

Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, Alison D. Goeller (eds.)

# EmBODYing Liberation

The Black Body in American Dance

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## Foreword: Black Bodies Dancing Black Culture – Black Atlantic Transformations

Thomas F. DeFrantz

More and more often, we are invited to read dance history that pays particular attention to cultural and political contexts for its production. This shift in critical writing, buoyed by the increase in performance studies and cultural studies perspectives, allows us to consider what particular dances *mean*, across time periods and geographies, for their dancers and audiences. More than this, the widening of critical lenses to locate African diaspora dance as a constellation of expressive practices and political circumstances leads us back – emphatically – to the body in motion. Increasingly, we are asked to consider dancing black bodies as the agents of social change, as case studies of identities in formation, and as avatars of ethnically-inflected artistic expression.

But do dancing black bodies always dance black? For many African American cultural historians, the critical category of “black dance” encompasses only social dance. In the realm of the social, the dancing bodies and their audiences merge. We must begin inside the circle. Frantz Fanon writes:

The circle of the dance is a permissive circle: it protects and permits... [Dance] may be deciphered, as in an open book, [as] the huge effort of a community to exorcise itself, to liberate itself, to explain itself. There are no limits – inside the circle. (57)<sup>1</sup>

But what happens outside of the circular realm of the social? How does concert dance created and performed by African American artists fall into and outside of the circle that protects and permits?

By invoking Fanon, I make a gesture towards blackness as an existential and corporeal reality. I want to claim the existence of “core black culture” that embraces the performative idioms of black expressive culture – music, oratory, fashion, game-playing, dance. All of these are generated within the circle that permits and protects. But all of them can also be accessed by cultural outsiders positioned well beyond the circle that permits and protects. More importantly, elements of black dance can be recognized and documented when the generative circle of the dance is opened to outside viewers.

Consider Bill “Bojangles” Robinson in the 1943 film *Stormy Weather*. Robinson’s dance we recognize unequivocally as black dance. He speaks through rhythm in the so-called vernacular – a designation underscored in this film as a

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<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1963.

longstanding tradition of stylized social dances which can be rearranged for the stage of popular entertainments. In the film, Robinson plays a man who aspires to be a professional dancer and spends his young adult life teaching himself variations on familiar steps until he is able, in true Hollywood ending fashion, to land a spot in a glamorous stage production. A significant sequence in the film, early in Robinson's ascent toward professionalization, emphasizes his experimentation with social dance idioms within a protective circle of musicians in the belly of a boat. Robinson tests his tapped social dance inventions in a smooth sequence of seemingly inevitable rhythmic ideas, coughing accentuations of cross-rhythms and subtle, ironic turns of rhythmic phrase that consolidate the underlying duple-meter form of the musical accompaniment. The irony of calling Robinson's artistry – or the idiom that he engages here – “vernacular” can't be lost on us as viewers; we marvel at his ability to transform open silences into active rhythmic breaks, and, with one toe, to describe circles containing the potency of temporal disruption and control on the deck of the ship. Surely he achieves transcendent mastery even here within the film's narrative of the naturalized, self-taught black dance. But if this is vernacular dance, we should each be able to reproduce it, or at least approach it. Are there any volunteers?

There is danger in talking about “black dance,” even within the ubiquitous quotation marks that often surround “race.” How willing are we to compress elaborate cultural practices into a neat package? Can we theorize something called “black identity” that contributes to articulations of “black dance?” Like British cultural theorist Paul Gilroy, I think that we have to. Gilroy writes:

Black identity is not simply a social and political category to be used or abandoned according to the extent to which the rhetoric that supports and legitimizes it is persuasive or institutionally powerful ... it is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self. Though it is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires. (1993a, 102)<sup>2</sup>

My body understands how to be inside and a part of the circle that protects and permits. The practical activity of my dance – my gesture, my words, and what I mean to tell you by my stance – all contribute to how I construct my own black identity. It is not a singular construction; it has no proscriptive limits of gender, sexuality, or caste. My life as a black person is coherent and always changing. My experience follows Gilroy in its complexity; I am aware that “the fundamental, time-worn assumptions of homogenous and unchanging black communities whose political and economic interests were readily knowable and

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993a.

easily transferred from everyday life into their expressive cultures has ... proved to be a fantasy" (1993b, 1).<sup>3</sup>

But this raises another series of questions. Does the black body, publicly displayed, automatically become a privileged "racial" sign? Black people dance inside the circle. The circle permits and protects. Black dance emerges inside the circle. The circle does not distinguish between private and public. Where, then, does this public display occur?

