⁸ Its surging group compositions, exploration of spirituality, and upbeat, measured optimism distinguish the work from other pieces that have come and gone over forty-five years of company operation. In this way, *Revelations* grounds the Ailey company's diverse repertory, as its continued performance fulfills Ailey's goal of presenting classic works from the modern dance repertory even as it creates a reflecting plane against which all new work must imagine itself.

In continual annual commissions of new work and revivals of old work, Ailey's repertory plan engages dancers and audiences with a range of material that otherwise would be unavailable to them. For the dancers, the varied repertory makes elaborate kinetic demands that reach far beyond the purview of any single choreographer's vision. Audiences are invited to view a shifting roster of choreographic grammars and relationships of movement to music, theme, and theatricality. The artistic demands of such a diverse repertory are not invisible, but they surely emerge in productive tension with Ailey's fulfilled ambition to create a modern dance repertory that could serve its dancers, audiences, and its own historical legacy as a vulnerable but vital performance

³⁸ For a discussion that troubles the "necessity" of *Revelations* in the Ailey repertory, see Thomas F. DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), especially 89–92 and 236–40.

tradition. By the mid-1970s, many regional American modern dance repertory companies followed Ailey's lead in presenting revivals of classic works and commissions of new work from various choreographers.³⁹

Ailey's gambit created a composite body of repertory within modern dance, one that could encompass work from several eras and ideologies. The company also values the individual composite bodies of its dancers, as it has encouraged each artist to bring varied training and personal histories onto the stage. Ailey repeatedly told reporters that he was not interested in "cookie-cutter dancers"; the same may be said of his choices to build repertory. Ailey and his dancers proved mastery of several dance idioms, as they allowed individual black selves to emerge in the staging of a vast repertory built from emphatically varied movement grammars. In this confirmation of diverse performance personae available to an ever-expanding cohort of black dancers, the Ailey company reveals a shifting, vibrating black self constantly in the process of becoming manifest through performance.

³⁹ A number of regional dance companies adopted Ailey's model of mixed repertory by several choreographers working in varied dance idioms as standard company technique, including Dayton Contemporary Dance Company (founded by Jeraldine Blunden in 1968), the Philadelphia Dance Company (founded by Joan Myers Brown in 1969), Denver's Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Company (founded in 1970), Dallas Black Dance Theatre (founded by Anne Williams in 1976), and Lula Washington's Los Angeles Contemporary Dance Theater (founded in 1980). Note that these are all African American-identified companies that employ an integrated roster of dancers led by a large cohort of African diaspora artists. Only more recently have other companies begun to explore mixed repertory, as in the examples of the Graham and Limón companies, both of whose founding directors have died.