

7 **Simmering Passivity**

The Black Male Body in Concert Dance

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Racial division, cultural fragmentation, and the absence of critical theory devoted to Afro-performance have contributed to the historical displacement of dance created by African-American men. This essay addresses the presence and potency of the black male body in concert dance through a consideration of: 1) strategies governing performance in the Afro-American grain, 2) critical reception of dancers and dances by mainstream press, and 3) analysis of representation as it is described by performance.

MARKED MEN IN SLAVE SOCIETY

The black man's body entered American consciousness as a powerful exotic commodity: a slave. Objectified on the auction blocks of the African gold coast and the Caribbean, his body reached American shores bearing a tangle of opposing physical imperatives. As commodity, it was to hold enormous labor capacity; while as personal property, it was to be eminently repressible, docile, passive. These contradictory demands fed not only the physical foundations of slave society; they also framed modes of stage performance later practiced by black men, including concert dance.

Slave society strictly regulated public dancing by black men before the 1800s. Uprisings, such as the South Carolina Stono Insurrection of 1739 linked the dancing body with rebellion: the resultant slave laws of 1740 prohibited any Negro from "beating drums, blowing horns or the like which might on occasion be used to arouse slaves to insurrectionary activity" (Winter 1947: 28). Drum dancing solidified connections between the slaves' varied West African cultures; to minimize these powerful affinities, slave owners legislated performance and carefully regulated dancing affairs which might provide opportunities "to exchange information and plot insurrections" (Hazzard-Gordon 1990: 33). Dancing came "under the strict governance and supervision of whites who legitimized violence as a means of controlling the slave population" (ibid.: 13). Eventually, serious dancing went underground, and dances which carried significant aesthetic information became disguised or hidden from public view.¹ For white audiences, the black man's dancing body came to carry only the information of its surface.

Black men approaching the concert stage also had to confront deeply entrenched, two-dimensional public perceptions formed by the minstrel stereotypes of the 1800s. Minstrelsy, a form of stage caricature created for white audiences, developed in response to a never-ending fascination with African retentions visible in Afro-American cultural habits. Performed by black and white men in blackface aping the plantation manners and festival dances of southern slaves,² the minstrel show solidified around 1840 and remained popular until the turn of the century. Its preferred format featured competitive and eccentric dances, boastful struts and cakewalks, and freakishly stylized characters, including stock types Zip Coon, Jim Crow, and Master Juba (Abrahams 1992: 145).

Built upon flamboyant exaggeration, minstrel stereotypes added a theatrical distance between white audiences and black male performers. Minstrelsy's success "placed American actors of all sorts in the position of agreeing to play black," with mannerisms grossly magnified and patently artificial (ibid.: 134). African-American William Henry Lane originated the stage persona of Master Juba c. 1840. In publicity, Master Juba, the internationally acclaimed "King of All Dancers," performed "irresistible, ludicrous, as well as scientific imitation dances . . . of all the principal Ethiopian Dancers in the United States. After which he will give an imitation of himself . . ." (Winter 1947: 33). Billed as an "imitation" performer, Lane in the persona of Master Juba buffered associations between the potent black body onstage and the preferred impotent everyday, male slave body.

Minstrelsy exploited cultural misreadings to survive as popular entertainment long after the Civil War. Although generations of black dancers learned their craft from the minstrel stages, "minstrelsy . . . fixed the tradition of the Negro as only an irresponsible, happy-go-lucky, wide-grinning, loud-laughing, shuffling, banjo-playing, singing, dancing sort of being" (Johnson 1930: 93). The stereotype of a singing and dancing "sort of [black] being" hardened, and Broadway musicals of the early 1900s typically presented black men as easy-going innocents whose dancing abilities could be fully appreciated in the simple delight they provided. Williams and Walker, the most popular blackface duo of this era, achieved their greatest fame in eccentric dances: Walker, the dandyish "Zip Coon" type, executed dynamic, high-stepping cakewalks "throwing his chest and his buttocks out in opposite directions, until he resembled a pouter pigeon more than a human being" (Emery 1988: 212); while Williams, the woeful, "Jim Crow" bumpkin, "brought down the house with a terrific Mooche or Grind - a sort of shuffle, combining rubberlegs with rotating hips" (Stearns 1968: 197). The minstrel mask defined the black man's body as eccentric, strange, physically dynamic, hysterically out of control, and naive. As minstrel historian Marian Hannah Winter wryly notes, "The word 'beautiful' was almost never used to describe minstrel dancing" (Winter 1947: 34).

