

TO MAKE BLACK BODIES STRANGE

Social Critique in Concert Dance of the
Black Arts Movement (1998)

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BLACK BODIES DESTABILIZED - MANIFESTOS OF BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

The Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s inspired a heightened critique of American social [dis]order by African American artists. Like their "New Negro" counterparts of a generation earlier, the group of writers and visual artists spearheading this movement denounced the seeming complacency of their immediate elders. "We Shall Overcome", the motto of the 1963 March on Washington led by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr, was replaced by "Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker!" a slogan popularized by playwright LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], whose play *Dutchman* opened in New York in March of 1964.

In that play, Lula, a white demon-woman, taunts an Ivy-League educated Negroman called, with dripping irony, Clay. Lula leads her *changeling into a dance of death which ends, inevitably, when she kills him and prepares to seek out her next victim.* The play hinges on an assumption that Clay wears a mask in public. It is a mask which has allowed him to survive and flourish in a hostile atmosphere, but it is a mask nonetheless - and Lula rattles him, prods and pokes, until he lets the mask drop to reveal vast stores of rage. Lula is able to push Clay to the edge and then kill him because she knows him so well. As critic Larry Neal observed, Lula's knowledge of Clay is extensive because in many ways she has created the mask that he wears. She has created him.

The young artists of the Black Arts Movement resisted this presumption of knowledge on the part of their white audiences. They worked, as Neal wrote, towards art which could suggest its own symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology.¹ As in *Dutchman*, art created in service to the movement attempted to destabilize stereotypical imagery of the Negro. Rendered apparent, the mask of a long-suffering but tolerant black populace crashed to the floor, revealing a vigorous

black body barely able to contain its anger in the face of overwhelming social inequity.

The Black Arts Movement held a unique and important relationship to the Black Power Movement. Artists were indeed concerned with the relationship between art and politics, and through their affirmed association with Black Power, they sought to create an essentialized vision which could prescribe artistic products. As Abby Arthur and Ronald Mayberry Johnson point out in their insightful study of 1960s literary magazines,

As revealed in black little magazines, the theorists and practitioners of the black aesthetic focused on both the appearance and purpose of the new literature. The purpose determined all other aesthetic matters, considered secondary in importance. Stated in general terms, the literature was to be an instrument of separatism, a means of disengaging blacks from Western culture. [...] Separatism, emphasized in contemporary literature, was not an end in itself. The larger goal was a new black consciousness and hence a new black community. [...] Inspired by their sense of purpose, writers of the black aesthetic presented themselves as missionaries of blackness, talked about art-for-people's sake, and dreamed of a literature exclusively by, about, and for, blacks.²

The movement assumed an infrangible connection between politics and art, and espoused a communal model of art production which valued participation of artists and audience as a guiding principle. On some level, the art explicitly confirmed the well-being of the group. Because, as Neal writes, the movement was "opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community",³ its artists rejected abstract metaphor in favor of direct expression which could immediately inspire its audience. The purpose of the art, as a tool of community engagement, mattered.

CONCERT DANCE

The task of pushing concert dance toward a politically viable use as both an instrument and expression of black power ideology fell to young dancers weaned on the largely apolitical choreographic standard common by the 1960s. Established modes of concert dance concerned themselves to a large degree with abstractions of, or dramatic narratives describing, everyday political concerns. Following an aesthetic lineage including Katherine Dunham, Martha Graham, Lester Horton, and Pearl Primus, young black artists in the 1950s imagined concert dance as the exploration and expression of the individual self through movement design. For these artists, the dancing body could achieve transcendence

through the exploration of intimate personal truths. In this model, the purpose of the art derived from the individual artist's ability to communicate to an audience.

Talley Beatty and Alvin Ailey number among the most prominent choreographers working in this individualistic idiom during the 1950s. Beatty's classic work, *Road of the Phoebe Snow* (1959), described an interracial love affair which ends in tragedy along the Lackawanna Railway in the South. Beatty had been one of Katherine Dunham's earliest company of dancers trained in Chicago, and he later worked with filmmaker Maya Deren in the landmark film *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945). He appeared in a revival of the musical *Showboat*, and in a 1946 ballet *Blackface*, created for the Ballet Society (the precursor to the New York City Ballet). Beatty began making dances for his own company in the late 1940s and his work, which was filled with fluid patterns and challenging, spitfire combinations, positioned its audience as a bystander to onstage dramatic events.

Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* (1960) presented an oblique narrative of spiritual uplift through a chronological setting of abstract dance to black religious music. An immediate success, *Revelations* suggested the triumph of black spirit through song and dance, from its opening dances with slavery-era costuming and music, to its enthusiastic promise of deliverance in its final song. "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham". *Revelations* established Ailey's company as the pre-eminent interpreter of black experience for a large international audience. But Ailey's choreography, like Beatty's, created an abstract metaphor for survival; dance created in the context of the Black Arts Movement, with its constant exploration of a performative dialectic between performer and audience, was to provide a tool for survival. The Black Arts Movement produced dance works with radical, inflammatory content which, in essence, sought to destabilize the familiar image of black people dancing – to make the dancing black body strange.

Concert dancers who approached the Black Power Movement faced a contradictory dilemma. Many of them had trained in ballet and established modes of American modern dance, two forms which had been created from a Europeanist vantage and for a largely white audience. The separatist demands of the nationalist moment precluded an acknowledgment of Eurocentric dance heritage; still, young black dancers respected the amount of information their bodies contained from intensive studio training. Even as younger dance artists strove to find forms which could be identified as conforming to an emergent black aesthetic, they could not easily dismiss their dance training as "inappropriately white". Black nationalists with no dance background eyed concert dance warily; they suspected work created in a mold favored by already established choreographers like Ailey and Beatty as complicit in maintaining the racist *status quo*.

BLACK ARTS DANCE PRACTICE

To create work, the movement spawned numerous aesthetic salons of black artists. Quoting from the Johnsons again about the concurrent literary movement, we can extrapolate a sense of the dance scene: "These gatherings gave considerable impetus to the Black Arts Movement. They brought writers together, enhanced their sense of community, and provided a setting and forum for the debate over and celebration of the black aesthetic".⁴ Dancers were no different in this, and coalition-building throughout the 1960s led to several shared performances and the First Annual Congress on Blacks in Dance held at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana.

Artists hoped to grab at an aesthetic momentum for making black art; to make work which spoke to a nationalist identity even as it rejected conventional Eurocentric models of dance composition. Few achieved this goal so completely as Eleo Pomare. Born in Colombia, South America, Pomare attended New York's High School of the Performing Arts, founded a company in 1958, disbanded it to travel to Europe to study and perform with Kurt Joos and Harold Kreutzberg, then returned to the United States in 1964 when he revived and expanded his company. Pomare, thus, began like many other dancers in the Black Arts Movement with a Eurocentric background, but he soon became enmeshed in the momentum of the moment and began making protest work.

Pomare's early landmark work, *Blues for the Jungle* (1966), explored a dysfunctional black community peopled by drug addicts, prostitutes, and various denizens. Like Ailey's earlier work *Blues Suite* (1958), Pomare staged a scene of socially disaffected black people, and implicated his mostly white audience in the construction of familiar black stage stereotypes. But where Ailey's work had offered an entertaining and only slightly critical take on the racial conditions, Pomare's work reached off the stage and into the audience, forcing the issue of social change on his dancers and their audience. In the solo "Junkie", for example, the dancer careers across the stage in search of a fix, finally tumbling off the stage and directly entreating the audience to satisfy his needs. The dance assumes the involvement of its audience in its construction; the dancer approaches and finally rejects his audience when he cannot get what he needs from them. The dance itself is conceived as an act of protest, and the inclusion and subsequent rejection of the audience here is an expression of that protest.

