**Black Dance**

**Summary**

Black dance is both an aesthetic and historical category. When the term first appeared in the late 1960s, it referred to dance forms grounded in African Americans’ collective experience, but over time the term ‘black dance’ has come to encompass both vernacular (social) and theatrical (stage) dance created by African-descended peoples in the U.S. and around the world. From the Cakewalk to the Charleston to the Lindy Hop to rock and roll dancing, twentieth-century social dances emerged first within black subcultures and then circulated broadly within dominant cultures. Over the same period, black artists commanded the international dance stage, from Bert Williams and George Walker to Josephine Baker to Katherine Dunham to Alvin Ailey. In everyday life and on the concert stage, black dance is a constitutive dimension of modernism.

**Exposition**

The term ‘black dance’ can be understood in three divergent yet related ways. The first understands black dance within the political and artistic milieu of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s, the period when the term came into common usage. The second includes all dancing by bodies racialized as black. The third understands ‘black dance’ as a set of African-derived aesthetic or performance traditions. Taken together, these definitions underscore the rich, complex, and at times contested meanings of black dance.

In its first usage, ‘black dance’ reflects the political ethos of the historical moment out of which the term emerged. Prior to the 1960s, practitioners and writers used the term ‘Negro’ to categorize African-American dance. With the successful passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, one might assume that equal opportunity had been realized for all Americans. Yet racial inequality persisted in many dimensions of public life, especially in education, housing, and employment. In response, black activists and artists became less interested in assimilating into the white mainstream. Some did not believe in the productivity of pursuing full citizenship through the court system alone. Thus emerged the Black Power Movement and the allied Black Arts Movement in the period from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, a broad-based movement that understood African Americans as possessing a distinct history and culture that was worthy of affirmation. The move from ‘Negro’ to ‘black’ dance, then, mirrored a larger political shift within African-American communities to self-define and to self-consciously present images of blackness that contested Euro-American standards of beauty, comportment, and intelligence. This indifference to cultural assimilation explains dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz’s observation that ‘Black dance’ was used by white critics in the late 1960s and 1970s ‘as a shorthand for work they felt uncomfortable with or ill-prepared to address.’[[1]](#endnote-1)

The replacement of ‘Negro dance’ with ‘black dance’ between 1967 and 1969 applied to a movement among African-American choreographers. Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus inaugurated a tradition that incorporated black vernacular dance into concert dance. Talley Beatty, Donald McKayle, Alvin Ailey, and Eleo Pomare would extend this tradition. Since the 1990s, choreographers like Dianne McIntyre, Bill T. Jones, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Ronald K. Brown and a host of other practitioners continue to innovate within the traditions of black dance.

In its second usage, the term ‘black dance’ has been used to describe dances done by black bodies on stage, that is, to ascribe blackness to all dances executed by bodies racialized as black. This usage also emerged within the Black Arts Movement, as artist-critics like Carole Johnson proclaimed the term ‘Black Dance’ ‘all-inclusive….any form of dance and any style that a black person chooses to work within.’[[2]](#endnote-2) Scholars then took this understanding of black dance as the premise for historical chronicles. For example, Lynne Fauley Emery’s foundational text *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today* (1972) charts the historical and political contexts that shaped an African-American experience and accordingly, black dance. Criminalizing sacred and secular indigenous African practices, the institution of slavery gave rise to new modes of dance practice and performance that have survived in varied forms into the present. Hence, from the outset black dance has been shaped by notions of capital, exchange, and desire. In consequence, its myriad forms remain enmeshed in history and speak to that history through the body.

