

Shuffle, Ball[et], Change

African Influences on American Dance Forms

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Of all the sociological consequences of immigration and resettlement, there is nothing so assuredly guaranteed as culture swapping, be it through the sharing of language, food, customs, or even dance. The first American settlers began the tradition of cultural meshing in a gastronomical way, by learning to enjoy indigenous foodstuffs: After its introduction from welcoming Native American residents, corn began to take on a prominent presence in the settlers' diets. Cultural sharing can be a more diffuse endeavor as well: Mexican dishes typically use plenty of spices, which both enhance flavoring and function as a preservative.

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Just as white American settlers borrowed from those who came before them, they borrowed as readily from those who came after. One of the most prominent influences on the development of a distinctly American culture derived from the influx of Africans on the new continent. Besides gastronomical innovations like potato chips and peanut butter, African contributions to the cultural canon range across language, fashion, music, and dance.

Modification is an innate feature of cultural adoption, making it difficult to untangle the genealogy of material that has evolved and been influenced by its heirs. Take the Charleston, a quintessential American dance. Despite its status as a cultural landmark, few Americans recognize the etymology of movement that led to the Charleston—the original African prototype, called the *Juba*, consisted of repetitive foot twisting, but was later revised to include kicking when

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the dance hit Harlem.

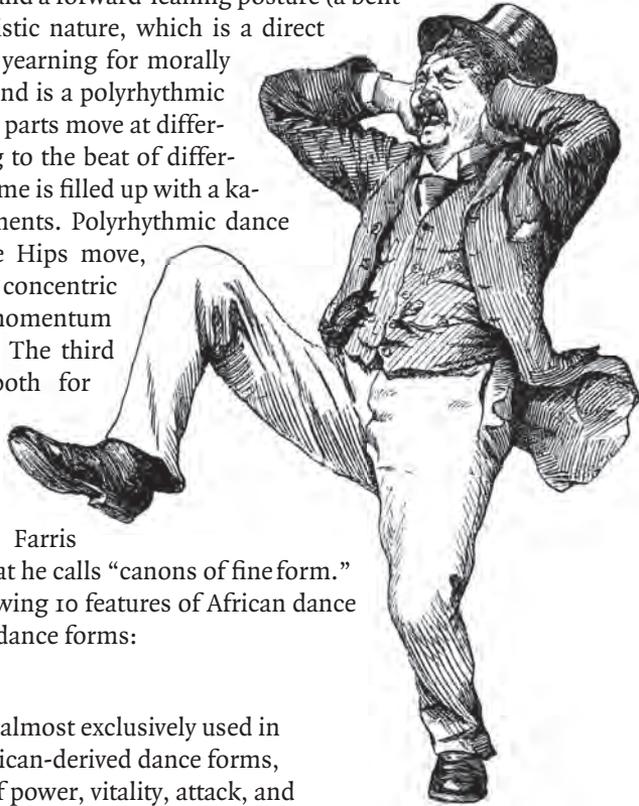
Although seldom recognized by performance scholarship until recently, African dance played an extraordinarily rich role in enhancing American dance forms, from classical to modern to social. Particularly notable influences can be found in choreographer George Balanchine's revitalized style of ballet as well as jazz dance, hip hop, and various social dances.

African styles of dance contain several features that set them apart from the Eurocentric aesthetic which has dominated American dance since its inception. Dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild recognized that "There is much repetition and routine in the quotidian African life: pounding grain, seeding ground, kneading bread." In Eurocentric dance, repetition has often been perceived as a dull cop-out. Although dances may have themes, they usually function like the refrain of a song—a return to familiarity after a novel insertion. On the other hand, some African dances contain the same move, such as a kick or a stomp, repeated on loop as many as two dozen times. Yet in this context a move does not get stale with repetition, but rather elevates the emotional barometer with each reappearance, building to a climax. In this context, a dance move performed once is seen as cold, powerless, or even incomplete.

