

"Simmering Passivity: The Black Male Body In Concert Dance"

By Thomas DeFrantz

Racial division, cultural fragmentation, and the absence of critical theory devoted to Afro-performance have contributed to the historical displacement of dance created by African American men. This essay addresses the presence and potency of the black male body in concert dance through a consideration of 1) strategies governing performance in the Afro-American grain, 2) critical reception of dancers and dances by mainstream press, and 3) analysis of representation as it is described by performance.

MARKED MEN IN SLAVE SOCIETY

The black man's body entered American consciousness as a powerful exotic commodity: a slave. Objectified on the auction blocks of the African gold coast and the Caribbean, his body reached American shores bearing a tangle of opposing physical imperatives. As commodity, it was to hold enormous labor capacity; while as personal property, it was to be eminently repressible, docile, passive. These contradictory demands fed not only the physical foundations of slave society; they also framed modes of stage performance later practiced by black men, including concert dance.

Slave society strictly regulated public dancing by black men before the 1800s. Uprisings, such as the South Carolina Stono

Insurrection of 1739 linked the dancing body with rebellion: the resultant slave laws of 1740 prohibited any Negro from "beating drums, blowing horns or the like which might on occasion be used to arouse slaves to insurrectionary activity" (Winter 1947:28). Drum dancing solidified connections between the slaves' varied West African cultures; to minimize these powerful affinities, slave owners legislated performance, and carefully mediated dancing affairs which might provide opportunities "to exchange information and plot insurrections" (Hazzard-Gordon 1990:33). Dancing came "under the strict governance and supervision of whites who legitimized violence as a means of controlling the slave population" (Hazzard-Gordon 1990:13). Eventually, serious dancing went underground, and dances which carried significant aesthetic information became disguised or hidden from public view.¹ For white audiences, the black man's dancing body came to carry only the information of its surface.

Black men approaching the concert stage also had to confront deeply entrenched, two-dimensional public perceptions formed in the minstrel stereotypes of the 1800s. Minstrelsy, a form of stage caricature created for white audiences, developed in response to never-ending fascination with African retentions visible in Afro-American cultural habits. Performed by men in blackface aping the plantation manners and festival dances of Southern slaves,² the minstrel show solidified around 1840 and

remained popular until the turn of the century. Its preferred format featured competitive and eccentric dances, boastful struts and cakewalks, and freakishly stylized characters, including stock types Zip Coon, Jim Crow, and Master Juba (Abrahams 1992:145).

Built upon flamboyant exaggeration, minstrel stereotypes added a theatrical distance between white audiences and black male performers. Minstrelsy's success "placed American actors of all sorts in the position of agreeing to play black," with mannerisms powerfully oversized and patently artificial (Abrahams 1992:134). African American dancer William Henry Lane adopted the stage persona Master Juba circa 1840. In publicity, Master Juba, the internationally-acclaimed "King of All Dancers," performed "irresistible, ludicrous, as well as scientific imitation dances ... of all the principal Ethiopian Dancers in the United States. After which he will give an imitation of himself ..." (Winter 1947:33). Billed as an "imitation" performer, Lane's stage persona as Master Juba buffered associations between the potent black body onstage and the preferred impotent, everyday male slave body.

Minstrelsy exploited cultural misreadings to survive as popular entertainment long after the Civil War. Although generations of black dancers learned their craft from the

minstrel stages, "minstrelsy ... fixed the tradition of the Negro as only an irresponsible, happy-go-lucky, wide-grinning, loud-laughing, shuffling, banjo-playing, singing, dancing sort of being" (Johnson, 1930:93). The stereotype of a singing and dancing "sort of black being" hardened, and Broadway musicals of the early 1900s typically presented black men as happy-go-lucky innocents whose dancing abilities could be fully appreciated in the simple delight they provided. Williams and Walker, the most popular blackface duo of this era, achieved their greatest fame in eccentric dances: Walker, the dandyish "Zip Coon" type, executed dynamic, high-stepping cakewalks "throwing his chest and his buttocks out in opposite directions, until he resembled a pouter pigeon more than a human being" (Emery, L. 1988:212); while Williams, the woeful, "Jim Crow" bumpkin, "brought down the house with a terrific Mooche or Grind - a sort of shuffle, combining rubberlegs with rotating hips" (Stearns 1968:197). The minstrel mask defined the black man's body as eccentric, strange, physically dynamic, hysterically out of control, and naive. As minstrel historian Marian Hannah Winter drolly notes, "The word 'beautiful' was almost never used to describe minstrel dancing" (Winter 1947:34).