Subsequent critics and historians, however, challenged the idea that the output of any black body dancing constitutes ‘black dance.’ As Richard Long noted in his magisterial survey, *The Black Tradition in American Dance* (1989), ‘the mere physical presence of Black dancers in a modern dance work or in a classical ballet should not invoke the use of the term “Black dance”.’[[3]](#endnote-3) Yet Long argues for the impact of cultural milieu on dance, tracing the varied influences of black dance on the ‘culturally diverse milieu’ of contemporary American dance.[[4]](#endnote-4) Thus Long includes within his survey ‘the work of Jerome Robbins and Twyla Tharp’ for their ‘absorption of Black stance and gesture into a choreographic matrix.’[[5]](#endnote-5) He also includes Caribbean choreographers Ivy Baxter, Rex Nettleford, and Eduardo Rivero in his survey of American dance.

Following Long’s lead, John Perpener traces how black choreographers developing their own modern tradition synthesized African and European-derived cultural elements. Mapping a black concert tradition from 1925 to 1945, Perpener highlights the interactions between black and white choreographers—Edna Guy and Ruth St. Denis, Charles Williams and Ted Shawn. Building on Perpener’s research, Susan Manning argues that modern dance and black concert dance developed in tandem from the early 1930s to the late 1960s and, in fact, became co-constituted performance traditions. ‘While the relations between Negro dance and modern dance were never fixed or clarified,’ she writes, ‘the practices at times merged, diverged, and circled around one another.’[[6]](#endnote-6) While Perpener showed how modern dance influenced black dance, Manning showed how black dance influenced modern dance. Taken together, Long, Perpener, and Manning challenge the historiography of black dance as a separate practice from American dance.

In its third usage, black dance refers to a set of performance principles or a collection of discernible traits. ‘Africanism’ is the term used to designate particular characteristics that distinguish black movement practices throughout the African diaspora, even when there are no black bodies present. Here the writing of Brenda Dixon Gottschild is seminal. In her thinking, an ‘Africanist presence’ understands black dance as a collection of signifiers found within the movement itself. These ‘subliminal but driving’ forces include an ‘aesthetic of the cool,’ ephebism, polycentrism/polyrhythm, high-affect juxtaposition, and an ‘embracement of conflict.’[[7]](#endnote-7) Dixon Gottschild argues that an ‘Africanist presence’ has influenced American dance, although this fact went long unacknowledged by white American choreographers and dance communities. White dancers used Africanist aesthetics to inflect their work with an ‘American’ quality. Black artists and communities were not granted authorship for their cultural and choreographic influence.

Over the last few decades, research on black dance has expanded its scope from a nationalist frame to a diasporic one with the proliferation of scholarship that looks toward global channels of influence rather than strictly national avenues. To be sure, artist-scholars at mid-century such as Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus—and choreographers like Josephine Baker and Asadata Dafora—inflected their embodied practice with international valence. Yet only recently has a focus on the African diaspora dramatically expanded the analytical frame through which scholars and practitioners interpret black dance. The African diaspora—that is, the network of African- descended communities in the Americas originally created through the coercion of the transatlantic slave trade—has given ‘black dance’ global resonance.

While Black dance as a descriptive category is historically figured, contemporary black dance practices continue to grow in their diversity of form. Emerging scholarship addresses black dance’s globalism both historically and contemporarily. Black dance is always shifting – expressing racialized pasts while gesturing toward new futures.

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**Suggested Paratexts**

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Pearl Primus in the stage production *Show Boat*, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

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Lindy Hoppers in the 1930s, digital collections, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

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Katherine Dunham in *her Le Jazz Hot*, digital collections, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

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Alvin Ailey in his *Blues Suite* (1958), digital collections, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

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1. T.F. DeFrantz (2002) ‘African American Dance: A Complex History,’ in *Dancing Many Drums:* *Excavations in African American Dance*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Quoted in T.F. DeFrantz (1999) ‘To Make Black Bodies Strange: Social Critique in Concert Dance of the Black Arts Movement,’ in *A Sourcebook of African-American Performance: Plays,* *People, Movement*, ed. A. Bean, London: Routledge, 91. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. R. Long (1989) *The Black Tradition in American Dance*, New York: Rizzoli, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. S. Manning (2004) *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, xiv. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. B. D. Gottschild (1996) *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance* *and Other Contexts*, Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 50, 11-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)