The differences between European and African dance are not only in choreography, but also in posture. European dance features the continued use of a straight, centered, regal spine: It is about centeredness, control, and detachment from emotion. European dance was characterized by a split between mind and body that can be attributed to religious influences. Christianity enforced an ontological separation of the carnal and the spiritual, framing the body as the site of sin. Thus high art forms aspired to a higher nature, and a dancer's vertical uprightness could be interpreted as a sign of moral elevation. Meredith Monk explains the aesthetic tone of ballet in the following way: "In ballet it has to do with the kind of geometry of the human being relating to a large geometric form.... It has to do with the positivist way of thinking about the human being as being higher than nature." The practice of using lifts—having a male dancer raise a female dancer into the air—is also a trait of European dance. Yet

while Christianity is monotheistic and based on celestial aspirations, African religions are polytheistic and geocentric. According to Gottschild, Africans used dance to communicate with their gods—a far cry from the Christian treatment of the body as a vessel for sin.

Gotschild identifies three features of the Africanist aesthetic. The first is a grounded quality of movement with a low center of gravity, accomplished by bent knees and a forward-leaning posture (a bent stance resembles an animalistic nature, which is a direct juxtaposition to Eurocentric yearning for morally pure, angelic qualities). Second is a polyrhythmic feel in which individual body parts move at different rates, essentially dancing to the beat of different drums. Each interval of time is filled up with a kaleidoscope of diverse movements. Polyrhythmic dance is exemplified by the Snake Hips move, in which the hips gyrate in concentric circles while the ensuing momentum carries the rest of the body. The third feature is improvisation, both for the individual and for the group.



In his *African Art in Motion*, choreographer Robert Farris Thompson outlines 10 of what he calls “canons of fine form.” Drawing from him, the following 10 features of African dance can be detected in American dance forms:

I. EPHEBISM

This word, which is almost exclusively used in association with African-derived dance forms, describes a fusion of power, vitality, attack, and the strength and energy of youth. Regardless of the age of the dancer, he or she can engage in strong, youthful choreography by following the vitality of the music. Clogging, a form of American folk dance that involves striking the heel and toe against the floor in various energetic rhythms,

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traces its heritage back to the African practice of “jamming” with rhythm. Clogging was also a precursor to tap dancing.

2. AFRIKANISCHE AUFHEBEN

The German verb *aufheben* has two definitions: to cancel and to affirm. It is interpreted as the suspension of the beat, or off-beat phrasing and accents, which is very common in African rhythms. This concept is better known by the terms “synco-
pation” or “swing.”

3. “GET-DOWN” QUALITY

This idea refers to the same body posture described by Gottschild—a low, squatting, grounded presence. The “get-down” quality can be perceived in music as well as dance, since many African rhythms follow a wavy pattern, as in a repeated cycle of steep rises before gentle slopes. In a similar way, dancers start out high and then gradually close in on the ground before looping back up. The bent spine, along with broader displays of angularity and asymmetry, are prominent characteristics.

Foxtrot



4. MULTIPLE METERS

Layers of rhythms produce multiple meters. African music is innately poly-rhythmic, and can have as many as four rhythms in command at once. The dancer is expected to match this level of polyrhythmic expression, possessing the control and agility necessary to dance to each drum with a different part of the body.

5. “LOOKING SMART”

This point is about attitude. It references the dancer’s flair, the way he swings his body and

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expresses vitality. It can roughly be described as the “style” that a dancer brings to the dance, and manifests in the ‘swagger’ style often found in African dance.

6. CORRECT ENTRANCE AND EXIT

According to Thompson, one major characteristic of African dances is the inclusion of clear boundaries. The dancer signals to the drummers, through dance, when to begin and when to end. Since African dance can contain great speed, the dancer must demonstrate a strong sense of control.



Jitterbug

7. VIVIDNESS CAST INTO EQUILIBRIUM

African dance is non-linear and off-center, but it relies on a feeling of balance. The original function of African dance was spiritual, and in order to worship a stance of personal stability is necessary.

8. CALL-AND-RESPONSE

This term is generally associated with song, but it can also be an effective tool in dance. Choreographer Kim Bears used a call-and-response structure in which one dancer moved while the other watched before reversing the process. In this, the act of sharing and paying attention was part of the performance itself.

9. ANCESTORISM

The belief that “the closest harmony with ancient ways is the highest of experiences.” The idea of following ancestral customs and paying homage to one’s heritage has near-sacred importance. One manifestation of this reverence is the ring shout,

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a form of community worship that moves in a circular, counterclockwise motion (the customary direction for traditional African rituals) in which the congregation members walk and chant in praise of deities. African-American dancers introduced a clever innovation to the ring shout in order to accommodate both African and European demands: They wanted to move in a circle, but Protestant custom forbade the crossing of the feet since it resembled dancing, a taboo practice. Thus the dancers began to form their own hybrid methods of shifting weight and shuffling, a look which came to be called buck dancing and was a prototype to tap dancing.