Minstrel dance performance by black men amplified issues of body control, power, and physical expression embedded within the restrictions of segregated society. Racial division marked the

black body in public American discourse, and mystified dance styles rarely witnessed by whites. The development of modernism and a corresponding interest in African arts suggested the potentially powerful convergence of social dance styles and Afro-American theme for African American men involved in concert dance.

EARLY CONCERT DANCERS

Black men entered the concert dance arena in the late 1920s, and the earliest dances they performed were aligned with emergent modernism in terms of theme, conception, and technique.³ Hemsley Winfield organized several performance groups between 1925 and 1934, including the Negro Art Theater, and choreographed dances in the manner of Ruth St. Denis and Helen Tamiris (Perpener 1992:68). In 1929 he caused a sensation dancing the role of Salome at the Greenwich Village Cherry Lane Theater. Filling in for an absent actress in the all-black cast, Winfield performed "dressed, as it were, in an old bead portiere and nothing else to speak [of]" (Long 1989:24). Drag performance inevitably confronts boundaries of representation; Winfield's successful portrayal, however anomalous, focused attention on masculinity, black men, and the modern.

Among Winfield's numerous concert works, "Life and Death"

created for the theatrical pageant De Promis Lan' in May, 1930, cast sixteen men as the inexorable force of Death which overcomes the singular being of Life, danced with charismatic vigor by the choreographer himself. A version of this piece became a staple of Winfield's frequent concert presentations until the choreographer's sudden death in 1933. Reviews and photographs indicate stylistic similarity to the playfully organized movement choirs made famous by Ted Shawn, but Winfield's performance predates the first concerts of Shawn's all-male company. Modern dance by a large group of men which didn't trade on minstrel stereotypes sat well outside societal norms. Typically, black bodies were essentialized as the material of naive, "primitive" dance.

Winfield's solo, "Bronze Study," premiered at the historic "First Negro Dance Recital in America" co-directed by Winfield and Ruth St. Denis disciple Edna Guy on April 29, 1931. Writing for the New York Times, John Martin dismissed the dance as "merely the exhibition of an exemplary physique." For Martin, physique, and its implicit work potential, lingered as the raw material of the dancing black body's value. But surely Winfield's posturing, however prosaic, sought to subvert the critical eye which refused to see beyond race; to render abstract the basis of racialist seeing. It is possible that "Bronze Study" replaced the simple marking of "exemplary black body" with

more complex distinctions of muscle tone, flexibility, stillness, cool stance, and most importantly, the public discourse of skin color.

Though the abatement of strict segregation throughout the 1930s allowed some black dancers to perform in integrated groups, their presence tweaked deep-set racial biases of audiences and critics. In 1931 Randolph Sawyer danced the Blackamoor in the Gluck-Sandor Dance Centre's "Petrouchka." Reviewing the otherwise all-white production, Martin euphemized upon Sawyer's "native talents" which "equip him to do a type of dance quite out of the range of his colleagues" (Martin 1931:n.p.). Audiences still couldn't quite understand how that "type of dance," implicated by the mere presence of Sawyer's black body, could converse with ballet.

Dancer Add Bates solidified his activities with the Communist Party as a member of the Worker's Dance League. Featured in Edith Segal's "Black and White Solidarity Dance," Bates and his partner are pictured on the cover of the March, 1933 Worker's Theatre (Long 1989:23). Defiantly posed square to the camera, determined and shirtless, Bates holds his thickly-muscled arm raised with a tightly-clenched fist to the side, at eye level. This powerful image of protest aligns the black dancer's body with subversion, tying its weighty volume to the

work of social change. There can be little wonder that the Worker's Dance League was quickly squashed by the United States government.

