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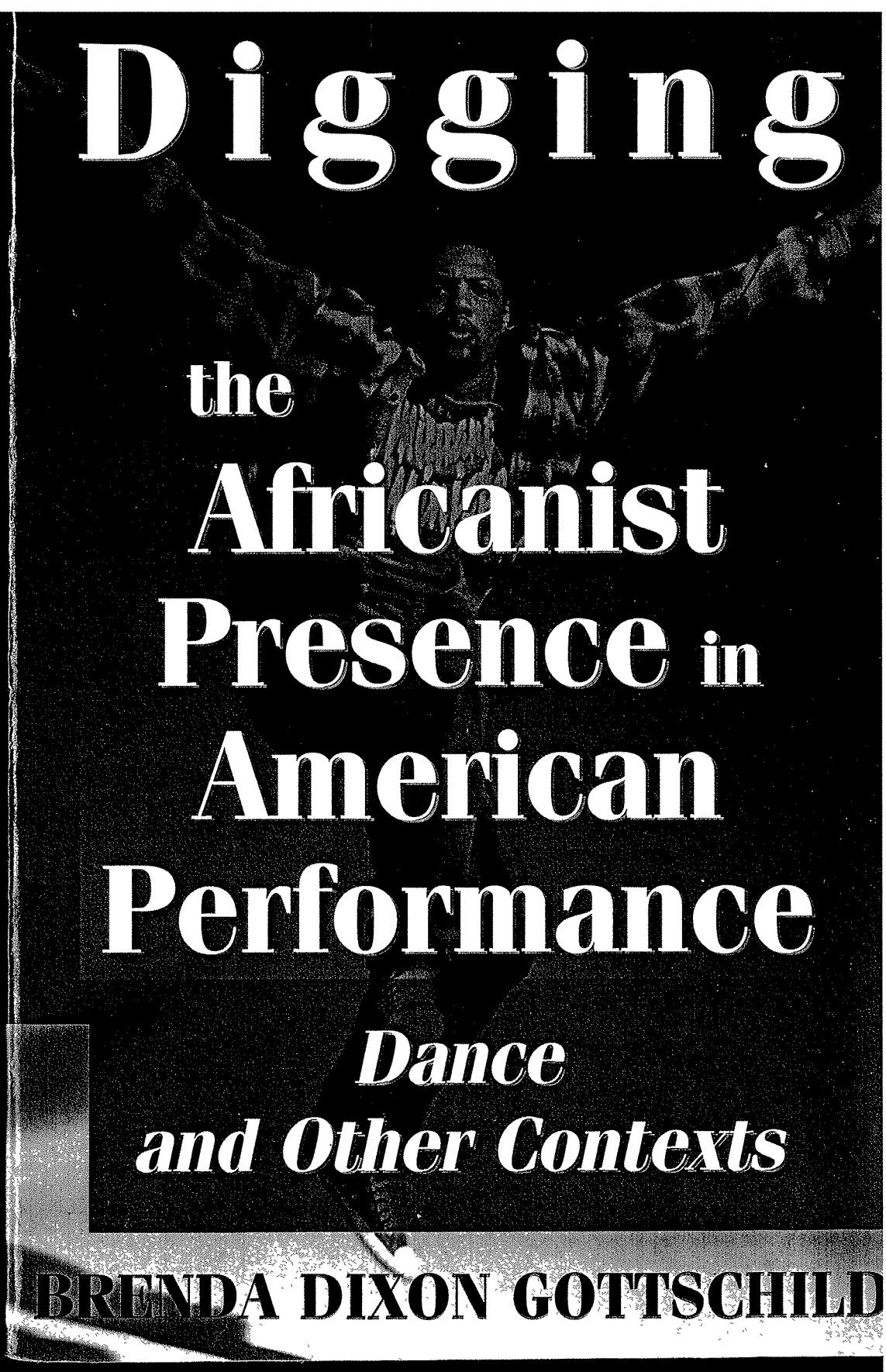

the Africanist Presence in American Performance

Dance and Other Contexts

BRENDA DIXON GOTTSCHILD

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quality of life for us all. Let us examine some important characteristics of the Africanist aesthetic as they are played out in performance.

