

THE BLACK DANCING BODY AS A MEASURE OF CULTURE¹

BRENDA DIXON GOTTSCHILD

Introduction

by Jaamil Olawale Kosoko [excerpt]:

Dr. Brenda Dixon Gottschild offered me everything I needed to hear as a young artist, as a young scholar; and for many of us, Dr. Gottschild is a seer and a knower and a giver of knowledge, concerned with revealing the undercommons hidden within the social, political, and historical record. Using her research in dance and performance practice as a measure of society to reveal deeper ways of understanding ourselves as inter-textual beings, she asks us, through each carefully choreographed page, to reckon with ourselves as artists, as Americans, as citizens, as humans.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild:

I'm going to open this, as is my wont, with a libation. You can say with me at the end when I pour, *Axé* – which means the same thing as “Amen” or “So be it” and all those good things.

I pour this libation and dedicate this presentation to two of my aesthetic mothers: Katherine Dunham, who brought the dances of Haiti to African Americans, and Pearl Primus, who, indeed, taught African Americans the dances of Nigeria. These two women taught us our history in order that we might envision our future.

Axé.

[Moving into the audience] I'm trying to get close, make contact with your Warmth Body *[clasping hands with someone in the audience]*, your Aura Body *[hovering, running her hands above one audience member]*, your Kirlian Energy Field Body *[reaching toward someone in the back row]*, your Infrared Body *[flashing fingers like light waves]*...Bodies, bodies, bodies.

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Those lines are spoken to me by my husband, Hellmut Gottschild, in a movement theater piece we created together, titled *Tongue Smell Color*. In it, as an African American woman and a German man, we explore issues of gender, nationality, guilt, memory, and race – sometimes zeroing in on the white male fascination and obsession with the black female body.



Brenda Dixon Gottschild performing her lecture

In one scene, Hellmut approaches and pursues me, and says those lines, “I want to get close, make contact with you”. I tell him he’s trespassing and that those bodies he’s speaking of are really just a dancer’s imagery, astral bodies. He takes offense and says those bodies are real, exist, and can be felt; that we all have many bodies that we cannot necessarily see. And that sends me into a tailspin of memories – body memories, black body memories, black female body memories, black enslaved female body memories.

As though in a trance, I repeat that word: Memories. Meh-mor, meh-moh-ree, mem, mem... until he cuts me off.

Me*mories, yes, indeed, the body remembers, the body *re*-members, the body speaks. The body tells us what’s valued in the culture. Bodies are mirrors that absorb, remember, and reflect society’s politics, art, religions, aesthetics, hopes, fears, strengths, failings – both the officially

sanctioned versions and the sub-rosa closeted taboos. Bodies are barometers measuring the pulse of society. And I'm here tonight with you to celebrate the body, the black body, the dancing body, our dancing bodies, as a measure of culture that bridges divisions and blurs boundaries.

I want to begin by giving you a little bit of context. I'm sure that everybody in this room is aware that dance is as old as humankind and that there are many kinds and forms of dance, and dance has served many functions in different societies and in different eras; for example, in African and African American cultures – and I call that *Africanist* cultures – dance is an integral part of a religious practice. And the deities, whether in Christianity or in Yoruba, present themselves to the community through the dancing bodies of the religious devotee, who in some fundamentalist churches dances when and as the spirit moves her. On the other hand, in most Europeanist Christian sects, the dancing body is a “no-no” and regarded as a vehicle that leads to evil rather than enlightenment.

That's one example of what it means for us to think of the dancing body as a measure of culture that points out what is valued or repressed in a given society. I also want us to think about dance and the dancing body as an embodied language. Ballerina Allesandra Ferri said, “You don't just *use* your body but you go *through* your body to talk”.

Of course many of us who are in theatre or dance know that those people who are concerned with language – the language of words, that is – often give short shrift to the language of movement. But the language of movement speaks to us as profoundly as words, although through different means and layers of experience. Now, inside each verbal language there are dialects, jargons, colloquialisms, neologisms, and so on. So the way a spoken language grows and changes is frequently by borrowing elements from other languages.

