

***“Until the lions have their own historian, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter.”
Akan Proverb***

Five centuries ago Europeans began to bring Africans to the Americas. Little did they know that, with Africans, they were getting Africanisms—trends, traits, and motifs that have their roots in African culture and pervade our daily lives from basketball to ballet, and everything in between. As much it has been ignored (or *invisibilized*), this stamp has left its imprint on nearly every creative aspect of European-American society. Why? Because, for Americans, Africanisms are not a choice but an *imperative* that come to us through the culture, the way electricity comes through the wires. That is, we draw from both all the time, with little or no awareness of their sources. In an essay on American literature, Toni Morrison called this presence the “unspeakable things unspoken,”¹ and, indeed, what is spoken or silenced depends on who is speaking and who has the power—the lion or the hunter? Who makes and keeps the records, and what is chosen to chronicle, archive, produce, present, or fund? Whose criteria are used—whose perspective—and how are choices made?

Whose story, whose history, is this, anyway?

This unique event, which I’ve come to call the Diaspora Dance Boom, is a contribution to setting the record straight by acknowledging what has been denied or just plain overlooked—namely, the fact that there are Africanist (meaning African and African American) resonances and presences alive and well in obvious and not-so-obvious areas of our dance practice. What may look like a mixed bag of offerings is really a consistent map of African diasporic influence on the dance making of selected members of Philadelphia’s

vibrant dance culture. For example, a ballet like George Balanchine's *Agon*, here performed by the Pennsylvania Ballet, has more in common with Alonzo King's *Steal Away*, here performed by Philadanco, than just an occasional off-center tilt or flexed foot. Both choreographers manifest a deeper level of *cool* that unites them in an Afro-Euro-American continuum of shared aesthetic principles. So-called black cultures are constantly interfacing with—read “influencing”—so-called white cultures, and vice-versa. Cultural dissemination is not a one-way street, not even a two-way street, but a multi-lane highway with auxiliary routes intersecting at the most unexpected places—and sometimes there are crashes, accidents!

Undeniably, American dance forms are culturally hyphenated phenomena that manifest both Africanist and Europeanist (that is European and European-American) characteristics. In other words, nothing is “pure” anything, and cross-pollination is the name of the game.² To explain this “mix-and-match” concept further, I use the literary term *intertextuality* and apply it to dance and culture. It means that cultures and cultural products influence each other in a constant, dynamic flux, even when adherents of a given culture purposefully refute “other” influences, subconsciously cannot face up to them, or simply are ignorant of their existence. Forces, trends, phrases, traits, movement modes—texts, or tropes, in other words—of the various cultures in the air around us form the threads with which we weave our “new” patterns. Intertextuality knows no bounds: the rich learn from the poor, the strong from the weak, the disenfranchised from the empowered—and the so-called avant-garde from recycled materials appropriated from other cultures. Due to the ongoing power of racism, the Africanist side of the equation has been

invisibilized, if not demonized. So let us take a look at a few signature Africanist markers in this landscape, with particular reference to how they are manifested in the dance companies here represented. We can clearly see these principles at work—or at play!—in the lively array of performances cued up for DanceBoom. The following traits are by no means comprehensive,³ but a few selected characteristics that may guide spectators to understand why *Lisanga Ya Bana Kin*, *Court*, and *Koresh* are on the same program, or why *Kulu Mele* shares a program with the Pennsylvania Ballet and Merián Soto.

Whether Africanist or Europeanist (or Latino, or Asian—and all of these terms are broad, generalized cultural markers), aesthetic processes and products are a matter of shifting principles and living landscapes. Still, we can ascertain certain common divergences that distinguish one cultural predilection from another. Let's begin with an easy one, a plainly visible marker in Africanist dance aesthetics from Africa to the Caribbean and South America, to the streets of North Philadelphia: a preference for dancing with the knees bent, torso slightly pitched forward from the hips, butt out, feet making total contact with the ground, in what art historian Robert Farris Thompson termed a “get-down” posture. This stance contrasts with the dancing body of European ballet and most forms of European folk dance where, instead, we find a vertically aligned spine, straight knees, and a tentative contact of the feet with the floor. The Africanist emphasis is grounded and earthy; the Europeanist is lifted and air-worthy. One is no better than the other, only different. White minstrels of the nineteenth century popular stage disrupted the white standard by taking on the manner/mien of plantation dance forms; early modern dancers like Helen Tamiris and Martha Graham used contracted torsos pitched off-center and insisted on bare feet making

full contact with the ground; and contemporary dancers trained in jazz, tap, hip hop, contact improvisation, body therapies, and modern/postmodern dance depend on the bent-kneed, grounded principle as a user-friendly technique—albeit in distilled and modified forms to suit their particular aesthetic needs. Look for “get-down” qualities in the work of Rennie Harris PureMovement, Germaine Ingram & Friends, Kariamuu and Company, Kulu Mele, Lisanga Ya Bana Kin, Merián Soto, and Eleone, as well as where you might least expect them to show up.

