African American Dance - Philosophy, Aesthetics, and “Beauty”
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> “A metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, or aesthetics is necessarily distorted by communicative practices which invariably include inherited and privileged structures, forms, assumptions, and codes that remain unstated. The subject, on such accounts, may be considered problematic because the subject may inappropriately present its ideas as ones that surmount the limitations of what it is to be a subject - contextually bounded.” (Harris, 1996: 197)

Aesthetics in dance, and especially the terms of “beauty” as they might relate to African American artistry, remain extremely difficult to discuss. How can aesthetic theory be engaged in relation to African American dance practice? What sorts of aesthetic imperatives surround African American dance and how does black performance make sense of these imperatives?” Who names the quality of performance, or who determines that a performance may be accurately recognized as “black? More than this, how can African American dance participate on its own terms in a discourse of “beauty?”

This essay offers portions of my current research project to consider the recuperation of “beauty” as a productive critical strategy in discussions of African American dance. I argue that black performance in general, and African American concert dance in particular, seek to create aesthetic sites that allow black Americans to participate in discourses of recognition and appreciation to include concepts of “beauty.” In this, I suggest that “beauty” may indeed produce social change for its attendant audiences. I also propose that interrogating the notion of “beauty” may allow for social change among audiences that include dance theorists and philosophers. Through a case-study consideration of work by three African American choreographers, Donald Byrd (b. 1949), Ulysses Dove (1947- 1996), and Abdel Salaam (b. 1949), I ultimately hope to suggest critical possibilities aligning dance performance with particular aesthetic theory relevant to its documentation and interpretation.

1. “Beauty” in Philosophy, Dance, and African American Studies

I mean for the essay epigraph by philosopher Leonard Harris to suggest that “aesthetics” and “beauty” number among the seemingly limitless subjects of both dance and philosophy. Aesthetics, as a field of inquiry, has not served dance, as a practice, well. Very little productive aesthetic theory related to dance has been published in the last century, and the literature related to modern or contemporary dance remains exceedingly thin. In many ways, the subject of dance within the context of aesthetic theory - especially contemporary Western concert dance - seems to exceed the limits of communication for those trained in that field.

Recently, American philosophers have been willing to explore “beauty” as an aesthetic action useful to the process of human recognition. Notably, in On Beauty and Being Just (1999), professor of aesthetics Elaine Scarry constructs an argument for “beauty” as a sensate cognition that can lead toward social justice. For Scarry, “beauty” contains sacred, unprecedented, and life-saving features that incite deliberation about the nature of truth and fairness. In recognizing and appreciating “beauty,” people experience its pressure toward distribution, and seek to both protect and reproduce (or create) its effects. In addition, as “beauty” brings copies of itself into being, its observers undergo a “radical decentering” that moves them toward ethical fairness; and “people seem to wish there to be beauty even when their own self-interest is not served by it” (Scarry, 1999, 123). In this analysis, “beauty” may achieve more than its presence suggests, as human responses to “beauty” may include social action.

Scarry does not lay out the terms of “beauty” she considers except by example of things seen and then felt; she seems to assume its recognition to be self-evidentiary. Her referents - a boy, a palm tree, a flower, a bird, the sky, among others - align her theory to Romanticist assumptions about “beauty” as it might be ever-present in nature. She offers little criteria for the recognition of “beauty,” although she does mention, in passing, a quality of symmetry as an “important element” in its assessment (Ibid., 130). Because she writes of the largest concept of “beauty” as a natural presence, she seems to be

unconcerned with any specific aesthetic qualities that mark its discovery. For Scarry, the pressure toward distribution performed by "beauty" is something already done by nature; a task that may be imitated by people (creative artists), but need not be "because it does not depend on human beings to bring it about." (Ibid., 109). In other words, "beauty" will persist whether humanists are willing to explore its qualities or not.