Some of you will probably recognize this word... Hellmut and I go back and forth from Germany a lot, so my first example of borrowing – one language borrowing from another – is something that I call “transformational linguistics”. In Germany, the popular word for a cell phone is a “handy”, and of course you hold a cell phone in your hand and it *is* handy; that's transformational linguistics. Of course in Germany there are a lot of direct appropriations: kids know how to “chill”, or they might “diss” you.

Why am I telling you all this? Because the same thing happens in movement. Like the spoken word, dance comes in many languages, and they too receive impulses and infusions from other languages. A good example, and one of my focal points, is the appropriation of Africanisms in so-called “white dance forms”.

But that's where we enter the realm of the politics of dance and culture. Europeanist body languages and Africanist body languages have actually been speaking with one another ever since they first met and clashed centuries ago, but they are different languages. To illustrate this point, I'm going to read a quote from my first book, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*:

In traditional European dance aesthetics, the torso must be held upright for correct classic form. The erect spine is the center, the hierarchical ruler from which all movement is generated. It functions as a single unit. The straight uninflected torso indicates elegance or royalty and acts as the absolute monarch, dominating the dancing body. This vertically aligned spine is the first principle of European dance, with arm and leg movements emanating from and returning to it [*demonstrating*]. The ballet canon is organized around this center. In fact, this structural principle is a microcosm of the post-Renaissance colonialist worldview. Like the straight, centered spine of its dancing body, Europe posited *itself* as the center of the world, with everything else controlled and defined by it.

As an aside, remember those images of Louis XIV as “Le Roi Soleil” – that’s where ballet emanated from, from his court. “L’état, c’est moi.” The world is me!

Africanist dance idioms show a democratic equality of body parts. The spine is just one of many possible movement centers, and it rarely remains static. The Africanist dancing body is polycentric. One part of the body is played against another, and movements may simultaneously originate from more than one focal point: the head and pelvis, for example. It’s also polyrhythmic (different body parts moving to two or more rhythms simultaneously) and [*demonstrating*] privileges flexible, bent-leg postures that reaffirm contact with the earth, sometimes called a “get down pose”. The component and auxiliary parts of the torso, of course – shoulder, chest, rib cage, waist, pelvis – can be independently moved or articulated in different directions.

As assessed by Africanist aesthetic criteria, the Europeanist dancing body is rigid, aloof, cold, and one-dimensional. By Europeanist standards, the Africanist dancing body is vulgar, comic, uncontrolled, undisciplined and, most of all, promiscuous.

So clearly, folks, there is a *translation* problem going on here.

Nevertheless and despite different lexicons, the reason for dancing is like the reason for dreaming. Through dance or dreams we access thoughts, ideas, and metaphors that can’t be perceived in any other way. In fact, dance is a literature that is illegible in literal translation.

Who am I in all this? Well, I am a performing researcher, researching performance. Writing is my “choreography” for the page, as I like to say. The body is my medium, and I recognize that the body, the dancing body, the black dancing body, thinks, speaks, and writes its signature across world history whether we know it or not and whether we recognize it or not. Dance has many layers to be uncovered and researched – that’s the part I love. This is maybe why I’ve felt like a detective sniffing out clues and acting on hunches. I follow cultural inklings, like the somatic trail I blazed about Africanisms in the Americanization of ballet.

Well, I’m an artist writing about art, writing into history two marginalized legacies that are my obsession and my passion: dance itself, and Africanisms in dance. As a cultural historian, I use a creolized approach to interrogate dance as history, biography, sociology, politics, philology, anthropology, philosophy, religion. In doing my job, I observe, listen, read, interpret, surmise, analyze, and compare, and too often I find myself confronted by inequalities if not

outright injustices.

In *Digging the Africanist Presence*, I started out by asking questions of American ballet, which, like all ballet, is regarded as a classically European art form...and what does that mean? Anybody? White...a classically *white* art form. But I was picking up a different scent. George Balanchine, a Russian choreographer who emigrated to the US in the 1930s, joined up with entrepreneur Lincoln Kirstein to form the Ballet Society in 1946, which in 1948 became the New York City Ballet. Balanchine has been credited with the Americanization of ballet. Well, if that's the case, I asked, what makes his ballet so American – so different from the Royal Ballet or from the Bolshoi?