Understandably, the easiest emotion to express in art of protest then, as it is now, was rage. In the work of several choreographers of this moment, the dancing black body was destabilized and marked by its eccentric movements or outlandish costuming. Concert work of this era often had titles which expressed black nationalist ideology: John Parks' 1971 work *Trilogy* had sections titled "It Happens Every Day (in which a

Brother dies)", "A Woman's Way (in which a Sister mourns)", and "the Man's the Klan (in which Brother and Sister come together)". According to a performance review by critic Zita Allen, "[t]he idea was clear: raised fists, the sound of explosions, the angry death of the brother in the first part, the lyrical mourning of the second part and in the third section, the determination and togetherness of both in the face of the enemy".⁵ Eleo Pomare's work "Gin Woman Distress" of 1971, danced by Carole Johnson in a lecture demonstration at the National Black Theatre in Harlem, was set to the spiritual "I'm Going Through". According to Arthur Wilson's review of the dance, Johnson created a portrait of a wayward woman: "As the dance ended, Carole stood limp and sorry eyed, her wig thrown on the floor, two large earrings sailing about the room, and her dress torn half off".⁶ The rending of her mask – in this case, a whorish identity contained in her hooker apparel – revealed submerged anguish and rage beneath the familiar veneer of the stereotype of black woman as sexually available. In a way, the dance echoed the dropping of the mask, the revelation of an estranged, alternative reality long denied.

In the same performance review, Wilson comments on another Pomare work danced by Johnson, an excerpt from *Black on Black*, also of 1971:

The piece from Eleo's new *Black on Black* in which Carole dances the role of Cleaver's wife is very strong in its didactic message of "niggers is afraid of revolution" (using the music of The Last Poets. HEAVY!) but needs much more work. A gun, sunglasses, and a black leather coat are used to give the appearance of the transition necessary to slip into revolutionary shoes. At the end of the dance Carole fires her gun several times in the declaration of "a ready to burn yo' ass nigger". This momentum is clearly necessary, but does not follow from the dance. . . . Maybe Eleo was concerned with suggestions, you know, THE MESSAGE, and not the MEDIUM. And if so, that's hip, black dance need not be structured or performed in the traditional emotionally contrived mime technique of Graham. We are no longer puppets on white strings.⁷

Part of forming a nationalist black art identity involved claiming a concert environment which valued participation of audience in the creation of the performance. The Black Arts Movement encouraged a vocal, call-and-response model of participatory spectatorship in which audience members answered performers' movements with applause, encouragement, and shouts. This was closely tied to African diasporic spiritual practice, and the black church offered obvious and sustained precedent for participatory performance. In this, the Black Arts Movement held profound implications for concert dance practice. We can track the change in a broad dancegoing public from silent witnesses to the cheering fans familiar by the 1980s to the efforts made by artists

working within the Black Arts Movement. An emphasis on the relationship between concert performance and the community meant a reevaluation of the audience's role in the performance as well as that audience's expectations. This also inspired the most important shift among black concert choreographers – the use of contemporary black music for concert dance. Again, this innovation held enormous implications and effected a profound impact upon concert dance practice the world over.

But the subsequent commodification of contemporary black music into an amorphous, unmarked category of “popular music” complicates this argument terribly. I mean to suggest that the artists of the Black Arts Movement ignored Eurocentric categories of high and low art which placed Aretha Franklin or Otis Redding below William Grant Still or Duke Ellington, or the entire body of spirituals, for that matter. Choreographing to black music which could be concurrently heard on radio hit parades or at house parties was not, for them, necessarily an ironic parody of concert dance convention or a gesture towards the articulation of a deracialized American cultural memory (as it might have been for the audience of, say, white American choreographer Twyla Tharp). For the black nationalist audience, as well as for many African Americans who didn't define themselves as nationalists, contemporary black music could rouse the aesthetic efficacy of its predecessors (which included William Grant Still, Duke Ellington, and the spirituals). Dancing to Donny Hathaway or Otis Redding offered an opportunity to confirm, with an audience, where contemporary black expressivity lay. A generation later, I think that African American choreographers still work differently with contemporary black music than their white counterparts do; witness the irony in white choreographer Neil Greenberg's “Disco Project” (1995) compared to the insistent spirituality of African-American Ronald K. Brown's choreography to similar club music selections which he titled “Heaven/Home” (1995).

