For Eliza, Amel, and Sky
(my mother, daughter, and granddaughter):
Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance

Dance and Other Contexts

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NOTES

1. The full title of this dance is "The Mind Is a Muscle, Trio A." It was choreographed to be performed by three soloists simultaneously, which is why it could justifiably be called a trio. However, the three perform the same movements independent of one another. They "relate" neither to each other nor to the audience. A 1979 film version of the "Trio" is performed solo by Rainer herself.

2. According to researcher Cynthia Novack,

> Contact improvisation is most frequently performed as a duet, in silence, with dancers supporting each others' weight while in motion. Unlike wrestlers, who exert their strength to control a partner, contact improvisers use momentum to move in concert with a partner's weight, rolling, suspending, lurching together. They often yield rather than resist, using their arms to assist and support but seldom to manipulate. Interest lies in the ongoing flow of energy rather than on producing still pictures, as in ballet; consequently, dancers doing contact improvisation would just as soon fall as balance. Although many contact improvisers demonstrate gymnastic ability, their movement, unlike that of most gymnastic routines, does not emphasize the body's line or shape. Even more important, they improvise their movement, inventing or choosing it at the moment of performance. (1990, 8)

3. Choreographers such as Garth Fagan, Alvin Ailey, Rod Rodgers, Blondell Cummings, Bebe Miller, Ralph Lemon, and Donald Byrd, to name a few, are African American by ethnicity. However, they are not choreographers of African dance. They are forgers of an American concert dance tradition. I point out this distinction to correct the categorical error that assumes that all dancers who are black make "black dance." The creations of these artists, like the work of their white counterparts, are influenced by both Africanist and European aesthetics. For an expanded discussion of the issue of "black dance" and "dancers who are black," see Dixon (1990, 117–23).

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STRIPPING THE EMPEROR: GEORGE BALANCHINE AND THE AMERICANIZATION OF BALLET

Note on Commercial Theatre

> You've taken my blues and gone—
>
> Langston Hughes 1974, 190

Some people imagine that ballet is about as far away from the Africanist aesthetic as black supposedly is from white, but things just aren't as defined or clear-cut as that, not even black and white. In spite of our denials, opposites intermingle more often than we admit. Cultures borrow from each other, and fusions abound.

George Balanchine had a profound influence on the Americanization of ballet. That is ironic, since he emigrated to the United States as an adult, professional choreographer schooled in the Russian ballet tradition. Sometimes it takes an outsider to see what the real flavor of a culture is all about. The Africanist presence plays a subtle but substantial role in defining American ballet. This component has been glossed over in the past, if touched upon at all; certainly, no consistent inquiry has been accorded it. As early as 1934, the same year Balanchine arrived in the United States, Arnold Haskell in his book, *Balletomania Then and Now*, noted: "During the past twenty years or more, Harlem influence upon all branches of art and life has been as great as the Diaghilev influence and has been felt even in the ballet, stronghold of tradition itself" (1977, 205).

While the African presence in modern art has received fluctuating attention over the course of the century, from the start the Africanist influence in American ballet has been tucked away in an interstice of history where it has been overlooked.[1] It is frustrating to read the literature on Balanchine's Broadway musical comedy career. Writers lavish praise

upon him for bringing dance-as-art to the musical comedy stage, but they have nothing to say about what he learned and gleaned from that genre, a venue that manifests a harmonious marriage of Africanist and Europeanist aesthetic principles. In a typical dilemma of derivation, they state the case so that it seems that culture is a one-way street, with the traffic moving from "high" to "low," when it should be clear that borrowing and exchange are interactive processes. Not only a donor, Balanchine was also the fortunate recipient of a rich, partly Africanist-inspired legacy during his musical comedy years. Furthermore, the term "jazz dance" functions as a smokescreen in a case like this. Like the Horst example in the previous chapter, it serves to conceal the Africanist presence.

Although the Africanist influence has been invisibilized, it shadows ballet and almost every American cultural pursuit. How could it be otherwise? When different cultures share the same geography, it is inevitable that they will also share the same biography, regardless of who is in power. Once we acknowledge this fact, we may begin to discover the presence of Africanist sources in Europeanist high art forms. I acknowledge and celebrate the stock influences on American ballet—Russian, French, Italian—that Balanchine brought with him from Europe. Those are understood and are well documented in the annals of ballet history. They are the subject of innumerable scholarly conferences, symposia, and academic discourses on both sides of the Atlantic. My purpose here is to retrieve the hidden legacy, the black text in Balanchine's Americanization of ballet. It's not the case that Balanchine was a choreographer of black dance. On the contrary, it is clear that he was a ballet choreographer who worked in the ballet medium and subscribed to a ballet aesthetic. I hope to make equally clear that throughout his career, he introduced to the ballet canon Africanist aesthetic principles as well as Africanist-based steps from the social, modern, and so-called jazz dance vocabularies. He brought these innovations to ballet while maintaining his grounding in the ballet aesthetic. The result was still ballet, but with a new accent. I hasten to add that, from its European beginnings, ballet has always borrowed from folk culture and popular motifs for replenishment. The appropriation of European folk forms was particularly rampant in ballet and other high art genres during the mid-nineteenth-century Romantic period. Choreographers like Jules Perrot and Jean Coralli made ballets like "Giselle" (1841); August Bournonville created a canon of folk-inspired works for his Danish troupe; and specific vernacular dances like "La Cachucha," an adaptation of a Spanish dance akin to the "Bolero," were adapted for and performed by the preeminent ballerinas of the era. This transition from vernacular to elite supplies essential lifeblood for the continuity of the ballet tradition.