Scarry is only one of several contemporary American philosophers who write about "beauty." Her universalist ethos, however, strikes familiar poses of exclusion for many contemporary stage choreographies, which are not concerned with the persistence of lightness or grace, as well as the physiognomic attributes of African Americans, which have rarely been considered "beautiful" by the largest American public. My project seeks to explore the recognition points of "beauty" that African American audiences attend to in dance performance in order to expand on the notion of what may be perceived as "beauty," as well as the logic that determines who may name that quality.

On the whole, contemporary dance studies has ignored the function of "beauty" as a potent aesthetic paradigm. We can easily understand why: the concept seems at once extremely unstable - what are the terms for recognizing "beauty?" - and monolithic, without significant nuance. More than this, "beauty"'s philosophical lineage has ignored dance, all the while positing universal values from which African American identity and subjectivity have also been excluded.

Yet many of the possibilities Scarry, among others, raises relate easily to African American concert dance practice. Here, dance performance may refer to the spiritual (sacred) and spontaneous (unprecedented) choreographies that have sustained generations of African American dancers in the context of harsh everyday racialized interactions (its life-saving feature). Among dance critics and historians, the quality and content of African American concert dance has generated sustained debate about its choreographic nature (can it be recognizably "beautiful" in and of it itself?) and the access of black Americans to advanced training in white-operated academies and schools (how can it press toward distribution? Who has access to it?).[1] While I do not mean to imply that African American concert dance embodies "beauty" in and of itself, Scarry's assertions will become important in later discussions of particular dances.

2. A "Beautiful" Duet for Ethnophilosophy and Feminist Aesthetics

Amid continuous overarching questions around what the terms of "beauty" may be and who may name them, I contend that "beauty" might be recuperated effectively as a critical paradigm when deployed within a particular culturally-explicit frame of performance analysis. My study of "black beauty" seeks to invigorate the analysis of how African American audiences experience and respond to aspects of concert dance in contexts that may be termed "black." My interest centers on how "beauty" is constructed by the body in motion, or more precisely, in the space between artist and audience that the concert stage inevitably creates.

African American philosophy, a branch of ethnophilosophy, offers a grounding context for aesthetics relevant to African American dance.[2] In 1977 philosopher Cornel West argued that this then-emergent literature sought to "make theoretically explicit what is implicit in Afro-American history to describe and demystify the cultural and social practices in this history and offer certain solutions to urgent problems besetting Afro-Americans" (West, 1977, 11). West's materialist call for philosophy as action informs African American dance practice: these choreographies emerge to offer simultaneous solutions to adverse minoritarian conditions, as well as fulfillment of aesthetic imperatives embedded within their recognition as "black."

African American philosophers have long underscored the creative and world-making view of philosophy as a practice, as well as the political importance of the documentation of a recognizable constellation of cultural processes. As with dance, the professionalization of philosophy for African Americans is fairly recent. Among its earliest proponents, author and Harlem Renaissance critic Alain Leroy Locke earned his

doctoral degree in philosophy from Harvard University in 1918. Locke's interest in the arts, represented by his editorship of seminal documents related to African American participation in dance, music, visual arts, and letters, set a twentieth-century standard for an alignment of African American philosophy and aesthetics.[3] In large part, Locke's efforts signaled the arrival of modern African American subjectivity in the European and European American imagination, as his critical work established recognizable boundaries for a consideration of longstanding art practices.

Locke's "ethnophilosophical" method documented the existence of African American artists as well as the persistence of African American cultural practices that flourished, unexplored by most critics, in segregated contexts. His studies assumed a black ontology, represented in artistic creations, that his focused critical attention brought to light for all to see. For Locke, the act of documenting presence in the arts satisfied a need to place African American creative practices within a larger context of recognized European and Euro-American artistry.

Clearly, "ethnophilosophical" approaches are hybrid and politically motivated. Philosopher Anthony Appiah asserts that there may be no "native" African tradition in philosophy, since philosophy as a practice has been created by the West. Still, philosophy becomes an inevitable partner in a project to ground aesthetic theory in performance research, if only because it contains what Appiah terms "the highest-status label of western humanism" (Appiah, 1996, 27). The current project to articulate a "black beauty" in concert dance bears similar weight; "beauty" is, of course, among the highest-status labels of gesture as thought, action, and spiritual wholeness. In a context that considers America's continuously fraught racial asymmetries, any maneuver to align African American corporeal practices and aesthetics with narratives of "beauty" proposes a strategic recuperation of some political import.