THE FEET

The reviews I've quoted come from *The Feet*, a monthly dance magazine published occasionally from 1970 to 1973. Carole Johnson, a dancer who worked with Pomare, and also as a soloist, was affiliated with *The Feet* for its entire existence, as contributor, subject, and editor. *The Feet* was created as a project of MODE, the Modern Organization for Dance Evolvement, of which Johnson was founder and president. In the premiere June 1970 issue of *The Feet*, MODE listed a two-part emphasis: to be of service to professionals in dance, and to be an educational and informational organization for the general public and people in other professions interested in dance. A twelve-part list offered the organization's goals as follows:

1. Design programs and projects that will create more work for black companies.
2. Take dance performances into the black communities so that the people will feel and understand the importance of dance in their lives.
3. Provide information about black dancers, choreographers, companies, and schools.
4. Begin a picture file and act as a clearing house so that magazines, especially black ones, can get information and feature dance in their publications.
5. Develop more written material on dance by printing articles and pamphlets.
6. Develop educational programs that make use of audio-visual techniques.
7. Start a newsletter for communication of ideas and activities.
8. Help develop and maintain up-to-date archives on black dancers and choreographers.
9. To develop financial support from a greater portion of the black people.
10. Help create centers in other areas of the nation so that companies can have residencies of at least a week.
11. Help black colleges find teachers.
12. Design programs so the neighborhood dance schools in the various cities can establish relationships with each other as well as with professional dance companies.⁸

This last goal speaks to the black nationalist agenda of MODE and *The Feet* as its publication instrument.

The nationalist moment assumed a commonalty among black people in communities scattered across the country which could be enriched by the creation of black art, art which contained an incontrovertible political component. *The Feet* forwarded black nationalist rhetoric in varying degrees of ferventness throughout its publication, and a page 1 article of vol. 1, no. 3 entitled “It's Nation Time – Labor for a Nation” solicited money to send delegates to the 4th annual Black Power Conference held in Atlanta, Georgia. Nine months later, *The Feet* reported how that festival established The Langston Hughes House of Kuumba as an outgrowth of the Creativity Workshop held at the Black Power Conference, and sponsored by the CAP, the Congress of African People. (This was the 1960s: there were lots of organizations with acronyms to be deciphered.)

In April and May of 1971, The House of Kuumba hosted a dance festival of groups which fit its prescribed statement of black art, as follows:

For Black Art to be of relevance and importance to the struggle for National Liberation, that art must possess three qualities:

1. Collective,
2. Committing, and
3. Functional.

COLLECTIVE – It must come from a whole people showing all the aspects of the people, the community, and the family.

COMMITTING – It should dedicate Black people to change; to struggle against those who struggle against them, and make peace with those who make peace with them.

FUNCTIONAL – It must be a communicating instrument that will speak to and inspire Black people and that will let Black people see themselves in order to better themselves.⁹

The festival program included the Chuck Davis Dance Company; Kawaida Village from Newark, New Jersey; Black Ensemble from Albany, New York State; the Eleo Pomare Dance Company; Black Dance Union (under the direction of Michael Peters, who later became Michael Jackson's choreographer); Larocque Bey Drummers and Dance; Rod Rodgers Dance Company; Morse Donaldson's Armageddon in Babylon; Movements Black Dance Repertory; Olatunji Dancers; and Glenn Brooks' "Interpret A People".

During its existence, *The Feet* ran reviews, poetry, interviews with dancers and choreographers, class listings, dance community news (such as who had changed companies), and touring schedules. As the arts movement gained momentum, MODE began an important initiative to pay tribute to "a person who contributed to the black experience in dance" in a formal ceremony. Its first award was given in May 1971 to Ismay Andrews, the early teacher of many black performing artists including Chief Bey, Commodore Joe, Eartha Kitt, Eleo Pomare, Bea Richards, and Brunilda Ruiz. Andrews taught in New York community centers from 1934 to 1959, leading African dance, music and drama classes within the black community which instilled artists with ideas of black pride. *The Feet* is especially notable in its efforts to fix a definition of "black dance", a maneuver necessitated by its common but vague usage by white journalists throughout the period. *The Feet* followed funding patterns of government agencies, and in February 1971 published a listing of grants from the New York State Council on the Arts given to all dance and Harlem-based organizations. Members of MODE were concerned with critical writing which was inevitably invoked to rank the companies in competition for funding.