There would be every reason to expect that the same process would occur in the Americas except that here, the popular cultural icons happen to be infused with Africanisms, patently and subliminally.

SECOND PREMISES

My guiding principles, listed and explained here, are grounded in contemporary revisionist scholarship:

1. Ballet is a form of ethnic dance (an observation made by dance anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku) and, like all (ethnic) dance, is subject to the influences and presences that are valued in its cultural context.
2. Influences from past and present cultures are woven into, intermeshed with, and redistributed in any given cultural form (such as ballet, for example) at any given moment in time.
3. The Americanization of ballet by a Russian immigrant, George Balanchine, shows both African American and European American influences.
4. An Africanist perspective can be used to reveal the Africanist presence in American ballet.

Ballet's Ethnicity

To state that ballet is a form of ethnic dance lends a democratic perspective to this cultural form. Along with European orchestral music, it has been lionized as "classic"—that is, beyond classification, in a class by itself—so that it is isolated from and raised upon a pedestal above other world art forms. To separate ballet in this way, to deem it "high" art while other forms are considered something less, sets up an unreasonable, ethnocentric hegemony. By revising our perspective and redrafting the rules of the game, we may see ballet for what it is—one form of world dance, amongst scads of others, representing the aesthetic choices of one group of people at a particular period in history. To regard ballet as another form of ethnic dance returns it to its place in the world community of dance. It is embraced, not debased, by its ethnicity, and it (and the world view that produced it) is recognized not as the supreme answer but as one possible solution to the question: "What is dance?"

When we examine the dictionary for the word "ethnic," we may begin to understand why people react with shock at the suggestion that ballet is ethnic. We also realize that the term, Greco-Roman in origin, was used by Europe to define Other in opposition, inferiority, and subordination to self. The following definitions come from the *American Heritage Dictionary* (1980, 450):

ethnic—adj.—1. Of or pertaining to a social group within a cultural and social system that claims or is accorded special status on the basis of complex, often

variable traits including religious, linguistic, ancestral, or physical characteristics. 2. Broadly, characteristic of a religious, racial, national, or cultural group. 3. Pertaining to a people not Christian or Jewish; heathen; pagan. [Late Latin *ethnicus*, heathen, foreign, from Greek *ethnikos*, of a national group, foreign, from *ethnos*, people, nation.]

The Latin-Greek origins show the degree of bias that was present in the original casting and usage of the term. According to the first definition, supposedly the accepted contemporary definition, ballet would be considered ethnic, just as European peoples, be they Irish, French, or German, are specific ethnic groups. Although it is an outmoded connotation given in an out-of-date publication, the third definition is the one that prevails and holds sway in general American usage.

Influences

This principle is summed up by the concept of intertextuality, discussed in Chapter 1.

Ballet's Americanizer

"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!" (quoted in Haskell 1977, 98). So suggested Balanchine to Arnold Haskell, his interviewer, in New York in 1934. Balanchine had recently arrived in the United States, invited by Lincoln Kirstein, who can best be described as the dream-come-true impresario. What Balanchine proposed was quite interesting, and I am sorry that he didn't try that black-white ensemble back in 1934. Although he was playing on the shock value of putting "primitives" on *pointe* and having the civilized "get down," such a cast might have helped change the racial tenor of American dance relations at a time when there were no mixed casts and no blacks were on *pointe* in white ballet companies. In fact, the idea is very non-European. He proposes a high-contrast, high-affect trick that is far beyond the parameters of good taste, in the European sense. Balanchine did not have to hit American soil for the Africanist aesthetic to wash over him. He had sharpened his performance teeth during his apprenticeship in Europe during the Jazz Age of the 1920s. (Substitute "Africanist" for the word "jazz," and the focus of that era becomes clearer.) He had choreographed "Apollo" (1928) for the Diaghilev Ballets Russes. After Diaghilev died, Balanchine worked in major European cities as a ballet master and choreographed revues for the popular stage. He also created musical routines for "Dark Red Roses" (1929), the first

feature-length English talking film. Europe's play with Africanist influences in music, dance, and the visual arts grew proportionately with colonialist expansion starting in the mid-Victorian era and came to full, ribald blossom as "the continent" reveled in these influences during the 1920s.

Perspectives

A revised picture from a particular vantage point, be it Africanist (discussed in Chapters 1 and 2), feminist, or other, yields and reveals information that otherwise remains concealed. Freudian and Marxist theories may be seen as the forerunners of twentieth-century revisionist thinking. Each methodology presents a new lens for refocusing our perspectives.

AESTHETIC VALUES AND CONDITIONING INFLUENCES

Why did Balanchine become the conduit for the (African) Americanizing of ballet? Katherine Dunham gives us a clue. "Balanchine liked the rhythm and percussion of our dances," she said, referring to her own African American dance company and to their work with Balanchine on the musical, "Cabin in the Sky" (1940). "I think most Georgians have a good sense of rhythm from what I've seen" (quoted in Mason 1991, 193). Balanchine was the perfect catalyst for defining and shaping American ballet. The groundedness and rhythmic sense that he inherited from the Georgian (Russian) folk dance tradition was the open door that allowed him to embrace the Africanist rhythmic landscape of his adopted homeland. With talent and initiative he was able to merge those elements from the two cultures, just as he fused ballet's cool aloofness with the Africanist aesthetic of the cool. Mixings such as these can occur only if compatible components and favorable conditions exist on both sides. According to Deborah Jowitt, "Certainly, Balanchine's take on Americans and America affected his style as profoundly as his background" (Jowitt 1988, 255). It is implicit and evident that things African American are part of his "take" on America.