Pioneer choreographers working to develop an African American audience for modern dance stuck close to mainstream models of male representation. Charles Williams formed the Creative Dance Group at Virginia's Hampton Institute in 1934 as an extension of that school's physical education activities. Hampton had been founded as a Reconstruction-era project of the American Missionary Association to socialize former slaves as they prepared for integrated life. Strong on concepts of work and morality, the school adhered to a strictly conservative doctrine of conduct which placed little importance on the modern performing arts. It took a herculean effort on Williams's part to secure school validation for the dance company; not surprisingly, the work Creative Dance Group performed remained muted and discreet. Heavily influenced by Ted Shawn's all-male company, which visited Hampton in 1933, Williams made dances which exploited the physical dynamism of Hampton's male dancers in traditionally masculine settings. "Men of Valor" (1934) featured movements derived from track and field events, and "Dis Ole Hammer" (1935) set a labor dance to traditional work songs. Williams also created African dance suites, in collaboration with African students studying at the school, as well as dances with

Afro-American themes, including a 1935 suite of "Negro Spirituals" (Perpener 1992:155-160).

Creative Dance Group, which usually performed for African American audiences, toured the country extensively throughout the 1930s and 1940s in a standard program which progressed from calisthenics and drills to modern dance pieces (Perpener 1992:159). The company functioned as proponents of "official" culture, in this case validated by the missionary administration which founded the college. Williams's dutiful presentation of dance as an extension of physical culture which glorified an idealized black masculinity was certainly not lost on its large African American audience, even if that representation included only athletic, laboring, or pious men. The Hampton group's performing success was decidedly influential in the formation of a responsive, core African American audience for concert dance, and led directly to the foundation of concert dance companies at other Southern black schools including Fisk, Howard, and Spellman College (Emery 1988:245).

New York performances by Asadata Dafora's African dance company forced issues of authenticity and the native black body for dancers and critics. Dafora staged subtly drawn adaptations of festival dances from his Sierra Leone homeland. "Kykunkor" (1934), the first of several evening-length works mounted by

Dafora, drew wide praise for its complex synergy of music and movement. For many critics, the success of Dafora's work hinged upon its use of "authentic" African materials derived from first-hand knowledge of classic West African aesthetics. "Kykunkor" defined successful black concert performance as serious, ritual-based exotica, unimaginably complex and undeniably distinct from mainstream modern dance. Though Dafora confirmed the profound theatrical potential of West African dance for American audiences and African American dancers, his success set in motion a critical formula which emphasized the exotic novelty of the black body on the concert stage. From this performance forward, black dancers became increasingly obliged to prove themselves as Other to the concert mainstream.

Some dancers resisted the need to demonstrate their "blackness" in easily stereotyped settings. Growing numbers of classically trained dancers, denied participation in white companies, worked for several short-lived, all-black ballet companies. Eugene Von Grona's American Negro Ballet debuted in 1937 at Harlem's Lafayette Theater. The son of a white American mother and a German father, Von Grona provided 30 Harlemites three years of training in ballet and modern dance relaxation techniques to form a company designed to address "the deeper and more intellectual resources of the Negro race" (Acocella 1982:24). Von Grona choreographed the company's first program to

music by Ellington, Stravinsky, W.C. Handy and Bach. Lukewarm critical reception, and the absence of a committed audience, shuttered the company's concert engagements after only five months. Aubrey Hitchens's Negro Dance Theater, created in 1953, offered the novelty of an all-male repertory company. English-born Hitchens, who "ardently believed in the special dance talents of the Negro race," mixed ballet works set to Bach with dances to generic blues and jazz (Hitchens 1957:12).

Both of these companies were formed with the express racialist purpose of proving the ability of the black body to inhabit classical ballet technique. The logic that pushed them to capitulate to stereotypical Negro themes in their repertory remains curious. Ballet locates its aesthetic power in the refinement of gesture away from everyday bodies and politics; if anything, a proliferation of black *danseurs* might have inspired a decline of color fetish among audiences and critics. It is possible that ballet could have normalized the black male body to the degree that the idiom unmarked the lingering minstrel persona. In giving their audiences familiar black stage types, however, the "get-down" ballets of these early all-black companies obscured issues of the body, black dancers, and Western classicism.

Modern dance allowed for more fluid connections between the dancing body, cultural representation and dance technique, and the post-World War II era saw a number of dancers and choreographers working to redefine the black male presence on the concert stage. West African aesthetic principles, still prominent in black social dance forms, emerged intact in the concert choreography of Talley Beatty, Louis Johnson, and Donald McKayle, signalling a shift in the political frame surrounding performance. Buoyed by the liberal optimism of the New York dance community of the post-war era, dancers explored ways to self-consciously align power and the black male body onstage.

