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The Dance Archaeology of Rennie Harris

Hip-Hop or Postmodern?

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Rennie Harris is a hip-hop concert choreographer. If this sounds like an oxymoron, then you have not seen his critically acclaimed dance works. Harris shatters the high art (read ballet and modern dance) and low art (read popular street dance) paradigm in a definitive style that challenges our notions of modernism in dance. "I like to manipulate time, where now, past, and future are at the same time."[1] And so Rennie Harris does in his exquisitely crafted dances that play with the time signature of movement: attempting to dance outside of time into eternity.

Harris has unintentionally contested the concert dance world in a fundamental way by establishing Rennie Harris Puremovement as the first American concert dance company to solely utilize the vibrancy, virtuosity, and showmanship of hip-hop dance as its launching pad, employing street dance to probe the human psyche as well as to make poignant personal, cultural, and even epochal statements. It is precisely the *informality* of street dance manipulated by a creative artist that can challenge the status quo of modern, ballet, and modern jazz dance as the only legitimate concert forms capable of compelling choreographic content. Harris explicates: "Urban dance is

not formal. It's an experience. It's social. That's what allows it to denounce what tends to control."[2] Indeed, Harris has taken the experience of street dance, in all its unceremonious, improvisational, at-the-moment creation, and transformed it into poignant choreography that is on the cutting edge of today's dance and theater worlds.

At the foundation of Harris's aesthetic are his deep concerns with the human condition, his own spiritual development, and the state of the world. Using hip-hop dance to explore these age-old issues, Harris has become an archeologist of sorts, digging up relics of the past that have proved to be persistent, remaining just below the surface: racism, misogyny, classism, and neocolonialism. These extant bugaboos of humanity, exorcized through his oeuvre, are laid raw and bare through his adept use of hip-hop elements and contemporary theatrical devices. These vital concerns are made clear in the body (hip-hop dance), text (rapped verse and recorded narratives), sound (DJing, beat-box, and aural soundscapes), and visuals (video collages), all allowing the audience to deconstruct gripping social issues while probing their personal relationship to them. Rennie Harris's particular use of form and content is the reason I ask the question: Are his dance creations hip-hop or postmodern? I explore the complex answer to this question in this chapter.

Rennie Harris Puremovement (RHPM), founded in Philadelphia in 1992, is the brainchild and lifeblood of Lorenzo "Rennie" Harris. Beginning in his North Philadelphia community as a stepper—a precision style of rhythmic unison dancing made famous by African American fraternities and sororities—Harris is well versed in many styles of the black-Latino vernacular dance that fall under the large rubric we call hip-hop dance: popping, locking, electric boogie, house, and b-boying/b-girling (break dancing). From street stepping he graduated to the Scanner Boys as a b-boy in which his tags, or names, became Disco ("because I was always dancing") and PSK or Prince Scare Krow (because of his penchant for the popping and electric boogie styles of hip-hop dance) as well as the one that really stuck, Prince of the Ghetto. He was discovered by the larger world when the Smithsonian Institution's Folklife Center came mining for American folk culture in his Philadelphia community in the late 1970s.[3] At age fourteen, he began teaching hip-hop dance for the Smithsonian, which had recently discovered the new phenomenon of hip-hop culture around the same time the first rap tune, Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight," was broadcast nationally. Harris was, therefore, one of the first hip-hop dancers to be legitimized by a preeminent U.S. cultural institution.

Once he was "discovered," his career skyrocketed. Having established himself as a precocious authority on street dancing in his teens, Harris went on to teach workshops at UCLA, Columbia College, and Bates College. He also has credits within the world of rap, having toured with famous old-school rappers like Run-DMC, the Fat Boys, and Kurtis Blow. He worked for a while in commercial music videos but quickly realized that he wanted more creative freedom to offer an alternative to hip-hop's commercial side. Today, he brings these dynamic styles to the concert stage in powerful statements that have mesmerized audiences throughout the world. Notably, he has won three Bessies (New York Dance Performance Award) for his choreography while simultaneously becoming a leading spokesman for the positive and creative aspects of hip-hop culture. As dance critic and scholar Sally R. Sommer recognizes, "Since Harris has survived into his forties he has taken the mantel of elder statesman, historian, teacher, and defender of Hip-hop's best values. Harris experienced guns and death, and he is tired of the Hip-hop that glorifies violence."[4] Harris has definitely earned the right to be hip-hop culture's moral conscious and to "represent," in the hip-hop sense, its regenerative and evolutionary side.

The Hip-Hop Dance Aesthetic

Harris's choreography conceptualizes hip-hop as a cultural extension of the Africanist dance continuum, from traditional West African dance through American tap and early jazz dance to the 1970s street corner b-boy competitions. B-boying/b-girling is embodied text just as rap music is oral poetry. Dance in hip-hop culture, as a part of the African diaspora, can be likened aesthetically to a Séné-Gambian village *bantaba* circle, where a griot, or oral historian, sings the genealogical lineage of the people along with symbolic gestures and often spontaneous dance by the people that serve to focus the expressive energy of the entire event. Today, Harris makes each of his dances collaborations between him and his dancers through their engagement with the improvisatory tradition. In his choreography, Harris celebrates this Africanist dance and cultural continuum through funky black American social dance, drill marching, choreographed unison electric boogie steps, and the all-important improvised b-boying.