You know, I picked up an Africanist scent.

In order to verify it, though, I had to step back. I had to see what was behind the trees; what were the clues, the hidden clues; who were the players, the *real* players. And I went back to what was right in front of my nose, namely contemporary culture and lifestyles. And I'm going to show you now a kind of peek into some recent cultural history that was abreast when I was writing this first book.

So this is from the mid-1980s to 1990s. This was a time that was called "the culture wars". And it was about...if you Google it..."revising the canon". So, this kind of appropriation that I will be talking about, it's not as though it's over; it continues even to this day, but this was my beginning.

I'm thinking about evidence of Africanist presences in pop culture of the late 20th century, here first as the semiotics of fashion and popular culture. And with these various photos, these periods, I'll say something like, "What's the message here?"

[Image] Here Africanisms are appearing as an exotic commodity of the mainstream beauty market. Can everybody identify these women? Who's the woman on the left?...Really? This is Cicely Tyson, an actress you really need to know. And the one on the right?



Cicely Tyson [left] and Bo Derek in slide image from Brenda Dixon Gottschild's lecture

Bo Derek.

See! Thank you, thank you, because that's the point. But my point is, whose braids came first?

[Image] This is from *Elle* magazine – a model with an over-arched spine – and what's the message here? A body carriage so popular in the contemporary high fashion and entertainment industry, which is characterized, with the butt out, as an Africanist posture. All of you may know, or may be too young to remember, that frequently as a black person in a dance class, we were told to "tuck it in". So, I think it's so interesting that neither of these postures is particularly black – that so-called "black postures" must be exaggerated or *modified* when black bodies enter the white world.

[Image] Lollapalooza...these were big rock music marathons. They would be out in a Woodstocky kind of setting, and they'd have booths on the side. So here's a hair-wrapping booth. I just think it's so interesting – another example of how white youth culture so readily adopts Africanisms as its own...no questions, no problems, though they are probably unaware of its origins.

[Image] And white athletes hand jiving. How often back then we would see high and low fives, fist bumping, and other Africanist-inspired expressive movement in professional sports.

[Image] And this one I call "from insult to fashion statement". The baggies on the street were originally the oversized overalls given to prison inmates – most of whom we know were black, and still are – to humiliate them. But they took that lemon and squeezed it into lemonade and made a style out of it. So, this loose style that came back to their sons, cousins, and brothers in black neighborhoods, like the young man on the left, again were picked up by white youth – on the right. And picked up by the young Kris Kross, wearing their clothes baggy and backwards. And also picked up by Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons – so she had taken that and made a high fashion style out of it. So, from insult to fashion statement. And I consider this American culture's *unconscious* homage to black men in prison.

And since we're talking about languages, just look at how much African American signifying has affected our speech and consequently our way of seeing the world. We all know that in hip talk if I say *[pointing/speaking to audience member]*, "Those dreadlocks are sick!", what do I mean?