Minstrel dance performance by black men amplified issues of body control, power, and physical expression embedded within the restrictions of segregated society. Racial division marked the black body in public American discourse, and mystified dance styles rarely witnessed by whites. The development of modernism and a corresponding interest in African arts suggested the potentially powerful convergence of social dance styles and Afro-American theme for African-American men involved in concert dance.

EARLY CONCERT DANCERS

Black men entered the concert dance arena in the late 1920s, and the earliest dances they performed were aligned with modernism in terms of theme, conception, and technique.³ Hemsley Winfield organized several performance groups between 1925 and 1934, including the Negro Art Theater, and choreographed dances in the manner of Ruth St. Denis and Helen Tamiris (Perpener 1992: 68). In 1929 he caused a sensation dancing the role of Salome at the Greenwich Village Cherry Lane Theater. Filling in for an absent actress in the all-black cast, Winfield performed “dressed, as it were, in an old bead portiere and nothing else to speak [of]” (Long 1989: 24). Drag performance inevitably confronts boundaries of representation; Winfield’s successful portrayal, however anomalous, focused attention on issues of masculinity, black men, and the modern.

Among Winfield’s numerous concert works, “Life and Death” created for the theatrical pageant *De Promis Lan’* in May, 1930, cast sixteen men as the inexorable force of Death which overcomes the singular being of Life, danced with charismatic vigor by the choreographer himself. A version of this piece became a staple of Winfield’s frequent concert presentations until his sudden death in 1933. Reviews and photographs indicate that “Life and Death” bore stylistic resemblances to Ted Shawn’s playfully organized movement choirs, but Winfield’s dance predated the first concerts of Shawn’s all-male company. Modern dance by a large group of men which didn’t trade on minstrel stereotypes stood well outside performance norms of the time. Typically, black bodies were essentialized as the material of naive, “primitive” dance.

Winfield premiered his solo, “Bronze Study,” at the historic “First Negro Dance Recital in America” co-directed by Winfield and Ruth St. Denis disciple Edna Guy on April 29, 1931. Writing for the *New York Times*, John Martin dismissed the dance as “merely the exhibition of an exemplary physique.” For Martin, physique, and its implicit work potential, lingered as the raw material of the dancing black body’s value. But surely Winfield’s posturing, however prosaic, sought to subvert the critical eye which refused to see beyond race. It is possible that “Bronze Study” replaced the simple marking of an “exemplary black body” with more complex distinctions of muscle tone, flexibility, stillness, cool stance, and most importantly, the public discourse of skin color.

Although the abatement of strict segregation throughout the 1930s allowed some black dancers to perform in integrated groups, their presence triggered deep-set racial biases in audiences and critics. In 1931 Randolph Sawyer danced the Blackamoor in the Gluck-Sandor Dance Center's *Petrouchka*. Reviewing the otherwise all-white production, Martin spoke euphemistically of Sawyer's "native talents" which "equip him to do a type of dance quite out of the range of his colleagues" (Martin 1931). Audiences still couldn't understand how that "type of dance," implicated by the mere presence of Sawyer's black body, could converse with ballet.

Other artists worked to align the black male body with social reform. Dancer Add Bates solidified his activities with the Communist Party as a member of the Worker's Dance League. Featured in Edith Segal's "Black and White Solidarity Dance," Bates and his partner are pictured on the cover of the March 1933 *Worker's Theater* (Long 1989: 23). Defiantly posed square to the camera, determined and shirtless, Bates raises his thickly muscled arm to the side, with a tightly clenched fist held at eye level. This powerful image of protest aligns the black dancer's body with subversion, tying its weighty volume to the work of social change.

