Journal or Book Title: Moving history, dancing cultures : a dance history reader /

Volume:
Issue:
Month/Year: 2001
Pages: 332–341

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Article Title: Stripping the Emperor: The Africanist Presence in American Concert Dance

Imprint:

Call #: GV1601 .M86 2001

Location: Bryn Mawr: Canaday Library Stacks (Monographs) Available

Item #:

Stripping the Emperor:
The Africanist Presence in American Concert Dance

BRENDA DIXON GOTTSCHILD

Several years ago, a student in my course at Temple University titled "Black Performance from Africa to the Americas" came up to me at the end of the first session and asked, "Should I take this class . . . I mean, as a white person?" The question animated her face with confusion and fear. My response was, "Honey, you're taking it right now; you've been taking it all your life!" As Americans, we are all "enrolled" in this course. Some of us do not know it; some do, but deny it. For Americans, the Africanist legacy is not a choice but an imperative that comes to us through the culture.[1]

Unlike the voluntary taking on of Easternisms in modern and postmodern practice, the Africanist legacy comes to Americans as electricity comes through the wires: we draw from it all the time, but few of us are aware of its sources. To quote Toni Morrison, it is "the ghost in the machine" or "the unspeakable things unspoken."[2] It infuses our daily existence in musical forms such as blues, jazz, spirituals, gospel, soul, rap, funk, rock, and yes, even European orchestral music. It is a considerable force in modern American arts and letters, as has been discussed by Morrison and other literary critics. It permeates American dance forms, from ballroom and nightclub floors to popular and concert stages. Finally, it pervades our everyday lifestyles, in ways of walking, talking, creating hairdos, preparing food, and acting "hip" or "cool."

What Africanisms am I talking about? They emerge from aesthetic principles, or canons, that have been codified and discussed at length by other authors, particularly Robert Farris Thompson, Susan Vogel, Kariamu Welsh Asante, and to a lesser extent, Geneva Gay and Will L. Baber, and Alfred Pasteur and Ivory Toldson.[3] From these sources I have designated five Africanist characteristics that occur in many forms of American concert dance, including ballet. It is important to note that these traits work together and are separated only for the sake of discussion. They indicate processes, tendencies, and attitudes. They are not intended to categorize phenomena. To show their interactive nature, I use the dance routine of Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker to illustrate each canon. An African American novelty dancer who attained enormous popularity in the cabarets of the 1920s, Tucker makes these Africanist principles clearly visible in his work. Ballet, the academic dance of Europe, offers the most dramatic contrast to the Africanist aesthetic. It has been regarded as the repository of European values and is characterized as a reflection of "what is thought most significant in the culture of the West."[4] For these reasons, I use ballet, rather than European vernacular dance, as the European reference point in the five principles that follow.

Embracing the Conflict

In a broad sense, the Africanist aesthetic can be termed an aesthetic of contrariety, while the European perspective seeks to remove conflict through efficient problem solving. The Africanist aesthetic embraces difference and dissonance, rather than erasing or resolving it. Contrariety is expressed in African dilemma stories that pose a question rather than offer a solution; in music or vocal work that sounds cacophonous or grating to the untrained ear; and in dance that seems unsophisticated to eyes trained in a different aesthetic. This principle is reflected in the other four canons and they, in turn, are reflected in it. "Embracing the conflict" is embedded in the final principle, "the aesthetic of the cool," in which "coolness" results from the juxtaposition of detachment and intensity. Those opposites would be difficult to fuse in European academic aesthetics, but there is room for their pairing in Africanist aesthetics. A routine performed by Tucker in such New York clubs as Connie's Inn and Harlem's Cotton Club—as described in Marshall and Jean Stearns's *Jazz Dance*—demonstrates this concept:

> Tucker had at the same time a disengaged and a menacing air, like a sleeping volcano, which seemed to give audiences the feeling that he was a cobra and they were mice. . . .
>
> When Snake Hips slithered on stage, the audience quieted down immediately. Nobody snickered at him, in spite of the mounting tension, no matter how nervous or embarrassed one might be. The glaring eyes burning in the pock-marked face looked directly at and through the audience, with dreamy and impartial hostility. Snake Hips seemed to be coiled, ready to strike.
>
> Tucker's act usually consisted of five parts. He came slipping on with a sliding, forward step and just a hint of hip movement. The combination was part of a routine known in Harlem as Spanking the Baby, and in a strange but logical fashion, established the theme of his dance. Using shock tactics, he then went directly into the basic Snake Hips movements, which he paced superbly, starting out innocently enough, with one knee crossing over behind the other, while the toe of one foot touched the arch of the other. At first, it looked simultaneously pigeon-toed and knock-kneed.[5]

The conflicts are paired contraries: awkward and smooth; detached and threatening; innocent and seductive. But the most significant conflict resides in the routine's deep subtext, in the ironic playing out of power postures by the otherwise disempowered black, male (dancing) body.

Polycentrism/Polyrhythm

From the Africanist standpoint, movement may emanate from any part of the body, and two or more centers may operate simultaneously. Polycentrism diverges from the European academic aesthetic, where the ideal is to initiate movement from one locus: the noble, upper center of the aligned torso, well above the pelvis. Africanist movement is also polyrhythmic. For example, the feet may keep one rhythm while the arms, head, or torso dance to different drums. In this regard, Africanist dance aesthetics represents a democracy of body parts, rather than a monarchy dictated by the straight, centered spine. Again, we turn to "Snake Hips":

> The fact that the pelvis and the whole torso were becoming increasingly involved in the movement was unavoidably clear. As he progressed, Tucker's footwork became flatter, rooted more firmly to the floor, while his hips described wider and wider circles, until he seemed to be throwing his hips alternately out of joint to the melodic accents of the music.[6]

From a "get-down" posture that centered the movement in the legs and feet, Tucker adds the pelvis as another center, illustrating polycentrism. On top of the crossover step, described above, he interpolates a pelvic rhythm, exemplifying the simplest level of polyrhythm. Again, these are interactive principles; embracing opposing rhythms, coupled with a shifting center, demonstrates high-affect juxtaposition.

High-Affect Juxtaposition

Mood, attitude, or movement breaks that omit the transitions and connective links valued in the European academic aesthetic are the keynote of this principle. For example, a forceful, driving mood may overlap and coexist with a light and humorous tone, or imitative and abstract movements may be juxtaposed. The result may be surprise, irony, comedy, innuendo, double-entendre, and finally, exhilaration. All traditions use contrast in the arts, but Africanist high-affect juxtaposition is heightened beyond the contrast that is within the range of accepted standards in the European academic canon. On that scale, it would be considered bad taste, flashy, or loud. "Snake Hips" demonstrates this principle, in part, through his choice of costume—a sequined girdle supporting a seductive tassel:

> Then followed a pantomime to a Charleston rhythm: Tucker clapped four times and waved twice with each hand in turn, holding the elbow of the waving hand and rocking slightly with the beat. The over-all effect was suddenly childish, effeminate, and perhaps tongue-in-cheek. The next movement was known among dancers as the Belly Roll, and consisted of a series of waves rolling from pelvis to chest—a standard part of a Shake dancer's routine, which Tucker varied by coming to a stop, transfixing the audience with a baleful, hypnotic stare, and twirling his long tassel in time with the music.[7]

