31 Koritz, "Dancing the Orient," p. 68.
32 Ibid., p. 70.
33 Ibid., p. 68.
34 Ibid., p. 76.
35 This position is implicit, though not explicit, in my book *Ecstasy and the Demon: Feminism and Nationalism in the Dances of Mary Wigman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
36 Mabel Dodge Luhan, *Movers and Shakers* (1936; Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), pp. 319–20.

9 SOME THOUGHTS ON CHOREOGRAPHING HISTORY

Brenda Dixon Gottschild

We all see things through our personal histories, with their parts rooted in convention and their parts that became subject to change. These histories come to include reflections on what made us enter into them. Through such reflections I believe we become political, because they address questions of gender, race, class, nationality and family origins. With political consciousness . . . some knowledge of self and place . . . change becomes possible.—Jill Johnston[1]

History is a fable agreed upon. So too is identity, which is a story not only arrived at by the individual but conferred by the group.—John Lahr[2]

For historians in any discipline the process of writing about the past is an exercise in metaphoric choreography. Deconstruction theory has taught us that to formulate a history means to interpret selected events. Besides the subjectivity of any one interpretation, the researcher/historian also risks the danger that theory/philosophy will come loose from context—an untenable situation, as the two quotations above indicate. In order to avoid that occurrence, I find it helpful to remind myself that I am first cause / first context. As an erstwhile theater professional, I find that choreography and the dancing body play a role in shaping my approach to research. I arrive at ideas affectively and kinesthetically, as well as cognitively. For example, I was actively at work on this essay in times of vulnerability and intuition: waking from sleep (especially from naps!); in the midst of my movement workout; as I lay sunbathing in midday summer heat. Such is the way in which I am seduced into a topic, listening to my accumulated research as it begins to speak to me. It parallels the way in which I worked as a performer, choreographer, and director. It approximates the findings noted in literature on the creative process.[3] Other performing artists who have become writers and scholars may note similar processes. In the same vein, I advise my doctoral

students, most of whom are/were performers, to regard research writing as "choreography for the page."

I mention the example of my personal process in order to arrive at my first premise: namely, that we bring our cultural, social, and preacademic habits and predilections to bear upon both the topics that we choose to research and the manner in which we go about it. Although this proposition may seem obvious and simple, the denial of it feeds the subjective/objective fallacy. If we accept this first premise, then it becomes apparent that it is a categorical error to speak of subjective/objective as contending approaches.[4] The two are binary opposites which do not oppose each other but work together and coexist. They are processes which reflect, embrace, and require each other. The fact that we as a culture have made such a big deal of the oppositional nature of binary concepts, ignoring the symbiotic relation of opposites defining each other, says a lot about how we perceive, what we value or devalue, what we do, and how we do it. It is heartening that some groups in our contemporary culture are showing signs of receptivity toward Asian and African concepts which are more sophisticated than ours in embracing competing opposites, or contrarieties. Living with the opposite, "the other," is no longer a luxury of choice but a necessity of survival for our planet and for the conception and execution of our research.

Recent research has begun to take these matters of process into consideration. Scholars have presented conference papers as performances.[5] A decade ago Victor Turner called for a "performative and reflexive anthropology" in which "we should not merely read and comment on ethnographies, but actually perform them," a concept which he put into practice with his students.[6] Earlier researchers like Katherine Dunham and Maya Deren immersed themselves in the cultural experiences of the "other" and proceeded in their work from the perspective of a subjective/objective (or intuitive/cognitive) continuum. Integrative approaches are also central to the work of Robert Farris Thompson and Cornel West—both visionaries in their own right. These efforts represent processes of experiential methodologies and deal with the horizontal interplay of content/context, rather than the vertical determination of cause/effect. They parallel efforts by performers and other artists to turn to the "-ings"—the dancing, not the dance; the singing, not the song—that is, to apprehend the vitality and energy of the subjunctive mode of process as an antidote to overdoses of the declarative, full-stop mode of a product-oriented tradition.

This horizontal, subjunctive, processual model offers some means by which we might "theorize the relationship between a given artistic/bodily endeavor and general cultural values relating to the body."[7] From some process of "lived

research" we might deduce principles about kinesthetic and affective ways of knowing. These observations lead to my second premise: that it would be wise should we researchers and historians listen to our materials and let the context suggest a methodology. This premise is a way of checking or restraining the force of the first premise. If we allow our context to lead us, we might travel paths that would not present themselves when we take the lead and travel the paths we already know. "Traditional scientific method can't tell you where you ought to go, unless where you ought to go is a continuation of where you were going in the past."[8] We know that, regardless of what we do, we will see the world through the lens of our specific, individual histories and our generic, sociocultural, economic, and political backgrounds. However, we need to continually test our approaches against the mirror of our personal biases. Like the power of the sun, this mirror both blinds and illuminates. The idea of listening to one's text/context and playing with its lead offers some balance.