Most pioneer choreographers working to develop an African-American audience for modern dance stuck close to mainstream models of male representation. Charles Williams formed the Creative Dance Group at Virginia's Hampton Institute in 1934 as an extension of that school's physical education activities. Hampton had been founded as a Reconstruction-era project of the American Missionary Association to socialize former slaves as they prepared for integrated life. Strong on concepts of work and morality, the school adhered to a conservative doctrine of conduct in which there was little place for the modern performing arts. It took a herculean effort on Williams's part to secure school support for the dance company; not surprisingly, the works he created were muted and discreet. Heavily influenced by Ted Shawn's all-male company, which visited Hampton in 1933, Williams made dances which exploited the physical dynamism of Hampton's male dancers in traditionally masculine settings. "Men of Valor" (1934) featured movements derived from track and field events, and "Dis Ole Hammer" (1935) set a labor dance to traditional work songs. Williams also created African dance suites, in collaboration with African students studying at the school, as well as dances with Afro-American themes, including a 1935 suite of *Negro Spirituals* (Perpener 1992: 155-60).

Creative Dance Group, which usually performed for African-American audiences, toured the country extensively throughout the 1930s and 1940s in a standard program that progressed from calisthenics and drills to modern dance pieces (*ibid.*: 159). The company functioned as a proponent of "official" culture, in this case validated by the missionary administration which founded the college. Williams's dutiful presentation of dance as an extension of physical culture which glorified an idealized black masculinity

was certainly not lost on its large African-American audience, even if that representation included only athletic, laboring, or pious men. The Hampton group's performing success influenced the formation of a responsive, core African-American audience for concert dance and led directly to the founding of concert dance companies at other southern black schools including Fisk, Howard, and Spellman College (Emery 1988: 245).

New York performances by Asadata Dafora's African dance company forced issues of authenticity and the native black body for dancers and critics. Dafora staged subtly drawn adaptations of festival dances from his Sierra Leone homeland. *Kykunkor* (1934), the first of several evening-length works mounted by Dafora, drew wide praise for its complex synergy of music and movement. For many critics, the success of Dafora's work hinged upon its use of "authentic" African materials derived from first-hand knowledge of classic West African aesthetics. *Kykunkor* defined successful black concert performance as serious, ritual-based exotica, unimaginably complex and distinct from mainstream modern dance. Though Dafora confirmed the great theatrical potential of West African dance for American audiences and African-American dancers, his success set in motion a critical formula which emphasized the exotic novelty of the black body on the concert stage. From this time on, black dancers became increasingly obliged to prove themselves as "Other" to the concert mainstream.

Some dancers resisted the need to demonstrate their "blackness" in easily stereotyped settings. Growing numbers of classically trained dancers, denied participation in white companies, worked for several short-lived, all-black ballet companies. Eugene Von Grona's American Negro Ballet debuted in 1937 at Harlem's Lafayette Theater. The son of a white American mother and a German father, Von Grona formed a company designed to address "the deeper and more intellectual resources of the Negro race" (Acocella 1982: 24). Before starting performances, he spent three years giving his thirty Harlem company members training in ballet and modern dance relaxation techniques. Von Grona choreographed the group's first program to music by Duke Ellington, Igor Stravinsky, W. C. Handy, and J. S. Bach. Lukewarm critical reception and the absence of a committed audience led to the company's demise after only five months. Aubrey Hitchens's Negro Dance Theater, created in 1953, offered the novelty of an all-male repertory company. English-born Hitchens, who "ardently believed in the special dance talents of the Negro race," mixed ballet works set to Bach with dances to generic blues and jazz (Hitchens 1957: 12).

Both of these companies were formed with the express racist purpose of proving the ability of the black body to inhabit classical ballet technique. The logic that pushed them to capitulate to stereotypical Negro themes in their repertory remains curious. Ballet locates its aesthetic power in the refinement of gesture *away* from everyday bodies and politics; if anything,

a proliferation of black *danseurs* might have inspired a *decline* of color fetish among audiences and critics. It is possible that ballet could have *normalized* the black male body to the degree that the idiom *unmarked* the lingering minstrel persona. In giving their audiences familiar black stage types, however, the “get-down” ballets of these early all-black companies obscured issues of the body, black dancers, and western classicism.

