7 Simmering Passivity
The Black Male Body in Concert Dance

Thomas DeFrantz

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. 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, 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).


**EARLY CONCERT DANCERS**

Black men entered the concert dance field earliest dances they performed the minstrel theme, conception, and technical performance groups between the 1830s and 1880s. Helen Tamiris (Perpener 1992: 24) wrote the role of Salome at the Greenway, for an absent actress in the all-black cast, was, in an old bead portiere and a dress (ibid.: 24). Drag performance inadvertently spurred Winfield's successful portrayal, issues of masculinity, black men.

Among Winfield's numerous performances for the theatrical pageant *De Profundis*, the ineradicable force of Death danced with charismatic vigor and this piece became a staple of Winfield's sudden death in 1933. Revue of the "Death" bore stylistic resemblance to movement choirs, but Winfield, a native of the all-black company. McCann didn't trade on minstrel stereotype of the time. Typically, black being naive, "primitive" dance.

Winfield premiered his solo, "Dance Recital in America" at the Edinburgh International Festival, and soon discovered the dance as a living art. For Martin, physiology, as the raw material of the dance, posturing, however prosaic, sought to see beyond race. It is possible to mark an "exemplary black" muscle tone, flexibility, stillness in the public discourse of skin color.
also had to confront deeply
ons formed by the minstrel
stage caricature created for
ever-ending fascination with
ultural habits. Performed
the plantation manners and
show solidified around 1840
century. Its preferred format
bastiff struts and cakewalks,
stock types Zip Coon, Jim

Minstrel stereotypes added a
black male performers. All
c sort in the position
magnified and
William Henry Lane
1840. In publicity, Master
All Dancers,” performed
imation dances . . . of all the
es. After which he will give
3). Billed as an “imitation”
Juba buffered associations
and the preferred impotent
survive as popular entertain-
generations of black dancers
es, “minstrelsy . . . fixed the
ible, happy-go-lucky, wide-
ing, singing, dancing sort
of a singing and dancing
ly musicals of the early 1900s
ng innocents whose dancing
ple delight they provided.
ace duo of this era, achieved
r. the dandyish “Zip Coon”
alks “throwing his chest and
es. the dandyish “Zip Coon”
while Williams, the woeful,
ese with a terrific Mooche or
erlegs with rotating hips”
ed the black man’s body as
ally out of control, and naive.
ner wry notes, “The word
minstrel dancing” (Winter

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. 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 (Perpen 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 beads 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-black 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 Blackamoors 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 representation included only all-black concert dance corps. The founding of concert dance companies, including Fisk, Howard, and Spivey, New York performances by Dada, whose performances of authenticity and criticism, Dafora staged subtly in his Sierra Leone homeland. *Kwami* length works mounted by Dafora’s synergy of music and movement, work hinged upon its use of “a first-hand knowledge of classic Western musical forms, an unimagined complex and diverse.” Though Dafora confirmed the psychological efficacy of the black body on the concert dance stage, the black body on the concert dance stage became increasingly obliged to perform in mainstream settings.

Some dancers resisted the easily stereotyped settings. Grootenhuis, for example, participated in white companies as well as all-black ballet companies. Eugenia Ewing, who had debuted in 1937 at Harlem’s Apollo Theater, was an all-black company. She left her American mother and a German father and returned to Europe to design a program of music for all-black audiences. Three years later she was touring Europe with her all-black group, which performed in the United States in 1940. This program featured the work of Aubrey Hitches’ Negro Dance Company, an all-black company believed in the special affinity of Negroes with the Negro spirituals. The company’s repertoire includes works by African-American composers such as Robert Cole and Charles Iraauxux, and the dance was performed the way the group had learned them in the United States.

Both of these companies were committed to the idea of proving the ability of the black body to perform in the mainstream. The logic that pushed them to perform in this way was that if their work was performed in mainstream settings, their repertory would be more likely to be accepted by mainstream audiences. This logic was based on the belief that the black body could only be appreciated if it was presented in a way that was familiar to mainstream audiences. The companies believed that by presenting their work in this way, they could overcome the racial prejudice that existed in mainstream audiences and gain acceptance for their work. Despite this logic, the companies faced significant challenges in achieving this goal. They had to work hard to break down the barriers of prejudice and to convince mainstream audiences that their work was worthy of their attention. The companies also had to be careful to present their work in a way that was accessible to mainstream audiences, without sacrificing the authenticity and integrity of their work. This was a difficult balancing act, but the companies believed that it was worth it in order to make their work accessible to a wider audience.
integration throughout the 1930s integrated groups, their presence and critics. In 1931 Randolph Duck-Sandor Dance Center's site production, Martin spoke which "equip him to do a type of dance," implicated by the mere verse with ballet.