Harris's choreography testifies to the eloquent articulation of both direct (text) and subtle (subtext) nuances through dance. Dance as narrative that indicates, identifies, imagines, and subverts in hip-hop culture was made lucid early on in hip-hop's development by Sally Banes's description of the

potential of the freeze in b-boying: "Another important set of motifs in the freeze section was the exploration of body states in a subjunctive mode—things not as they are, but as they might be—comparing and contrasting youthful male vitality with its range of opposites: women, animals (dogs, horses, mules) babies, old age, injury, and illness . . . and death."[5]

Innovative freezes and the stop-on-a-dime syncopated breaks in the fast-paced rhythmic phrasing are a part of the masterful b-boy or b-girl's solo. In true Africanist style, movement dialogue of the soloist with the other dancers on the stage and the audience creates the community of the b-boy circle. This "conversation" is made audible through the shouts and taunts on stage, along with the audience's hand clapping and screams, all of which challenge each b-boy to surpass the last skilled bodily display. Each improvised rhythmic step and swift change of direction masterfully attempts to keep up with today's fast-paced MTV-BET pastiche lifestyle. Hip-hop dance mirrors the intricacies of our interwoven lives in urban America, reflecting the synergy and complexity of dancers of various ethnicities creating within this Africanist dance style.

Knowledge of the components of a skilled b-boy/b-girl solo is necessary to understand Harris's oeuvre. Following the entrance into the dance circle, four basic sections of b-boying are the tools of good improvisation: (1) top rock or uprock, standing feet work of rapid weight shifts: (2) six-step, fast feet and hand rhythms working together while crouched close to the floor; (3) power moves or improvised acrobatics containing a myriad of spins and flips; and (4) an ending "freeze" pose. The third section may contain traditional moves such as flares (spinning on the back with legs above the head), the turtle (rhythmic hopping on both hands while the rest of the body is suspended close to the floor), one-handed hand spins, or back flips and are interspersed with the second section, or six-step. The masterful combination of these two b-boy components renders more of a dance style as opposed to pure acrobatics, utilizing the subtle textures of the music. All b-boys or b-girls take their turn soloing, but the energy builds in just the right encoded manner, partially because each dancer knows the etiquette of just the moment to enter the circle when current dancer executes his or her final freeze. Because of its highly skilled, exhibitionist style, Harris has dubbed this branch of hip-hop dance the "ballet of hip-hop dance."[6] Harris has been able to transform a dance form meant as virtuosic spectacle into an often delicate and subtle, pared-down, concert-oriented movement vocabulary that explores the human condition.

In order to reproduce the spontaneity and in-group rules, Harris cannot always control these b-boy circles that he inserts into his choreography. Although he attempts to retain the structure and social process of good b-boy form, his choreographic works become a give and take between choreographic structure and the at-the-moment creation of the dancers. "Because it's on the stage, people think community does not exist. My dancers will change my choreography [to fit their needs at the moment], sometimes to the point that I don't even recognize it. We have actually had b-boys come up on stage from the audience and represent."[7]

In his form of dance, Harris must be ready for anything. The democracy of the b-boy circle demonstrates how individualism of dance style works with what Robert Farris Thompson calls the "looking smart" aesthetic to create the necessary communal social context.[8] In the end, it is the collective energy of the circle to which each individual has contributed that is evaluated as a successful performance. The socializing process promoted by this communal aesthetic becomes salutary for the traditional concert dance audience.

Hip-Hop Dance in Historical Context

Improvisational emphasis and the "looking smart" aesthetic are a part of a long history of black popular dancing that has permeated the Americas through the Atlantic slave trade. Because the Africanist aesthetic in dance and music has become so all pervasive, Harris has easy access to this historical dance continuum, as do American audience members who view his choreography. My earlier comparison between the Séné-Gambian *bantaba* and hip-hop dance circles is a far-reaching association across the globe that encompasses the history of an approach to the body, community sensibilities, and ultimately to life itself. Dance scholar Jacqui Malone explains, "Africans' strong attitudes toward music and dance—and the links between them—set the stage for the dance and music-making cultures to come in North and South America."[9] Malone further explains, "African-American dance serves some of the same purposes as traditional dances in Western and Central African cultures: On both continents black dance is a source of energy, joy, and inspiration; a spiritual antidote to oppression, and a way to lighten work, teach social values, and strengthen institutions."[10] Dance carries social values in all cultures, but the role of improvisation and the individualist style promoted by the embodying of group values in African-based dance is particularly instructive for the outsider audience member.

American popular dances of the twentieth century are rife with this Africanist dance aesthetic through the influence of African American culture.

The turn-of-the century cakewalk, even with its Europeanist mocking allusions, the 1920s Jazz Age Charleston with its relaxed torso and polyrhythms that freed the American body publicly, the 1930s Lindy Hop's frenetic and showmanlike quality that complemented the big band sound, all the way to the world dance craze of the 1950s twist that freed the European pelvic girdle, as well as the youth-oriented dances of the 1960s that led to the 1980s break dance craze are all a part of this historical dance continuum in which I situate the dance foundation of the choreography of Rennie Harris. American audiences that view his work are already socialized into this aesthetic as part of the American dance legacy.