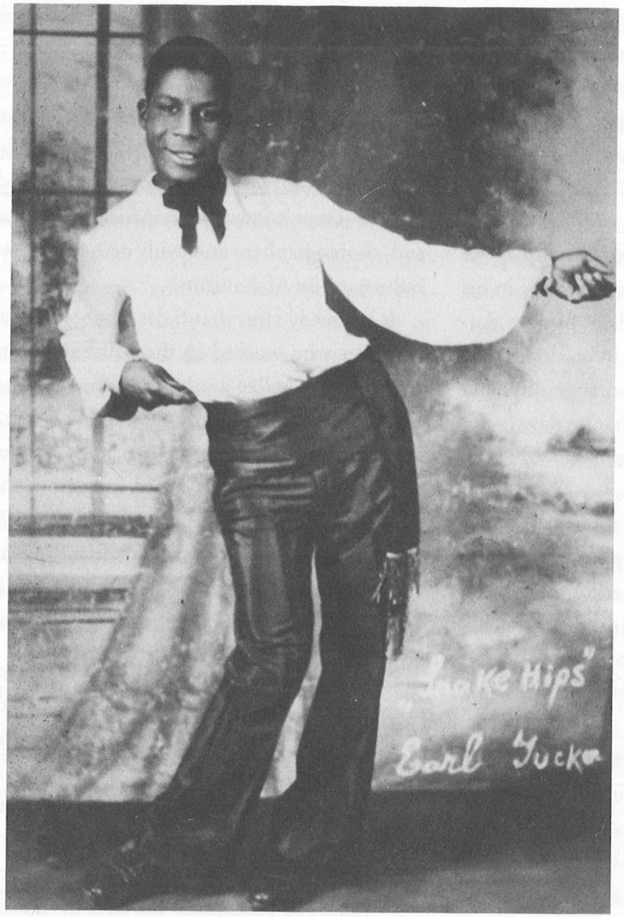
Tucker shifts unpredictably from childish and effeminate to challenging and "macho" movements, disregarding European standards for consistency in characterization. In addition, with no preparation or transition, he changes from light, almost cheerleader-like hand and arm gestures to weighted, sensual undulations centered in the lower torso. A third high-affect juxtaposition occurred with the "break," described above. Tucker cut off the movement in the middle of a Belly Roll, came to a break, or full stop, and shifted the mood and rhythm of his intricately structured routine.

Ephebism

Named after the ancient Greek word for youth, ephebism encompasses attributes such as power, vitality, flexibility, drive, and attack. Attack implies speed, sharpness, and force. Intensity is also a characteristic of ephebism, but it is a kinesthetic intensity that recognizes feeling as sensation, rather than emotion. It is "the phrasing of every note and step with consummate vitality," with response to rhythm and a sense of swing as aesthetic values.[8] The torso is flexible and articulate: "The concept of vital aliveness leads to the interpretation of the parts of the body as independent instruments of percussive force."[9] Old people dancing with youthful vitality are valued examples of ephebism in Africanist cultures. Moving with suppleness and flexibility is more important than maintaining torso alignment. Meanwhile, speed, sharpness, force, and attack are comparatively muted concepts in the European ballet tradition. (See descriptions later in this essay by Balanchine dancers, who contrast his sense of speed and timing with that found in traditional ballet.) The percussive force of independent body parts, with rhythm as a principal value, is not a part of the European ballet aesthetic.

> Tucker raised his right arm to his eyes, at first as if embarrassed (a feeling that many in the audience shared), and then, as if racked with sobs, he went into the Tremble, which shook him savagely and rapidly from head to foot. As he turned his back to the audience to display the overall trembling more effectively, Tucker looked like a murderously naughty boy.[10]

Tucker's "tremble" is an excellent example of ephebism. This movement articulates the separated segments of the torso, one against the other, in a broken yet continuous movement sequence. It can be accomplished only with a totally flexible torso, which will allow the tremorlike reverberations to ripple nonstop through the body. The movement is also percussive, forceful, and intense in its attack. It racks his



34. Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker, 1928. Courtesy Frank Diggs Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

body. An additional fillip of ephebism is demonstrated in Tucker's "naughty boy" self-presentation.

