

Body Percussion, Choreography, and the Concert Stage: Developing
Diasporic Literacy Among American Audiences

by

Audrey Woolever

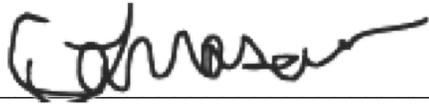
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By

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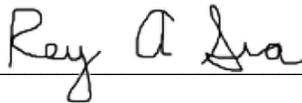
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Abstract

For my Master's thesis project, I will examine the Africanisms intertwined in American modern dance by researching body percussion specifically. This is not to say that body percussion is a part of American modern dance. Rather, I am interested in incorporating elements of body percussion within a modern dance work in order to draw out Africanist aesthetics that can be found in both body percussion and modern dance today. Through an analysis of such aesthetics found in body percussion, my goal is to trace how these characteristics are woven into American modern dance and serve as foundational aesthetics to the Europeanist art form. My research will also investigate African diaspora during the postmodern era to shed more light on the idea of intertextuality in twenty-first century modern dance. To fulfill the creative portion of my thesis requirement, I will create a work that blends body percussion, full-bodied movement and the rhythmic musicality that interests me as a modern dancer. By incorporating elements of body percussion with modern dance, my artistic research is preceded by a dissecting of movement to identify its Africanist influences. Proceeding this step, my work attempts to visually illustrate how the amalgamation of both showcases the inherent roots of Africanisms in European American modern dance and, how this can lead to greater acknowledgement of the Africanist aesthetic.

Keywords

African diaspora, body percussion, diasporic literacy, high-affect juxtaposition, intertextuality, multiculturalism, overreading, twenty-first century modern dance

Introduction

Let me begin by stating my research is delimited by my knowledge of body percussion. Stepping¹ was a huge part of my life in my undergraduate career and I base my artistic research on what I learned by being introduced to stepping and being a member on a step team for three years. It is important to note that body percussion and stepping are not interchangeable terms. While both are performance practices that have close relationships to social contexts, stepping uses body percussion, but not all body percussion is necessarily directly related to stepping. For my research, when I use the term “body percussion,” I am referring to the act or technique of tapping or hitting the surface of a body part to produce sound. Throughout this project, I am interested in examining the integration of two genres. I illustrate how Africanist aesthetics embedded in American modern dance are foundational and how their presence shapes the “American” art form. I stress here the use of quotation marks around the word “American,” because I argue against the canonization of modern dance as a strictly Europeanist art form. By giving credit where credit is due, this research is fulfilling as it contributes to the framing and forwarding of cultural equality between African American art and European American art. It is also important to take a moment to acknowledge my race as a white American woman writing about African aesthetics. Certainly, there is the challenge to not culturally appropriate Africanist aesthetics in my writing and choreography. I understand that my knowledge of these aesthetics does not in any way make myself or my dancers proficient in the characteristics of African diaspora. By no means is my research final. It is a jumping-off point into developing a diasporic literacy among American audiences. It is a step toward educating audience members and

1) When I refer to “Stepping,” I am referring to a percussive, high energy dance work in which steps are emphasized with precision and intensity.

spurring conversation on the already prevalent Africanist aesthetics in American modern dance today.

“...the Africanist presence comes to Americans from home base, from the inside. Like electricity through the wires, we draw from it all the time, but few of us are aware of its source.

It is the marrow in the bones of our culture...”² –Brenda Dixon Gottschild

The idea of denial and the unacknowledged potency of the Africanist aesthetic in American life has been a commonplace attitude of Americans since before the 1990s. In fact, prior to the 1990s, the Africanist presence in European American dance was denied. Carl Van Vechten, a critic and novelist from the 1930s, reflects on this period by stating (not contemporarily), “Nearly all the dancing now to be seen in our musical shows is of Negro origin. But both critics and public are so ignorant of this fact that... [they say] it is pity the Negro can’t create anything for himself, that he is obliged to imitate the white man’s revues.”³

This shaping of a “white America” is a direct result of the “whitening” of the Africanist aesthetic.⁴ Such attempts of the erasure of race is, in part, a result of the documentation and accreditation of European aesthetics and performance practices instead of Africanist ones. In addition, the theory of “home truths” aides in what Gottschild terms the “invisibilization” of Africanist aesthetics in the American dance world.⁵ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, author of *Digging*

2) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 23.

3) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 32.

4) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 30-31.

5) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 47-48.

the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts, explains a home truth as, “an indisputable fact or basic truth, especially one whose accuracy may cause discomfort or embarrassment...Africanisms are home truths in European American culture.”⁶

In the mid-nineteenth century, European American culture strived to be a singular, dominant culture. However, history has proven the impossibility of this notion through the understanding that “cultural information is intertextual, not linear.”⁷ Intertextuality, Gottschild explains, is the theory that “All texts are intertexts. That is, forces, trends, languages, movements, modes—texts, in other words—of previous and contemporary societies influence us, live within and around us, and form the threads through which we weave our ‘new’ patterns.”⁸ Unwilling to acknowledge the multiculturalism of their culture, European Americans rendered Africanist aesthetics “...the bastard child, the muffled scream that still can be heard in spite of efforts to hush it. They are the asymmetrical threads breaking the desired and mythical uniformity of the American fabric.”⁹

From a cultural and social point of view, twentieth-century modern dance extolled white Americans as the sole proprietors of the form while ignoring its Africanist roots. At the same time, African American choreographers such as Katherine Dunham worked to “establish ‘Negro Dance’ as a serious artistic genre...Enacting a diaspora narrative...depict[ing] the transformations of black dance forms as they moved from the Caribbean to the United States.”¹⁰

6) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 47.

7) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 4.

8) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 3.

9) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 47-48.

10) Anthea Kraut, “Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham,” in *Theatre Journal*, Volume 55, Number 3, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2003, 446-447.

In her essay, “Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham,” Anthea Kraut cites Brent Hayes Edwards, a Professor of English at Columbia University, who explains black diaspora as “the links and commonalities among groups of African descent throughout the world.”¹¹ Diaspora, then, is a “transnational approach to black identity.”¹² It can be used to show the trajectory of Africanist aesthetics to the New World and how this migration of movement has been preserved through the cross-cultural exchange by adding European aesthetics to the form.

Two choreographers who have successfully situated their percussive Africanist work within the context of American modern dance are David Parker and Reggie Wilson. Through an analysis of Parker’s, “Slapstuck,” and Wilson’s, “The Good Dance,” my goal is to demonstrate how these works forward the presence of Africanist aesthetics in twenty-first century modern dance by illuminating the intertextuality of the European American art form. Both of these choreographic works demonstrate the amalgamation of body percussion with modern dance as a way to develop a “‘diaspora literacy’ in American audiences.”¹³ In respect to the length of this project, Parker and Wilson’s work are just two examples which can lead to greater acknowledgement of the Africanist aesthetic and diaspora on the American concert stage.

As stated previously, when I use the term “body percussion,” I am referring to the act or technique of tapping or hitting the surface of a body part to produce sound. Through my analysis of Parker and Wilson’s works, I will focus on the aesthetics of their movement from an

11) Anthea Kraut, “Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham,” in *Theatre Journal*, Volume 55, Number 3, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2003, 435.

12) Anthea Kraut, “Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham,” in *Theatre Journal*, Volume 55, Number 3, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2003, 435.

13) Anthea Kraut, “Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham,” in *Theatre Journal*, Volume 55, Number 3, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2003, 450.

Africanist and Europeanist lens. In so doing, I will illustrate how each of these choreographers use body percussion to forward African diaspora in American modern dance.

Such acknowledgement of the African diaspora is made possible in part because Parker and Wilson make artistic choices that inspire Randy Martin's concept of "overreading." In "Overreading The Promised Land: Toward a Narrative of Context in Dance," Martin defines "overreading" as "the analytic procedure for enlisting a recognition of the movement of dance to evaluate the political horizons for mobilization in society...This approach entails employing dance to read the contours of the text as well as reading through and past the dance."¹⁴ Put more simply, this concept proposes dance is more than an aesthetic activity. "Overreading" encourages viewers to make meaning of a dance by looking at it through a political, cultural and/or social lens. Researchers who employ "overreading" also consider the interdisciplinarity of the work by looking at the history and cultural aspects of the dance that may or may not be reflected in the dance itself. I posit that Parker and Wilson's artistic choices to overtly play with the concept of body percussion, attending to the high-affect juxtaposition characteristic of African dance, is an attempt to develop a "'diaspora literacy' in American audiences."¹⁵ Concomitantly, this artistic choice forwards the development of Africanisms in American modern dance through the inspiration of Martin's concept of "overreading." A dance is not just simply a dance.

14) Randy Martin, "Overreading The Promised Land: Toward a Narrative of Context in Dance," in *Critical Moves: Dance Studies Theory and Politics*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998, 55.

15) Anthea Kraut, "Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham," in *Theatre Journal*, Volume 55, Number 3, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2003, 450.

Chapter One

A Dance Enthusiast Minute of Minimalism

“Perhaps one of the reasons we easily delight in Parker’s juxtapositions and inventions is that he embraces and respects so many dance and music forms. While he first studied tap in Boston and then was introduced to post-modern experimental dance at Bard, he never experienced these schools of dance as being remote from one another.”¹⁶ –Christine Jowers

In 1996, David Parker and Jeffrey Kazin co-founded The Bang Group, a New York City-based, rhythm-driven, contemporary dance company that tours and performs widely through the United States, Canada and Europe. Parker is a Guggenheim Fellow in choreography and has won numerous awards for his work both here and abroad.¹⁷ He is a writer, curator and teacher of dance composition having served on the faculties of The Juilliard School, Marymount Manhattan College, Princeton University, SUNY Purchase, Hunter College, Barnard College and The Alvin Ailey School.