A word about coolness: the cool of a Balanchine ballet like "The Four Temperaments" (1946) is of a different ilk than the cool of a classic like "Swan Lake." Balanchinian cool, like its mother, the Africanist cool (let us say that the cool aloofness of European ballet is its father) is tongue-in-cheek, sassy, somewhat ironic. It leads to open-endedness and double entendre, not to the resolution of traditional European ballet. It is not the aristocratic, haughty coolness of that tradition but the cool arrogance of people with an *attitude*—Americans, black, brown and white. Some people think Balanchine ballets are brash; some people think African

American youth are brash. The Balanchine dancer and the African American social or street dancer share a remarkable quality—the juxtaposition and balance of hot and cool. Thus, for both, the intensity of a body involved in a speedy, complex combination may be balanced by the radical opposition of a cool, masklike face.

Vital to Balanchine's Americanization of ballet was his love of classicism, combined with an active interest in contemporary life and culture. As recounted in Francis Mason's *I Remember Balanchine* (1991, 161), he once told one of his young dancers, who asked him how she could become a choreographer, "Your eyes is camera and your brain is a file cabinet." He was an avid observer of the culture, not only its dance and dancers, but people, places, and things in general. African Americans held a particular fascination for him. According to one of his close friends, this curiosity manifested itself at least once in his choice of a sexual partner: "He was interested in trying a female of the species [*sic*] he had never had before, including one of our black entertainers who was famous in Paris. He did that purely to see, 'I wonder how a Negro woman is?'"[2] (Mason, 133).

His idea of having black ballerinas dance on *pointe* while whites perform "a frenzied jazz" indicates Balanchine's desire to use black skin as a color value in his modernist stage picture. The same intent figured again in his casting of "Agon" (1957), as described by ballerina Melissa Hayden: "The first time you saw Diana Adams and Arthur Mitchell doing the pas de deux it was really awesome to see a black hand touch a white skin. That's where we were coming from in the fifties. It was marvelous what Balanchine did" (Mason, 359). In the racially segregated world of pre-1970s United States, this pairing—specifically, the arch taboo of black male and white female—was a near-revolutionary move, especially in the all-white, elite world of the ballet stage. According to Arthur Mitchell, the only black member of Balanchine's New York City Ballet Company for many years: "There was a definite use of the skin tones in terms of Diana being so pale and me being so dark, so that even the placing of the hands or the arms provided a color structure integrated into the choreographic one" (Mason, 395).

The visual value of skin color also played a part in other ballets, like "Midsummer Night's Dream" (1962) and "Figure in the Carpet" (1960). However, Balanchine's stage fascination with blacks was not limited to skin tones. He was also seeking to use (or, from the Europeanist perspective, to improve upon) qualities that he saw as native to the black dancing body. In the early 1930s he wanted to establish an integrated dance school. Black dancers would be sought for their superb "combination of suppleness and sense of time" (quoted in Mason, 116). It is ironic and unfortunate that, first, the integrated school was never

established; second, Balanchine therefore sought out these same movement qualities in white dancers; and third, he perpetuated the ethnic status quo by maintaining a basically segregated ensemble (with less than a handful of exceptions over a period of four decades). Balanchine's preference for this type has been a significant force in changing the preferred body shape of the present-day ballerina. No longer the long-waisted, short-legged body type of the classical Russian ballerinas from Pavlova to Plisetskaya, she is the reverse: a long-legged new woman with a proportionately short torso. According to Mitchell,

> 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. (1987, 36)

Dancer Francisco Moncion had this to say about one Balanchine choice: "This dancer [ballerina Marie-Jeanne], Balanchine's favorite at that time, had an extraordinary body. Her legs seemed to start up in her chest. She had long feet, too" (quoted in Mason, 200). According to ballerina Moira Shearer: "Balanchine liked a certain type of shape in a dancer—*long legs* and not too much flesh. . . . He liked *strength* very much—*actual physical strength and stamina*. . . . I think he liked *speed* and a *good jump* as well" (quoted in Mason, 337, emphasis added).

The italicized qualities are attributes that, by racial stereotyping, have been commonly attributed to dancers of African lineage and used to point out the difference between the black and white dancing body. They were frequently the characteristics that pre-Balanchine white choreographers avoided in their choice of female dancers, not knowing how to use them and, perhaps, thinking that they were traits that made the black ballerina seem "masculine." Along with the overall tenor of racism in America, this evasion also meant that white ballet choreographers were not obliged to consider using black dancers. They could excuse themselves by declaring that they were not racists, but that black bodies were inherently unfit for ballet. Then enter Balanchine, who secures white bodies with these characteristics, recasts them culturally and choreographically, and, in so doing, redefines the feminine ideal in ballet.