NOTES

1. See Kramer (1987). Alfred Dreyfus (1859–1935) was a Jewish captain in the French army who was framed, tried, and convicted as a traitor (1894) by military court martial in spite of his protests of innocence at a time when the French military was infused with anti-Semitism. Despite clear, new evidence that pointed to high-ranking French officers as the actual perpetrators (1898), a second court martial reindicted Dreyfus. He was finally exonerated by presidential pardon and a supreme court of appeals decision (1906). This extended affair attracted world attention, involved the protest of writer Émile Zola, and coalesced and empowered the French left wing.

2. For a discussion of "memory of suffering" in another context, see Welch (1985, 35–46).

3. Major issues that beg examination include the cult of the "Lost Cause," largely the construct of white Southern women; the force of those racist white Northerners who disregarded the failures of Reconstruction and, equally, ignored the significant black contribution to the Union's cause; and the oppositional icons of "mammy" and "belle." All have evidenced an enduring national appeal. See Clinton (1995).

4. That is, ballet, modern, and postmodern dance, performed in concert halls, lofts, or alternative, experimental spaces and considered "dance as art" by the establishment's connoisseurs of taste, as opposed to the popular entertainment and vernacular dances of the culture.

The terms "revise," "revision," and "revisionist" are used in their currently coined designations, as in "revising the canon," and indicate reassessment, reappraisal, or reevaluation of traditionally sanctioned viewpoints.

5. African religions have generally eluded Europeanist comprehension. The deities are not objects (trees, rocks), animals (snakes), or people (although people, as ancestors and heroes, may become deities). Instead, they are the attitudinal aspects or driving forces—the sub-inter-super-texts—that shape people, animals, or things. They are processes, not products. The error lies in attempts to define the Africanist through a Europeanist terminology and frame of reference.

6. I consciously use the term "embodied" rather than "possessed." The process is learned and culturally conditioned and is characterized by heightened control and a deepened level of perception. The intelligent, quasi-omniscient spirit-force is embodied in the practitioner. The word "possession" designates an Africanist experience in Europeanist terminology. It is biased toward the European perspective, which could see only chaos and confusion in witnessing the powerful, rhythmic movement and physical transformation brought on by danced religions.

7. I use the word "trope" to mean a constellation of images and ideas that takes on a meaning and implication beyond its literal designation and carries the force of a cultural imperative.

2

FIRST PREMISES OF AN AFRICANIST AESTHETIC

What are some of the signposts of the Africanist aesthetic, and how is it manifested in European American culture? In word, text, performing and visual arts, and everyday life, it is a standard that values process. How a thing is done—the movement of the action—is as important as getting it done, the static fact of the result or product. Even language (the written and, especially, the spoken word) is conceived as a mobile concept, a shaker and mover, with the power to effect change. Honoring this tradition, Paul Carter Harrison uses the Bantu term, *Nommo* (which can be roughly translated as "the power of the word"), for the title of his book on African American drama and its cathartic, catalyzing effect (1972). Words are verbal movement, and the gesture is a physical manifestation of *Nommo*.

Physical and verbal movement—thus, traditional West African gods are dancing deities in danced religions. Each one has its own chants, rhythms, gestures, and steps. These sacred principles were brought to the New World in Middle Passage[1] and through them African Americans changed the face, shape, and sound of Christianity. As Africanist scholar Sheila Walker has pointed out, the existence of these danced religions is an acknowledgment that the universe is a dynamic process-in-motion, not a static entity (1993).

Physical and verbal movement—according to sociolinguist Thomas Kochman, action words are positive-value indicators in the African American vocabulary ("swinging," "dig," "bopping," "jamming," and so on), while unfavorable words are likely to indicate passivity or immobility ("square," "lame," "stiff," "a drag," "hung up," "put down," "strung out," "busted," and so on) (1972, 160–69). These words and phrases are fat with irony, multiple meanings, and innuendo, three interrelated at-

tributes of the Africanist aesthetic that have been worked, reworked, and brought into high relief because of the need of diasporan African peoples to simultaneously conceal and reveal, disguise and display themselves in alien, if not hostile, New World environments.

Similarly, in Africanist visual arts, motion concepts are privileged to such a degree that art historian and Africanist Robert Farris Thompson can justifiably speak of "African art in motion." In his book of the same title he identified a constellation of essential attributes in West African aesthetics that he termed "canons of fine form" (1974, 5–45). Due to geographical and chronological continuities and retentions, these characteristics persist, even in diasporan Africanist cultures. Middle Passage and subsequent wrenching experiences of the African diaspora stripped African peoples of their societal organization, but not of their cultural systems.[1] They were desocietized but not decultured, to borrow the terminology of folklorists John Szwed and Roger Abrahams (1977, 66). The overriding principle of Thompson's canons is that of balance, coolness, or "the aesthetic of the cool." It is "an all-embracing, positive attribute which combines notions of composure, silence, vitality, healing and social purification" (1974, 43).