Here I follow philosopher Lucius Outlaw's suggestion of African American philosophy as a "gathering notion" around which to create a possibility of moving toward a useful philosophy of black performance (Outlaw, 1996, 64). Outlaw reminds us that all philosophy is created according to an agenda of arranging and naming, and emerges as "a matter of historical, cultural, social, and political circumstance" involving the people who produce it. (Ibid., 75). This may seem self-evident: what reason might there might be to invent philosophy other than to present ideologies of a particular subject-location? However, the implications of considering philosophy as a response to material need are broad. In terms of dance, an African American philosophy of aesthetics may allow us to recognize and articulate qualities of performance in a way that Eurocentric aesthetics can not. But we must also resist a rush to rewrite aesthetics in order to understand dance. In a discussion of African cultural practices and the circumstances surrounding their narration by contemporary philosophers, Outlaw cautions: "the practices named do not require this arranging and naming as security for their meaningfulness or integrity, nor for their validity" (Ibid.) For Outlaw, philosophy may make sense of particular practices for the purposes of philosophy, but this process of analysis emerges in response to practices "already done." In similar terms, African American dance performance may "gather" around particular aesthetic principles, but it will never conform to those guidelines as if only to satisfy their delineation.

Similarly, Feminist Aesthetics provide a counterbalance to the prevalent Kantian model of beauty as a *jouissance* experienced by an individuated [masculine] beholder, typically as he gazes on a static object, like a flower. Cultural theorists including Joanne Waugh and Rita Felski have argued that feminist aesthetics might be an approach to aesthetic theory more than any single totalizing formulation. Felski points out that while feminist criticism "does not need *an* (autonomous) aesthetic, it cannot afford to ignore the realm of *the* aesthetic, because it is necessarily implicated within and influenced by its institutional and discursive logics" (Felski, 1995, 431). Surely this is true for an Africanist dance criticism as well; its artists, audiences, and critics are aware of competing and contradictory concert dance idioms whose aesthetic sensibilities are not easily reconciled. Felski clarifies her motives thus: "From Romanticism to modernism and postmodernism, the figure of the artist has become closely identified with an ideal of transgressive masculinity, while women have been seen as, at best, capable of reproduction and imitation, but not of creative innovation" (Ibid., 432). In this, she might make reference to any African American modern or postmodern dance artist, whose works are almost inevitably tethered to the European-derived parentage

of Balanchine, Cunningham, Graham, or Wigman. Finally, Felski argues that "women's art has been typically read by critics as an expression of the limits of their sex; the transcendent and universal qualities ascribed to great art have remained almost by definition beyond their reach" (Ibid.) Here echo generations of dance critics and aesthetes who discuss African American dance as merely an expression of the limits of a recognizable black identity. So long as African Americans dance "black," these critics report, they will only be able to express that limited experience without access to the realms of universal "beauty" and "truth."

But what if "beauty" needn't be universal, or even visible, to be potent? Feminist aesthetics coupled with ethnophilosophy offer a resistant platform to consider the possibility, as well as the means to move beyond the realm of the visual as the dominant signifier of aesthetic meaning. For example, Laura Mulvey famously engaged this resistant critique of a prevalent visual pleasure offered by film (Mulvey, 1975). Her exposure of a recurrent masculinist gaze constructed by mainstream Hollywood films indicted the tyranny of the visual in the construction of pleasure and "beauty." As feminist philosopher Hilde Hein notes, aesthetic philosophy since Plato has referred to vision as "the noblest and most theoretical of the senses" in the West (Hein, 1995, 457). However, an Africanist aesthetic enactment of "beauty," as I intend to explore it, refers to the visual as only an aspect of the sensorial. To move beyond "beauty" as something visually apprehended, toward "beauty" as a performed gesture felt by a witnessing audience, we must be willing to resist the primacy of sight as truth, and allow for the possibility of an aesthetic sensibility concerned with spirit.