The Aesthetic of the Cool

As Thompson so eloquently explains, the "aesthetic of the cool" is all-embracing. It is an attitude (in the sense that African Americans use that word, "attitude") that combines composure with vitality. Its prime components are visibility—dancing the movements clearly, presenting the self clearly, and aesthetic clarity; luminosity, or brilliance; and facial composure, or the "mask of the cool." The "cool" embraces all the other principles. Taken together, the sum total of all the principles can be characterized as "soul force." It is seen in the asymmetrical walk of African American males, which shows an attitude of carelessness cultivated with calculated aesthetic clarity. It is in the unemotional, detached, masklike face of the drummer or dancer whose body and energy may be working fast, hard, and hot, but whose face remains cool. The aloofness, sangfroid, and detachment of some styles of European academic dance are completely different from this aesthetic of the cool. The European attitude suggests centeredness,

control, linearity, directness; the Africanist mode suggests asymmetricality (that plays with falling off center), looseness (implying flexibility and vitality), and indirectness of approach. "Hot," its opposite, is a necessary component of the Africanist "cool." It is in the embracing of these opposites, and in their high-affect juxtaposition, that the aesthetic of the cool exists.

Throughout Tucker's routine, for example, he strikes a balance between the sexual heat implied in his pelvic movements and the cool attitude of his face. Luminosity and brilliance come through in his direct relationship to the audience and the choreography, and visibility is demonstrated in the fact that he dances not as a character but as himself. These traits are valued in the Africanist aesthetic.

Some people imagine that ballet is about as far away from anything Africanist as black supposedly is from white, but things just are not as defined or clear-cut as that: not even black and white. In spite of our denials, opposites become bound together more often than we admit. Cultures borrow from each other and fusions abound.

The Africanist presence is a defining ingredient that separates American ballet from its European counterpart. Ironically, it was George Balanchine, a Russian immigrant of Georgian ethnicity, who was the principal Americanizer of ballet. Why and how is a story worth telling, even in brief. Balanchine cut his teeth as a choreographer in Europe during the Jazz Age of the 1920s. His early *Apollo* for the Diaghilev Ballets Russes exuded jazz references. After Diaghilev's death, Balanchine worked in major European cities as a ballet master and choreographed revues for the popular stage to earn a living. He also created musical routines for the first feature-length English talking film, *Dark Red Roses*, made in 1929.[11]

The jazz aesthetic was familiar to him before he came to the United States. Once here, he served a long apprenticeship on Broadway which helped him to assimilate popular, social, and vernacular dance influences in the service of a newly defined ballet medium. Beginning in 1936, he choreographed or co-choreographed a number of musicals, including *The Ziegfeld Follies, On Your Toes, Babes in Arms, I Married an Angel, The Boys from Syracuse*, and, with Katherine Dunham, *Cabin in the Sky*. He worked with the Nicholas Brothers, two extraordinary tap-dancing kids, in *Follies* and *Babes*, and with Josephine Baker in *Follies*. Thus, he had direct contact with African American dancers and choreographers and with genres that were highly influenced by Africanisms.

It is already clear that Balanchine was a ballet choreographer who worked in the ballet medium and subscribed to a ballet aesthetic. What I hope to make equally clear is that, throughout his career, he introduced to the ballet canon Africanist aesthetic principles as well as Africanist-based steps from the so-called jazz dance repertory. He introduced these innovations into the ballet context while maintaining his grounding in the ballet aesthetic. The result was still ballet, but with a new accent. My guiding premises follow:

- Ballet, like all dance, is subject to the influences and presences that are valued in its cultural context. Therefore, it can rightfully be called a form of ethnic dance.
- Influences from past and present cultures are woven into, intermeshed with, and redistributed in any given cultural mode at any given moment in time. (To paraphrase this idea in structuralist terms, every text is an intertext.)
- The Americanization of ballet by a Russian immigrant, George Balanchine, will show both African American and European American influences.
- Looking from an Africanist perspective reveals the Africanist presence in American ballet.