Beyond American shores, black American social dance forms also influenced Europe. British dance scholar Belinda Quirey reflects on this aesthetic's influence in England: "The Americans soon put an end to any stodginess. We have never looked back since. From Jitterbug to Jive, from Jive to Rock 'n' Roll, from Rock 'n' Roll to the Twist, and from then on to the more recherché items of Afro-American culture it has all been one way traffic. . . . As far as body mechanics go, the important thing is the different use of the foot and of the pelvis. The latter change has been seen most obviously in the Twist, but it has been there from the start of the Jitterbugging."[11] This historical dance legacy came from Africa to the Americas, where African-diasporic dance cultures merged European partnering styles and African improvisational "apart dancing" to create vibrant fusion dance styles in the United States, the Caribbean, and South America that have all affected the rest of the world. Rennie Harris's adept use of the skilled b-boy solos in the African apart dancing tradition is exactly where his choreography merges with this dance history (figure 15.1).

I agree with Jonathan Jackson's appraisal of the place of improvisation in the African American dance repertoire: "The central principle on which my analysis is based is that in African-American vernacular dancing improvisation *is* choreography."[12] Rather than antecedent, improvisation, with its riffing, repeating, layering, and ritualization, according to Jackson, is choreographic creation in the moment that is predicated on the summoning of individual and collective energies in the act of dancing. What he calls dance "vamping" (so prevalent in music) or "jockeying" is the antecedent to choreographic inspiration that can lead to the inspired improvised solo. In hip-hop, uprocking or top rocking is the vamp that precedes the six-step and power moves of the b-girl. Vamping establishes the "groove, or a sense of repetitive on-goingness."[13] As Jackson explains, the groove is the communal beat that contains the collective rhythm from which inspired improvised choreography will emerge. Harris's adroit use of his dancers' skilled improvised bodily texts is a great part of what makes his choreography so compelling and appealing. As I will explore, Harris is well aware not only of improvisation as choreography but also of the African dance continuum from which it comes.

Figure 15.1: Rennie Harris in "Scarecrow" (1998). Photo by Bob Emmott.

Early Repertoire Sets the Stage

Within this aesthetic context, one of Harris's earlier works, "Students of the Asphalt Jungle" (1995), made his artistic statement and established Rennie Harris Puremovement as a new kind of concert dance company based on the power of street dancing. Making the Africanist cultural continuum clear, Harris incorporates specific West African dance movements into his choreography, which to the novice viewer could be mistaken for hip-hop dance. For example, in "Students of the Asphalt Jungle" he uses movements from *Ekonkon*, a celebration dance of the Djoba people of the Casamance region of Senegal. This quoting of specific West African dance is situated within basic dance torso isolations as well as popping, locking, and funk movements that create a rich intracultural text of dance. Then, suddenly halfway through the precise choreographic patterns of audience-facing dance lines, diagonals, and cannons, one by one the six male dancers, bare chest and dressed in white pants and sneakers, come down stage center to "throw down" in nuanced polyrhythmic movement statements that not only demonstrate skilled athletic solos but also subvert our high art notion that they do not have anything to actually "say." Here rhythmic virtuosity is celebrated as dialogic process between self and body, dancer and community, soloist and audience. This, in other words, is a kind of contemporary *African* American dance, developed over five hundred years in the black Atlantic.

Yet even in this celebration of the New Age African dance circle and the continuation of Africanist movement styles, Harris makes an explicit *political* statement. The opening soundscape is of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s voice expounding on justice and freedom. In using this recorded speech at the beginning of the dance, Harris illuminates the sociopolitical context of this male bravado dance ritual, and thus he cojoins his aesthetic with its social context. The last syllables of King's resounding words are technically slowed to allow a seamless segue into the beginning musical rhythms, reminding us that ubiquitous celebratory R & B, soul, funk, and blues, produced in working-class black communities, were created in spite of social containment and personal pain. As the title alludes, Harris positions "Students of the Asphalt Jungle" in a *specific* place: urban America with all of its seething, shifting, overlapping of race and class. The U.S. asphalt jungle is his "dance studio," a kind of training ground for these male dance "students" using the streets to prove their triumphant manhood, despite the mean situations in which they often dodge the police and each other.

Yet, it is "Endangered Species," his 1994 tour-de-force solo that set the direction of Harris's use of hip-hop as a concert form. "I'm not interested in entertaining anymore. I have personal issues to deal with, and I have to deal with how they affect me."[14] The centrality of Harris's personal issues, as an impetus for his choreography, became apparent within two years after he began Puremovement. "Endangered Species" became his first attempt at inserting his personal life as a black male growing up in a Philadelphia ghetto into his developing artistic corpus. A sole black male figure, danced by Harris himself, enters a smoke-filled center stage spotlight, using a slow mime-electric boogie run that turns in the four sacred directions. It is as if he is both blessing the stage for the story that is about to be told and running for his life, in slow motion, at the same time. He wears black pants and a long-sleeved sweatshirt, sporting dread locks that drape his anguished face. The entire effect transports one out of time.

The solo male figure is every (black) man, but he has a particular family story to tell. Again, the textual soundscape becomes crucial to this solo work and carries the spoken statement that Harris wishes to make in "Endangered Species": "Two of my brothers are hustlers, aka gangsters," the prerecorded text of Harris's voice begins.[15] The soundtrack breaks his story down for us, including the violence against his lesbian sister by one of his brothers. "Maybe he thought he could beat it out of her." Harris reveals the violence from which he comes, from which many us emerge onto life's stage. "It sounds crazy, but maybe we're all guilty. . . . I didn't have a choice. I had to adapt. . . . My identity was lost. It was taken from me. As a kid I wanted to be white. I guess that was because of that European concept." As the sound text positions this black everyman into a specific story—a particular family in a particular urban ghetto—ambiguity, fear, and despair ripples through his body with the hip-hop dance techniques of the "snake" and "ticking," allowing us to literally see his anguish in the adeptly executed isolations of his muscles.