Thus, my thesis emerges here, at the shared edges of "ethnophilosophy" and feminist aesthetics. To recognize "black beauty" in motion, we engage awareness of social and political circumstance as well as the perception of fullness of gestural execution and the manifestation of spirit. I shall turn now to consider possibilities of black performance, answered in part by case study considerations of particular choreographies.

3. "Beauty"'s Bits: Black Performance, Narrative, and Movement Lexicons

Black performance allows us to imagine possibilities for social movement, social particularity, social flexibility, and social change. Its evidentiary markers - "black" and "performance" - are each contingent manifestations, deployed according to particular contexts. As a social category, "black" becomes implicitly bound up with "white," "Asian," "Latino," "aboriginal," and other corporeal locations; "black" does not exist without a presumption of other identities. In this, "black" implies particular social referents as well as social movements through those referents towards boundaries supplied by other social categories. The performance of blackness, then, may refer constantly to absent, discarded, and elided performances which form an offstage background to the social category of "black." Black performance emerges as an inflection of social identity in motion, with intimations of movement toward and away from contingent social categories.

Elements of performance that may be consistently recognized as "black" allow us to consider social particularity. Within shifting social boundaries, black performance carries corporeal artifacts - gestures, rhythms, soundings, rhetorics, aesthetic logics - that distinguish it among itself. "Black" may describe a contingent social location, but its emergence in performance is tied to the perception of particular gestures. These gestures form the corpus of a performance ideology that hold significant import in the realm of American concert dance, and comprise the distinctive features of African American concert dance.

And yet, social flexibility is embedded in black performance by virtue of its citational - its "signifyin'" - ethos. Black performance prizes referential logics and spontaneity as foundational creative approaches. Spontaneity may be borne out as rhythmic emphasis or unexpected citation in any idiom of black performance, including music, oratory, social dance, and concert dance. This flexibility of source material and its interpretation also underscore the contingency of "black" as a marker of social location: improvisation and spontaneity confirm unexpected possibility as a hallmark of black performance.

Finally, black performance can herald social change in the moment of its emergence. Because the visible evidence of "black" highlights other social identities, and its performance prizes spontaneity and flexibility while referring to a particular black ground, its presence achieves a simultaneous stabilizing and distending effect.

Black performance can enable social change by confirming its transformative possibility. In this final feature, we find the possibilities of "beauty" as a productive aspect of performance. African American dance can choreograph gestures of "beauty" recognizable to African American audiences, a possibility denied in almost any other modern American location. Here, concert dance may predict social change through the staging of "beauty" as an action.

To offer a case study of performance that marks out social flexibility and social change through the use of particular movement lexicons, I turn to the work of Donald Byrd.[4] For Byrd, "beauty" often comes to be tied to the triumph of physical technique, or excellence in form. Form is tied to finish, with jagged edges smoothed into a seamless performance persona engaged by the dancers. The ruptures of Byrd's rhythmic phrasing makes clear principles of percussive attack or complex meter, but without breaking an overall flow of movements performed to their physical ends. In pushing his dancers to work at the ends of physical possibilities, he forces them to respond in the physical crucible of the spirit. This, in turn, extracts a "beauty" of dancing in the spirit by virtue of the force of physical challenges posed to the dancers. Byrd stages social movement within dance idioms, born of the tension between the execution of balletic movements with a low-to-the-ground weighted stance.