male body with social reform. The Communist Party as a tenant in Edith Segal's "Black partner are pictured on the cover of the 1989: 23). Defiantly posed, Bates raises his thickly matted fist held at eye level. This dancer's body with subversion, I change.

develop an African-American mainstream model of male Creative Dance Group at the mission of that school's physical environment, to socialize former song on concepts of work and doctrine of conduct in which arts. It took a herculean sport for the dance company; muted and discreet. Heavily laden, which visited Hampton, noted the physical dynamism of muscular settings. "Men from track and field events, for dance to traditional work in collaboration with as well as dances with Afro-American Spirituals (Perpener 1992: formed for African-American throughout the 1930s and from calisthenics and drills to as a proponent of the missionary administration presentation of dance as 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 exotic, imminently 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" (Accella 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 reflected by the [heterosexual] 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 was a ‘man dancer,’ one who didn’t wear a shirt, pants, and tie and danced and turned to dance when a high school minstrel show’s flamboyant theatrics caught his eye. Horton’s utopian vision of a man was a kind of masculinity: “I didn’t really say I want to be a dancer. I wanted to be a man” (Gruen 1976: 419).

Ailey may have felt constrained to capitalize on the simmering sexual tension at the Horton studio. His appearance in *House of Flowers* featured a very sexy half-dressed Lavalade designed to titillate (500). Among the last-gasp attempt at musicals set in foreign locales, the company of male dancers included Louis Johnson, and Walter Nichols, competing West Indian bordon style of “hooker” roles. According to a review, the cast exuded a predictably erotic sexual energy.

Every Negro show includes an exception in that respect. Tall, slender, dusky maidens in flashy costumes a number of wild, grotesque sound alike by the time of the final scene.

*House of Flowers*, a show the New York dance scene as part of a black bodies performing for white audiences. Ailey had few African-American technical expertise to draw upon, as Graham, and her dance was filled with the techniques of José Limón and I just have the technique which was similar to my own. Between the study, he performed in the opening of *Tropical Revue*, and Anna Sokolow’s theatrical macho of Paradise. “I was impressed by his style, the masculinity of his projection.”
Inspired a decline of color sensitive that ballet could have that the idiom unmarked the audiences familiar black stage use early all-black companies used western classicism.

Sections between the dancing queue, and the post-World War II spheres working to redefine the African aesthetic principles, merged intact in the concert season, and Donald McKayle's performance. Buoyed by community of the post-war era, in power and the black male

a paradigm of contemporary and concert performance machismo in a number of roles his body and cast it as the site of male sexuality, including ming despair deflected by the role of a persona which redefined the concert stage to include subject poverty of rural Texas: separated when he was an to town as she struggled to segregate his life in southeast American and nurtured recalled: "Having that kind in me that I think pervades also created a fierce pride in and jock joints which figured 46). In 1942 Ailey joined his concert dance was sparked Katherine Dunham's 1945

particular from his fantasy world of theater and wood 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 black modern 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" (Graebner 1976: 419).

Ailey may have felt constricted by society at large, but he quickly learned to capitalize on the simpering, 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 evaded 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 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 promise 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 the black body as at once more *Flowers*, the women in *Blues Suite* eager clients. But Ailey manages a larger frame of African-American the ephemeral release of the African-Americans. The frame realities in the creation of int. dance styles.

*Blues Suite* reached its final *Jazz Piece* (1961). *Roots of the* in earlier formats, Ailey’s revision. An overarching narr. despair remained common to a classic example of the choreo-active repertory of the Alvin Ailey. The reading of four sections of filmed performances made in the 80s and 90s attended the 1980s and 1990s.

The dance begins with two American folklore: the train from the repressive conditions not only for funeral services, but for attention. Fast conga drums beat the talking drum sound which sub-Saharan. The cur. the drum sound which sub-Saharan. The cur. the drum sound which sub-Saharan. The cur. is heavy with stifled rage and despair.

Gradually, the fighting and progression Ailey suggests that to the blues – as the transforma lexicon shift – from stasis, through to a common ground representa of dance without removing the re-disenfranchised African-Americans and the dance they do is defined whether it contains elements of technique.

Although the men in *Blues Suite* with women, the solo “I Cry” public vulnerability. Backed m
Simmering Passivity

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 Aliley 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 Aliley to foreground harsh political realities in the creation of intensely flamboyant and entertaining blues dance styleds.