A good way to understand the Africanist aesthetic is to isolate specific aspects of that principle for the purposes of discussion, apply them to a specific Africanist example, and discuss that example in light of the Europeanist aesthetic. Thompson, Susan Vogel and Kariamu Welsh Asante, among others, have investigated the Africanist aesthetic and described its primary characteristics.[2] Borrowing from these sources, I have designated five Africanist elements that occur in many forms of European American concert dance, including ballet. It is important to note that these traits work together and are separated and categorized only for the sake of discussion. They indicate processes, tendencies, and attitudes; they are "intratextual," so to speak, and do not appear as separate entities in practice. To show their interactive nature, I use the dance routine of Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker to illustrate each attribute. An African American novelty dancer who attained enormous popularity in the Swing Era of the 1920s and 1930s, Tucker's cabaret routine clearly demonstrates Africanist principles, as described in Marshall and Jean Stearns' book, *Jazz Dance* (1979, 236–38). Other Africanist dances could have served as my example, for they share subtextual characteristics with Tucker's dance, even though their form and function may differ considerably.

Ballet, the academic dance form of Europe, offers the most dramatic contrast to Africanist dance aesthetics. It has been regarded as the repository of European values and is characterized by aesthetician Rayner Heppenstall as a reflection of "what is thought most significant in the

culture of the West. . . one epitome of the total history of the West" (quoted in Cohen 1982, 131). For these reasons, I use ballet as the quintessential European referent in elucidating the five principles that follow.

EMBRACING THE CONFLICT

In a broad sense, the Africanist aesthetic can be understood as a precept of contrariety, or an encounter of opposites. The conflict inherent in and implied by difference, discord, and irregularity is encompassed, rather than erased or necessarily resolved. That this principle is basic to the Africanist world view is manifested in the importance of the crossroads as a symbol in Africanist cultures worldwide. The crossroads is the locus of the "coincidence of opposites" (Deren 1991, 100n). Thus, Africanist art forms deal in paradox as a matter of course, with irony following close behind. Contrariety is expressed in African dilemma tales, in music or vocal work that sounds cacophonous or grating to the untrained ear, and in dance that seems unsophisticated to eyes schooled in a different aesthetic. This principle is reflected in the others and they, in turn, are reflected in it. Embracing the conflict is embedded in the final principle, the aesthetic of the cool, since coolness results from the juxtaposition of detachment with intensity. Both precepts—and all the other aesthetic principles—are manifested as simultaneously ludic and tragic (frequently even self-mockingly so, as in the blues), in an attitude and style that is uncharacteristic of Europeanist endeavor. These opposites would be difficult to pair and to leave unresolved in European academic aesthetics, but there is room for their encounter in Africanist aesthetics, "academic" or otherwise. A routine performed by Tucker in Harlem nightclubs such as Connie's Inn and the Cotton Club demonstrates this concept:

> Tucker had at the same time a disengaged and a menacing air, like a sleeping volcano. . . .
>
> 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. (Stearns and Stearns 1979, 236)

The conflicts are paired opposites: awkward and smooth, detached and threatening, innocent and seductive. Perhaps the most significant conflict resides in the routine's deep subtext, in the ironic playing out of power postures by the otherwise disenfranchised 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 runs counter to academic European aesthetics, where the ideal is to initiate movement from one locus—the nobly lifted, upper center of the aligned torso, well above the pelvis. Africanist movement is also polyrhythmic. For example, the feet may maintain one rhythm while the arms, head, or torso dance to different drums. This democracy of body parts stands in sharp contrast to the erect body dictated by the straight, centered spine. Again, we turn to "Snake Hips" in *Jazz Dance*:

> 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. (236)