Parker grew up in Lynnfield, Massachusetts and did not begin formally training as a dancer until the age of sixteen. It was only after both of his parents decided to go back to school to follow their true passions that they began supporting Parker’s dream of becoming a dancer.¹⁸ In an article he wrote for *Dance Magazine* titled, “Why I Choreograph: David Parker,” Parker explains he started with tap because “I [he] had fallen in love with Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire...It wasn’t only that I longed to dance like him [Fred Astaire], but I longed to organize everything I knew into beats and steps as he did.”¹⁹ Parker continued to follow his passion at

16) Christine Jowers, “Dance Up Close to David Parker and The Bang Group,” *The Dance Enthusiast*, Feb. 11, 2014, <https://www.dance-enthusiast.com/features/day-in-the-life/view/David-Parker-The-Bang-Group-Head-Over-Heels->

17) “David Parker,” *The Yard*, accessed August 13, 2019, <http://www.dancetheyard.org/david-parker>.

18) Christine Jowers, “Dance Up Close to David Parker and The Bang Group,” *The Dance Enthusiast*, Feb. 11, 2014, <https://www.dance-enthusiast.com/features/day-in-the-life/view/David-Parker-The-Bang-Group-Head-Over-Heels->

19) David Parker et al. “Why I Choreograph: David Parker,” *Dance Magazine*, December 21, 2010: <https://www.dancemagazine.com/why-i-choreograph-david-parker-2306899640.html>

Bard College before moving to New York City in 1979. Interested primarily in rhythmic structures, Parker began choreographing a series of acapella dances in which the music was made by the dancing itself. To elaborate, he describes these dances as featuring, “Velcro costumes, toe-tap shoes, bubble wrap, whistling, harmonicas, singing, actual hoofing, and smacking and clapping.”²⁰ Within these acapella works, Parker states they “taught me about the cadences of intimacy. They helped me choreograph my way in and out of love, friendship, and sadness.”²¹ By forging dancers’ bonds through rhythm, Parker knew then what would become the basis of his work.

“Slapstuck,” a duet choreographed by David Parker, is an example of an American work that showcases the multiculturalism present in American modern dance well. This duet produces a percussive score when the two dancers, Parker and Jeffrey Kazin, partner while wearing neck to toe Velcro suits. Throughout the performance, the two dancers stick body parts to each other’s suits such as an arm or leg while at other times allowing their whole bodies to come in contact with each other. Then, comedy ensues when the dancers pry themselves off each other with varying rhythms to make the percussive sound score.

This performance takes place in 2011 on a proscenium stage, adhering to the European expectation for the performers and audience members to be separated in space. From the beginning of the piece, performers play with the Africanist aesthetic of high-affect juxtaposition. According to Gottschild, high affect juxtaposition includes: “Mood, attitude, or movement breaks that omit the transitions and connective links valued in the European academic

20) David Parker et al. “Why I Choreograph: David Parker,” *Dance Magazine*, December 21, 2010: <https://www.dancemagazine.com/why-i-choreograph-david-parker-2306899640.html>

21) David Parker et al. “Why I Choreograph: David Parker,” *Dance Magazine*, December 21, 2010: <https://www.dancemagazine.com/why-i-choreograph-david-parker-2306899640.html>

aesthetic.”²² For example, the piece begins when one dancer enters the space from upstage left and starts moving downstage right by stomping and tapping his feet to create an upbeat rhythm for the piece. The opening of the dance sets the stage for a solo. The mood changes abruptly when a second dancer enters the space from upstage left. The first dancer turns around, walks over to the other dancer, and physically pushes him off stage left and into the wings. After, the first dancer returns his focus to downstage right and begins the same movement from the start. High-affect juxtaposition ensues when the second dancer runs on stage toward the first dancer and jumps unpredictably sideways onto the Velcro of his partner’s back. The audience laughs at this. Laughter is often an outcome of the high-affect juxtaposition Africanist aesthetic. Gottschild explains, “The result may be surprise, irony, comedy, innuendo, double entendre, and, finally, exhilaration.”²³ The beginning of “Slapstuck” alone hits quite a few of these attributes. First, the second dancer enters the stage unpredictably. In addition, with no transition, he jumps, hurling his body in the air to land the front side of his body on his partner’s back. Before this happens, it can be assumed the audience does not know the dancers are wearing neck to toe Velcro suits. Upon first entering the space, it looks like the dancers are each wearing a black jacket and black pants. Therefore, the laughter develops as the audience processes the Velcro suits and witnesses the first dancer try to shake his partner off of him.

Throughout this piece, the Africanist aesthetics of polycentrism and polyrhythm are also present in Parker’s work. Polycentricism is when movement can initiate simultaneously from two or more centers in the body while polyrhythm is when multiple rhythms can be playing out

22) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 14.

23) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 37.

on the body at once.²⁴ Each of these Africanist aesthetics counters Europeanist aesthetics. While Europeanist aesthetics value the initiation of movement from one center of the body, usually “the nobly lifted, upper center of the aligned torso, well above the pelvis,” polycentricism oftentimes uses the pelvis as one of its centers of movement.²⁵ Additionally, the “democracy of body parts” used with polyrhythms juxtaposes the “erect body dictated by the straight, centered spine” of the Europeanist aesthetic.²⁶ We see the use of polycentricism and polyrhythm in “Slapstuck” as the piece progresses. Three minutes and forty-five seconds into the eleven minute and forty-five second piece, the two dancers start to play with polyrhythms. This is the moment the two dancers begin dancing in unison together. The dancers start stomping their feet while taking turns attaching and detaching their upper bodies from each other’s Velcro. When this is happening, the dancers are more upright, adhering to the erect stature of the spine of the Europeanist aesthetic. However, when they increase speed, the dancers turn their bodies more earthbound as the movement center changes to the legs and feet.

The dancers maintain this faster rhythm not more than twenty seconds before they each depart from one another spreading out into the space and playing their own rendition of the set rhythm. This choreographic concept is most closely associated with apart playing and dancing—another characteristic of the Africanist aesthetic. According to Robert Ferris Thompson, author of “An Aesthetic of the Cool,” apart playing and dancing is when:

West African musicians dance their own music. They play ‘apart’ in the sense that each is often intent upon the production of his own contribution to a polymetric whole...Playing apart...grants

24) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 14.

25) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 14.

26) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 14.

the West African space in which to maintain his own private or traditional meter and to express his own full corporeal involvement in what he is doing.²⁷

Thompson contrasts apart playing and dancing to a classical symphony orchestra of the West when, at the sign of the conductor's baton, each section of the orchestra takes up their instruments and plays them in unison. He says, "Africans unite music and dance but play apart; Europeans separate dance and music but play together."²⁸ We see apart playing and dancing in "Slapstuck" when the two dancers break away from the fast-paced rhythm they set. While one dancer maintains a rhythm rather stationary, the other moves about the space with a larger kinesphere making his own rhythm against the rhythmic structure set by his partner. Then, the two sync up their movements again, setting yet another tempo to the piece. When the rhythm is set, the same dancer breaks from the pattern and plays his own sound score. In this moment, both dancers incorporate their hands in their use of body percussion by clapping and slapping their thighs and calves.

This dominance of a percussive concept found throughout "Slapstuck" is yet another trait of West African music and dance. Thompson states, "West African dances are talking dances, and the point of the conversation is the expression of percussive concepts."²⁹ When I hear the word "percussive," the first thought that usually comes to mind is making sound by hitting an object or body part. However, Thompson argues that "Instead of emphasizing the expression of West African dance (and its derivatives) in terms of taps and rattles, clapping and stamping, it would seem far more penetrating to say that it is West African dancing itself that is

27) Robert Farris Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool," in *West African Dance*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1966): 72-86. doi:10.2307/3334749.

28) Robert Farris Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool," in *West African Dance*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1966): 72-86. doi:10.2307/3334749.

29) Robert Farris Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool," in *West African Dance*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1966): 72-86. doi:10.2307/3334749.

percussive.”³⁰ This statement ties back to the Africanist aesthetics of high-affect juxtaposition, polycentricism, polyrhythms and apart playing and dancing. Africanist aesthetics compared to Europeanist ones embrace contrasting rhythms and movements having multiple centers. The vigor and attack of these aesthetics whether subtle or not, are not only what sets them apart from the more compressed and reserved nature of Europeanist aesthetics. Additionally, they work toward developing a diasporic literacy among American audiences when made evident through the use of body percussion.

30) Robert Farris Thompson, “An Aesthetic of the Cool,” in *West African Dance*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1966): 72-86. doi:10.2307/3334749.

Chapter Two

“Post-African/Neo-HooDoo Modern Dances”

“With a blend of postmodern and black aesthetics, Reggie Wilson's work explores connections between secular and spiritual cultures of the African diaspora in the Americas. Audiences are drawn to his unique synergy of formal rigor, playfulness and depth.”³¹

—Eva Yaa Asantewaa

Reggie Wilson, Executive and Artistic Director, Choreographer and Performer of Reggie Wilson/Fist & Heel Performance Group, is another dance artist who uses body percussion to highlight the African diaspora on the American concert stage. According to New York Live Arts, Milwaukee-raised Wilson, founder of the company in 1989, “draws from the movement languages of the blues, slave and spiritual cultures of Africans in the Americas and combines them with post-modern elements and his own personal movement style to create what he calls ‘post-African/Neo-HooDoo Modern Dances.’”³²

Wilson is a graduate of New York University, Tisch School of the Arts, where he studied composition and was mentored by Phyllis Lamhut.³³ He has lectured, taught and conducted extended workshops and community projects throughout the United States, Africa, Europe and the Caribbean. Wilson has also “served as visiting faculty at several universities including Yale, Princeton and Wesleyan Universities.”³⁴ He is also the recipient of numerous prestigious awards, some of which include: Minnesota Dance Alliance's McKnight National Fellowship (2000-2001), a 2002 BESSIE-New York Dance and Performance Award for his work *The Tie-tongued*

31) Eva Yaa Asantewaa et al. “How Creating Dance Helps Reggie Wilson ‘Get Rid’ of His Obsessions,” *Dance Magazine*, (2018): Accessed August 24, 2019, <https://www.dancemagazine.com/reggie-wilson-2598700050.html>.