There are many places in Balanchine's ballets where the Africanist legacy comes bursting through, most notably in the new movement vocabulary he introduced to the ballet stage. The displacement of hips or other parts of the torso, instead of vertical alignment; leg kicks, attacking the beat, instead of well-placed extensions; angular arms and flexed wrists, rather than the traditional, rounded *port de bras*—all of these touches usher the viewer into the discovery of the Africanist presence in Balanchine. These elements appear in works throughout his career and are highlighted in ballets such as *Apollo* (1928), *The Four Temperaments (1946)*, *Agon* (1957), *Stars and Stripes* (1958), and *Symphony in Three Movements* (1972), among others. If and when they appeared in European ballet, these elements were reserved for lesser, "ignoble" characters and represented that which was comic or rustic, vernacular or exotic. Balanchine wielded these movements in a decidedly nontraditional fashion and assigned them central significance as movements for principals and soloists.

In the first movement of *Symphony*, the corps dancers lunge from side to side, with the straight leg turned in and one arm angularly jutting downward in a style unknown in traditional ballet. Later, a male sextet makes a prancing entrance that only can be described as an updated version of the cakewalk, with the upper torso leaning deeply backward. The second movement opens with torso isolations as a central element in the first duet, the same isolations used more baroquely in *Bugaku* (1963), which, even though it is based on a Japanese wedding ritual, reveals marked Africanist tendencies. This movement vocabulary allows Balanchine to expand the ballet idiom by introducing the articulated torso to its vertical standard.

The second and third duets of *The Four Temperaments*—the allegro tempo second duet and the adagio third—share some of the same Africanist-inflected movements. In both, ballroom dance references are as evident as the traditional *pas de deux* conventions into which they have been inserted. In both duets the male twirl-turns the female on one spot, as social dancers do, except that she is "sitting" in the air in *plié* while on point. The male then pumps his partner's hips forward and back as he grips her waist. He could pull her off the floor with this movement, and they would resemble Lindyhoppers. In the second duet this movement is capped off with jazzy little side lunges, straight, outstretched arms, and flexed wrists, as the two dancers face each other. And they exit with "Egyptian" arms (raised to shoulder height and bent perpendicularly from the elbow). In the third duet the male leads his partner into deep, parallel-legged squats (it would be misleading to call them *pliés*) which she performs while still on point. Then, standing, he offers his back to her. Facing his back, she wraps her arms around his neck, drapes the full length of her body against his, and leans on him. He moves forward for several steps, dragging her along. This looks like a cleaned up, slowed down variation on a typical Lindy exit. (And only in the Lindy have I seen as much female crotch as in these two duets.)

In the first variation of the "Melancholic" section a female quartet enters. Their arms are in second position, not in a traditional *port de bras*, but straight, with flexed wrists. They perform high kicks which are resolved by pushing the pelvis forward on a 1-2, kick-thrust beat, and their legs are parallel as they *bourrée* around the male. The choreography for the male is heavy, low, intense, and marked by deep lunges and acrobatic backbends. He metaphorically follows the music and "gets down"—as if this were a melancholy blues. His ephebism is balanced by the quartet's cool. He exits in a deep, acrobatic, nonacademic backbend, his outstretched arms leading him offstage, his center in his head and arms, not his spine.

There are many instances in the "Sanguinic" variation, especially in the choreography for the female soloist, where the movement is danced from the hips, which are thrust forward. This and the exit in "Melancholic," described above, are examples of the simplest version of polycentrism. Several centers are not occurring simultaneously, but the center has shifted from the vertically aligned spine to other parts of the body. The "Phlegmatic" solo opens and closes as a study in torso isolations and asymmetry. Paul Hindemith's score intimates the chords and intervals associated with blues and jazz.

Why did Balanchine incorporate these Africanist principles in his ballets? Katherine Dunham gives us a clue. "Balanchine liked the rhythm and percussion of our

dances," she said, referring to her own African American ensemble. "I think most Georgians have a good sense of rhythm from what I've seen."[12] Balanchine was the perfect catalyst for defining and shaping American ballet. The Georgian rhythmic sense that he culturally inherited was the open door that allowed him to embrace the Africanist rhythmic landscape of his new homeland. With his talent and initiative he was able to merge those two principles, just as he fused ballet's cool aloofness with the Africanist aesthetic of the cool.