From a "get-down" posture that centers 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. To repeat, these are interactive principles. Embracing contrasted rhythms, coupled with a shifting center, demonstrate the next characteristic, 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 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 Europeanist academic canon. In those terms, Africanist contrasts may be considered naive and extreme, poorly paced, flashy and loud, lowly and

ludicrous, or just plain bad taste. On the one hand, I recall the complaint by the young Anatole Broyard (1950, 56) about the "inauthenticity" of a black jazz singer who moved without transition from singing the ballad "Strange Fruit" to crooning a love song: "A moment ago a lynching, and now a supplication to his 'baby,'—all in the same universe of discourse, all in a day's work. *A real American juxtaposition*" (emphasis added). Indeed, it is a real *African* American juxtaposition, and one that Broyard found rather disturbing. On the other hand, dance writer and enthusiast Arnold Haskell saw beyond the Europeanist aesthetic and gave an Africanist-based reading to these juxtapositions when he wrote, in the 1920s, that African Americans "blend the impossible and create beauty" (1977, 204). "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. (236–7)

Tucker shifts unpredictably from childish and effeminate to challenging and "macho" movements, disregarding Europeanist 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 occurs with the "break," described above. Tucker cuts off the movement in the middle of a Belly Roll, comes to a break, or full stop, and shifts the mood and rhythm of his intricately structured routine.

EPHEBISM

Emanating from the ancient Greek word for youth (*ephebe*), this principle 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. Thompson (1974, 7) describes it as "the phrasing of every note and step with consummate vitality," with response to rhythm and a sense of swing as inherent attributes. 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. Rhythmic speed, sharpness (as in sudden or abrupt changes in dynamics), force, and attack, meanwhile, are comparatively muted concepts in the classical European ballet tradition and are dictated and circumscribed by the requisites of the ballet form. Conversely, Africanist ephebic energy takes lead and primacy over form. (Choreographer George Balanchine's Americanization of ballet offers an Afro-Euro-American sense of speed and timing that sets it apart from traditional European ballet.) The percussive force of independent body parts, with rhythm as a principal value, is not 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. (237)

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 only be accomplished with a totally flexible torso which will allow the tremor-like reverberations to ripple non-stop through the body. The movement is also percussive, forceful, and intense in its attack. It racks his 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, this characteristic is all-embracing. It lives in the other concepts, and they reside in it. It is an attitude (in the sense that African Americans use that word) that combines composure with vitality. Its prime components are aesthetic visibility and lucidity (dancing the movements with clarity, presenting the self with clarity), and luminosity, or brilliance. The picture is completed by facial composure, the actualized "mask of the cool." "The cool" contains all of the other principles. It is seen in the asymmetrical walk of African American males, which shows an attitude of carelessness cultivated with a calculated aesthetic clarity. It resides in the disinterested (in the philosophical sense, as opposed to uninterested), detached, mask-like face of the drummer or dancer whose body and energy may be working fast, hard, and hot, but whose face remains cool. Conversely, it may also be expressed as a brilliant smile, a laugh, a grimace, a verbal expression

that seems to come out of nowhere to break, intercept, or punctuate the established mood by momentarily displaying its opposite and, thus, mediating a balance. It is through such oppositions, asymmetries, and radical juxtapositions that the cool aesthetic manifests luminosity or brilliance. From them emanate an Africanist understanding and interpretation of concepts such as line and form. The aloofness, *sangfroid*, and detachment of some styles of European academic dance are one kind of cool, but they represent a completely different principle from the Africanist 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 the indispensable complement of the Africanist cool. Hot illuminates cool; cool illuminates hot. It is in the embracing of these opposites, in being and playing the paradoxes, from inside-out and outside-in, and in their high-affect juxtaposition that the aesthetic of the cool exists. This precept, the essence of all of the other principles, can be characterized as "soul force," which Gay and Baber describe as "energy, . . . fiber, . . . spirit and flair" (1987, 11). As Lerone Bennett stated in speaking of the concept of "soul," so also can it be said about the cool: "It is, above all, of the *spirit* rather than the letter" (quoted in Gay and Baber, 11).

Throughout Tucker's routine he strikes a balance between the sexual heat implied in his pelvic movements and the cool (or "disengaged" yet "menacing") attitude of his face. The sinister and the seductive are also juggled and balanced. 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 presents heightened aspects of himself. He manipulates the interface between character and self and is the watcher as well as the watched, playing at seduction while also seducing, all the while shading his routine with innuendo. (This presentation of self as character is a forerunner of and intertextual model for the self-reflexive performance theater of our own postmodern era.) These are valued traits in the Africanist aesthetic landscape and, in their interactive totality, manifest the cool.