This premise requires that we also listen to the language that we use. Language is one of our major reflectors as academics; it holds a mirror to the world we live in and, reflexively, it molds our thoughts. People and systems are not different because of their language but because of their experiences in the world, which made different things important to different people. We can use language to build bridges or to make barriers. Take for example the devious language of dehumanization used in the Persian Gulf war: a "patriot missile" surely has a noble mission; "collateral damage" gives "us" the right to decimate "them" without having to bear the guilt of acknowledging their deaths; and "friendly fire" exonerates us even when we attack ourselves. On the other hand, terms like "exotic," "primitive," and other such descriptors may serve the reverse purpose in dance writing. By using such terminology, the object of those terms is put in a category below that of the academic, Europeanist concert dance ideal.[9] In a very real sense, these words are almost always negative-value indicators. They are important tools in the language of disenfranchisement and have been used in describing concert dance by people of African lineage from the beginning of the concert dance era. But such choices of vocabulary may have more to say about who is writing than who is performing or what is being seen.

As an African-American woman—a status described in some circles as one of double jeopardy—I am acutely aware of the language of empowerment and disempowerment. To give one example, I cite a dance review published in a national monthly magazine wherein the European-American male writer used basically the language of Europeanist ballet aesthetics (line, form) to discredit—disempower, if you will—the New York season of a major African-American concert dance company.[10] Here is his opening paragraph:

> For dancerly directness, simplicity, cohesion, and strict kinetic pleasure, the most rewarding moment in a performance by Garth Fagan Dance occurs during the curtain calls. Neatly lined up across the stage, standing in recognizable First Positions [*sic*], the company bends forward into smooth and unaffected bows. The uncomplicated actions, clearly centered in consistently loose lower backs, give a potently elemental effect: They tell of plumb-line stretch, central force, and plastically easy articulation.[11]

This introduction, praising the postperformance bows, states that none of the criteria the writer values appear in the performance and that virtually the only "rewarding moment" is after the performance proper is over. That is the only time that the performers show a clear-cut, linear arrangement. The phrases "neatly lined up across the stage" and "plumb-line stretch" give us the message that linearity and verticality matter a lot to the writer. He goes so far as to have the phrase "first position" placed in the upper case. These value indicators reveal that the writer perceives Fagan's work as though it were bad ballet.

His assumption is a major categorical error and an example of comparing pigs to fish. It is clear to any dance critic or scholar who takes the time to study Fagan's choreography and its sources that his work is not based upon adherence to ballet precepts any more than Alvin Ailey's work is an example of Louis Horst's principles of modern dance forms—and Ailey's work has suffered in this skewed equation in the same way that Fagan's suffers at the pen of this writer. Fagan's work is not based on the centered verticality of ballet, so of course that will not be a value exhibited in his choreography. His canon is a synthesis of Africanist and Europeanist influences with a strong emphasis on the fluid, articulated torso, which is a strong aesthetic value in African dance. It is a forceful, dynamic, and effective marriage of cross-cultural influences.

This critic does not see the merger as the measure. Instead, he holds onto one side of the equation—namely, European ballet—as his standard, implying that the African side is lesser because it doesn't uphold that standard. He reinforces this point of view in the next paragraph: "Beyond a pervasive air of unaffected gentility, the company of fourteen tends to bypass the structural niceties of theatrical dancing for the quirky, hard-to-follow idiosyncrasies of Fagan's choreography."[12] Well, what are the "niceties of theatrical dancing"? Who sets those criteria? Is the critic privy to them and not the choreographer? Is theatrical dancing meant to be nice? The "unaffected gentility" line has a bit of the "noble savage" implied in it, but updated for a 1990s readership. The implication in these excerpts and, indeed, throughout the review is that Fagan doesn't know the rules nor how to abide by them, but the critic does.

My assessment is the reverse: it is this critic who doesn't know the rules—or the aesthetic criteria underlying Fagan's work. To simply characterize it as idiosyncratic is to fail to come to terms with the style of dance. In the phrase "hard-to-follow idiosyncrasies" he reveals that he really does not know what is going on, how to look at it, or how to write about it. It veers from the only norm the writer knows and reveres—but which the choreography was never intended to obey. I won't belabor the point. The review continues in this vein; it is demeaning and small-minded. No matter that the review was written several years ago: such distortions continue as old-school critics trained in one aesthetic perspective are faced with a panoply of dances that simply do not fit. One of the easiest ways to disempower others is to measure them by a standard which ignores their chosen aesthetic frame of reference and its particular demands. In examples such as this one, language is deployed as an intercultural weapon.