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, Aliley'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 Aliley 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 strung across the stage in posed attitudes of futile 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 Aliley 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. 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 playing, the dance depicts sexual boasts, struts, and Apache-style dependence heavily upon a realization at the Stella Adler acting studio of body language, stance, and the conflict between the characters. Formed by the dramatic narrative, the sharp relief. In one instance, a kneeling man’s shoulder, thro
choked with contractions of pain
the depths of his anguish, the
witness. He rises towards some
and brittle. The group reaches
ly defiantly, wrestling one man
embers disperse to strike poses
om his dance. As he works out
alone. As his dance ends the
and he exits quickly after it.
ated wailing of singer Brother
with the Alvin Ailey company since
niment. Sellars's wailing has
ade the rural South. His vocal
ation to what is essentially a
ly a refrain. The lyric, "I cried, tears rolled
ow sweet the woman used to
ly devoid of character.) Firmly
Sellars's aggressive sound
ression of sorrow and the male
entific" mode of (heterosexual)

Mean Ole Frisco," a dance for
man looks towards an offstage
head. Watching the train closely,
on, sinking into asymmetrical
swaying hip movement begins
fast shuffle tempo of the song.
Fasing, with some interplay for
an describe powerful accents at
pace, stopping the energy with
ide spatial formation, without
enging for a lover that the train
ric), sexuality is buried deeply
avoided homoeroticism here
sive movement, and a fierce
act by the men. The result is
nable to relate to each other.
e more strange by Ailey's own
in the 1960s, his heterosexual
ality. In this dance, the
rosexual, single mindedly in

ax, features a man and woman
n broad strokes of gender role
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

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)
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 phrases 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 demeanor. In this “real” ending to the piece, the characters are again solitary, sprawled across the stage, separated by forces beyond their control. Prehensive, gloom-ridden, and tormented.

The violent juxtaposition of images aptly represents the process men through the post-war era of triumph, they were inevitably with racism, homophobia, and receptive only to broadly stashed danced savage, hyper-masculine primitive roles which catered to the male body. Denied the opportunities the realities of their men simmered passively for themselves in terms of movement.

NOTES

1 African art historian Robert documents of aesthetic history and beauty and ethics in tradition
2 Abrahams draws out the details of festivals (1982: 131–43).
3 Perpener (1992) provides an
4 Murray associates the sound

BIBLIOGRAPHY

African-Americans, Philadelphia.
Johnston, J. (1961) “Mr. Ailey,”*.
Latham, J. (1973) “A Biograp*
dance encounter, speaking of functional circumstance – in
of the age-old battle of the dance styles with concert
e to essentialize black social
When markers of black dance
the end of musical phrases,
 parts, and apart phrasing care carefully embedded within
and Woman. Here, blues
to be (hetero)sexual.
ch follow the duet, three men
re, Ailey used formal dance
etics in movement terms.
swooping balances cut
opped by percussive attacks
lying rhythmic structures in
itional contrasts are obvious
es of compositional
y in square blocks of four
ng rhythmic shifts from fast,
 halve-note balances separate
ceived both “to” and “apart
ations, these solos oblige the
ique. The difficult rhythmic
ality and precision. In these
 of concert dance proficiency
 dance technique is disguised

beginning a long sequence of
comic characters constantly
Sham” contradicts the anger,
otions, exploring instead the
ion ends with tightly focused
red toward the audience in a
pt of a scene from a Broadway
l by the repetition of “Good
painful everyday life of labor
only solemn; bodies carry an
ed within downward directed
al” ending to the piece, the
the stage, separated by forces

The violent juxtaposition of euphoria and eschew which ends _Blues Suite_
aply 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 naïve-
primal 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 them-
selves 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
3 Perpener (1992) provides an overview of the pioneers and their techniques.
4 Murray associates the sound with itinerant folk style guitar strummers (1978).

BIBLIOGRAPHY
Abrahams, R. (1992) _Singing the Master: The Emergence of African-American
Magazine_ (March): 22–4, 30–2.
YM-YWHA Program Notes (March 30).
New York: Birch Lane Press.
(December 31): 11.
Emery, L. (1988) _Black Dance From 1619 to Today_, second revised edition,
Books.
8 Being Dance

Meredith Monk, Leslie Satin

In 1979, I saw Meredith Monk's Labor Day performance at Mills College. I was struck by the familiar events, bowls and bowls and bowls of muslin, Monk imagining and winding back through the years.

In the years since that view, I have also become deeply absorbed in the aesthetic intersections — the choreographers' works, my interest in autobiography, in the performative self-representation, can I always see and hear and feel. Autobiography functions as an aesthetic accumulation. Some work requires more detail; in other instances, see the work of a writer or a writer's autobiography.

Sometimes the choreographers write about the dances they create. And I - a dancer with words, around steps, through the movements - am a choreographer: “I am a dancer.” The phrase “I am a dancer” seems, in a way, to say something about the seductive notion of autobiography.

This story suggests the history of western autobiography: to be a writer, and, generally, to be white, as well as the valorization of autonomous, personal, linear - as the conceptual beginning, at least - the model of the autobiographical. But enough, repeated in the act of creation, in type and in time, the “reality” of the dance is illusory, limited to the performance.