ALVIN AILEY

Alvin Ailey's career in the late 1950s offers a paradigm of contemporary assumptions surrounding the black male body and concert performance. Ailey's choreography formed fires of black machismo in a number of roles which literally displayed his body and cast it as the site of desire. Among his earliest dances, "Blues Suite" (1958) transferred to the stage traditional assumptions concerning black male sexuality, including overt aggression, insatiability, and an overwhelming despair deflected by the [hetero]sexual act. As a dancer, Ailey created a persona which redefined popular stereotypes of the black male body on the concert stage to include the erotic.

Ailey was born January 5, 1931 into the abject poverty of rural Texas. The only child of working-class parents who separated when he was two, Ailey and his mother moved from town to town as she struggled to provide him basic sustenance. Strictly segregated life in southeast Texas offered a hostile environment for African Americans and nurtured a fear and mistrust of whites which Ailey later recalled: "Having that kind of experience as a child left a feeling of rage in me that I think pervades my work" (Ailey 1989:9). This background also created a fierce pride in black social institutions, including the church and jook joints which figure prominently in the choreographer's later work (Latham 1973:446). In 1942 Ailey joined his mother in Los Angeles, where his interest in concert dance was sparked by high school excursions to the ballet and Katherine Dunham's 1945 "Tropical Revue."

Ailey arrived in California shy, lonely, and particularly sensitive from his itinerant childhood. He found solace in the fantasy world of theater and the movies, and gravitated toward the Hollywood masculinity of dancer Gene Kelly. Kelly's popularity hinged upon his "man's man" persona: "He was a 'man dancer,' one who did not wear tights. Here was a man who wore a shirt, pants, and a tie and danced like a man!" (Latham 1973:457). Ailey turned to dance when a high-school classmate introduced him to Lester Horton's flamboyantly theatrical

Hollywood studio in 1949. Excited by Horton's utopian vision of a multicultural dance melting pot, Ailey poured himself into study and developed a weighty, smoldering performance style that suited both his athletic body and his concern with the representation of masculinity: "I didn't really see myself as a dancer. I mean, what would I dance? It was 1949. A man didn't just become a dancer. Especially a black man" (Gruen, 1976:419)

Ailey may have felt constricted by society at large, but he quickly learned to capitalize on the simmering, hyper-masculine persona he developed at the Horton studio. His appearance in the 1954 Broadway musical House of Flowers featured "a very sexy pas de deux" with partner Carmen de Lavallade designed to titillate its mostly white audience (Latham 1973:500). Among the last-gasp attempts at exoticized, "mostly black" Broadway musicals set in foreign locales, House of Flowers boasted an extraordinary company of male dancers including Geoffrey Holder, Arthur Mitchell, Louis Johnson, and Walter Nicks. Truman Capote's libretto described two competing West Indian bordellos, and offered African American actresses myriad "hooker" roles. According to Brooks Atkinson's New York Times review, the cast exuded a predictable exotic-primitive appeal: "Every Negro show includes wonderful dancing. House of Flowers is no exception in that respect. Tall and short Negroes, adults and youngsters, torrid maidens in flashy costumes and bare-chested bucks break

out into a number of wild, grotesque, animalistic dances ... [which] look and sound alike by the time of the second act" (Atkinson 1954:n.p.). Exemplary of the contradictions implicit in racial stereotyping, House of Flowers introduced Ailey to the New York dance scene as part of the "wildly monotonous" grotesquerie of black bodies performing for white audiences.

Ailey had few African American mentors, and the concert dance techniques he encountered failed to engage him: "I went to watch Martha Graham, and her dance was finicky and strange. I went to Doris Humphrey and Jose Limon and I just hated it all. I suppose that I was looking for a technique which was similar to Lester's [Horton] and I just did not find it" (Latham 1973:582). Between commercial appearances and sporadic dance study, he performed in the one-night-only seasons of Sophie Maslow, Donald McKayle, and Anna Sokolow. Ailey identified with the theatrical macho of Broadway and Hollywood choreographer Jack Cole: "I was impressed by his style, by the way he danced, by his manner, by the masculinity of his projection, by his fierceness, by his animal-like qualities" (Ailey 1995:80). While dancing for Cole in the Broadway musical Jamaica, Ailey and Ernest Parham gathered a group of dancers to fill an afternoon concert slot at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA on March 30, 1958.