32) “REGGIE WILSON/FIST AND HEEL PERFORMANCE GROUP,” New York Live Arts, Accessed August 24, 2019, <https://newyorklivearts.org/artist/reggie-wilsonfist-and-heel-performance-group/>.

33) “REGGIE WILSON/FIST AND HEEL PERFORMANCE GROUP,” New York Live Arts, Accessed August 24, 2019, <https://newyorklivearts.org/artist/reggie-wilsonfist-and-heel-performance-group/>.

34) “REGGIE WILSON/FIST AND HEEL PERFORMANCE GROUP,” New York Live Arts, Accessed August 24, 2019, <https://newyorklivearts.org/artist/reggie-wilsonfist-and-heel-performance-group/>

Goat and the Lightning Bug Who Tried to Put Her Foot Down, a 2002 John Simon Guggenheim Fellow and a 2009 United States Artists Prudential Fellow.³⁵

Throughout his career, Wilson has traveled extensively to the “Mississippi Delta to research secular and religious aspects of life; to Trinidad and Tobago to research the Spiritual Baptists and the Shangoists; and to Southern, Central, West and East Africa to work with dance and performance groups as well as various religious communities.”³⁶ His work has been presented both nationally and internationally at venues such as Dance Theater Workshop, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, UCLA Live, Linkfest and Festival eNkundleni (Zimbabwe), Dance Factory (South Africa), Danças na Cidade (Portugal), and Festival Kaay Fecc (Senegal).³⁷

Reggie Wilson/Fist & Heel Performance Group is known for their investigations of “the intersections of cultural anthropology and movement practices.”³⁸ By combining the cultures of those of African descent in America with post-modern elements, the company’s performative work is a continued manifestation of the “rhythm languages of the body provoked by the spiritual and the mundane traditions of Africa and its Diaspora.”³⁹

Wilson, a Brooklyn-based choreographer, produced “The Good Dance” in collaboration with Congolese contemporary choreographer Andréya Ouamba. Premiered in 2010, this work

35) “REGGIE WILSON/FIST AND HEEL PERFORMANCE GROUP,” New York Live Arts, Accessed August 24, 2019, <https://newyorklivearts.org/artist/reggie-wilsonfist-and-heel-performance-group/>

36) “REGGIE WILSON/FIST AND HEEL PERFORMANCE GROUP,” New York Live Arts, Accessed August 24, 2019, <https://newyorklivearts.org/artist/reggie-wilsonfist-and-heel-performance-group/>

37) “REGGIE WILSON/FIST AND HEEL PERFORMANCE GROUP,” New York Live Arts, Accessed August 24, 2019, <https://newyorklivearts.org/artist/reggie-wilsonfist-and-heel-performance-group/>

38) “REGGIE WILSON/FIST AND HEEL PERFORMANCE GROUP,” New York Live Arts, Accessed August 24, 2019, <https://newyorklivearts.org/artist/reggie-wilsonfist-and-heel-performance-group/>

39) “REGGIE WILSON/FIST AND HEEL PERFORMANCE GROUP,” New York Live Arts, Accessed August 24, 2019, <https://newyorklivearts.org/artist/reggie-wilsonfist-and-heel-performance-group/>

was the culmination of a multi-year collaboration and cultural exchange with Ouamba and his Dakar, Senegal-based company 1er Temps. According to Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA), “The Good Dance,”:

An evening-length program featuring movement, text and live vocal work,...melds the rich art, culture and history of each man's ancestral past, incorporating the rhythms of African, Caribbean and African-American dance to create a theatrical world that passionately reflects upon the connections, both intimate and metaphoric, of the cultures of the Congo and Mississippi rivers.⁴⁰

Although I do not have access to the full-length video of “The Good Dance,” the excerpt includes the necessary components I need to support my claims mentioned above.

To begin, Wilson’s work challenges my definition of body percussion by extending it beyond the body. We see the use of percussion in “The Good Dance” through the use of half-filled, capped, water bottles spread in various lines across the performance space. The performance takes place in a Black Box theater in Brooklyn, New York. Although there is recorded sound playing in the background, the more intimate and enclosed space of the Black Box reverberates the sound the water bottles make when dancers pick them up, toss them, or kick them, knocking down others along the way. The hap hazardousness of the different ways the water bottles become strewn about the performance space adheres to the high-affect juxtaposition characteristic of the Africanist aesthetic. Instead of the piece having clear transitions where one movement ebbs and flows into the next, the excerpt from “The Good Dance” shows each of the eight dancers in their own world, so to speak. At times, the movement of two dancers will bring them into each other’s kinesphere. Otherwise, the dance appears to be a meshing of eight different solos sharing the same space as each dancer moves and embodies the