The issue of black body attributes as ideal, but black dancing body as taboo on the ballet stage, is a convoluted matter of fear, power politics, and the love-hate relationship between self and Other, black and white. The possibility that the shape of the white dancing body—or any body used for specific cultural purposes—changes over time due to the preferences of people in power says a mouthful about cultural conditioning and imprinting and points to environmental and societal factors as po-

tent forces in determining how we look and, in every sense, how we "perform." If we open any high fashion magazine or go to the movies, we see the post-1950s ideal woman. Like the stereotyped African body (not the Hottentot Venus stereotype, but its binary opposite, as epitomized in Josephine Baker), although finessed and edited down to a white standard, her boyish frame is long, lean, and leggy. The relatively short torso is sensually accentuated by the arched spine, which puts a revisionary, modified emphasis on the buttocks. Women diet, exercise, and train, from early adolescence onward, to mold their frames into this ideal form.

Much of the vilification of Africanist culture and peoples of African lineage is focused on the image of the black body, the dancing body, the grounded, freely articulated body—sexualized and therefore dangerous—and the fear of it. It is a site that is charged with tension. Given this condition, and its special virulence regarding the black male, it should come as no surprise that John Martin, the reigning New York dance critic of the era and a leading advocate of Martha Graham, criticized in 1940 the young Talley Beatty (then a member of the Katherine Dunham dance group) for what Martin paternalistically described as Beatty's "serious dallying in ballet technique" (quoted in Emery 1988, 255). For Martin, Beatty's appropriation of ballet was inappropriate for "the Negro," and out of character with "the essence of Negro dance itself," which he characterized as "not designed to delve into philosophy or psychology but to externalize the impulses of a high-spirited, rhythmic and gracious race" (quoted in Emery, 255). There is more than a little of the primitive trope at play in that statement.

When I was in high school, I remember reading one of Martin's *New York Times* reviews in which he complained about the casting of black Arthur Mitchell as the male soloist to partner a white ballerina in New York City Ballet performances of Jerome Robbins' "Afternoon of a Faun" (1953). It was the early Civil Rights era and Martin carped that, because the nation was in the throes of that movement, an integrated pas de deux was unrealistic and unacceptable (although the ballet has nothing to do with civil rights or any other social issue). Could he have accepted that partnership before the Civil Rights movement? Was there any reason to believe he would ever deem it appropriate for a black—specifically, a black male—to be featured in a ballet *pas de deux* with a white female simply as a dancer, and not in a color-coded role?

Let us return to the claim that the black dancing body is unsuitable for ballet. To quote dance writer David Vaughan, "Ballet technique has always accommodated itself to human bodies in all their variety" (1988, 27). Or, as ballet master Richard Thomas put it, "Anybody can *do* ballet. It's not a matter of how you're built but of whether you have a brain"

(1991, 8). Balanchine, whose preferred body type (albeit on white dancers) ran contrary to classical European standards, helped change the picture. In 1969, former New York City Ballet soloist Arthur Mitchell took Balanchine's vanguard move a step further. By creating the Dance Theater of Harlem, a ballet company composed principally of dancers of African lineage, he made a formal institution of the ultimate taboo in ballet—the black dancing body. (Prior to Mitchell's initiative there had been a handful of all-black ballet companies in the 1940s and 1950s. Mitchell's was the first to survive and gain ongoing attention in the powerful white ballet establishment.) Mitchell's ensemble has earned an international reputation for excellence and is, moreover, one of the American ballet troupes lauded for its execution of the Balanchine repertory.

Balanchine's Africanist apprenticeship really began before he came to the United States and even before he went to Western Europe. Early on, he was introduced to the Africanist aesthetic through the work of other artists whom he admired. Among this group was the Russian constructivist Kazian Goleizovsky, "whose cool, erotic-gymnastic etudes and interest in American jazz stimulated the Russian art world of the twenties" (Jowitt 1988, 255). Balanchine's work is marked by speed and density, with more dancing packed into his phrases than had ever been seen before in ballet. Heightened speed and densely laden phrases are common characteristics in most forms of African-based dance and music. They are underlying Africanist correspondences in Balanchine's work. In the Africanist aesthetic, the opposite of beauty is not ugliness, but incompleteness, or unfulfillment. Similarly, Balanchine stated the following in the 1934 Haskell interview: "It is a deep down love that is important [in ballet, as opposed to the requisites for careers such as museum study or academic knowledge]; there must be a strong reaction to things seen. Even if they are ugly things, it doesn't matter. Apathy is the only enemy" (Haskell, 96).

Elements appeared in Balanchine ballets—angular arms, turned-in legs, bent knees—that certainly were considered ugly by the ballet establishment. These same elements are basic syllables in Africanist dance language. According to some early members of the New York City Ballet, this Africanist aesthetic has been slowly leaching out of the choreography since Balanchine's death in 1983. States Barbara Walczak, who danced with the company in the 1950s:

> The difference between the original and today's "Barocco" ["Concerto Barocco," 1940] 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. We were supposed to fall off. It was like waves on an ocean. The energy behind the steps

was different. They were attacked more than they are now. They were not meant to be done with a soft attack. (quoted in Mason, 259)

The specific qualities of energy, attack, speed, timing, and off-centeredness that Balanchine brought to ballet were partially informed and influenced by his exposure to Africanisms in the culture, and his particular sensitivity in using them to serve the ballet aesthetic.