We might do well to consider a counternarrative of public spaces as "white spaces." I contend that a public space – at least in terms of concert dance – is a white space, a space of production and consumption, a modernist space, a fetishized space, a Europeanist space. A display of the black body in any of these spaces confers a responsibility onto the artist, who assumes "custodianship of the racial group's most intimate self-identity. The black body makes explicit the hidden links between blacks and helps to ground an oppositional aesthetic constituted around our phenotypical difference from 'white' ideals of beauty and a concept of the body in motion which is the residue of our African cultures" (Gilroy 1993b, 246). Significantly, this public space is outside the circle that protects and permits. Think back to Robinson and his quick-footed time step: what would he have said had there not been a militia of white crew members, producers, scriptwriters, songwriters, casting agents, studio chiefs and intended audiences tearing open the circle where he danced? Would he have smiled so aggressively to those omnipresent, but invisible, white bodies? Might he have allowed us to *feel* what his dance meant, beyond the surface effect of what his body was permitted to do?

In many circumstances, African American dancers break open the circle that protects and permits. Gilroy writes of contemporary black social dance: "Instead of taking our places in the circle of the dance where subordination was ambivalently enacted, transcended, and transformed ... we are invited to consume particularity just like any other commodity. The ring shout gives way to polite applause" (1997, 22).<sup>4</sup> Here, the performer no longer dissolves into the crowd, thereby enacting a relationship of black identity in antiphonal call and response forms. The dancer offers stylized movements as objects to be casually consumed by immobile spectators.

But what of our concert dancer, already removed from the realm of the social by virtue of her interest in focused aesthetic principals adopted from Western ideals? I offer that she might, by necessity, align herself with the African diaspora. Here, she will take comfort in the multitudes similarly disenfranchised and deposited in the New and Old Worlds without recourse to a "real"

<sup>3</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1993b.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Gilroy, "Exer(or)cising Power: Black Bodies in the Black Public Sphere." *Dance In The City*. Ed. Helen Thomas. New York: St. Martin's P, 1997. 21–34.

homeland. The African diaspora is a utopia; an “eruption of space into the linear temporal order of modern black politics which enforces the obligation that space and time must be considered relationally” (Gilroy 1993a, 198). It is a tool for survival. The diaspora closes our circle for the dance across time and space. Through it, we black dancers allow ourselves to collaborate whether we understand each other or not.

The diaspora enlivens us and simultaneously reminds us to mourn. Its ubiquity constantly turns us towards death and “points to the ways in which black cultural forms have hosted and even cultivated a dynamic rapport with the presence of death and suffering” (Gilroy 1993a, 198). Because there is no “real” Africa in diaspora, we gain access to inexhaustible storehouses of pain, suffering, expressions of loss, exile, and eternal journeying. Gilroy discusses music, but the same is true for dance; this rapport with death “serves a mnemonic function: directing the consciousness of the group back to significant, nodal points in its common history and its social memory” (1993a, 198). The Black Atlantic actually encodes this diasporic longing into a historical moment: born of the rupture of the Middle Passage, the Black Atlantic is a “non-traditional tradition, an irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable, and asymmetrical cultural ensemble that cannot be apprehended through the manichean logic of binary coding” (Gilroy 1993a, 198). We mourn what can never really be – the diaspora, or its undoing through repatriation – and we dance inside the circle to mourn our loss. The circle permits and protects our memory of loss.

The Black Atlantic means to allow us a common dialectic as Africans in diaspora. According to Gilroy and others, antiphony, or call and response, is the principal formal feature of its artistic practices and expressive cultures. Antiphony works best in physical intimacy, within a circle where all can see the other dancers across the way.

Moving into the circle, I ask: where is the Black Atlantic located in concert dance gesture? Where is it? Richard Wright locates its expression in the diasporic tradition of bitterness, while Gilroy calls this the condition of “being in pain” (1993a, 203). Either articulation suggests that we will recognize the Black Atlantic in concert dance through a pervasive dissatisfaction with existing modes of expression; a need and desire to remake concert dance – that is, dance of the open circle – in some unique idiom or perverse restructuring of what came before. If the circle that permits and protects must be opened, it will deny its audience’s expectations of comfort; it will force you to mourn, or shout, or become enraged so that you might enter into dialogue with its bitter tongue; so that you might somehow close the circle that permits and protects. The Black Atlantic gesture in concert dance intends to force its audience to presence, that we might see each other across the footlights.