Ailey danced in two of his three world premieres: "Redonda,"

a curtain-raiser suite of five dances to a Latin theme, and "Ode and Homage," a solo dedicated to the memory of Horton. His stage persona in this period, suggested in description, photographs and films, built upon an impassioned flailing of his body through dance passages steeped in fiery cool. Ailey seemed to enjoy tempting his audiences with an exotic allure, delivered from the safe distance of the stage. Critics likened his style to the movements of wild animals: Doris Hering, reviewing for Dance Magazine, compared him to "a caged lion full of lashing power that he can contain or release at will" (Hering 1958:27) while John Martin noted his "rich, animal quality of movement and innate sense of theatrical projection" (Martin 1958:Section X, p. 11). Jill Johnston, writing for the Village Voice, found Ailey's over-the-top histrionics perplexing: "he moves constantly, in high gear, as though in a panic, and like a synthetic composite figure of a smattering of contemporary influences" (Johnston 1961:n.p.). Ailey's machismo caused P.W. Manchester to quip that he presented a stage world "in which the men are men and the women are frankly delighted about it" (Manchester 1959:7).



Figure 7.1. Blues Suite: impervious to empathy. Members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in a posed arrangement for the "Mean Ole Frisco" section. (Photo: © Jack Mitchell)

BLUES SUITE

Blues Suite, the third Ailey work premiered on the 1958 program, garnered instant popular and critical acclaim. Drawing on fragments of his Texas childhood, Ailey set the dance in and about a "barrelhouse," a backwoods music-hall/whorehouse for working-class African Americans. To a musical background of standard 12-bar blues, ballads, slowdrags, and shams, archetypal Depression-era characters conveyed the fleeting pleasures of dance buried within an evening fraught with fighting, regret, and despair. Costumed with dazzling Broadway-style flair, the suite sizzled with rage and sorrow, at once highly theatrical and pointedly dramatic.

Ailey's original program note aligned his dance with cultural roots: "The musical heritage of the southern Negro remains a profound influence on the music of the world ... during the dark days the blues sprang full-born from the docks and the fields, saloons and bawdy houses ... indeed from the very souls of their creators" (Ailey 1958). The note served to validate the blues milieu for an uninitiated white audience by defining it as both personal (from the soul of their creator) and artful (part of a profoundly influential musical heritage). The reference to the dark days (of southern slavery) neatly telescoped cultural history into the premise for the dance: audiences were invited to

view the dancing black bodies as authentic bearers of the blues. Blues Suite intended to map this southern musicality onto the concert dance stage.

The bawdy house setting played directly into traditional stereotyping of the black body as at once morally corrupt and titillating. As in House of Flowers, the women in Blues Suite portrayed hookers, and the men, their eager clients. But Ailey managed to locate the gender role-playing within a larger frame of African American pathos. Here, blues dancing stood for the ephemeral release from overwhelming social inequities suffered by African Americans. The frame allowed Ailey to foreground harsh political realities in the creation of intensely flamboyant and entertaining blues dance styles.

Blues Suite reached its final format in the fall of 1964. Alternately titled Jazz Piece (1961), Roots of the Blues (1961) and The Blues Roll On (1963) in earlier formats, Ailey's revisions were largely due to shifting company personnel. An overarching narrative suggesting cyclical and inevitable despair remained common to its several versions. The dance became a classic example of the choreographer's early style and remained in the active repertory of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater through 1995. The reading of four sections of the dance which follows is based upon filmed performances made in the 1960s and

1970s, and live performances attended in the 1980s and 1990s.

The dance begins with two traditional calls to attention in African American folklore: the train whistle, which suggests movement away from the repressive conditions of the south, and church bells, which toll not only funeral services, but the arrival of news worthy of community attention. Fast conga drums beat incessantly as the curtain rises, echoing the talking drum sound which traditionally dispersed information in Sub-Saharan cultures. The curtain reveals bodies strewn across the stage in posed attitudes of fitful despair: eyes closed, energy drained. Are they asleep or dead? To classic strains that acknowledge the capitulation to oppressive circumstances - "Good Morning Blues, Blues How Do You Do?" - they rise, shake off the inertia which held them, and begin an angry ritual of fighting each other to stake out territory. The atmosphere is heavy with stifled rage and disappointment.