The Africanist aesthetic goes beyond Europeanist thinking about form and content. It has had a profound influence on postmodernism because of its ability to communicate in the subjunctive (rather than the indicative or declarative) mood and, thus, to privilege process over product—the doing, not the done, or, as performance theorist Richard Schechner states, *getting* there, rather than getting *there* (1973, 131). Schechner's examination of postmodern performance (1982, 95-106) suggests the following contrastive look at Europeanist and Africanist traditions as paired opposites: linear focus against a multiplicity of signals;

narrative form against self-referential clusters of information; upward progression (toward resolution) against circularity (including repetition); cause-effect against continua; and, finally, product against process. Experimental theater and postmodern dance constructed their identities around a return to the subjunctive, the experiential-experimental mode, in contrast to the Europeanist post-Renaissance, "high" art perspective that privileges product (the dance) over process (dancing). An interesting anecdote highlights the difference:

> "Revelations" [Alvin Ailey's most famous choreography] has never been notated or copyrighted. Its survival and its aesthetic integrity are entirely a matter of the oral tradition linking the generations of dancers who have performed it. Only one other company—a small group in Mexico—has ever been given permission to stage the work. By way of explanation, Dudley Williams, an Ailey dancer since 1964, said, "It's very personal to us. Why would you *want* to do it?" The costume designer, Ves Harper, said, "'Revelations' was the result of a kind of intellectual process which produced a behavior pattern that was not necessarily intellectual." He added, "I'm not sure that it can be taught. It has to be lived." (n.a., *New Yorker* 1992, 5)

In an era when the American concert dance world is obsessed with documentation, preservation, and reconstruction of American modern dance "classics," this statement stands out like a voice from another planet. It is, actually, a highly informed voice from another aesthetic, a descendent of the same process-oriented perspective that created homes out of mud and water and paintings in the sand. "Revelations" is a wonderful example of fusion between Africanist and Europeanist movement vocabularies and was made to be performed on proscenium concert stages. One could counter that the Europeanist-inflected conventions inherent in the dance make it an excellent candidate for notation. However, the intent and attitude (that of a "lived experience," so to speak) expressed in the *New Yorker* extract oblige us to regard and value equally the Africanist roots of the work—a necessity if its integrity is to be maintained.

In a 1979 Sunday *New York Times* feature article, George Balanchine, the Americanizer of ballet, stated something about reviving dances that is in a slightly different vein but nevertheless complements the Ailey company statements:

> I want to make new ballets. I'm not interested in reviving my works. If you made a borscht, you'd use fresh ingredients. If you were asked to write a book twice, you'd use new words. People say, what about posterity? What do you preserve, I ask? A tape? What counts is now. . . . Choreography is like cooking or gardening, not like painting, because painting stays. Dancing disintegrates, like a garden. It's life. I'm connected to what is part of life. (Hodgson 1979, D17)

A similar processual aesthetic informs postmodern performance. Where does it come from? Well, how long have Africans and Europeans influenced one another on American soil? Richard Schechner, a European American, has said that he feels more kinship to the African American August Wilson's play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, than to Victorian European Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*—that is, more of a brotherhood, in mindset and lifestyle, with aspects of his African-American-inflected present than with aspects of his European-rooted past (1992).

According to Cornel West:

> And the fact that when you look closely at jazz, or the blues, for example, we see a sense of the tragic, a profound sense of the tragic linked to human agency. So that it does not wallow in a cynicism or a paralyzing pessimism, but it also is realistic enough not to project excessive utopia. It's a matter of responding in an improvisational, undogmatic, creative way to circumstances, in such a way that people still survive and thrive. This is a great tradition intellectually, in fact, it has had tremendous impact on the way in which Americans as a whole respond to the human condition, respond to their circumstances. (hooks and West 1991, 34)

This talent for balancing the ludic and the tragic (which was placed in high relief during the era of blackface minstrelsy, and will be discussed in Chapter 6) will be modified and finessed by European Americans to fit their aesthetic needs as they utilize the Africanist aesthetic in forms ranging from American ballet to mainstream pop music. No longer can we afford to address European and Asian sources of modern and postmodern performance without also acknowledging this forceful, substantial Africanist presence.

These five premises will serve as the orientation and reference point for discussion in the chapters that follow.

NOTES

1. The term, Middle Passage, formally denotes the longest part of the Atlantic Ocean journey traveled by slave ships and their human cargo. In current usage, it means the journey traveled by Africans from freedom to slavery.
2. See Thompson (1974); Vogel (1986); and Welsh Asante (1986). For a more general discussion of Africanisms in America, see also Gay and Baber (1987); and Pasteur and Toldson (1982).