Byrd's choreographic project explores the expressive limits of classical ballet technique sutured to the weightiness of modern dance. His work tends to be highly kinetic - almost excessively so - in an effort to align compositional rigor with a patently discursive physicality. Highly literate in terms of dance compositions, his works always reference other dances, and he enjoys a choreographic game in which he challenges his audiences to recognize trace elements of other choreographies as they are played out in his own constructions. In Dance at the Gym (1991) for instance, Byrd makes structural reference to Jerome Robbins' choreography from West Side Story, wrung through an Africanist aesthetic wringer. The work for eight dancers - four men and four women - describes competitions and flirtations among a group of urbanites in a workout session of sorts, set in an abstraction of a commercial gym. In one sequence, we are invited to view the percussive attack of the dancer as she repeatedly pierces the space above her head with her pointed foot; the antiphonal phrasing that constructs gestural responses to various movement calls; the complex rhythm and apart-playing of a group of women that challenge us to repeatedly choose a focal point within the proscenium frame.

These choreographic structures signal the work's convergence with Africanist aesthetic features. The dancer hits her foot against the space above her head with an unanticipated, tangible force. The attack of her kicking gestures convey a temporal rift in the basic rhythmic pulse of the dance and its musical score. The unexpected bursts of percussive attack serve as a reminder of powerful, submerged forces that propel the more obvious, visible rhythmic phrasing and aural musical gestures. They allow for the recognition of spirit as they herald the extension of rhythmic possibility in the dance.

Byrd's choreography reveals itself to be "black" through its citations, call and response, complex rhymicity; it conducts "beauty" through the corporeal luster that its virtuosity creates. Byrd encourages an intense visual "finish" from his dancers that becomes as important to his work as the compositional strategies he employs. As if to coax every ounce of tension from their taut performances, the movements are phrased to emphasize an unimpeachable mastery of physical technique in terms of, at least, flow, depth of spatial field, and rhythmic intensity. This performed "finish" contributes to a quality of "beauty" aligned to an aesthetic of the cool; Byrd's dancers perform super-hero styled feats without, it seems, breaking a sweat. In this way, they construct "beauty" as action that predicts social change through the synthesis of dance aesthetics. Here, ballet is sutured to modern dance via Africanist aesthetic principles to charge the stage with vistas of "beautiful" virtuosity and luster.

Where the brightness and sheen of Byrd's choreography proposes "beauty" as a visible effect of dance motion and a suturing of dance movement lexicons, other choreographers focus on the force of unseen social narratives to produce motions of "beauty." In an irony not without consequence, nearly all of the markers of performance that allow its recognition as "black" are nonmaterial. Virtual forces propel black performance, and these nonmaterial aspects form its substance. They include the gestures, the tonalities, the guttural wails, the rhythmic complexities, the deployment of allusions, the tempi and forces of action that shape performance. Unlike the physical technique of, say, Martha Graham modern dance, these aspects of black performance have no codified system of production; no physical training that perpetually produces their effects.

To discuss the nonmaterial, we find the usefulness of "spirit" as an animating feature of Africanist performance. "Spirit" might be similar to the sacred aspect of "beauty" that Scarry mentions, in that its nonmaterial manifestations are bound up with "faith" and legacies of "knowledge." In the context of black performance, "spirit" refers to the contingent presences of immaterial, animating, vital forces that allow human beings to recognize incorporeal actions. The spirit "flashes" in Africanist performance to momentarily confirm incorporeal action enabled by the performance, and not bounded by the performer's body. In the "flash of the spirit" we find what African art historian Robert Farris Thompson has described as the motivation of successful Africanist performance (Thompson, 1983) .[5]

To enable the flash of the spirit, the dancer must be willing to become the thing that is being danced or being summoned. Other aesthetic theorists, including choreographer and author Delores Cayou, have termed "functionalism" - or a willingness to become the thing that is danced - as an aspect of excellence in Africanist performance (Cayou, 1971, p. 8). This aspect teams the artistic ability to become the dance with the gathered audience's ability to perceive the "spirit" animated by the dance, and to honor and protect its arrival. In this group action of honoring and protecting, the manifestation of "spirit" is again likened to the sacred components of "beauty" mentioned by Scarry. Clearly, "spirit" needn't be tied to a particular religious doctrine. It emerges in the fullness of gesture performed with vitality and clarity for the purpose of group cognition - at times, for the performance of "beauty."