The 1928 *Apollo* confirmed that Balanchine was an experimentalist and innovator in the same rank as those in literature, music, and painting who similarly reached out to African, Asian, or Oceanic vocabularies to expand their options. This ballet marked the first of Balanchine's collaborations with Igor Stravinsky who was influenced, in part, by Africanist principles in his radically rhythmic, chromatic scores. Balanchine described this work as a turning point in his career. As the three muses enter together, they perform the same high kicks with pelvis thrusting forward that reappear in *The Four Temperaments* nearly twenty years later. There is a delightful moment when they move by waddling on their heels, their legs straight. On another stage, and in another mood, that would be a tap-dance transition step. And the asymmetrical poses the dancers assume diverge from traditional ballet but are akin to Africanist dance, particularly the moving poses struck in African American stage and social dance styles of the 1920s.

Apollo's first solo is a twisting, lunging affair. He simultaneously jumps, bends his knees so that his heels touch his hips, and twists his hips so that they angle against his torso. His landings dig into the floor as one leg releases and kicks downward on the beat. Indeed, this solo explores the downbeat—the earth, not the air—and the soloist, like a jazz musician, hits the beat on the "one" count, not taking the preparatory "and" count that is traditional in ballet. This passage suggests a fusion between Africanisms and vernacular dance influences from Balanchine's Russian past. Another example of Balanchine's nonballetic use of phrasing and timing is recounted by Maria Tallchief, to whom he was married in the late 1940s:

> In a demonstration with Walter Terry and Balanchine, I did an eight-count *développé*, straight up and out with the *port de bras* in the manner in which we most often see it done. Then George turned to me and demanded, "Now out in *one* count and hold the rest." That is an example of the simplicity of his style. [Emphasis Tallchief's.][13]

The nontraditional timing Balanchine introduced into the ballet canon, like his introduction of the articulated torso, stretched the parameters of ballet and revitalized and Americanized the technique.

In his second solo, Apollo does several moves in which he pulls his weight off center as he lunges and stops short in an asymmetrical *plié* on the forced arch. His turns and lunges are grounded and abrupt. He stops them suddenly, as if on a dime. Unlike traditional ballet practice, the turns are not resolved: they simply stop. Both solos manifest ephebism in their speed, attack, and force. Apollo's solos and the "Melancholic" solo from *The Four Temperaments* are dances about weight and groundedness, not defying gravity but meeting it embracing it. The jumps are performed not to highlight the going up, but to punctuate and emphasize the coming down. Ballet's traditional airborne quality is not present here. Instead, we find the connection to the earth characteristic of Africanist dance and American modern dance. In fact, the Africanisms evident here probably came to Balanchine through modern dance as well as social and show dance. This solo is followed by an amusing vaudeville chorus that seems to come out of nowhere. The muses join him and, with no preparation and on an abrupt change in the mood of the score, they all *plié* in an asymmetrical position, settle back into one hip with buttocks jutting out, and bounce in unison to the rhythm. They are setting time for a change in rhythm, and this is their "break." It is a radical juxtaposition, set against the previous mood and movements. It is also a quote from popular dance styles. The work ends as the three muses lean their bodies against Apollo's back, their legs in gradated arabesques, while he poses in a lunge, legs parallel, arms raised, hands flexed.