Gradually, the fighting evolves into dance movements. In this casual progression Ailey suggests that his dance occupies a cultural space similar to the blues themselves--as the transformation of social and political rage into art. The lexicon shift--from stasis, through the stylized drama of angry individuals, to a common ground represented in dance--draws the audience into concert dance without removing the markers which

distinguish the characters as disenfranchised African Americans. These Blues People are black people, and the dance they do is defined by that unique political circumstance, whether it contains elements of social dance, ballet, Graham, or Horton technique.

Although the male roles in Blues Suite are largely defined by interaction with female characters, the solo "I Cried" includes a striking demonstration of public vulnerability. Backed by contrapuntal motions from the group, a single man sits, center stage, his body racked with contractions of pain and anger. As he shakes and trembles, detailing the depths of his anguish, the group extends a hand towards him, bearing witness. He rises towards some unseen offstage goal, his body tensely elongated and brittle. The group reaches after him, offering help; he pushes them away defiantly, wrestling one man to the ground in the process. The group disperses to strike poses of studied indifference, their faces averted from his dance. As he works out his frustration, the group exits, leaving him alone. As his dance ends the train whistle sounds, stealing his attention, and he exits quickly after it.

The solo is complemented by the full-throated wailing of singer Brother John Sellars, who has performed this piece with the Ailey company since 1961 both live and on its taped

accompaniment. Sellars's wailing has a strident masculine grain rarely heard outside the rural south.⁴ His vocal style gives an intensely personal interpretation to what is essentially a common song, without author or copyright. (The lyric, "I cried, tears rolled down my cheek/Thinking about my baby, how sweet the woman used to be" is a simple, bare-bones couplet, practically devoid of character.) Firmly rooted in the Afro-American vernacular, Sellars's aggressive sound masculinizes the connection between the expression of sorrow and the male dancer: it validates concert dance as an "authentic" mode of [heterosexual] male behavior.

The train whistle serves as the bridge to "Mean Ole Frisco," a dance for five men. Entering the space singly, each man looks towards an offstage train, imagined to pass over the audience's head. Watching the train closely, they undulate in seething slow motion, sinking into asymmetrical stances with one hip thrust sideward. A swaying hip movement begins slowly and accelerates, finally matching the fast shuffle tempo of the song. The dance continues with mostly unison phrasing, with some interplay for groups of three against two dancers. The men describe powerful accents at the ends of phrases--shooting an arm into space, stopping the energy with a tightly clenched fist. They dance apart, in wide spatial formation, without ever seeing each other.

Although the dance is about the men's longing for a lover that the train took away (the "Frisco" of the blues lyric), sexuality is buried deeply beneath a brawny veneer. Ailey studiously avoids homoeroticism here through blockish phrasing, constant explosive movement, and a fierce abstention from physical or emotional contact by the men. The result is a strangely harsh depiction of black men as unable to relate to each other. The latent homophobia of the staging is made more strange by Ailey's own homosexuality. Ailey performed this dance in the 1960s, his heterosexual stage persona far removed from his offstage reality. In this dance, the desirous black male body is overtly heterosexual, single mindedly in pursuit of an offstage woman. [photo]

"Backwater Blues," the central pas de deux, features a man and woman in a low-down, brutal lovers' battle. Drawn in broad strokes of gender role playing, the dance depicts several stages of a courtship ritual built from boasts, struts, and apache-style physical confrontation. The choreography depends heavily upon a realistic acting approach Ailey derived from study at the Stella Adler acting studio (de Lavallade 1995:165). A pervasive use of body language, stance, and gesture fills out details of emotional life between the characters. Formal dance movements function as extensions of the dramatic narrative, making the rare motionless position stand out in sharp relief. In one instance, the woman,

precariously balanced on the kneeling man's shoulder, throws back her head to pound her chest in angry defiance. The image resounds beyond this dance encounter, speaking of the emotional outrage brought about by dysfunctional circumstance--in this case, life in a southern whorehouse.