Here, I turn to the work of choreographer Ulysses Dove.[6] Dove's choreography is marked by its relentless speed, violent force, and daring eroticism. He treats the dancer as a weapon of sorts, out to slay the demons of torpor. His movement palate is impossibly dense, requiring a precision of execution as well as an inevitable extension of the technical capability of its dancers. Many of his works portray an unlikely community of people who seem to know each other well; they describe violence as an inevitable family trait that will result from their interaction. The world of these works is up in arms; fights emerge from multiple simmering hostilities, and an anger palpably born of social and sexual dysfunction forces the people of these works through uncomfortable compromises in terms of movement.

His work Episodes (1987) described a harsh landscape of men and women who rush toward each other as if to connect emotionally, but are inevitably repelled by the very force of their [e]motion. Clad in chic, form-fitting black, the dancers are pinned, rather than revealed, by shafts of blinding white light focused as a diagonal crossroads on the stage. The overall mood is unrelentingly tense, in no small part due to the extreme physical demands of Dove's choreography. When slow-motion phrases emerge, they offer little release from the overall drive and fervor of the staging. Episodes presents a landscape of urgency and danger. Within this misanthropic space, audiences may recognize actions as an expressive response to the random racism of everyday life for many African Americans. In recreating violence and intense physical challenge as the *lingua franca* of his work, Dove stages African American survival and perseverance as aesthetic action. The dance offers "spirit" in its existence and repeatability; it proposes "beauty" as an ability to survive.

Episodes, like other of Dove's works, depicts a world of narrative relationships without beginning or ending; of actions answered by movement consequences that lead to other movement choices without reference to theatrical mise en scène. Many of Dove's works take place in oblique settings that suggest abstractions of physical locations without details of particularity. For example, Episodes is set at a physical

"crossroads" designated by the lighting design; the dancers relate to each other as people, with particular histories, somehow trapped within this scenographic limbo. The dancers here persist, as if to underscore a truth of African American corporeality that endures through adverse social circumstances. The stories of the dancers and their relationship are viewed through an aesthetic lens that values the arrival of "spirit" in certain movement sequences - an unexpected drop to the floor; a series of turns performed on the knees; an unanticipated foot-stomping sequence that echoes ecstatic religious dancing. Dove aligns "beauty" with the survival of black subjectivity in these stories of relationships - violent, harsh, nuanced and erotic - that confirm a persistence of black corporeality.

While explorations of individual subjectivity offer a valuable platform for considerations of black beauty, particular dances and dance practices also mark black performance in diaspora. As practice and commodity, black performance creates vibrant economies of national and global production and dispersal. In terms of African American dance, this process began in the nineteenth century with the cakewalk, a transformed slave festival dance that became first a national, and then international fad at the beginning of the twentieth century (Krasner, 1997). Black social dance idioms, from the cakewalk to hip hop, have held currency in all corners of the world, where they are often performed by dancers with no recognizable African ancestry. This tendency toward distribution of black performance underlines "diaspora" as a possibility available to these aesthetic constellations. A genealogy of performance in diaspora echoes and recasts the standard understanding of "diaspora" as the movement of bodies across geography.

While popular African American social dances have emerged at regular historical intervals to be dispersed into global contexts, in the wake of the 1960s civil rights movement, African Americans have embraced neo-African choreographies. These dances reference "beauty" as a reclaiming of creative gestural expression derived from an (imaginary) ancestral homeland. Neo-African dance forms, also highly popular among African, Latina, and European Americans, offer diasporic opportunities for holistic corporeal memory (Heard and Mussa, 2002). Ancestral "beauty" is protected by these dances, in their recovery by African Americans, and in their frequent staging in touring concert dance festivals such as the annual DanceAfrica series.[7]

Here, Abdel Salaam's choreography offers insight.[8] Salaam constructs "beauty" as an inevitable function of civil rights activism that laid bare Africanist aesthetics in diaspora. Neo-African dance forms gained currency in the United States as a function of dispersed Black Arts Movement ideologies (Heard and Mussa, 2002). Salaam's interest in these choreographies grew as he found dance to be a "tool of empowerment, a tool of stimulation" for his core African American audience (Salaam, 2002). He propels his interest in dance as black studies through teaching and choreography, with an intention to underscore that dance may offer simultaneous political action and art. He created his company to encourage a particular mode of spectatorship, one that resonates with a neo-African diasporic ethic.