40) Reggie Wilson, “Fist & Heel Performance Group and Andréya Ouamba,” YouTube, March 19, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWHp3IBxCYY>

culture they bring to the piece as a whole. Due to this nonuniformity and an absence of smooth transitions, a common Europeanist perspective on this aesthetic is that “Africanist contrasts may be considered naïve and extreme, poorly paced, flashy and loud, lowly and ludicrous, or just plain bad taste.”⁴¹ Oppositely, Arnold Haskell, a dance writer and enthusiast looks beyond this perspective and instead offers a more African-based response to high-affect juxtaposition. He says, “African Americans ‘blend the impossible and create beauty.’”⁴²

Wilson’s, “The Good Dance,” supports Robert Farris Thompson’s claim that it is “West African dancing itself that is percussive.”⁴³ This is evident when watching any of the eight dancers move. Although there is a steady rhythm of the recorded music in the background, the dancers do not let this beat influence or dictate their movements. Instead, each dancer seems to be playing out a unique rhythm within their movement. The trio that forms momentarily at the beginning of this excerpt is a perfect example of this. The trio consists of one female dancer and two male dancers. All connected at the arms, when the male dancers turn to face each other, the female turns outward and extends her left arm and left leg in a body half in suspended time. This body half rotates counterclockwise, enabling the dancer to separate from the other two dancers as she walks stage left with the same slow tempo of her rotation away from the trio. From here, the female dancer performs a solo while all seven other dancers move about the space in their own time and fashion. Her solo consists of the shapes she makes then holds, for a second or two before finding a transition to her next “pose.” At the same time, the two male dancers from her trio perform a duet that seems to play with the idea of negative space around a partner. One male

41) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 14.

42) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 15.

43) Robert Farris Thompson, “An Aesthetic of the Cool,” in *West African Dance*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1966): 72-86. doi:10.2307/3334749.

dancer starts slicing his arms around the kinesphere of his partner while the other responds by moving around the arm gestures of his partner. The movement in this duet is much faster than the movement of the female who left their trio. It is also more aligned with the tempo of the sound score in the background but, it does not mimic its percussive nature exactly. The rhythm each dancer emanates throughout their body changes unpredictably and no two dancers stay in the same place for long. With so much to observe and try to retain, there is much room for surprise when viewing this work. This element of surprise supports the high-affect juxtaposition of the piece.

Along with high-affect juxtaposition, the dancers' ability to move to their own beat ties into multiple meter—a second trait of West African music and dance, according to Thompson. Thompson explains multiple meter as, “the simultaneous execution of several time signatures... The dancer picks up each rhythm of the polymetric whole with different parts of his body; when he does so, he directly mirrors the metric mosaic.”⁴⁴ It is interesting to note how many of the Africanist aesthetics weave in and out of each other. For instance, multiple meter is made possible by polycentricism and polyrhythm—other Africanist aesthetics mentioned in the analysis of “Slapstuck” by David Parker *and* polyrhythms can be showcased in apart playing and dancing. The use of multiple meter in “The Good Dance” can be seen by looking at the dance as a whole and also by honing in on individual dancers. The former view allows observers to recognize that no two dancers are moving to the same beat. It highlights the individualism present and shows how uniqueness can still be achieved when dancing in a group that is specifically a communal work. The latter is seen throughout the excerpt but I will briefly

44) Robert Farris Thompson, “An Aesthetic of the Cool,” in *West African Dance*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1966): 72-86. doi:10.2307/3334749.

illustrate a close up of a solo that happens about thirty seconds into the excerpt of the work to support my point. The male dancer in this solo performs a lot of quick motions with his arms and legs, allowing those limbs to serve as the centers of his movement (I.e. embodying polycentricism). These arm and leg movements eventually bring him to the ground where he is on all fours. In this position, multiple meter is seen in the polyrhythms of his head and tail (dis)connection. His head shakes from side to side in a faster tempo than his tail. The African aesthetic of multiple meter also highlights the percussive nature of the West African dancing present in the work. Thompson connects these two Africanist traits well. He says, “Multiple meter is, in brief, a communal examination of percussive individuality.”⁴⁵

45) Robert Farris Thompson, “An Aesthetic of the Cool,” In *West African Dance*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1966): 72-86. doi:10.2307/3334749.

Chapter Three

Addressing and Understanding Diaspora on the American Concert Stage

Today

While Africanisms in American modern dance are foundational to the form, how one chooses to view a work brings me back to Martin's concept of "overreading" and the idea of "intertextuality." I posit, if one is able to grapple with these two terms, and engage them while observing American modern dance, then there is a greater chance at developing a diasporic literacy among American audiences. But it is not that easy. It would be naïve to assume "overreading" and "intertextuality" are terms accessible to a majority of observers of American modern dance. As a curator of art, it is imperative to understand the work I create will reach and impact audience members in a variety of ways. In tandem, viewers of my work bring their own plethora of knowledge to the table. Whether the audience member works in the dance field, knows of someone who does, is an avid observer of dance, or is watching a dance performance for the first time, the diversity of insight in the audience should be addressed. How then, can the dance community truly educate all audience members on the knowledge and history of their craft that they bring to the concert stage? How can artists transpose the intellect behind their artistic decisions?