Modern dance allowed for more fluid connections between the dancing body, cultural representation, and dance technique, and the post-World War II era saw a number of dancers and choreographers working to redefine the black male presence on the concert stage. West African aesthetic principles, still prominent in black social dance forms, emerged intact in the concert choreography of Talley Beatty, Louis Johnson, and Donald McKayle, signaling a shift in the political frame surrounding performance. Buoyed by the liberal optimism of the New York dance community of the post-war era, dancers explored ways to self-consciously align power and the black male body onstage.

ALVIN AILEY

Alvin Ailey's career in the late 1950s offers a paradigm of contemporary assumptions surrounding the black male body and concert performance. Ailey's choreography formed fires of black machismo in a number of roles he made for himself which literally displayed his body and cast it as the site of desire. Among his earliest works, *Blues Suite* (1958) transferred to the stage traditional assumptions concerning black male sexuality, including overt aggression, insatiability, and an overwhelming despair deflected by the [hetero]sexual act. As a dancer, Ailey created a persona which redefined popular stereotypes of the black male body on the concert stage to include the erotic.

Ailey was born January 5, 1931 into the abject poverty of rural Texas. The only child of working-class parents who separated when he was an infant, Ailey and his mother moved from town to town as she struggled to provide him with basic sustenance. Strictly segregated life in southeast Texas offered a hostile environment for African-Americans and nurtured a fear and mistrust of whites which Ailey later recalled: “Having that kind of experience as a child left a feeling of rage in me that I think pervades my work” (Ailey 1989: 9). This background also created a fierce pride in black social institutions, including the church and jook joints which figured prominently in his later work (Latham 1973: 446). In 1942 Ailey joined his mother in Los Angeles, where his interest in concert dance was sparked by high school excursions to the ballet and Katherine Dunham's 1945 *Tropical Revue*.

Ailey arrived in California shy, lonely, and particularly sensitive from his itinerant childhood. He found solace in the fantasy world of theater and the movies, and gravitated toward the Hollywood masculinity of dancer

Gene Kelly. Kelly's popularity hinged upon his "man's man" persona: "He was a 'man dancer,' one who did not wear tights. Here was a man who wore a shirt, pants, and a tie and danced like a man!" (Latham 1973: 457). Ailey turned to dance when a high school classmate introduced him to Lester Horton's flamboyantly theatrical Hollywood studio in 1949. Excited by Horton's utopian vision of a multicultural dance melting pot, Ailey poured himself into study and developed a weighty, smoldering performance style that suited both his athletic body and his concern with the representation of masculinity: "I didn't really see myself as a dancer. I mean, what would I dance? It was 1949. A man didn't just become a dancer. Especially a black man" (Gruen 1976: 419).

Ailey may have felt constricted by society at large, but he quickly learned to capitalize on the simmering, hyper-masculine persona he developed at the Horton studio. His appearance in the 1954 Broadway musical *House of Flowers* featured "a very sexy pas de deux" with partner Carmen de Lavallade designed to titillate its mostly white audience (Latham 1973: 500). Among the last-gasp attempts at exoticized, "mostly black" Broadway musicals set in foreign locales, *House of Flowers* boasted an extraordinary company of male dancers including Geoffrey Holder, Arthur Mitchell, Louis Johnson, and Walter Nicks. Truman Capote's libretto described two competing West Indian bordellos, and offered African-American actresses myriad "hooker" roles. According to Brooks Atkinson's *New York Times* review, the cast exuded a predictable exotic-primitive appeal:

Every Negro show includes wonderful dancing. *House of Flowers* is no exception in that respect. Tall and short Negroes, adults and youngsters, torrid maidens in flashy costumes and bare-chested bucks break out into a number of wild, grotesque, animalistic dances . . . [which] look and sound alike by the time of the second act.

(Atkinson 1954: 11)

House of Flowers, a show that embodied the contradictions implicit in racial stereotyping on both sides of the stage lights, introduced Ailey to the New York dance scene as part of the "wildly monotonous" grotesquerie of black bodies performing for white audiences.