Maria Tallchief, New York City Ballet ballerina and one of Balanchine's former wives, tells a similar story:

Phrasing and timing were the most important aspects of the technique as I learned it. In a demonstration with Walter Terry [dance critic] and Balanchine, I did an eight-count *developpé* [leg extension], straight up and out with the *port de bras* [arm positioning] 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. The speed was not hard for me, because I always had more of a propensity for allegro dancing than anything else. Standing still was the tricky part. (quoted in Mason, 239)

What is interesting about this quote is not only the reference to speed and timing, but also the last point about standing still. Balanchine asked Tallchief to simultaneously move fast and attack hard, and immediately follow by being still—in other words, to demonstrate the aesthetic of the cool by a hot-cool, high-affect juxtaposition. The nontraditional timing Balanchine introduced into the ballet canon, like his introduction of torso articulation and off-center movement, stretched the parameters of ballet and served to revitalize and Americanize the genre. In these excerpts Walczak and Tallchief inadvertently pointed out his use of the Africanist aesthetic.

Choreographed when Balanchine was only twenty-four, the ballet "Apollo" contains many of the elements that shaped his subsequent career, including Africanist presences. It was first presented by the Diaghilev Ballets Russes in Paris in 1928. It advanced his credibility as an experimentalist and innovator in rank with those in literature, music, and visual arts who also reached out to African, Asian, or Oceanic vocabularies to expand their creative options. This ballet also marked the first of Balanchine's collaborations with Igor Stravinsky, whose radically rhythmic, chromatic scores were influenced by Africanist, Asian, and vernacular European principles outside the European classical music tradition. ("Agon" [1957], "Jewels" [1967], and other landmark Balanchine ballets were also choreographed to Stravinsky scores that were marked by jazz-Africanist inflected elements.) Balanchine described "Apollo" as a turning point in his career, and so it was. Through it he appropriated Africanist conventions that were present in European

popular performance, adapted them for use on the ballet stage, and imported (or exported) them to the United States where, with considerable additional input, he changed the face and shape of ballet.

Balanchine's early American career included a substantial apprenticeship on Broadway. Between 1936 and 1948 he choreographed or co-choreographed a number of musicals, including "The Ziegfeld Follies" (1936), "On Your Toes" (1936), "Babes in Arms" (1937), "I Married an Angel" (1938), "The Boys from Syracuse" (1938), and, with Katherine Dunham, "Cabin in the Sky" (1940). His sense for contrasts and the erotic-exotic play between blacks and whites onstage was illustrated in the 1936 "Follies," in which he had Josephine Baker surrounded by a chorus of white males in Zouave uniforms. (Apparently, blacks were insulted and whites were horrified; see Kisselgoff 1987, 38.) African American choreographer Herbie Harper worked with him on the choreography for Ray Bolger in the "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" ballet in "On Your Toes" (Long 1989, 38). Balanchine worked with the Nicholas Brothers, two extraordinary tapdancing kids, in "Follies" and "Babes," and with Josephine Baker in "Follies." In 1949 he staged the New York City Opera production of "Troubled Island," using Jean Léon Destiné's African American dance company. He withdrew as choreographer from the African American musical "House of Flowers" (1954) before the New York premiere (Long, 83). Thus, he had direct contact with African American dancers and choreographers and with genres that were highly influenced by the Africanist aesthetic.

We are told in his biography that, in making dances for the opera "Aida," Balanchine created routines for white dancers that were based on black dance movements (McDonagh 1983, 89). Inversely, he worked with an all-black cast for "Cabin in the Sky." In this instance, he stated,

What is the use of inventing a series of movements which are a white man's idea of a Negro's walk or stance or slouch? I only needed to indicate a disposition of dancers on the stage. The rest almost improvised itself. I was careful to give the dancers steps which they could do better than anyone else. (McDonagh, 89)

But Balanchine was not the sole choreographer of the musical; Katherine Dunham collaborated with him. The reason that he did not need to invent movements (apart from the creativity of the dancers themselves) was that he had a seasoned, talented African American colleague to work with. To state that "the rest almost improvised itself" is to fall into the trap of assuming that African peoples do not work, train, or practice in order to perform successfully, that dancing, for them, is an inborn trait. Did Balanchine give them the steps to do or did the dancers suggest and show him steps from which he then chose? Why does he resort to the passive voice in the only section of the quote that deals, not with him, but

with the black dancers? Thus, it is not even stated that the black dancers improvised the routines, but that the routines improvised themselves, as though the black dancers had no agency in the process. There is a subtle difference, but the documented description makes the African American dancers seem like Balanchine's puppets, while the modifications suggested by these questions would indicate some initiative and creativity on the part of the African Americans, which is the more likely scenario.

Balanchine's statement parallels what choreographer Agnes de Mille said about the Honi Coles and Cholly Atkins number in "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" (1949), as related in Stearns and Stearns' *Jazz Dance* (1979, 309), that the dance was created in one brief rehearsal. (Without flatly stating it, De Mille implies that she did the choreography when, in fact, Coles, Atkins, and arranger Benny Payne had worked out the routine in separate rehearsals prior to the one in which they showed their work to her for her approval.) In both cases the work created by African Americans is attributed to intuition, not technical acumen and creativity. The European choreographer is given the formal credit and made to seem superior in ability, if not intelligence. But the evidence belies this picture. Without acknowledging its significance, Don McDonagh (1983, 79–95), in his book on Balanchine, tells us that the choreographer directly used Africanist material in "Aida," "Cabin," and "Follies." Although he does not discuss Balanchine's contact with the Nicholas Brothers in "Follies," he mentions the fact that Balanchine "designed" the two Josephine Baker numbers, which she danced "in her own style no matter what the choreographer did for her." And the author describes the jazz-inspired "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" (whose co-choreographer was Herbie Harper, a name not mentioned by McDonagh) as the saving grace for "On Your Toes." With these points in mind about bodies and choreographies, let us now take a detailed look at some of the Africanist influences, presences, and correspondences in Balanchine's ballets.