In Ancestral Earths (1992) Salaam collaborated with several Native American dancers[9] to explore intertwined diasporic legacies. The work stages African American dancers and musicians, clad in beaded neo-African costume, in tandem with Native American dancers and musicians, dressed in feathered ceremonial garb. In the theater space, the visual synergy of extravagant costume establishes an obvious grounding of mythic "beauty" in motion. The movement vocabulary of the work confirms distinctions in percussive approach. Where Salaam's choreography highlights complex arrangements of body-part isolations in densely-layered patterns, the Native American choreography teases nuance from repetition of steady, full-bodied pulsations. The work offers ever shorter alternations of separate Native and African American dance ideas, to culminate in a shared improvisational space entered by dancers representing each tradition.

Salaam's work often highlights "diaspora" as source of "beauty" in the form of remembered neo-African choreographies. He also stages gender according to a holistic Africanist worldview that assumes the presence of distinctive "male" and "female" energies in every human being. In his work, grand themes of communal interest including judgement, rebirth, and regeneration, are to be considered as sources of primal energy to be recycled through the art of dance. Particular dances of West African origin, also

restructured for the stage, provide the foundational movement lexicon for many of his works. While these dances are not practiced by large numbers of African American audiences, they are recognized as part of a diasporic movement legacy that references black group identity through performance.

Movement lexicons, interpersonal narratives, and disaporic dances transferred to the concert stage provide three prisms through which "beauty" may be reflected. But "beauty" must be recognized as such in order to fulfill its potential. In terms of dance, the process that allows audiences to recognize "beauty" remains insufficiently theorized. The performing arts function within increasingly impoverished systems of thought dedicated to analysis or interpretation. We need only consider how Alvin Ailey's first-generation modern work Revelations (1960) stands for "black dance" in an unequivocal way that forecloses broad black audience interest in, say, the work of postmodern African American choreographer Bebe Miller. "Beauty" may be enacted in choreography constructed by both Ailey and Miller, but it must be recognized in context in order to thrive. The recognition of "beauty," especially in terms of concert dance, is in no way automatically achieved.

Concert dance is not symmetrically available to all African Americans who might attend it, notwithstanding material expense or aesthetic education. Even if all those who wanted to attend concert dance performances could do so, this work demands a grounding in the aesthetic logic of stage performance that must be undertaken by audiences. "Black beauty," as I discuss it here, is performed within a frame of the concert stage proscenium. Unfortunately, a useful grounding in the aesthetic experience of dance attendance escapes the growing African American working class and lower-middle class populace.

"Beauty" - in any definition - cannot flourish without representation. It has to be reflected, pursued, and circulated to be engaged; it has to be assembled in its component parts to fulfill itself; it must be re-membered to construct its effects. "Beauty," like "blackness," offers a contingent experience that grows in volume as critical theory is brought to bear on its contents.

I do not argue here for the contrivance of strict critical formulae as the basis for aesthetic awareness or the recognition of "beauty." When "beauty" emerges in African American choreographies of the concert stage, its presence and appeal break from any surrounding structures, including the hybrid Euro-American modern dance legacies that its choreographers may engage. This approach to reconsider the terms of "beauty" offers a way to consider African American subjectivity within dance that might allow it to flourish on its own terms. "Beauty" need not be universal to be a potent and important paradigm for group awareness and well-being. "Black beauty," defined here as performed movement, might allow philosophy and dance studies to reconsider how various "truths" of movement are contingent upon the analytical frames brought to bear on their contents. Not all audiences recognize "beauty" in these works or as it might be performed by African American dancers. "Black beauty" surely exists in terms of concert dance; its aesthetic principles and contents demand sustained exploration. My hope here is to participate in the creation of a conversation about "black beauty" in concert dance that opens possibilities for sustained discussions of aesthetics. In this, I hope that "beauty" may emerge in this process, and then disappear again, to leave all of us marveling in its wake.