Next, the Africanist dancing body “dances many drums,” meaning that this is an aesthetic that privileges complex, contrapuntal rhythms that may be expressed in the articulated torso of the African dancer or on the ballroom or club dance floor. “Dancing many drums” means a polycentric and polyrhythmic dancing body: shoulders, ribs, belly, pelvis, and buttocks are allowed to participate in the dance, rather than remain still, as they are required to do, for example, in English clog dancing, Irish step dancing, and academic forms of ballet. In a polycentric example, the “get-down” posture may center the movement in the feet and legs, while the pelvis (and even an additional body part, such as the head or rib cage) may simultaneously operate as a centrifugal force. The polyrhythmic dancing body may carry one rhythm in the feet plus one or more additional accent patterns in other body parts. In musical terminology, if the Africanist dancing body is polyrhythmic/polycentric, then the traditional Europeanist preference is diatonic: the counterrhythms of call-and-response (one part of the body “answering” another with a counter/encounter), versus the through-line of cause-effect-resolution. Again, the works of Lisanga Ya Bana Kin, Kulu

Mele, and Kariamu and Company exemplify this precept. Look for applied examples in the work Rennie Harris.

These are brief, broad sweeps. Now, let us jump ahead to touch on a very subtle, very crucial premise—the principle of coolness or, as Thompson termed it, “an aesthetic of the cool.”⁴ The Europeanist attitude suggests centeredness, control, linearity, directness. *Energy is controlled by form*. The Africanist mode suggests asymmetricality (that plays with falling off center), looseness (implying flexibility, vitality, and the possibility of improvisation, even danger), and indirectness of approach. Here *energy dictates and controls the form*. Whether it is Tania Isaac’s ensemble, the Koresh Dance Company, Paule Turner’s Court, the choreography of George Balanchine, or **that of Charles Anderson**, the Africanist presence is a basic building block in modernism, postmodernism, and the (African) Americanization of ballet. Beginning with Balanchine in the 1930s, elements appeared in ballet—angular arms, turned-in legs, bent knees, pelvic and chest articulation and displacement, leg kicks, heightened speed, densely layered phrases—that were considered “incorrect” by the European ballet establishment. (They’d been used in ballet to designate ignoble or comic characters, but not for dancers in central, heroic roles.) These same elements are basic syllables in Africanist dance languages. Once we are able to set aside racial bias, we can see that this pervasive Africanist aesthetic is a cultural borrowing that has enriched ballet and made it worthy to move into the new millennium, enhanced and energized, yet still recognizable under the label, “ballet.” But it may be time to slough off old labels, anyway

When you see *Agon*, compare it in your mind's eye with Europeanist ballets such as *Swan Lake* and *Giselle*. You will see a world of difference, **due partly to the fact that Balanchine had choreographed a number of contemporary musicals in London and New York and worked intimately with such stellar African American artists as Katherine Dunham, Josephine Baker, and the Nicholas Brothers. Intertextuality!** Looking at it from the “other” side, keep in mind the voice of Joan Myers Brown, founder and director of Philadanco and a consummate ballerina in the Anthony Tudor tradition, explaining that at age seventeen she had to give up hopes of pursuing a professional career due to racial bias against blacks in ballet.⁵

From ballet to Broadway, from lofts and site-specific settings to the concert stage, the Africanist aesthetic, then, is a largely invisibilized quotient that has informed and inflected most contemporary dance genres. This is why I believe it is time for us to reexamine old categories and dichotomies such art and entertainment, or classic and ethnic. Aren't we all ethnic? Don't all traditions have classics? Actually, haven't the Europeanist and Africanist incentives⁶ been equal partners in forming the principles that govern our arts and lifestyles—from the music we listen to, to our ways of talking and moving; from hip, asymmetrical ways of walking and wearing our baseball caps to other, more subtle examples of a cool, “laid-back” attitude? Let's face it: we are a culturally Creolized people, we Americans—and thriving within the American legacy inherited by every new wave of immigrants, from every corner of the globe, is the African American legacy!

So, what about Philly? This community may be no better or worse than the rest of the United States of America in having to relearn the alphabet of cooperation and coexistence.

Undoubtedly, we are beset by as many ongoing racial and social problems as the next urban center. And the dance world is not different from the world at large, but a microcosm of that world, reflecting its problems but also mirroring its hopes and potential. What we see in Philadelphia, if not a city of brotherly love, is a dance community of sisterly potential, where some of the old borders have been crossed, dividing lines blurred, and new alliances and understandings brought forward. DanceBoom is one example. With initiatives such as this, and a robust dance community led by international icons such as the Philadelphia Dance Company, Rennie Harris PureMovement, and Group Motion, there's a good chance that the lions will have a hand in writing their own histories.

¹ Morrison, Toni. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Winter, 1989, 1-33.

² This fact holds true for all forms of social and cultural production wherein different ethnic groups meet, maneuver, and mix—even when one group is oppressed by a dominant culture that sees itself as superior (as in the black-white dynamic/history of Africans and Europeans in the Americas). My comments, however, are delimited to dance.

³ For a comprehensive list of Africanist/Europeanist characteristics, see Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996 (paperback, 1998), 11-19, and passim. For greater detail on varied aspects of this Africanist/Europeanist continuum/dichotomy, see also my *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era*. New York NY: Palgrave-St. Martin's Press, 2000 (paperback, 2002); and *The Black Dancing Body-A Geography from Coon to Cool*. New York NY: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003.

⁴ See Thompson, Robert Farris. "An Aesthetic of the Cool. West African Dance." In *The Theater of Black Americans*. Ed. Errol Hill. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980, 99-111; and "Afro-Modernism." *ArtForum*, September 1991, 91-94; and *African Art in Motion*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974.

⁵ See Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, pp. 76-77 (with ballet photo of Brown).

⁶ This contention in no way denies the interplay of additional cultural forces, be they Native American, Asian, Latino (a combined Afro-Euro-Amerind aesthetic, in and of itself), or from other world cultures. Still, the confrontation of Europeans and Africans in the New World and the cultural constructs of these two broad but divergent groupings form the matrix and scaffolding of American culture.