Scholars and social critics such as Cornel West have articulated black male angst within the realities of urban ghetto life. In delineating the taxonomy of sociological explanations of urban problems of unemployment, poor housing, unequal education, gang violence, and the like, West examines the *personal* in relation to these sociological indexes: "[P]eople, especially degraded and oppressed people, are hungry for identity, meaning, and self-worth."[16] This is exactly what the recorded text of Harris's "Endangered Species" alludes: "My identity was lost. It was taken from me." The soundtrack continues: "If I'm for my race, does that make me a racist? I don't hate anyone, so I guess I'm not a racist. Racism! That's a funny word. Yet that is what America was built on."

Racism and its insidious effects is what he is trying to exorcize through the use of his body and soul. West gives us further reflection on the complexity surrounding the victimization process in black urban ghettos: "Although black people have never been simply victims, wallowing in self-pity and begging for white giveaways, they have been—and are—victimized. Therefore, to call on black people to be agents makes sense only if we also examine the dynamics of this victimization against which their agency will, in part, be exercised. What is particularly naïve and peculiarly vicious about the conservative behavioral outlook is that it tends to deny the lingering effect of black history—a history inseparable from though not reducible to victimization."[17] Harris allows us an up close and personal view of one black male victim in this history, and this dance work is his exercising personal agency against it through dance. In "Endangered Species," form and content are poignantly made inseparable as Rennie Harris's dance aesthetic.

Harris has been able to step outside of insidious U.S. racism, with dance as his vehicle of vision and personal salvation. In "Endangered Species," he stands, he crouches, he kneels, and he lies down in desolation. He cries out in pain of it all. Each robotic pop that he does technically appears as a fractured image of a man, as if he feels every lash of the slave master's whip, every continued overt and covert racist act against his people. But it goes far deeper than that. As he writhes on the floor, he cries out: "Ma, help me, help me!" He bridges the pain of the historical, social, and personal, all in one heartfelt cry.

Harris's Postmodern Dance

Given the particular symbiosis of Harris's form and content, an examination of postmodernism in dance and his hip-hop aesthetic is in order. Contemporary postmodernism is a general challenging affront to previous sacrosanct modernist paradigms of conceptual representations of reality. Yet postmodernism means different things in different disciplines.[18] In dance, as in other performing arts, postmodernism has meant a redefining of previous conceptions of form, with a different emphasis on the body, while critiquing perceived clichéd modernist conventions. Sally Banes's *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (1977, 1987) first laid out the dance landscape, starting in the 1960s, that developed out of the classic modern dance era. She delineates a typology of a postmodernist movement in dance over the second half of the twentieth century that included the use of gravity (crucial to hip-hop dance), dissonance, and a horizontality of the body, as opposed

to the verticality of classical ballet and what became defined as classical modern dance. Underpinning this "new" physicality was a simultaneous interest in both primitivist and other disciplines' modernist approaches and an engaging of the stridency of modern life in the twentieth century.[19] "The body itself became the subject of the dance, rather than serving as an instrument for expressive metaphors."[20]

Replacing the sacrosanct establishment of modern dance became the raison d'être of dance postmodernism. Banes discusses choreographers who challenged the era of Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, José Limón, Katherine Dunham, and Alvin Ailey with the postmodern choreographers of the 1960s and 1970s: Judson Dance Theatre artists, such as Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, David Gordon, and others who began to explore what she considered true modernism. Some postmodernists did eventually return to narrative content in the 1980s—the period she calls the "re-birth of content"—such as Lucinda Childs, Laura Dean, and Karole Armitage. Banes also established a general rubric of "new" approaches to dance that bind these sequential but overlapping camps: pastiche (radical juxtaposition), emphasis on irony, playfulness, historical references, the use of vernacular materials, and process over product, breakdowns of boundaries between art and life, and between artists and audiences.[21] Banes goes on to elucidate the use of narrative text and the language of gesture that also emerged in the postmodern era of the1980s. "One method of installing meaning in dance, the most nonverbal of the arts, is in fact to appropriate language and language-like systems. . . . Not surprisingly, the interest in verbal language has been accompanied by a rekindling of interest in narrative structures. . . . [T]he narrative, whose death seemed a certainty in the sixties and seventies, has been reborn in the eighties."[22]

Given this typology of postmodern dance characteristics, Rennie Harris's aesthetic becomes quintessentially postmodern at the turn of the twenty-first century. Although Harris may not have been aware of the convolutions of the shifting postmodern concert dance scene, his natural instincts as a creative artist, coming of age in the hip-hop era, fit naturally into these explorations. In "Endangered Species," he engages hip-hop gestures, such as both arms extended to the side with a tilt of the head that has come to mean a challenge ("You want a piece of this?"). He introduces this gesture in the section of the soundtrack that alludes to guns. It becomes indicative of the gestural, languagelike features of the postmodern aesthetic in dance. His use of recorded text as an ongoing narrative, often instead of music, is another device introduced into concert dance during the postmodern era of

the 1980s. Harris is intent on telling stories of the ghetto, but *how* he does it corresponds to the concert dance era into which he inserted his hip-hop aesthetic.