While trading on the entertainment value of the age-old battle of the sexes, Ailey is able to align black social dance styles with concert performance. Ailey uses the dramatic narrative to essentialize black social dance as the site of sexual power negotiation. When markers of black dance appear, in flamboyant percussive breaks at the end of musical phrases, multiple meter elaborated by isolations of body parts, and apart phrasing palpable in layered rhythmic patterns, they are carefully embedded within a theatrically constructed tension between Man and Woman. Here, blues dance is masculinized to the degree it is construed to be [hetero]sexual.

In the brief solos of "In The Evening," which follow the duet, three men prepare for a night at the barrelhouse. Ailey uses formal dance vocabulary to describe three distinct personalities in movement terms. Arcing turns, interrupted by slight hesitations; swooping balances, cut off by full-bodied contractions; and cool struts, stopped by percussive attacks of static poses all visualize the music's underlying rhythmic

structures in terms of breaks and ruptures. These oppositional contrasts are obvious functions of lingering West African aesthetic principles of compositional balance. Ailey fashions the phrasing mostly in square blocks of four and eight counts, but sharp accents and strong rhythmic shifts from fast, sixteenth-note foot-tapping accents, to slow, half-note balances separate the dance from the music: the dance is conceived both "to" and "apart from" the steady musical beat.

Conceptually similar to classical ballet variations, these solos oblige the men to demonstrate mastery of dance technique. The difficult rhythmic structures of the dances baldly expose the dancers' musicality and precision. In these pure dance variations, Ailey sets a standard of concert dance proficiency accessible to black male bodies. In this case, dance technique is disguised as libidinous male posturing.

The dance solos end when the women reappear, beginning a long sequence of festive blues dancing by the group and two comic characters constantly out of step. The giddy playfulness of the "Sham" contradicts the anger, despair, and fierce attitude of previous sections, exploring instead the entertainment aspects of blues music. The section ends with tightly-focused unison phrases, the dancers' smiling faces turned toward the audience in a gesture of communal celebration. Reminiscent of a scene from a

Broadway musical, this false, happy ending is followed by the repetition of "Good Morning Blues," signaling the return to the painful everyday life of labor and oppression. Faces are averted and suddenly solemn; bodies carry an intense weightiness; speed and agility are buried within downward directed motions and angry demeanors. In this "real" ending to the piece, the characters are again solitary, sprawled across the stage, separated by forces beyond their control, apprehensive, gloom-ridden, and tormented.

The violent juxtaposition of euphoria and despair which ends Blues Suite aptly re/presents the professional experiences of Ailey and other black men through the post-war era of concert dance. Smiling through a fleeting triumph, they were inevitably burdened by political circumstances rife with racism, homophobia, and disinterest. Forced to entertain audiences receptive only to broadly stereotyped personae, African American men danced savage, hyper-masculine, aggressively heterosexual, and naive-primitive roles which catered to traditional assumptions about the black male body. Denied the opportunity to perform powerful dance that reflected the realities of their lives outside the theater, African American men simmered passively for decades, awaiting the chance to define themselves in terms of movement.

Endnotes

1. African art historian Robert F. Thompson describes particular dances "key documents of aesthetic history; ... nonverbal formulations of philosophies of beauty and ethics" in traditional West African settings (Thompson 1986:85).
2. Abrahams draws out the development of minstrelsy from slave corn-shucking festivals (Abrahams 1992:131--143).
3. Perpener (1992) provides an overview of the pioneers and their techniques.
4. Murray associates the sound with itinerant folk style guitar strumming (Murray 1978:n.p.).

Photo Caption:

Impervious to empathy: The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in a posed arrangement for the "Mean Ole Frisco" section of Ailey's Blues Suite. (Photo by Jack Mitchell)

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Contributor Biography

Thomas DeFrantz is a director, choreographer, and dance scholar. His writing has appeared in the Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History and The Village Voice. He earned his Ph.D. from New York University's department of Performance Studies.

Other artists worked to align the black male body with social reform. Dancer Add Bates solidified his activities with the Communist Party as a member of the Worker's Dance League. Featured in Edith Segal's "Black and White Solidarity Dance," Bates and his partner are pictured on the cover of the March, 1933 Worker's Theatre (Long 1989:23). Defiantly posed square to the camera, determined and shirtless, Bates holds his thickly-muscled arm raised with a tightly-clenched fist to the side, at eye level. This powerful image of protest aligns the black dancer's body with subversion, tying its weighty volume to the work of social change.