THE AFRICANIST MIRROR

There are many ways in which the Africanist legacy comes bursting through Balanchine's choreographies. The most noticeable is the new approach to movement vocabulary, which he introduced to the ballet stage. The displacement and articulation of hips, chest, pelvis, and shoulders, instead of vertical alignment of the torso; leg kicks, attacking the beat, instead of carefully 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 aesthetic in Balanchine. Moreover, this presence goes beyond surface characteristics such as movement vocabulary and is a significant subtext in Balanchine's

work. One such example is in the play between energy and form in the Balanchine canon. In European academic ballet, energy is subordinated to form; energy is measured and contained by form. In Africanist-inflected dance, form is subordinated to energy, and energy situates and determines form—for example, where the leg will end in an extension, or how the arm will be raised in a gesture. It is energy that predicates and mandates the form. Balanchine finesses and plays with the edges of this difference, and gives ballet a new life blood in the process. Surface and deep structure Africanist components 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), "Jewels" (1967), 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 comic, rustic, vernacular or exotic components. Balanchine crafted them in a decidedly nontraditional fashion and assigned them to soloists and principals in serious ballets, thus assuring them integral significance in his work.

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 can only be described as an updated, balletic 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 the orientalist "Bugaku" [1963], which, without irony, utilizes Africanist movement vocabulary to depict a Japanese wedding ritual). "Cakewalk"-inspired variations are also a leitmotif in the "Rubies" section of "Jewels," as are Africanist-inflected ballroom dance partnering conventions in this ballet's pas de deux work. Balanchine struts and parades his Broadway heritage to the hilt in this red-hot gem of a suite and blatantly uses his ballerinas as showgirls. The "Rubies" choreography is "in your face" (meaning brash, challenging, and up-front), to borrow a phrase from African American pop culture. In these two and in a variety of other ballets, the Africanist influence allows Balanchine to expand the ballet idiom by introducing the articulated torso to its vertical standard.

Two of the three thematic duets that form the opening suite of "The Four Temperaments"—the allegro second duet and the adagio third—share some of the same Africanist-inflected vocabulary. In both, ballroom dance references are as evident as the traditional pas de deux conventions into which they have been inserted. Additionally, both duets contain particular passages that make them look like a deconstructed Lindyhop. Let me explain.

In each duet the male twirl-turns the female in place, as social dancers do, except that she is "sitting" on the air in *plié* (that is, with knees bent) while on *pointe*. In the allegro she maintains this position, with right arm akimbo and the left overhead. She is supported by her partner, who stands behind her and clasps the wrist of her lifted, left arm. With his free hand, he twirls his partner by touching her elbow and giving her a little push to propel her around. It is ballroom dance sleight-of-hand. At this point, the couple performs a very interesting lift, which reappears a few beats later in this duet, then again in a variant form in the third duet and, later on, in the finale. The male, again positioned behind the female (she has her back to him), supports her with his hands at her waist. He lifts her while she swiftly and simultaneously spreads her legs in the air in a neat, clipped, second-position scissor. She is in this pose for a split second, while he lowers her to allow her to momentarily alight, touching her buttocks upon his "lap" (which, in this case, is an open seat: he has his legs apart and knees bent, in a parallel *plié* position, to support her in her descent). This way of allowing a female dancer simultaneously to be lifted and "sit" on her partner was a popular "Lindy" sequence during the 1930s and 1940s. It occurs in any number of film clips and photographs of Lindyhoppers in action. To be sure, a ballroom aesthetic is not a ballet aesthetic, even though my point is to note the commonalities and interrelationships. Thus, in the "Lindy" version of this lift, the female is helped into the air by the male dancer who bumps her buttocks with his knee (the leg of the gesturing knee may be bent or straight). Balanchine finessed this lift to an acceptable ballet standard and omitted this direct contact between male knee and female butt. The "Lindy" version is faster, more explicit, and more dynamic, but the lift is the same, in principle.

Let us continue to analyze the allegro duet. Still positioned behind his partner, the male supports the female by steadying her against his torso, gripping her waist with one arm and using the other to grip the thigh of her right leg, which is lifted in arabesque. All the while she has her back facing him, so that his role is to clutch and exhibit her. In this position he pumps her hips forward and back as he clunkily propels her through a turn in place, the *pointe* of her standing foot dragging the floor. He could pull her off her feet, speed it up, and take her out on the ballroom dance floor in an airborne "Lindy" variation. This movement is capped off with jazzy little side lunges, straight, outstretched arms, and flexed wrists, as the two dancers face each other. Once more they perform the scissor-leg lift, and the female lightly perches on her partner's open lap. They exit, making "Egyptian" arms (Euro-American dancer's lingo for arms raised to shoulder height and bent perpendicularly from the elbow).