Yet dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild situated the entire postmodern aesthetic within a ubiquitous Africanist aesthetic in American culture: "So much of what we see as avant-garde in the postmodern era is informed by recycled Africanist principles and parallels traditional, characteristic Africanisms that we all grew up with as Americans, black, white, and brown. . . . The coolness, relaxation, looseness, and a laid-back energy; the radical juxtaposition of ostensibly contrary elements; the irony and double entendre of verbal and physical gesture; the dialogic relationship between performer and audience—all are integral elements in Africanist arts and lifestyle that are woven into the fabric of our society."[23]

Rennie Harris's entire approach draws from this rich range of the Africanist aesthetic. Harris explains, "From the ring shout to the cakewalk to the camel walk (one of the early hip-hop dances) to the moonwalk. This is the black dance legacy."[24] Viewed from Gottschild's revisionist perspective, Harris does not, in fact, borrow from a postmodern concert-dance aesthetic developed by white dance artists. Instead, it is the evolving field of contemporary concert dance that consciously and unconsciously borrowed from the pervasive Africanist aesthetic within which Harris was already socialized. Gottschild further elucidates: "Irony, paradox, and double entendre, rather than the classical European, linear logic of cause, effect, and resolution are basic to the Africanist aesthetic and offer a model for postmodernism subconsciously and at times, deliberately. It is probable that Dunn, Rainer, and others were not aware that in traditional Yoruban performance modes, the categories of play, ritual, and spectacle are fluid, multidimensional, multicentered concepts that put to shame the Europeanist idea that Africanist ritual is rigid and static."[25]

Postmodern dance and the Africanist aesthetic are therefore inseparable. Given the fact that hip-hop jams were starting in New York during the 1970s, at the height of the Judson Dance Theatre movement, spanning contact improv "jams" that borrowed from the freestyling of the b-boy circle and earlier forms such as the jazz jam sessions, the "parallel processes" and the lack of "coincidence," to which Gottschild refers, are made salient in Harris's work. American artistic production would not be what it has become without the all-pervasive Africanist aesthetic. Hence, my discussion of Harris's work within a postmodern dance context is from this understanding of his centrality to one of its antecedents and mainstream culture's partial appropriation of an aesthetic that was second nature to his sense of physicality, aesthetic principles, and overall approach to performance.

Rome & Jewels: *One Foot in the Streets and One Foot in the Universe*

Radical juxtaposition of Harris's developing aesthetic was clearly established with the summer 2000 premiere of his first evening-length, critically acclaimed, dance-theater work, *Rome & Jewels*. Harris says about himself: "I have one foot in the streets, and one foot in the universe."[26] The production toured for two years internationally, and *Rome & Jewels* brought his two feet together in a dynamic reenvisioning of Shakespeare's classic *Romeo and Juliet*, a tale of young love, an interfamily feud, and premature death. The Philadelphia press assessed, "Harris and his local hip-hop troupe Puremovement have launched a remarkable project, not always easy to understand but accumulating force and power from its fusion of Shakespeare and African American cultural forms. Both street kids and scholars will find themselves laughing at familiar codes."[27] By the time *Rome & Jewels* made its New York premiere that fall at the prestigious Joyce Theater, the critics had boned up on hip-hop culture and were ready for Harris's innovative new dance-theater challenge. *The New York Times* highlighted Harris's adroit juxtaposition of various hip-hop dance styles to represent the rivaling gangs: "These battles are portrayed through competing hip-hop dance styles, with the Caps as 'b-boyers' and the Monster Q's as hip-hoppers (popping and electric boogie boys). . . . In Mr. Harris's schema, these competing dance styles function as both identifying gang colors and as weapons of gang warfare." The critic goes on to reinforce my earlier point about his use of staged improvisation: "But even while their dancing declares their allegiance to their gangs, the members are most respected for their ability to improvise—to assert themselves as individuals—within these dance forms."[28] Through his creative genius, what was considered low art is now revolutionizing how we even conceive concert dance and theater, and in the process he blurs the lines between lowbrow and highbrow, a dichotomy about which the United States has always been ambivalent.[29]

Harris, therefore, was armed with aesthetic "permission" to experiment with one of the most famous stories in Western theater. From the obvious influential theatrical antecedents like *West Side Story* (1957) and Baz Luhrman's film *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), he was fortified to privilege his own background as context to make his unique statement about this continuing human

theme. In fact, the issues of the hip-hop generation are perfectly suited for Shakespeare's vision of love and hate in the drama of societal antagonisms. The mid-1990s so-called West Coast–East Coast rap wars, which some say resulted in the deaths of Tupac Shakur and Christopher "Biggie" Smalls, are proof of the ripe fodder hip-hop culture provides for the tensions in the plot. Harris needed to look no further than his North Philadelphia origins for inspiration. Harris reflected to an audience before an Ann Arbor, Michigan, performance of *Rome & Jewels* in 2002. "This piece made me realize I had issues. In working through them in *Rome & Jewels,* I knew I was doing something right."[30]