They're cool

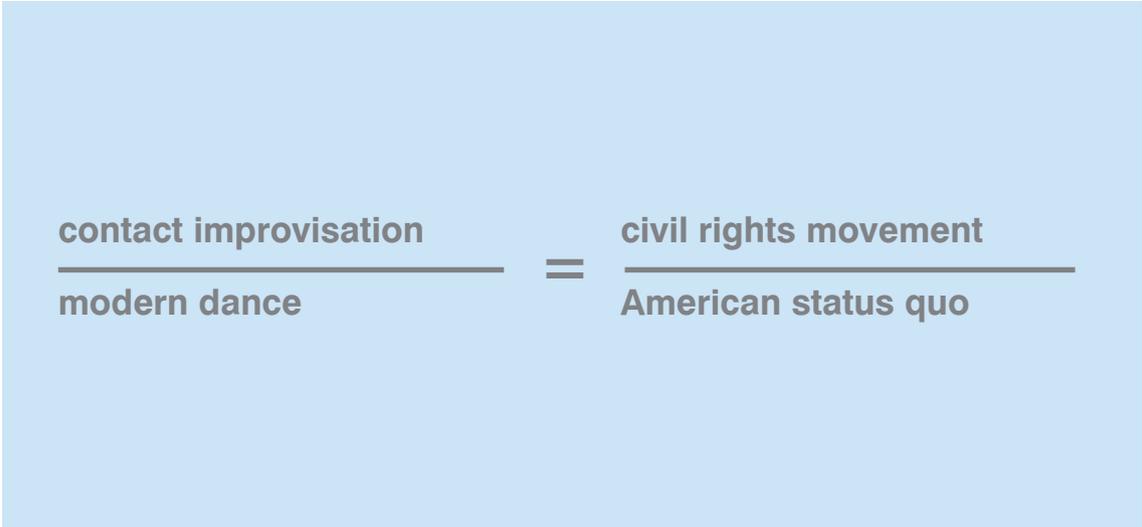
And if I say, "Yeah, well, you know I'm chilling and that's cool", you don't think that I'm saying I need my jacket. If I go *[making a Stevie Wonder/Michael Jackson squeal]* "Aaooww!" you know that I'm not in pain.

So, radical juxtaposition, rather than a classical Europeanist linear logic of cause, effect, and resolution. Irony, paradox, double entendre, as basic premises of the Africanist aesthetic – and where do we find them? We find them every place in our millennial lifestyles.

In *Digging the Africanist Presence*, I discussed some of the Africanist resonances in areas

that have been considered exclusively white terrain. And to illustrate this widespread though unconscious cultural adoption of deep-structure Africanist attitudes – not Africanist content but *attitudes*, I discuss Contact Improvisation.

Like African American movements as diverse as the early blues, jazz, and civil rights grassroots communities, the contact community began as a subculture that thrived in spite of, and as a protest to, establishment modern dance.



contact improvisation

modern dance = **civil rights movement**

American status quo

I made a little equation to illustrate this, and what this illustrates is that contact's response to establishment modern dance unconsciously parallels – and is predicated upon – the civil rights movement's response to the American status quo. In other words – and again, this whole thing of intertextuality and picking up what's in the air – that is a lot of the driving stimulus.

[Image] In an example of perhaps inadvertent borrowing, even the contact improviser's *jam* takes its name from...? *[question posed to audience]*

Jazz, exactly. The jazz musician's word for group improvisation. Like an old-fashioned African American revival meeting, these jams see contacters from far and wide converge to hold a marathon [of CI]. And in contact, as in its jazz paradigm, participants improvise, allowing their creations to be inflected and modified by what the others are doing.