Ailey had few African-American mentors, and the concert dance techniques he encountered failed to engage him: "I went to watch Martha Graham, and her dance was finicky and strange. I went to Doris Humphrey and José Limón and I just hated it all. I suppose that I was looking for a technique which was similar to Lester's [Horton] and I just did not find it" (Latham 1973: 582). Between commercial appearances and sporadic dance study, he performed in the one-night seasons of Sophie Maslow, Donald McKayle, and Anna Sokolow. However, Ailey identified more with the theatrical macho of Broadway and Hollywood choreographer Jack Cole: "I was impressed by his style, by the way he danced, by his manner, by the masculinity of his projection, by his fierceness, by his animal-like qualities"

(Ailey and Bailey 1995: 80). While dancing for Cole in the Broadway musical *Jamaica*, Ailey and Ernest Parham gathered a group of dancers to fill an afternoon concert slot at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA on March 30, 1958.

Ailey danced in two of his three world premieres: *Redonda*, a curtain-raiser suite of five dances to a Latin theme, and *Ode and Homage*, a solo dedicated to the memory of Horton. His stage persona in this period, suggested in description, photographs and films, built upon an impassioned flailing of his body through dance passages steeped in fiery cool. Ailey seemed to enjoy tempting his audiences with an exotic allure delivered from the safe distance of the stage. Critics likened his style to the movements of wild animals: Doris Hering, reviewing for *Dance Magazine*, compared him to “a caged lion full of lashing power that he can contain or release at will” (Hering 1958: 27) while John Martin noted his “rich, animal quality of movement and innate sense of theatrical projection” (Martin 1958: 11). Jill Johnston, writing for the *Village Voice*, found Ailey’s over-the-top histrionics perplexing: “he moves constantly, in high gear, as though in a panic, and like a synthetic composite figure of a smattering of contemporary influences” (Johnston 1961: 15). Ailey’s machismo caused P. W. Manchester to quip that he presented a stage world “in which the men are men and the women are frankly delighted about it” (Manchester 1959: 7).

BLUES SUITE

Blues Suite, the third Ailey work premiered on the 1958 program, garnered instant popular and critical acclaim. Drawing on fragments of his Texas childhood, Ailey set the dance in and about a “barrelhouse,” a backwoods music-hall/whorehouse for working-class African-Americans. To a musical background of standard twelve-bar blues, ballads, slowdrags, and shams, archetypal Depression-era characters conveyed the fleeting pleasures of dance buried within an evening fraught with fighting, regret, and despair. Costumed with dazzling Broadway-style flair, the suite sizzled with rage and sorrow, at once highly theatrical and pointedly dramatic.

Ailey’s original program note aligned his dance with cultural roots: “The musical heritage of the southern Negro remains a profound influence on the music of the world. . . . During the dark days the blues sprang full-born from the docks and the fields, saloons and bawdy houses . . . indeed from the very souls of their creators” (Ailey 1958). The note served to validate the blues milieu for an uninitiated white audience by defining it as both personal (coming from the souls of their creators) and artful (part of a profoundly influential musical heritage). The reference to the dark days (of southern slavery) neatly telescoped cultural history into the premise for the dance: audiences were invited to view the dancing black bodies as authentic bearers of the blues. *Blues Suite* intended to map this southern musicality onto the concert dance stage.

The bawdy house setting played directly into traditional stereotyping of the black body as at once morally corrupt and titillating. As in *House of Flowers*, the women in *Blues Suite* portrayed hookers, and the men, their eager clients. But Ailey managed to locate the gender role-playing within a larger frame of African-American pathos. Here, blues dancing stood for the ephemeral release from the overwhelming social inequities suffered by African-Americans. The frame allowed Ailey to foreground harsh political realities in the creation of intensely flamboyant and entertaining blues dance styles.

Blues Suite reached its final form in the fall of 1964. Alternately titled *Jazz Piece* (1961), *Roots of the Blues* (1961) and *The Blues Roll On* (1963) in earlier formats, Ailey's revisions were largely due to shifting company personnel. An overarching narrative suggesting cyclical and inevitable despair remained common to its several versions. The dance became a classic example of the choreographer's early style and remained in the active repertory of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater through 1995. The reading of four sections of the dance which follows is based upon filmed performances made in the 1960s and 1970s, and live performances attended in the 1980s and 1990s.