10. COOLNESS

This is a strong intellectual and attitudinal aura. To be cool a dancer must be clear-headed and comfortable.

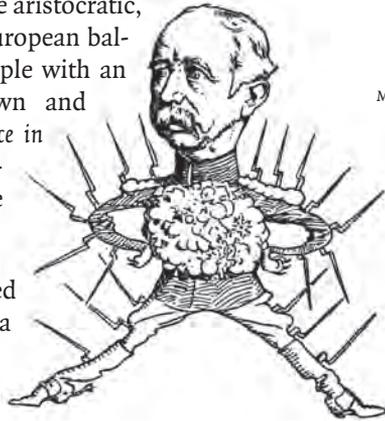
All of these characteristically “African” qualities can be found in American dance, be it ballet, social dance, modern dance, or hip hop. However, these dances don’t always provide suitable evolutionary appropriation and intention in that they are now used in unforeseen ways and contexts. The cakewalk, for instance, was originally a strut that black slaves performed to mock their self-important masters. However, whites who glimpsed it were amused by the dance and adopted it for their own purposes—particularly minstrel shows.

Jazz music can be called the folk music of the city—with its informal swing and slangy sprawl, the form seems uniquely wrought from urban America. The form is marked by a sort of anti-posture, with loose hips and abrupt movements; Monk describes it as the “aesthetic of the cool.” Part of this aesthetic reflects the idea of the subjunctive mode: feeling and experience. When Martha Graham acknowledged the influence of black dance, calling it “dangerous and hard to handle,” she was likely imagining jazz dance. Some of the most recognizable forms of jazz dance are tap dance and swing dance. Both tap and swing, forms that contain energetic footwork,

likely originated in black vernacular dance. Syncopation and improvisation, two keystones of African dance, are defining features of both styles. Tap dance was first used in vaudeville performance spaces, by dancers such as Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and George W. Cooper. The tap trend caught on, and Robinson and Cooper began to tour across the country and in England. Soon tap became so popular that Bojangles would perform it alongside Shirley Temple in Hollywood films.

Black dance did not only have an influence on folk dances and comedy routines, but also on the ‘high art’ of ballet. Coming to the U.S. from Russia, choreographer George Balanchine made radical innovations in balletic technique which were well received. One could argue that his familiarity with his native country’s own rhythmic and energetic folk dances eased the transition to the use of African styles—the cool aloofness of ballet and the cool aesthetic of African dance meshed well. America’s pervading performative tone and style were described as “not the aristocratic, haughty coolness of [traditional European ballet] but the cool arrogance of people with an attitude—Americans, black, brown and white” (*Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*, 63). This pervading American coolness came from African coolness.

Additionally, Balanchine changed the look of ballet by injecting a faster pace, another characteristic of African dance. As one dancer remarked, “Dancing Balanchine is harder—the patterns, the way they change in Balanchine ballets. The ballets are so fast, and they travel much more than a lot of the more classical companies” (*Ibid.*, 76). Balanchine’s dances contain much pushing and thrusting, especially in his version of “Swan Lake.” Further, Balanchine used flexed feet, angled arms, and retracted hips in his new aesthetic: features that are clearly display African influences. Additionally, he replaced leg extensions with more kicks, pulled the pelvis off-center, and gave greater allow-



Moonwalk

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ance to a dancer's energy and instinct for creating form, rather than restricting form to the dictates of alignment and convention. All of these components coaxed ballet from a Eurocentric to an African template of movement.

Fifty years later, African dance techniques are still making an impact on modern dance. School-age children, regardless of race, take hip hop dance classes across the country. Television shows, such as *So You Think You Can Dance?*, regularly feature hip hop choreography, and consider hip hop dance alongside ballet and avant-garde dance. Hip hop culture even redefined the ideal of the beautiful: Suddenly, distinguished from images of white propriety, music videos featuring women with big buttocks, dark skin, and robust bodies, became beautiful, desirable assets. The phenomenon is large enough to also have derivative styles, such as turfing, juking, and krunking.

“All texts are intertexts,” writes Gottschild. “To know one's culture and to play its game, but also to remember and keep one's own—that is and has always been the task” (*Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*, 57). Despite the immersion and exchange of dance styles, it is clear that the heritage of African dance is continually manifest in the canon of American dance.

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