The Africanist presence in Balanchine's works is a story of particular and specific motifs, of which there are many more examples than the ones given here, from ballets that span the course of his career. In other words, these were not dispensable, decorative touches that marked one or two ballets; rather, they were essential ingredients in his canon. However, the story only begins here. More significant is the underlying speed, vitality, energy, coolness, and athletic intensity that are fundamental to his Americanization of ballet. The tale continues with the radical dynamics, off-center weight shifts, and unexpected mood and attitude changes in Balanchine's work that create a high-affect juxtaposition of elements uncommon in traditional ballet but basic to Africanist dance. Less innovative artists might have held onto the old, but Balanchine could not settle for that. He was enticed by what he saw as American qualities of speed and coolness. Of course, those qualities are predicated as much on the African presence in the Americas as the European. It simply will not suffice to say that jazz dance influenced his work. That term, "jazz," has become another way to misname and silence the Africanist legacy; systematic exclusion of African Americans from American ballet has done the same. Buried under layers of deceit, that legacy in ballet has been overlooked. Some of the hidden story is intimated in Balanchine's original intentions for his new American ballet school, as recounted by Lincoln Kirstein:

> For the first [class] he would take 4 white girls and 4 white boys, about sixteen yrs. old and 8 of the same, *negros* [*sic*]. . . . He thinks the negro part of it would be amazingly supple, the combination of suppleness and sense of time superb. Imagine them, masked, for example. They have so much abandon—and disciplined they would be *nonpareil*. [Emphasis Kirstein's.][14]

Thus, even before his arrival in the United States, Balanchine was calculating how he could draw upon the energy and phrasing of African Americans. Of course, the primitive trope is at work here, with the concomitant allure of the exotic. Even so, if his dream had been realized, what a different history would have been wrought for American ballet and its relationship to peoples of African lineage. One can only imagine that, innocent and ignorant of American racism, Balanchine understood, once here, that his dream school was unfeasible.

The texts that discuss Balanchine's Broadway musicals praise the ways in which he "improved" on show dancing; none of them acknowledge what he gained from that experience and took with him back to the ballet stage. But Balanchine himself may well have been aware of the two-way exchange. He said in a 1934 interview with Arnold Haskell, soon after his arrival in the United States:

> There are other ways of holding the interest [of the audience], by vivid contrast, for instance. Imagine the effect that would be produced by six Negresses dancing on their pointes and six white girls doing a frenzied jazz![15]

What he suggests, of course, is an example of high-affect juxtaposition. In working on *Concerto Barocco*, described by former New York City Ballet dancer Suki Schorer as a ballet with "a very jazzy feeling," he aimed for clarity in syncopation, timing, and attack, and he characterized a particular step as "like the Charleston."[16] His original intention for this work is expressed by former company member Barbara Walczak in her comparison of two versions of the ballet. Inadvertently, she points out Balanchine's use of the Africanist aesthetic:

> The difference between the original and today's *Barocco* is a *timing* difference, an *energy* difference. It was never meant to be lyrical. One difference was that many of the steps were *very off-center*. . . . The energy behind the steps was different. They were *attacked* more than they are now. [Emphasis mine.][17]

Patricia McBride, who danced for Balanchine from 1959 until his death in 1983, says, "Dancing Balanchine is harder—the patterns, the way they change in Balanchine ballets. The ballets are so fast, and they travel much more than a lot of the more classical companies."[18] Speed, timing, and attitude changes are key elements in Balanchine and are key to the Africanist aesthetic. They are not signature components of the ballet from which he emerged. It seems ironic that when Schorer compares the Russian ballet companies with Balanchinian ballet she states that the Russians do not understand "phrasing, counting, the timing within a step. *They've never seen anything.* They only know what they know" [emphasis mine].[19] What they don't know, and what Balanchine was exposed to, is the phrasing, counting, and timing that come from the Africanist influence in American culture, so native to us that we take it for granted. By embracing these elements that he encountered in the United States, Balanchine expanded the definition of ballet. There is no doubt that his redefinition included both Africanist and European elements, fused into a spicy, pungent brew.