Harris truly makes us question our sense of what is high culture with his use of the battling styles of hip-hop dance, the poetics of rap, and the radical juxtapositions of sound that have always been at the center of hip-hop sampling and DJing since Afrika Bambaataa's electrofunk sound in the culture's early days in the Bronx. He sees rap as having iambic pentameter, just as Shakespeare's poetic form. Harris also views Shakespeare as violent and scandalous as some hip-hop cultural forms are today: "What makes them so great together is that they're one and the same. There's nothing different. Some people will ask me if their kids can come to the show: Is it vulgar, is it violent? Shakespeare was vulgar and violent."[31] He goes on to elucidate more about the cutting-edge nature of rap and its connections to classic Shakespearean text in a *St. Louis Dispatch* interview: "Rappers are juxtaposing all kinds of mad [crazy] stuff coming out of everywhere. Shakespeare did that. I made all these small connections when I was preparing to do the work, familiarizing myself with it to take the edge off of being nervous about messing with the world treasures, so to speak. Once I made those connections, I was inspired."[32]

Human beings continually configure ourselves around some form of difference and otherness. Yet creative geniuses like Harris deconstruct difference to lay bare human commonalties. Creating *Rome & Jewels* ultimately becomes a catharsis for him, allowing Harris to coordinate his two feet, one in the streets and one in the universe, theatrically pointing him in the direction of his next major evening-length work.

Facing Mekka: *Confronting the Self*

Facing Mekka, Harris's next mammoth undertaking, premiered at Lafayette College in fall 2003. The company describes the work as being exploratory of human commonalities that are often reflected in the dance and music

of various cultures. In today's global-cosmopolitan era, contemporary choreographers are engulfed in a fusion of cultures and styles that reflect the United States as a center of world culture. Rennie Harris's *Facing Mekka* is a deep exploration of this cultural fusion through the human body and spirit via the African diaspora. *Facing Mekka* is unlike any of Harris's other works because he attempts to show global connections, a concept underpinning his work with Shakespeare's poetry. Musically, this newer Herculean work is a vivid aural cacophony of DJing, a recorded soundtrack, and East Indian tabla. The multiple-image video collage made by Tobin Rothlein serves as a visual bricolage of world cultures and events, from brutal images of the Civil Rights movement and World War II to scenes of Islamic pilgrimages to the holy city of Mecca.

Again, in this work, form is based in hip-hop dance; however, b-boying, popping, and the robot are broken down even further to their essential movement phrasings and contrasted with traditional African dance and a Japanese Butoh aesthetic. The internal muscular work of Butoh connects with the skillful muscular isolations of popping, becoming a point of exploration to reveal deep cross-cultural connections through the body. As Suzanne Carbonneau notes, "[F]or Harris, extending hip-hop means expanding the possibilities for the form to achieve meaning, depth, and significance, rather than to simply increase its physical thrills and acrobatics."[33] In *Facing Mekka,* one views the minute changes in movement from a West African stomp or jump with a graceful throw of the arm, to a sensual Caribbean hip movement, to a familiar power move of a b-boy, to the slow, meditative gestures of his female dancers, all in the service of probing the potential of the human spirit.

Facing Mekka is essentially structured in an overture and nine sections, within two distinct parts. Three elements bind the piece into a coherent whole: Harris himself, as a sagelike elder who inserts himself periodically within the multicultural musings of the dance, a rectangular white mat area center stage that serves as focal performing point for soloists and small groups, and the live musicians (DJ turntablist, African drummer, Indian tabla player, cello, and singers) always visible on stage right. Part one is like a community ritual of cleansing that tries to exorcise that which ails us as a planet. Harris's elder figure briefly appears on the center mat crouched over in a dim light, seeming to be emerging from something, but can hardly stand upright. As he finally stands and begins to reach upward, the lights fade. A man appears, dressed in an African caftan, singing/praying like a West African griot who chants the ancestral lineage or an Islamic muez-

zin who calls the faithful to prayer from the minaret of the mosque. This figure calls to the spirit in us all through slow, pleading, melodic phrasings in a non-English language, as the dancers of the ensemble appear behind him, standing stoically and looking straight ahead. This overture ends as the praise singer fades behind them and as the dancers begin to move in a fierce rhythmic manner. The piece is now in full force.

In the first section, the community, equally charged by women and men, begins the cleansing ritual necessary for transformation. Here, the women and men perform an Afro-jazz, African dance. The rhythm-heavy musical ensemble, led by the *djembe* drums, sometimes in unison, provides the driving and sometime droning center for the energy-charged dancing, interspersed with Egyptian angular motifs. This opening dance makes clear the continuities between West African and African American dance styles as having the same root. During this fast and furious rhythmic section, a female dancer carrying a white handkerchief appears, waving it at the floor and throughout the general space. She is the ritual cleanser, ridding the community and this sacred and theatrical space of all negativity. Harris's sage figure enters, executing his crouched-over, scarecrowlike popping style, and then quickly exits, leaving the dancers moving to a slower African-based rhythm that eventually embraces Cuban songs that call orisha (Yoruba) deities inherited from Nigeria. This new dimension of spiritual invocation with Caribbean influences, which revise African religions, leaves two men center stage on the white mat. Their sequence contains slow b-boy movements that are low to the ground and appears to leave them struggling. They are trying to heal themselves.