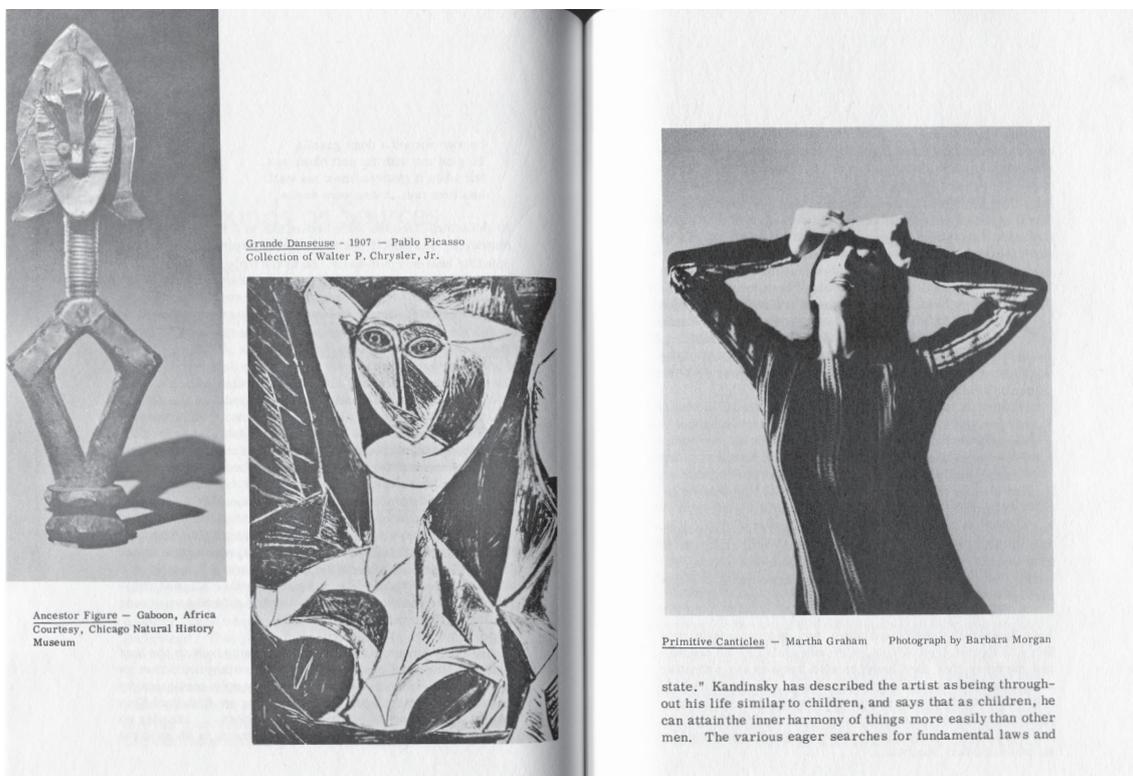
[Image] And...does everybody know him? What about some of the young'uns? Steve Paxton. And if you're doing contact...you really should look into some of his early stuff.

What's the precedent for wearing sunglasses while performing in a dark interior space? Jazz. The jazz aesthetic is so pervasive in America, you don't even think about it. This comes from the bop era, post-World War II, after the big bands that were *hot*, like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, that played out to the audience in a luminous kind of hot performance. The jazz

musicians Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, they started working not like that [*arms open wide*] to please the audience, but like this [*arms forming a circle*] to please themselves. It was cool. It was actually called *cool jazz*. They would, in nightclubs, wear sunglasses, bop caps, perhaps they were smoking a joint. And they would turn to each other, and sometimes one would walk off the stage while somebody else was soloing. It was all cool. So a totally different kind of aesthetic, and that certainly informs contact. It's a jazz aesthetic under there.

I had thought at the beginning to name this whole study, instead of "Africanist presence", the "jazz aesthetic". And that seemed very right, but then I wanted to take it back to really where it started, and it really is an African aesthetic also. If any of you are interested in knowing more about that, you should look at Robert Farris Thompson's classic book *African Art in Motion*, where he gives "ten canons of fine form", which I then apply to dance in *Digging the Africanist Presence*. Anyway, all of this reminds us of the way one language infiltrates another, whether by direct appropriation or transformational linguistics. So we could say that without the jazz aesthetic, contact improvisation could not have come about.

The Africanist presence was such a driving force in the foundations of modern dance that its pervasiveness may partly account for its neglect.



Pages 54–55 from *Modern Dance Forms in Relation to the Other Modern Arts*, by Louis Horst and Carroll Russell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Book Company, 1961)

So, I call myself the quilt maker of cultural theory, because I'm just taking the pieces that I'm finding in culture and then making the connections. *[Image]* Here's a page from Louis Horst's book *Modern Dance Forms*... In the 1960s, this was probably what dance departments in America used as a standard book. On the left is a sculpture from Gabon. The center is a Picasso painting, *Grande Danseuse*. *[Image]* And here we have Martha Graham in her woolen period in the 1930s in a dance called *Primitive Canticles*. Now, what's interesting is that Horst made the connection for me; I didn't have to do it. But he never talked about it that way. He called this *archaic*. He never said African anything, even though he's comparing it to an African sculpture, and even though we know that Picasso, Braque, and Matisse, as well as many others, were drawing on African art in order to move themselves forward in the Europeanist art world.