The third duet, the adagio, manifests some of the same movement characteristics of the second, but in slower tempo. While remaining on *pointe* the female sinks into a *demi-plié* on the right leg, with the left leg lifted in a modified *passé*, the foot of her lifted, bent leg resting above the knee of the standing leg. As in the allegro, the male supports his partner by holding the hand of her left arm, which is lifted overhead, and propels her into sustained twirl-turns in place by pumping the elbow of her right arm, which is extended in front of her. The male leads his partner into deep, parallel-legged crouches (it would be misleading to call them pliés), which she performs while still on pointe. 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 of a typical "Lindy" exit. (And only in the "Lindy" have I seen as much female crotch as in these two duets.) As they conclude, the male supports the female, again from behind, by allowing her to rest the armpits of her outstretched arms in the bend of his elbows. In this potentially awkward position he drives her across the floor as she *rond-de-jambes* (or circles) one leg and the other leg alternately, each time ending in the scissored position of the lift described in the allegro. The difference is that, in this adagio, the ballerina is not lifted to achieve this pose. Her toes touch the floor, with her crotch momentarily resting on her partner's thigh, before she is propelled by him into repeating this pose with the other leg.

What is so interesting about these duets is how they deconstruct and defy the traditional European ballet canon of verticality and male support of female centeredness, essentials in the classic pas de deux. Rather than maintaining her alignment and acting as the buffer to bring her back to center (as is the classic European ballet role model for its *danseurs;* see, for example, the adagio pas de deux of the Prince and Odette in "Swan Lake"), the males in these duets push, thrust, or manipulate their partners off center. They seem to play with letting the female fall. It is a ballroom dance risk-taking that Balanchine has crafted to meet the needs of the ballet aesthetic and the concert stage. The themes from these three duets are then played out in the four variations that follow.

In the first variation, the "Melancholic," a trio composed of male soloist and two females echoes some of the themes established in the duets. Then four women enter. 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 the second count of a 1–2, kick-thrust beat, and their legs are parallel as they *bourrée* (or take evenly-paced, small, quick steps on *pointe*) around the male soloist. Throughout this variation, the turned-in, "primitivist" position of

early modern dance (as inspired by the African and Oceanic statuary that influenced modern art) is deployed as an equal partner with the turned-out legs of traditional ballet. The choreography for the male is heavy, grounded, intense, and most probably comes by its Africanist resonances via the modern dance vocabulary of the 1940s Graham/Humphrey/Weidman tradition. It is marked by low lunges, deep, acrobatic backbends, and dramatic backward falls, with the male catching his weight on his arms just before reaching the floor. Taking his lead from the music, he "gets down," as if this were a melancholy blues. He leans on Paul Hindemith's score, which intimates the chords and intervals associated with blues and jazz. His fluid ephebism is balanced by the quartet's cool. He exits in a deep, acrobatic, nonacademic backbend, his outstretched arms leading him offstage, the center of gravity in his head and arms, not his spine.

There are many instances in the "Sanguinic" variation, especially in the choreography for the female soloist, in which the movement is initiated in the forward thrust of the hips. This and the exit described in the "Melancholic" section 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.

The finale is a recapitulation of important themes. The Egyptian arms exit of the second duet; the forward thrusting hips and high kicks of the female quartet in the "Melancholic" variation; and those second and third duet scissor-legged lifts, ending with the females momentarily straddling their partners—all are featured as the ensemble brings this extraordinary work to its finish.

Although the Africanist aesthetic influenced continental European culture (and affected Balanchine before his emigration), it comes to full flower in the European American landscape because of a larger and deeper Africanist presence here. For that reason, if no other, European Americans pick up the Africanist aesthetic in the very air they breathe. It is second nature for them, but not necessarily for Europeans. For example, according to an anecdotal report, on their first rehearsal shot at it, the La Scala ballet ensemble missed the point and erased the American-flavored nuances in "The Four Temperaments." Instead of imitating the American rehearsal director in performing the jazzy hip displacements and angular arms, they inadvertently adjusted and "corrected" the movements so that they were centered and aligned in accordance with traditional ballet standards.[3]

In contrast, Balanchine's "Apollo," although choreographed in Paris before his emigration to America, is bathed in the Africanist aesthetic.

As the three muses enter together, they perform the same high kicks with pelvis thrusting forward that reappeared 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 their asymmetrical poses diverge from traditional ballet but are akin to Africanist dance, via the moving poses struck in Africanist-inflected stage and social dance styles of the 1920s. The title character's first solo is a twisting, lunging affair. He simultaneously jumps, bends his lower legs so that his heels touch his hips, and torques his hips so that they angle against his upper torso. His landings dig into the floor as one leg releases and kicks downward on the beat. Indeed, these jumps explore 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 dance passage may be a clear example of the fusion between Africanist influences and vernacular dance influences from Balanchine's Russian past.

In his third solo,[4] Apollo performs 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 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 and embracing it. The jumps are performed not to highlight the going up, but to punctuate and emphasize the coming down—to highlight rhythm and percussion, rather than melody and ethereality. 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. This solo is followed by an amusing vaudeville chorus that seems to come out of nowhere. The muses join him. 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 the "break." It is a radical juxtaposition, set against the previous mood and movements. It is also a quotation 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.

Accounts by Balanchine dancers unconsciously attest to the Africanist presence in his work. In working on "Concerto Barocco," described by former New York City Ballet dancer Suki Schorer as a ballet with "a

very jazzy feeling" (quoted in Mason 1991, 459), Balanchine aimed for clarity in syncopation, timing, and attack. Schorer states that Balanchine characterized a particular step as "like the Charleston," which may have meant the timing, rhythm, speed, movements, or all of these. 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" (Mason, 444). Abrupt and unpredictable changes in speed, timing, and attitude are key elements in Balanchine and are key to the Africanist aesthetic. They are not signature components of the ballet world from which he emerged.