Balanchine's legacy, like the Africanist legacy, is a living one, much of which cannot be codified or contained by "the steps." Arthur Mitchell worked well with Balanchine, and Mitchell's cultural background and training helped. His description of *Metastaseis & Pithoprakta* shows Africanisms in Balanchine's way of working through rhythm rather than steps and in requiring the dancing body to be laid back, cool, and free to receive his messages:

> Suzanne Farrell and I danced a pas de deux that was one of those eerie things that didn't use steps per se. He'd say, "I want something like this," and he would start moving. You would just have to be free enough to let your body go and do it. I think one of the things that helped me so much with him was that, *being a tap dancer, I was used to rhythm and speed.* [Emphasis mine.] Many times when he was choreographing he would work rhythmically and then put the step in. If you were looking for a step, it wouldn't be there. But if you got *dah,* da-*dah-dah-dah,* it would come out. [Emphasis Mitchell's.] The rhythm was always the most important. The choreography was set in time and then space.[20]

According to Mitchell, Balanchine sometimes referred to Dunham in his work with students and sent dancers to study with her. He also regularly called on Mitchell to "come in and show these kids, because they don't know old-fashioned jazz."[21] A final statement from Mitchell is most telling about Balanchine and the Africanist legacy:

> There was a fallacy that blacks couldn't do classical ballet—that the bodies were incorrect. But then you talked to Balanchine, who was the greatest master of them all and changed the look of ballet in the world today. He described his ideal ballerina as having a short torso, long arms, long legs, and a small head. If that's ideal, then we [peoples of African lineage] are perfect.[22]

Mitchell's quote acclaims the black dancing body, and the body is the origin and outcome of my thesis. I call this essay "Stripping the Emperor," but what needs stripping is our way of perceiving. Once we dare see the naked truth, as the child in Anderson's tale, we shall see a body, the American dancing body. It is a portrait in black and white.

Notes

Temple University and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts provided partial support for this ongoing research project.

1. The term "Africanist" is used here to include diasporan concepts, practices, attitudes, or forms which have roots or origins in Africa. ("Diaspora" refers to the dispersion of African peoples from their homeland, beginning in the transatlantic slave trade era.) My precedent for using this term is set in recent scholarship. For example, see Joseph E. Holloway, *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), and Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

2. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* (winter 1989): 11.

3. For a thorough discussion that is applicable to both visual and performing arts, see Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974). Thompson compiles an Africanist aesthetic paradigm that he terms the "Ten Canons of Fine Form." See also Susan Vogel, *Aesthetics of African Art* (New York: Center for African Art, 1986), and Kariamu Welsh Asante, "Commonalities in African Dance," in *African Culture—The Rhythms of Unity*, ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Kariamu Welsh Asante (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), 71–82, for a dance-specific discussion of Africanist aesthetics. For a more generalized discussion of Africanisms in America, see also Geneva Gay and Will L. Baber, eds., *Expressively Black: The Cultivated Basis of Ethnic Identity* (New York: Praeger, 1987), and Alfred Pasteur and Ivory Toldson, *Roots of Soul: The Psychology of Black Expressiveness* (New York: Anchor, 1982).

4. Rayner Heppenstall, quoted in Selma Jeanne Cohen, *Next Week, Swan Lake* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 131.

5. Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance* (1964; New York: Schirmer Books, 1979), 236.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 236–237.

8. Thompson, *African Art in Motion,* 7.

9. Ibid., 9.

10. Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance,* 237.

11. *Choreography by George Balanchine: A Catalogue of Works* (New York: Viking, 1984), 25.

12. Interview with Dunham in Francis Mason, *I Remember Balanchine* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 193.

13. Ibid., 239.

14. Letter from Lincoln Kirstein to A. Everett Austin Jr., dated July 16, 1933, reprinted in ibid., 116–117.

15. Haskell, *Balletomania Then and Now* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 98.

16. Mason, *I Remember Balanchine,* 459.

17. Ibid., 259.

18. Ibid., 444.

19. Ibid., 462.

20. Ibid., 395.

21. Ibid., 396.

22. "Talk of the Town," *New Yorker,* December 28, 1987, 36.