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Endnotes

1. Among many studies of racialized history of American dance practice, see especially Gottschild (1996), Long (1989), Perpener (2001), and Manning (2004).

2. Outlaw (1996) offers an effective overview to theoretical and semantic distinctions between African, African American, and Africana Philosophy. For the overview-granting purposes of this essay, I will use only “African American” where “Afro-American,” “African,” or “Africana” may offer more nuanced implications.

3. Locke’s (1886-1954) many publications including Negro Art: Past and Present and The Negro and His Music, both of 1936.

4. Raised in the American black middle class of the 1950s, Byrd studied performance aesthetics and dance at Tufts and Yale Universities, the Cambridge School of Ballet, the London School of Contemporary Dance, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center, and with Mia Slavinska. He danced, briefly, with Twyla Tharp, Karole Armitage, and Gus Solomons jr. before he founded his company Donald Byrd/The Group in 1978 with a commitment to the idea that “dance can change and enrich the lives of many people” (Byrd: 2004). Highly prolific, he has created over 80 works for his own company and others including a 1998 production of Carmina Burana for the New York City Opera. In 2002 Byrd dissolved his own company and assumed artistic directorship of the Spectrum Dance Theater of Seattle, Washington.

5. Thompson’s inventory of “guiding principles” of Africanist performance have been frequently recounted, but bear repeating here. They include dominance of a percussive performance style; multiple and complex rhythmic meter; overlapping call and response in singing; an inner pulse control that retains a rhythmic common denominator; suspended accentuation patterning that allows for cross-rhythms; and the performance of songs and dances of social allusion.

6. Born in Columbia, South Carolina, the eldest of three children, Dove began dance study with Carolyn Tate while a pre-medical student at Howard University. He transferred to the University of Wisconsin to study with Xenia Chlistowa of the Kirov Ballet, and in 1970 graduated from Bennington College with a degree in dance. Upon moving to New York, Dove joined the Merce Cunningham company and performed with Mary Anthony, Pearl Lang, and Anna Sokolow. In 1973 he joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, where he quickly rose to the rank of principal dancer acclaimed for his commanding presence, bright clarity of movement, and truthful dramatic intensity. He turned to choreography in 1980, and began a significant freelance career making dances for the Basel Ballet, the Cullberg Ballet, the Dutch National Ballet, the London Festival Ballet, American Ballet Theater, the New York City Ballet, and the Groupe de Recherche Choreographique de l'Opera de Paris where he spent three years as assistant director. Dove's death from AIDS placed him among the most prominent of publicly discussed gay male black dance artists.

7. Since 1977, DanceAfrica has offered an annual festival of American dance companies based in traditional and neo-African idioms. The festival continues to be organized by African American founding director Chuck Davis.

8. Born and raised in New York City, Salaam trained in modern and neo-African dance as an adult student at Lehman College under the guidance of Joan Miller. He quickly became concerned with patently hybrid constructions of dance idioms. He founded his company, Forces of Nature, in 1980 with a desire to combine martial arts, Lester Horton and José Limón-based methods, with selected sub-Saharan African dance languages to explore the cultural and philosophical foundations of African dance traditions. Housed in Manhattan's Church of Saint John the Divine, Forces of Nature performs Salaam's emphatically diverse repertory that includes postmodern offerings as well as many neo-African dance and drumming pieces. The company achieved acclaim in New York and internationally for its recreation of historical, mythical, and epic events through dance theater based in Africanist narrative themes.

9. On separate occasions, Salaam's collaborators included the Silver Cloud Native American Dancers and Musicians, and Matoaka Little Eagle with members of the Thunderbird American Indian dancers.