[Image] Next, Martha Graham in *Satiric Festival*. And here you can see that she's disrupting everything that I tried to demonstrate for you before – instead of vertical alignment, she has arched her spine; instead of turned-out legs, she is in a parallel position; and of course she has angular arms instead of a soft classical ballet *port de bras*.

[Image] One more from the modern stuff. This is Iris Mabry, a dancer who was contemporaneous with Martha Graham, in a dance called *Bird Spell*. To me that looks like a piece of African sculpture. What is interesting also is this nexus between modern dance and modern art, because these dancers were not borrowing from dancers at the Apollo Theater in Harlem or African dancers who hadn't really started coming on tour; they were very influenced by the modern art of Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Léger. So for them it was a kind of secondhand appropriation.

Let me just talk for a little bit about these Africanist references in ballet. If you look at a video of Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments* or *Apollo*, you can see this very clearly. So *[demonstrating]* pelvic and chest articulation and displacement instead of vertical alignment; leg kicks instead of measured *battements*; angular arms instead of the traditional fluid *port des bras* of ballet. Those are Africanist motifs that have been imported into ballet. But even more significant than these motifs is the underlying speed – and this is what Balanchine brought to ballet – a speed, a vitality, an energy, a coolness. Balanchine would tell his ballerinas, "Dance with your feet fast and your face cool...your face as though it's not there". So this deep structure or subtext of being cool made all the difference in giving ballet an "American" quality. But naming and language are of utmost importance – these qualities are not only American; they are *African American*. So we need to pay closer attention to the words we select to describe the language of movement.

Before there was a New York City Ballet, Mr. B cut his eyeteeth on Broadway. And he had also choreographed popular musicals in London. Jennifer Dunning's book *But First a School* reports that he had actually wanted to have a school with four black dancers, four white dancers. When he first came to America, he didn't know about racism and segregation. He thought the black dancers could "teach them such vitality", you know, it was a little bit of exoticism and all that. But the idea that in 1932 he had wanted to start a school in America where young black and white young kids could learn ballet together... Kirstein had to wake him up to the fact that

this was impossible. But Balanchine already had a sense that there was something going on there, that he could get from it.

[Image] So here he is, and does anyone recognize the female figure on the bottom left?

[Audience member] Is that Katherine?

Yes, that's Miss Dunham! And this is Balanchine horsing around with the cast of *Cabin in the Sky*, which is one of the musicals that he choreographed in 1940, and he *co*-choreographed that with Katherine Dunham – frequently that is omitted. I paid someone \$200 to get this photo... They didn't even identify her.

[Image] And here is Balanchine with Arthur Mitchell. I say it's Mr. Mitchell teaching him some jazz. And just to test if you're awake, why would I say that it's Mr. Mitchell's body that is decidedly in the Africanist or jazz pose? Yeah. His hip is definitely more gotten down, asymmetrical, angular. And what's interesting is Mr. B is showing Mr. M a piece of Mr. B's choreography. But now for any of you who have choreographed, you know that when you have a dancer who does something really further than you imagined, you might use it. *Stealing?* No. *Appropriation.* Yes. Yes.



George Balanchine [left] and Arthur Mitchell in rehearsal for New York City Ballet's *The Four Temperaments*, choreography by George Balanchine (New York), 1963. (Photograph: Martha Swope. Accessed via The New York Public Library Digital Collections.)

Beyond the Balanchine example, and in a larger sense, my work aims to break down barriers between so-called art and so-called entertainment, between high and low, between black and white, if you will. Indeed, my work is concerned with dance, with history, and with affecting social justice. And that final area is the one that centers and grounds my thinking professionally and personally. I aim to perform corrective surgery on the historical record.

There's a Buddhist saying, "What the mind doesn't know, the eye cannot see". That may help explain America's blind spot about its Africanist heritage.

In this presentation, I've tried to give you some recent history, but these things are not in the past, not over and done with. History is happening right now, as I speak. Cultural appropriation continues. Credit is not given where credit is due. Cultural appropriation is *booming*... And any white choreographer you name, from Bob Fosse to Bill Forsythe, is somehow using black aesthetic riches as their own.