The dance begins with two traditional calls to attention in African-American folklore: the train whistle, which suggests movement away from the repressive conditions of the South, and church bells, which toll not only for funeral services, but for the arrival of news worthy of community attention. Fast conga drums beat incessantly as the curtain rises, echoing the talking drum sound which traditionally dispersed information in sub-Saharan cultures. The curtain reveals bodies strewn across the stage in posed attitudes of fitful despair: eyes closed, energy drained. Are the figures asleep or dead? To classic strains that acknowledge the capitulation to oppressive circumstances – “Good Morning Blues, Blues How Do You Do?” – the dancers rise, shake off the inertia which held them, and begin an angry ritual of fighting each other to stake out territory. The atmosphere is heavy with stifled rage and disappointment.

Gradually, the fighting evolves into dance movements. In this casual progression Ailey suggests that his dance occupies a cultural space similar to the blues – as the transformation of social and political rage into art. The lexicon shift – from stasis, through the stylized drama of angry individuals, to a common ground represented in dance – draws the audience into concert dance without removing the markers which distinguish the characters as disenfranchised African-Americans. These blues people are black people, and the dance they do is defined by that unique political circumstance, whether it contains elements of social dance, ballet, Graham, or Horton technique.

Although the men in *Blues Suite* are largely defined by their interaction with women, the solo “I Cried” includes a striking demonstration of male public vulnerability. Backed by contrapuntal movements from the group,

a single man sits, center stage, his body racked with contractions of pain and anger. As he shakes and trembles in the depths of his anguish, the group extends a hand towards him, bearing witness. He rises towards some offstage goal, his body tensely elongated and brittle. The group reaches after him, offering help; he pushes them away defiantly, wrestling one man to the ground in the process. The group members disperse to strike poses of studied indifference, their faces averted from his dance. As he works out his frustration, the group exits, leaving him alone. As his dance ends the train whistle sounds, stealing his attention, and he exits quickly after it.

The solo is accompanied by the full-throated wailing of singer Brother John Sellars, who has performed this piece with the Ailey company since 1961 both live and on its taped accompaniment. Sellars's wailing has a strident masculine grain rarely heard outside the rural South.⁴ His vocal style gives an intensely personal interpretation to what is essentially a common song, without author or copyright. (The lyric, "I cried, tears rolled down my cheek/Thinking about my baby, how sweet the woman used to be" is a simple, bare-bones couplet, practically devoid of character.) Firmly rooted in the Afro-American vernacular, Sellars's aggressive sound masculinizes the connection between the expression of sorrow and the male dancer: it validates concert dance as an "authentic" mode of (heterosexual) male behavior.

The train whistle serves as the bridge to "Mean Ole Frisco," a dance for five men. Entering the space singly, each man looks towards an offstage train, imagined to pass over the audience's head. Watching the train closely, the dancers undulate in seething slow motion, sinking into asymmetrical stances with one hip thrust to the side. A swaying hip movement begins slowly and accelerates, finally matching the fast shuffle tempo of the song. The dance continues with mostly unison phrasing, with some interplay for groups of three against two dancers. The men describe powerful accents at the ends of phrases – shooting an arm into space, stopping the energy with a tightly clenched fist. They dance apart, in wide spatial formation, without ever seeing each other.

Although the dance is about the men's longing for a lover that the train has taken away (the "Frisco" of the blues lyric), sexuality is buried deeply beneath a brawny veneer. Ailey studiously avoided homoeroticism here through blockish phrasing, constant explosive movement, and a fierce abstention from physical or emotional contact by the men. The result is a strangely harsh depiction of black men as unable to relate to each other. The latent homophobia of the staging is made more strange by Ailey's own homosexuality. Ailey performed this dance in the 1960s, his heterosexual stage persona far removed from his offstage reality. In this dance, the desirous black male body is overtly heterosexual, single mindedly in pursuit of an offstage woman (Figure 7.1).