It seems ironic that when Schorer compares the Russian ballet companies with Balanchinian ballet, she states that the Russians don't understand "phrasing, counting, the timing within a step. They've never seen anything. They only know what they know" (Mason, 462). What they don't know, and what Balanchine was exposed to, is the phrasing, counting, and timing that comes 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 aesthetic, is a living one, much of which cannot be codified or contained by "the steps." In the words of another former Balanchine dancer, Paul Mejia, "You don't learn Balanchine, you live it" (quoted in Mason, 480). Arthur Mitchell worked well with Balanchine, and Mitchell's cultural background and training helped. His description of "Metastaseis & Pithoprakta" (1968) shows the Africanist aesthetic in Balanchine's process-oriented 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 added]. 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 in the original]. The rhythm was always the most important. The choreography was set in time and then space. (quoted in Mason, 395)

According to Mitchell, Balanchine sometimes referred to Katherine Dunham in his teaching and sent his 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" (Mason, 396). It seems that he was asking Mitchell to demonstrate an energy field and an attitude toward the movement as much as he was requesting the mere steps. More 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 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*. (quoted in Mason 116–17)

Thus, even before his arrival in the United States, Balanchine was calculating how he could draw upon the energy and rhythm of the black dancing body. 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 might have ensued for American ballet and its relationship to peoples of African lineage. That plan was not carried forth, however. Balanchine and Kirstein did engage Talley Beatty, then a promising young talent, to work with Ballet Society, the post-World War II forerunner of the New York City Ballet. For whatever reasons, Beatty appeared in only one work under their auspices, and, irony of ironies, that work was Lew Christensen's ballet, "Blackface" (1947) (Dale Harris 1995, 28). One can only imagine that, innocent and ignorant of American racism, Balanchine understood, once here, that his dream school was infeasible.

The Africanist presence in Balanchine's works is a story of particular and specific movement motifs, of which numerous examples could be cited from ballets that span the course of his career. They are not decorative touches that marked one or two ballets; they were essential building blocks in his canon. The story continues. More significant are the underlying speed, vitality, energy, coolness, and intensity that are fundamental to his Americanization of ballet. The tale proceeds 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. His legacy lives on in an American—and increasingly, a European—ballet tradition that will never be the same as it was before. It is due to his influence and, to a considerable degree, his crafting and shaping of the Africanist aesthetic, that a new, energized, and expansive standard has become commonplace in contemporary ballet practice.

Less innovative artists might have held onto the old, but Balanchine didn't settle for that. He was enticed by what he saw as American qualities, and they rest as much on the African presence as the European. It simply will not suffice to say that jazz dance influenced his work. That term serves to misname the Africanist legacy that, buried under layers of deceit, has been invisibilized. Surely Balanchine himself would not have willingly disavowed this presence.

BLUE NOTE

We cannot quantify attitudes or impulses, but we can record appearances. And we can expand the lens through which we view our world and try for a wide-angle shot. Through the Eurocentric lens, Balanchine used "jazz" and Broadway influences as an occasional, decorative touch. This perspective sees Europe and Europeans as the alpha and the omega of American culture, with everything-everyone else as marginal. However, from an Africanist study of Balanchine, heretofore concealed information may be revealed. From this enhanced perspective, the Balanchinian flexed foot, angled arm, retracted hip, or thrust pelvis are essential parts of a larger, polycentric whole, not merely interesting twists on an otherwise Europeanist turn. American culture is both heated and cooled by the Africanist presence, and this particular intertext of borrowings, receivings, and exchanges influences us all, not only in outside form but also in underlying attitudes that can be felt, even if they cannot be quantified. When we are able to see the African reflection as the image of our culture, then finally we will behold ourselves fully—as Americans—in the mirror. At that point it will be silly to talk about Africanist presences as "the Africanist contribution." That is the outdated language of disenfranchisement, the mindset that implies that the European is something bigger or better into which the African—the Other—is subsumed. But there is no Other, *we are it.*

The body—the Africanist body as mover, shaper, and shaker of the American body—is the origin and the outcome of my thesis. I call this chapter "Stripping the Emperor," but we all know that this is impossible, for the emperor is what he is—a naked body. What needs stripping is our way of perceiving. Once we dare see the naked truth, as the child in Andersen's tale, we shall see a body, the American dancing body. It is a black-and-white portrait, an affirmation of opposites, in which the negative contains the positive.

NOTES

1. The 1984 New York Museum of Modern Art mega-exhibit, "'Primitivism' in the Twentieth Century: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," revitalized this discourse in modern art.

2. Evidence revealed by Jean Claude Baker, one of her adopted children, indicates that this person was Josephine Baker (Baker 1993, xxiii).

3. Conversation with Clyde Nantais, former dancer-choreographer with the Boston Ballet and doctoral candidate, Temple University Dance Department, May 1990.

4. This description is based upon the Dance in America (WNET-TV, NY) production, *Baryshnikov Dances Ballet* (broadcast 5 February, 1988) in which Mikhail Baryshnikov dances the title role in *Apollo.* In 1978 Baryshnikov left the American Ballet Theatre to work with George Balanchine as a member of the New York City Ballet, where he remained for one year. Bringing his own jazzy, eclectic touches to his performance of this classic, Baryshnikov's interpretation of Apollo is a unique triangulation of Balanchine, Baryshnikov, and the jazz-inflected Africanist presence.