The next four sections demonstrate Harris's use of hip-hop dance as a part of his arsenal to achieve meaning, depth, and significance. Although some male dancers deconstruct b-boy moves into their simplest components through slow-motion technique, others are often moving at the expected virtuosic full speed of hip-hop power moves. Again, the sage (Harris) enters briefly with his hunched-over, spastic, popping movements and quickly exists. During this section, dancers take the six-step into various time signatures, all the while dancing to a droning melodic singer who again pleads for spiritual redemption within a subdued lighting that puts the audience in another time zone. As the women enter with b-girl slow-motion acrobatics, they introduce Butoh-like movements on the central white mat. The sensual arms, hip, and mimelike walks are executed to a soft flute, in contrast to the previous, more intense section with the singer. It is here that Harris introduces beat-boxing, another hip-hop element, through the verbal dexterity

of the original male African singer, and at the same time the women move out of abstract movement and into recognizable b-girl moves. As the dancers fade away, they leave the singer, who takes center stage with his beat-boxing, accompanied by the scratch beats of the DJ, segueing back into his Arabic prayer that ends the first part. The cleansing and community ritual is now complete.

Part two opens with a solo female dancer whose painted face is reminiscent of African initiates undergoing a spiritual rite of passage. She is a kind of New Age initiate of the future. She is crouched down on the floor struggling to arise. With slow-motion b-girl moves and abstract movement, she reflects the pain of growth. She never fully stands throughout the whole piece but hangs over after standing, with her hands scraping the ground as she moves. When she is joined by other female dancers, a unison motif privileges a hunched-over aesthetic that is simian-like in its effect. Finally, the original dancer stands upright and reaches upward while the chorus moves in the background with a popping style laced with Egyptian-like poses. After the male dancers join the females, the full community is constituted again as the deconstruction of b-boying moves continues with a sense of going in and out of real time. Musically, the tabla becomes prominent, and as the dancers fade into the background, what Harris's musicians do musically underpins and echoes the multicultural amalgam of the dance. A long tabla solo blends into the other instruments as they enter the intense rhythmic soundscape; the night I was present, the experience was transcendent.

The second half of *Facing Mekka* is considerably different in mood and furthers Harris's intent of confronting the self both individually and collectively. After the cleansing communal ritual of the first half, the latter part of the work is an intense probing of the possibilities of healing ourselves from both personal and collective global obstacles. The individual and the social are conflated in an obvious layering of meaning through movement choices, music, and the stunning visual-paneled backdrop that projects epoch scenes of world events, placing us in various time periods and cultures. In the concluding scene, all of the dancers onstage exit by walking slowly backward off stage left, leaving the elder sage alone, still crouched over. He begins his spastic, popping, jerky movements again, but slowly they become more articulate and coherent, and as he moves to the center white mat we see the human possibility of all of this personal, cultural, and global exploration—a full-blown man that is everyman. He has been there all the time, and the community had to move through the cleansing, healing, and personal probing in order for this every human to be born. The dimensions that *Facing*

Mekka encompasses as a process of confronting the self is rife with traditional African religion, Eastern meditations, as well as Islamic allusions through the focal, unifying point of the Kaaba of Mecca's Great Mosque, to which Muslims face no matter where they are in world. This is Harris facing Mecca, facing himself for world salvation.

In our hip-hop-rock-reggae-garage-new wave times, Harris explores what binds us as human beings in a post-9/11 world that sorely needs to understand and move to that which unites rather than divides. And if the music, rhythms, and movements that fused and permeated the world through the cultures that emerged from the transatlantic slave trade could possibly lead us to a more united space, what more appropriate movement form than hip-hop. Hip-hop's street vernacular, as it evolved from the Africanist aesthetic continuum, becomes a launching pad into this exploration of global humanity that is *Facing Mekka*. Harris's ending solo as sagelike elder, who has inserted himself periodically within the multicultural musings of the dance, is called "Lorenzo's Oil." When one knows Harris's canon of work, one realizes this is actually a reworking of "Endangered Species." In *Facing Mekka,* Harris has moved far beyond the mesmerizing rhythmic acrobatics of hip-hop dance, taking us on a vertical dive into the collective human soul. His stage oeuvre is so street—colloquially layered with signifying, radical juxtaposition and social commentary—that it becomes postmodern by definition. As Harris often says to his audience, "Race means competition—there's only culture."[34] In plumbing the archaeology of the human spirit, *Facing Mekka* becomes a metaphor for Harris facing himself while forcing us to face our potential that waits just below the surface of human culture at every moment. Throughout his career, Harris has privileged the creating of community, whether onstage, in his workshops, or in the projection of his philosophy. He implores the best of hip-hop culture: free choice and skilled individuality within the context of community. As he expounds, "In my choreographic process, individual identity is first and foremost. Once I let go [with my dancers], I was able to keep it hip-hop because the dancers change it, taking the risk factor up, which makes it more exciting for the audience. The black/Latino community has always had to have voice [as oppressed people]. Hip-hop is just the latest part of that story."[35] He has come full circle: After he has traveled around the globe, he returns to his origins, his own self, where any artist lodges his or her work. As in his previous dances, Harris starts and ends with the urban streets, making no detours to the ballet or modern dance methods to speak his movement truth.

From "Students of the Asphalt Jungle" to *Facing Mecca,* Harris's aesthetic is simultaneously black vernacular and postmodern. The implicit use of physical gravity and horizontality in breaking, along with Harris's use of radical juxtaposition and direct and indirect movement texts, positions his choreography right in the center of the postmodern aesthetic. Yet this same style and approach is based in the Africanist aesthetic that is as old as African apart dancing and as "new" as avant-garde jazz riffing. Given this dual way of perceiving Harris's choreographic canon, he is developing perhaps a new form of theatrical ritualization that is both basic and futuristic, with one of his feet in the street and the other in the universe.