"Backwater Blues," the central pas de deux, features a man and woman in a low-down, brutal lovers' battle. Drawn in broad strokes of gender role



Figure 7.1 *Blues Suite*: impervious to empathy. Members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in a posed arrangement for the “Mean Ole Frisco” section. (Photo: © Jack Mitchell)

playing, the dance depicts several stages of a courtship ritual built from boasts, struts, and Apache-style physical confrontation. The choreography depends heavily upon a realistic acting approach Ailey derived from study at the Stella Adler acting studio (de Lavallade 1995: 165). A pervasive use of body language, stance, and gesture fills out details of emotional life between the characters. Formal dance movements function as extensions of the dramatic narrative, making the rare motionless position stand out in sharp relief. In one instance, the woman, precariously balanced on the kneeling man’s shoulder, throws back her head to pound her chest in angry

defiance. The image resounds beyond this dance encounter, speaking of the emotional outrage brought about by dysfunctional circumstance – in this case, life in a southern whorehouse.

While trading on the entertainment value of the age-old battle of the sexes, Ailey was able to align black social dance styles with concert performance. Ailey used the dramatic narrative to essentialize black social dance as the site of sexual power negotiation. When markers of black dance appear, in flamboyant percussive breaks at the end of musical phrases, multiple meter elaborated by isolations of body parts, and apart phrasing palpable in layered rhythmic patterns, they are carefully embedded within a theatrically constructed tension between Man and Woman. Here, blues dance is masculinized to the degree it is construed to be (hetero)sexual.

In the brief solos of “In The Evening,” which follow the duet, three men prepare for a night at the barrelhouse. Here, Ailey used formal dance vocabulary to describe three distinct personalities in movement terms. Arcing turns, interrupted by slight hesitations; swooping balances cut off by full-bodied contractions; and cool struts, stopped by percussive attacks of static poses, all visualize the music’s underlying rhythmic structures in terms of breaks and ruptures. These oppositional contrasts are obvious functions of lingering West African aesthetic principles of compositional balance. Ailey fashioned the phrasing mostly in square blocks of four and eight counts, but sharp accents and strong rhythmic shifts from fast, sixteenth-note foot-tapping accents, to slow, half-note balances separate the dance from the music: the dance is conceived both “to” and “apart from” the steady musical beat.

Conceptually similar to classical ballet variations, these solos oblige the men to demonstrate mastery of dance technique. The difficult rhythmic structures also baldly expose the dancers’ musicality and precision. In these pure dance variations, Ailey set a standard of concert dance proficiency accessible to black male bodies. In this case, dance technique is disguised as libidinous male posturing.

The solos end when the women reappear, beginning a long sequence of festive blues dancing by the group and two comic characters constantly out of step. The giddy playfulness of the “Sham” contradicts the anger, despair, and fierce attitude of previous sections, exploring instead the entertainment aspects of blues music. The section ends with tightly focused unison phrases, the dancers’ smiling faces turned toward the audience in a gesture of communal celebration. Reminiscent of a scene from a Broadway musical, this false, happy ending is followed by the repetition of “Good Morning Blues,” signaling the return to the painful everyday life of labor and oppression. Faces are averted and suddenly solemn; bodies carry an intense weightiness; speed and agility are buried within downward directed motions and angry demeanors. In this “real” ending to the piece, the characters are again solitary, sprawled across the stage, separated by forces beyond their control, apprehensive, gloom-ridden, and tormented.

The violent juxtaposition of euphoria and despair which ends *Blues Suite* aptly re/presents the professional experiences of Ailey and other black men through the post-war era of concert dance. Smiling through a fleeting triumph, they were inevitably burdened by political circumstances rife with racism, homophobia, and indifference. Forced to entertain audiences receptive only to broadly stereotyped personae, African-American men danced savage, hyper-masculine, aggressively heterosexual, and naive-primitive roles which catered to traditional assumptions about the black male body. Denied the opportunity to perform powerful dance that reflected the realities of their lives outside the theater, African-American men simmered passively for decades, awaiting the chance to define themselves in terms of movement.

NOTES

- 1 African art historian Robert F. Thompson describes particular dances as "key documents of aesthetic history . . . nonverbal formulations of philosophies of beauty and ethics" in traditional West African settings (Thompson 1986: 85).
- 2 Abrahams draws out the development of minstrelsy from slave corn-shucking festivals (1992: 131-43).
- 3 Perpener (1992) provides an overview of the pioneers and their techniques.
- 4 Murray associates the sound with itinerant folk style guitar strummers (1978).

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