Consider a concert dance of the Black Atlantic; Donald Byrd’s newly-minted *In A Different Light: Duke Ellington*, created in 1999. In the first act of the three-

part piece, titled "A Gentle Prelude," Byrd takes us outside the familiar, permissive circle of black dance with a work decidedly grounded on the proscenium stage. Still, I recognize his bitter choreographic tongue. The dance encodes antiphony as a choreographic technique: a slow, extended lean is answered by a fast, erect stride across the stage; a lyrical break in Ellington's piano score is undercut by an abrupt jab of an arm into the air. And there is more revisioning on a conceptual level: clearly, the work is a meditation on George Balanchine's *Serenade* of 1934, danced here by modern dancers to an assembled score by Ellington. As a whole, the work trades on an excess of virtuosic display, an excess of rhythmic progressions housed within an overarching abstract framework that gathers momentum as it goes along. In this dance, the audience is made aware of what Gilroy calls the "ethics of antiphony" (1993a, 207) – portrayed here as a cresting and falling tension between the lyrical piano score and the weighty, percussive movements of Byrd's choreography.

But this dance offers an obviously complex relationship to the Black Atlantic and longed-for, diasporic circle of the dance. Consider another contemporary work – choreographer Ronald K. Brown's *Grace*, made for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, also in 1999. This work is much easier to discuss in terms of its relation to the Black Atlantic paradigm. I sense the "get-down" qualities of the movement and its performance; the celebratory aspects of its house music score; the depiction of black machismo in the line of shirtless men whose virility and steamy cool force me to cheer against all my heteronormative tendencies. When I saw the entire dance in performance twice in its first season, I understood more about its construction: its arching sacred dimension contained by its musical frame, the Duke Ellington spiritual "Come Sunday"; its deployment of black bodies as privileged racial signs able to fully explore the shifting rhythmic changes of the recorded score; its choreographic recuperation of neo-African idioms in its movement lexicon that grant the work an aura of authenticity. As a friend told me, the dancing black bodies perform movements that "suit them to a 'T'." Here, in the evening at a proscenium theater, they remind me of a night somewhere else, in a night club: of dances that explicitly express desire and regret, desire for intimacy with another and regret for the lack of true cultural coherency.

In its entirety, *Grace* explores sexuality and its discursive limits; the loss and recovery of spirituality, described here by a devotional leader and her efforts to assemble her charges; and, of course, a certain kind of kinetic bitterness in several solo passages of jagged, inward-focused rhythmic passages. The half-hour work begins with a soloist clad in white who enters the central performance space from an offstage sanctuary; she consecrates the stage for dancing by the group clad mostly in red; after a night on the town – or in the clubs, if you will – the dancers all change to white clothing and follow the devotional leader into the sanctuary suggested at the back of the stage space.

In telling a story of the black church, choreographer Brown evokes the memory of slavery which, ultimately, gave rise to the black church. He positions the dance firmly within a modernist tradition born of the Middle Passage and the gross cultural ruptures that slavery enacted. The dance becomes black dance, within the protective and permissive circle, not only in its outward, kinetic features, but in its opaque narrative of church practice; in its final tableau of diasporic wandering as the dancers amble away from the audience singly, but as a group, towards an offstage place of worship. Moreover, Brown's work references the mythologized "black vernacular" in its use of house music, club stance, and spontaneous-seeming bursts of dynamic physical energy.

This takes us back to vernacular dance and the problem of conflating the everyday gesture with the extraordinary. Concert dance is never vernacular; dance that is prepared can only make reference to dance that emerges within the closed black space. So what of our circle? Is it exclusive to black dancers in "core black cultural spaces?" Can "black dance" stretch to accommodate work by white choreographers? Certainly. Its aesthetic principles can be learned, and then the protective circle can form around a new, hybrid dance. We certainly see this in white hip hop, in cheerleading, in some concert dance choreography by choreographers who do not claim African ancestry. But this reformation often inspires failures in readings, as audiences, dancers, and choreographers don't necessarily understand their relationship to the circle. The circle protects and permits. When it is opened, we are no longer protected, although we may be permitted. Gilroy reminds us that "the globalization of vernacular forms means that our understanding of antiphony will have to change. The calls and responses no longer converge in the tidy patterns of secret, ethnically encoded dialogue" (1993a, 110).

But this change in locality that Gilroy predicts needn't be conceived as a loss; in terms of dance scholarship, it may most definitely be a gain. The migration of African diaspora dance forms from the closed circles of social spaces to the open circle of the concert stage allows us an enormous opportunity to document performance and its vital impact on culture in re/formation. The transformations of African-derived movements through the Middle Passage, and their emergence in the Americas and Europe as elements of concert dance, hold enormous significance for scholars working to construct histories of the body in motion. These particular histories – of black bodies dancing black – form the body, the corporeal essence, of the essays assembled in this remarkable volume.

Thomas F. DeFrantz  
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