Notes

1. Rennie Harris, interview with the author, Ann Arbor, MI, January 11, 2002.
2. Ibid.
3. Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 158–59.
4. Sally Sommer, "Prophets in Pumas: When Hip Hop Broke Out." *Dance Magazine,* July 2004, 31.
5. Sally Banes, "Breaking," in *Fresh Hip Hop Don't Stop,* ed. Nelson George (New York: Random House, 1985), 97. For one of the most complete theoretical texts on the languagelike semantic features of dance, see Judith Lynne Hanna, *To Dance Is Human: A Theory of Nonverbal Communication,* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
6. Rennie Harris, interview with the author, Tallahassee, FL, March 4, 2005.
7. Ibid.
8. Robert Farris Thompson first explicated specific aesthetic principles of African-based performance in his "ten canons of fine" form and his "aesthetic of the cool" in *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act in the Collection of Katherine Coryton White,* exhibition catalog, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, for the Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974).
9. Jacqui Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 22.
10. Ibid., 24.
11. Steve Bradshaw, Belinda Quirey, and Ronald Smedley, *May I Have the Pleasure: The Story of Popular Dancing* (London: Dance Books, 1987), 88–89.
12. Jonathan David Jackson, "Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing," *Dance Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (Winter 2001/2002): 42.
13. Ibid., 47.
14. Rennie Harris, "Dance and the Community," plenary session, Congress on Research in Dance Annual Conference, Tallahassee, FL, March 4, 2005.
15. Rennie Harris Puremovement, "Repertoire," video recording, 1998.
16. Cornel West, "Nihilism in Black America," in *Black Popular Culture,* ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 38.
17. Ibid., 39.
18. In social theory, Frederic Jameson's classic neo-Marxian analyses in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press,

1992) interrogates the concept of postmodernism and challenges its very existence. Far from accepting the most common definition that postmodernism is "the end of meta narrative," Jameson views the idea that the present historical juncture is defined by the *lack* of an organizing grand paradigm is itself a self-referential grand theory. This neo-Marxian perception of the confluence of our contemporary times and a kind of late capitalism is key for Harris's evening-length hip-hopera, *Rome & Jewels*, which I investigate in this chapter.

19. Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1977, 1987), xii. I am aware of the continued debate, spawned by Susan Manning's challenge to Sally Banes's *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (1987), about what exactly constitutes postmodern dance; however, Manning's concerns with Banes's "partisan" periodization of dance history and postmodernism's place in it ("Modernist Dogma and Post-modern Rhetoric," *The Drama Review* 32, no. 4 [1988]: 32–38), as well as Banes's own rejoinder upholding her delineation of postmodern dance choreographers based in their own self-description ("Terpsichore in Combat Boots," *The Drama Review* 33, no. 1 [1989]: 13–16), has little relationship to my concerns with what I call Harris's postmodernist hip-hop aesthetic. Three years later, several choreographers and dance scholars (including Sally Banes) in Ann Daly's "What Has Become of Postmodern Dance" (*The Drama Review* 36, no. 1 [1992]: 48–69) thankfully extended the debate. In this article, Banes observed that the second generation of postmodern dancers, emerging in the 1980s, following the analytic and metaphoric postmodernists of the 1960s and 1970s, made more use of the "avant/pop music world . . . and its use of narratives and the traditions of dance history" (60). By the 1990s, we had established dance makers using pop music and a new engagement with ballet and modernists styles, such as Bill T. Jones, Susan Marshall, and Bebe Miller. My point is that Rennie Harris takes use of the vernacular to a new dimension by *ignoring* ballet and modern dance by invoking a parallel Africanist vernacular dance tradition only utilized in fragments by previous choreographers (e.g., Bill T. Jones with his pop-locking inserts within modern balletic phrasings and Doug Elkins's forays into hip-hop styles). But no one completely privileged a black-Latino street dance form, as does Harris, as the basis for serious concert choreography to comment upon both the form itself and to make poignant narrative statements about the interior, social, and global spheres we inhabit.

20. Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, xviii.

21. Ibid., xxiii.

22. Ibid., xxix.

23. Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence*, 50–51.

24. Rennie Harris, interview with the author, Tallahassee, FL, March 4, 2005.

25. Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence*, 51.

26. Harris, "Dance and the Community."

27. Elizabeth Zimmer, "Fusing Shakespeare, Hip-Hop Dance," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 16, 2000.

28. Suzanne Carbonneau, "This Shakespeare Is a Hip-Hop M.C.," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2000.

29. For one of the early definitive studies of this issue in U.S. popular culture, see Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

30. Rennie Harris, preperformance audience address, Power Center, Ann Arbor, MI, January 11, 2002.

31. Rennie Harris, interview with the author, Ann Arbor, MI, January 11, 2002.

32. Kevin C. Johnson, "The Bard in Hip-Hop," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 21, 2000.

33. Suzanne Carbonneau, "Facing Out, Facing In: Facing Mekka," http://www.puremovement.net/rhpub.html (accessed May 2004).

34. Rennie Harris, preperformance audience address, Power Center, Ann Arbor, MI, January 11, 2002.

35. Ibid.