Heather Roffe, Associate Professor of Dance at Nazareth College, may have an answer to these questions. In September 2019, Roffe showcased some of her choreographic work in MERGED VII at the Rochester Fringe Festival in Rochester, New York. The show consisted of works by international choreographers James Hansen and herself. The performance began when Heather Roffe walked downstage center to address the audience and welcome everyone to the show. After going through the usual debriefing of concert etiquette and emergency exit locations, Roffe informed the audience the show they were about to see included an array of dances—dances that were comedic, fantastical and emotional which could stir up a conversation. As a way to begin this conversation, Roffe then asked the audience to briefly turn to someone they did

not know and introduce themselves. I am curious to know if more dance performances were to begin in this way—when the Artistic Director or a choreographer addresses the audience and prompts them to think about the dances they witness—then dance-goers would become more active viewers and have the capability to think about dance in a new light, such as through a cultural, political, or social lens. As a result, the act of viewing a dance as more than an aesthetic activity could become habitual, enabling dance performances to become more comprehensible to all.

In terms of comprehensibility, CITY Newspaper Critics' Pick described the choreography in MERGED VII as “simultaneously thought-provoking to seasoned dance viewers and accessible to first-time audiences...It seemed new and fresh, yet it was still accessible and, at times, even poignant.”⁴⁶ It is important to analyze some of the rhetoric used in this quote. The use of the word “accessible” stands out in this critique. The term “accessible” is defined by Merriam-Webster as something that is “capable of being reached” such as “a remote region *accessible* by rail.”⁴⁷ However, capability does not ensure the outcome will always be reached, or the goal will be met one hundred percent of the time. I contend that this notion of accessibility can also be applied to dance. For instance, CITY Newspaper Critics' Pick stated the choreography of Merged VII “...was still accessible and, at times, even poignant.” I argue the dances become poignant (and truly accessible) only if and when audience members make a connection to the dance happening before their eyes. This connection could be made in

46) “Merged VII,” *CITY Newspaper Critics' Pick*, (2014): Accessed September 21, 2019, <https://rochesterfringe.com/tickets-and-shows/merged-vii>.

47) “Accessible,” Merriam-Webster, accessed September 22, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/accessibility>.

numerous ways, such as by reaching a point of understanding or appreciation for what they are watching.

However, while prompting an audience to participate as active viewers, it is also just as important communicating the limitlessness of any dance. In other words, dance is open to any and all interpretations and there is no right or wrong connection a viewer can make with the performance. In regards to my research, I find that bringing out the Africanisms embedded in American modern dance through body percussion sheds a new light on the “American” art form. It de-romanticizes the canonization of modern dance as a purely Europeanist aesthetic. Additionally, the use of body percussion aides in highlighting, and making more accessible characteristics of diaspora that have been disregarded on the concert stage for decades. From the two artists I have researched in depth, it is clear that situating their work in the context of American modern dance is challenging because they do not perpetuate Europeanist aesthetics and Europeanist aesthetics only. Modern dance is constantly evolving and it continues to be infused with movement characteristics outside of its Europeanist home base. This is why Africanist aesthetics should be recognized as a part of American modern dance because their roots are foundational to the form.

While working to keep aesthetics of the African diaspora alive on the concert stage today, African American choreographers like Reggie Wilson must also vie for recognition of original authorship versus that of natural expression. In other words, their intellect and innovation is challenged by the European “categorization of most African American expressive practices as ‘folk’ culture.”⁴⁸ The problem, Anthea Kraut explains in her essay ““Stealing Steps” and

48) Anthea Kraut, ““Stealing Steps” and Signature Moves: Embodied Theories of Dance as Intellectual Property,” in *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 2 (2010): 175. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40660601>.

Signature Moves: Embodied Theories of Dance as Intellectual Property,” is that “...white mainstream culture has historically dismissed African American artistic forms like the blues and jazz as the product of ‘natural’ expression rather than original authorship—that is, as ‘genes, not genius,’ to quote dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild.”⁴⁹ Reggie Wilson’s “The Good Dance” forwards the Africanist presence in American culture and demonstrates the intellect and innovation behind black expressive forms. However, when modern dance works such as Wilson’s do not showcase purely Europeanist aesthetics, the choreographers not only have to vie for recognition of original authorship but are also challenged to figure out how to situate their percussive Africanist work within the context of American modern dance. This is why developing a diasporic literacy among American audiences is so imperative. While “European Americans may reach out to the Africanist aesthetic in their quest for the illicit, the dangerous, the hip, the Other,” those of African descent in America struggle to claim their traditional movement style as their own and obtain an equal respect for the form as American modern dance.⁵⁰

We see this struggle of ownership when looking at the issue of copyright laws for African Americans in the United States. According to ““Stealing Steps” and Signature Moves: Embodied Theories of Dance as Intellectual Property,” choreography was denied copyright protection until 1976 and the fight to win intellectual property rights for dance began decades prior to that.⁵¹ From this essay, it is not surprising to find that the key players in the struggle for copyright are as Kraut states, “white modern dance and ballet artists like Loïe Fuller, Ruth St. Denis, Hayna

49) Anthea Kraut, ““Stealing Steps” and Signature Moves: Embodied Theories of Dance as Intellectual Property,” in *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 2 (2010): 173-89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40660601>.

50) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 35.

51) Anthea Kraut, ““Stealing Steps” and Signature Moves: Embodied Theories of Dance as Intellectual Property,” in *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 2 (2010): 174. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40660601>.

Holm, and Agnes de Mille.”⁵² She continues, “The names of nonwhite dancers in particular are not present, or at least are not easily detectable, in official copyright archives prior to the late twentieth century.”⁵³ This is a direct correlation to the categorization of African American dances as “folk” culture. As a result, Richard Schur explains in *Parodies of Ownership: Hip-Hop Aesthetics and Intellectual Property Law*, “By construing [the creative works of marginalized people] as mere folk tales, intellectual property law has allowed dominant culture to plunder the traditions and forms of African Americans and other minority groups.”⁵⁴ Concomitantly, assigning folk forms to the public domain enabled white Americans to capitalize on the intellectual property of African Americans for their own artistic pursuits. My thinking in regards to race is influenced by scholars Nadine George and Danielle Robinson. See “Dance and Identity Politics in American Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters, 1900-1935”⁵⁵ and *Modern Moves: Dancing Race During The Ragtime And Jazz Eras*⁵⁶ for more information.

As much as European Americans may have felt they were the sole proprietors of American modern dance, so many failed to recognize the aspects of Africanist aesthetics embedded in the form. Gottschild exemplifies the irony of this well. She states, “European culture and bodies become a repository for internalizing and preserving the Other. In fact, *they are the Other.*”⁵⁷ Takiyah Nur Amin, author of “African American dance revisited: Undoing

52) Anthea Kraut, ““Stealing Steps” and Signature Moves: Embodied Theories of Dance as Intellectual Property,” in *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 2 (2010): 174. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40660601>.

53) Anthea Kraut, ““Stealing Steps” and Signature Moves: Embodied Theories of Dance as Intellectual Property,” in *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 2 (2010): 174. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40660601>.

54) Richard L. Schur, *Parodies of Ownership: Hip-Hop Aesthetics and Intellectual Property Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 164.

55) Nadine A. George, “Dance and Identity Politics in American Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters, 1900-1935,” in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.

56) Danielle Robinson, *Modern Moves: Dancing Race During The Ragtime And Jazz Eras*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015.

57) Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1996, 37.

master narratives in the studying and teaching of dance history” would agree with this revisionist way of thinking. As the title of her chapter suggests, Amin claims it is imperative for dance researchers and educators to challenge the prevailing, “White supremacist capitalist patriarchy” canon of dance history by infusing it with African American history to embrace all that American dance truly is.⁵⁸

Joann Kealinohomoku is one such scholar who challenges the Euro-American canon of dance history by looking at ballet as a form of ethnic dance. She posits: “Ethnic dance should mean a dance form of a given group of people who share common genetic, linguistic, and cultural ties...In the most precise usage it is a redundancy to speak of ‘ethnic dance,’ since any dance could fit that description.”⁵⁹ While the focus of this research is not on rhetoric and the power it has on influencing our perception of the world, it is centered on Martin’s concept of “overreading” and the “intertextuality” of American modern dance. Through my analysis of Parker and Wilson’s works, not only do I demonstrate how Africanist aesthetics are indeed “foundational,” “global,” “contemporary,” and “generative”⁶⁰ but I press onward toward cultural equality between African American art and European American art.

Throughout this project, my goal is not to place Africanist aesthetics high on a pedestal nor is it to claim their authenticity. Rather, I illustrate how body percussion highlights the African diaspora present in American modern dance on the American concert stage today. The potency of Africanist aesthetics in American modern dance cannot be ignored or denied nor can

58) Takiyah N. Amin, “African American dance revisited: Undoing master narratives in the studying and teaching of dance history,” in *Rethinking Dance History: Issues and Methodologies*, edited by Lorraine Nicholas and Geraldine Morris, Abingdon: Routledge, 2017, 45.

59) Joan Kealinohomoku, “An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance,” in *Moving History / Dancing Cultures*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001, 41.

60) Takiyah N. Amin, “African American dance revisited: Undoing master narratives in the studying and teaching of dance history,” in *Rethinking Dance History: Issues and Methodologies*, edited by Lorraine Nicholas and Geraldine Morris, Abingdon: Routledge, 2017, 46.

the multiculturalism present in the art form. Instead, credit must be given where credit is due and the dissolution of a master dance narrative must be achieved if we are to preserve and embody a more truthful existence for generations to come. Developing a diasporic literacy among American audiences is just one way we can begin to truly understand the multiculturalism present in American modern dance and open up our eyes to the intertextuality of the world as it is today.

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