Several editorials by Carole Johnson were devoted to the impossible task of defining "black dance":

The term "Black dance" must be thought of from the broadest point that

must be used to include any form of dance and any style that a black person chooses to work within. It includes the concept that all Black dance artists will use their talents to explore all known, as well as to invent new forms, styles, and ways of expression through movement. [...]

Since the expression "Black dance" must be all-inclusive, it includes those dancers that work in:

1. the very traditional forms (the more nearly authentic African styles);
2. the social dance forms that are indigenous to this country, which include tap and jazz dance;
3. the various contemporary and more abstract forms that are seen on the concert stage; and
4. the ballet (which must not be considered as solely European).¹⁰

The breadth of this definition renders it pointless, and the debate over terminology continues to this day.

The Feet published a final anniversary issue in June 1973. In this final issue, Carole Johnson offered a column titled "Reflections on 'Organization' in the Dance World" which contained a history of MODE and its predecessor, the Association of Black Choreographers; and a list of summary of projects executed by MODE, which included *The Feet*, the dance service award, a television panel discussion, a community dance series, and the First National Congress on Blacks in Dance held at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, from 26 June to 1 July 1973. In this essay, Johnson offers a candid assessment of the organizational, structural and functional problems she encountered in administering MODE:

One is that the goals have been too broad for the small group of people committed to executing them; two is that services have not been clear to dancers and often have not been realized because of a lack of funds, and three is that MODE came into existence before the dance companies were physically prepared to lend the support necessary [to make the organization work].¹¹

Here, black nationalism is all but replaced by a softer dance-nation rhetoric as Johnson concludes:

because the dance community black and white is so small, everyone is needed to change the status of dance. The majority of black people do not feel welcome or that they have the power to make changes in the larger or more established dance institutions. Black people are part of the nation and must also share a part in helping solve the problems peculiar to the dance. For black people, the work necessary for the recognition of dance in the structures of this country can be best coordinated in conjunction

with the attempt to assure the rightful place of black people in the dance history of this country. If this is revolutionary or militant, then, indeed, MODE is just that.¹²

CONCLUSIONS

According to the Johnsons, the Black Arts Movement dissipated because its participants "could not achieve a consensus on the meaning of separatism, nationalism, and revolution, all expressions central to the movement. As a result, the political implications of art-for-people's sake, a slogan used as a partial definition of the black aesthetic, never became sufficiently clear".¹³ In terms of concert dance, the 1973 congress marked the end of the era, although I'm not sure why that happened. Maybe the large gathering of dancers and companies working in an Africanist mode confirmed a healthy, *sub rosa* constellation of performance which revived confidence in diasporic regeneration. The dance boom continued, and companies which grew from dance schools in regional locations – such as Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, Philadanco, Dallas Black Dance, and Denver's Cleo Parker Robinson – followed the models of Alvin Ailey and Arthur Mitchell in integrating their companies and nurturing an integrated, though predominantly black, audience base. Each of these groups turned to the emergent black middle class as their ideal audience members; that middle class had less interest in blatant social protest ideology.

Still, artists of the Black Arts Movement profoundly helped toward the alteration of the dance world *status quo*. Like their literary kin, these artists drew attention to unresolved questions of cultural aesthetics and mythologies surrounding black bodies in concert dance. Their dances, filled with inflammatory content which spilled off the stage, sought to destabilize the familiar image of black people dancing. They replaced the smiling, feel-good dances to blues and jazz music, which were common on the popular stage of the 1950s, with angular and unpredictable imagery of protest to make the dancing black body strange. Their work demands sustained investigation and interpretation.

NOTES

1. Neal 1968:29.
2. Johnson 1979:172.
3. Neal 1968:29.
4. Johnson 1979:171
5. Allen 1971:3.
6. Wilson 1971:3.
7. Wilson 1971:6.

8. Johnson 1970:7.
9. "First Dance":4.
10. Johnson 1971:2.
11. Johnson 1973:27.
12. *Ibid*:32.
13. Johnson 1979:198.

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