I am also reminded of an example in Michael Kirby's article "Criticism: Four Faults."[13] The point I make here was probably unnoticed by European-American readers, whether male or female, and probably unintentional on the part of the author. It is an example of disempowerment for African-American females. In order to prove that criticism is subjective but that there still exists some consensus regarding aesthetic values, Kirby states that it would be possible to take a poll and ascertain that Marilyn Monroe is considered a beautiful woman in our society. He explains his argument, using the term *woman* to refer to the (European) female who is characterized as beautiful. He states that "the 'beautiful' woman that Rubens painted and the 'beautiful' woman photographed in the last century are quite different from the 'beautiful' woman of today."[14] Fine. Then he claims that in spite of the "subjective nature of experience," it is still possible to be objective in describing a performance. His example is what interests me. He states, "If I say that there are three performers on stage, that one of them is a black girl, that none of them is speaking, and so forth, these statements are both value-free and objective."[15] In using the term "black girl," he has used the language of disempowerment in referring to an African-American female, since the other females referred to, all Europeans, were referenced as women. His inconsistency shows that even the most innocent, supposedly simple and straightforward language is in fact subjective and value laden. Mature African-American women and men were referred to by European Americans as boys and girls until very recently. Dancers, too, have been subjugated to the less-than-full-person status of the boys-and-girls terminology.

I find this example noteworthy because it comes from a researcher and historian whose work has been about breaking stride with traditional currents. It suggests that listening to one's materials to hear personal biases is not a bad

idea for any of us, whether we are categorized as avant-garde or traditional, liberal or conservative. Of course, there are examples throughout our culture which are more blatant than the two offered here that illustrate the debasing use of language in reference to the other. However, these subtle manifestations are potentially more dangerous than their overt counterparts. It is ironic that this seemingly tangential "slip" (after all, "black girls" were not the subject of the essay) is one of the points upon which one may justifiably hang a refutation of Kirby's thesis regarding objectivity. Frequently it is the seemingly insignificant elements—the pieces that look as though they are filler in the cracks of our research—which are essential to the full picture of what we experience and how we report it.

My third premise is that, given the first two premises, we need to keep ourselves off center in order to stay on target. Some ways of doing this include the use of reversals/inversions; an awareness of intertextuality; and an awareness that aesthetics and performance history, theory, and criticism, like all constructs, are functions of power (which is the real message of the foregoing examples). None of these are new ideas, but the configuration that I bring to them from my particular perspective may shape them in ways to suggest new applications to the reader.

Reversals/inversions can be invaluable in offering alternative approaches. In the same sense that the hatha yoga headstand is performed not only to physically stimulate circulation to the brain but also to psychically offer the practitioner the experience of seeing the world in chaos—upside down—and to find one's center off-center, feminist and cultural activist Jill Johnston recommends gender reversals: "I recommend reversing many things in your mind's eye when looking at dance, just to see where we still stand in our sexual politics. I can't watch TV or movies without doing this myself. When a woman cries, I put the man in her place and imagine the unthinkable when a man tells a woman what she thinks. I turn it all around."[16] Likewise, I recommend culture reversals. What if we stand on our heads and look at our culture as African based? In visual arts classes students occasionally are assigned a similar exercise and must make a representation by depicting only the "negative spaces," the spaces in and around the "subject." The exercise shows by the experiential process and its result that subject/object and foreground/background are relative—and, from this informed perspective, the dichotomy between subject/object blends into a dialogic relationship.

The Africanist reversal provides a similar perspective. For example, Duke University historian Peter Wood suggested to the planners of Colonial Williamsburg that, in the reconstruction of that village, the plantation owners be played by African Americans and the enslaved workers by European Americans. As we know, the idea did not catch on, but it was a good one and would have allowed an exchange of information for both cultures.[17] Historian Eric Foner points out that an Africanist perspective on the American Revolution would conclude that that event was not the harbinger of liberty and equality but worsened the situation for African Americans and strengthened the institution of slavery.[18] Likewise, Florida State University psychologist Naim Akbar commented that, from a European perspective, the "Old World" is Europe and the "New World" is America; but, from an Africanist perspective, the "Old World" is Africa, and the "New World" is Europe.[19] An Africanist perspective on the roots of Greek culture is based on the "Ancient Model" which acknowledges Greece's Egyptian and Levantine roots, while the Eurocentric or "Aryan Model" posits Greece as a "pure" culture and purposefully excludes acknowledgment of nonwhite influences. Similarly, we could look at the works of Picasso and Braque in their African-influenced, wedge/plane period and term them Africanist, rather than Cubist.

I have been engaged for the past several years in investigating the Africanist presence in European-American culture by focusing an Africanist mirror on European-American performance, and dance in particular. In making my observations I discuss signature characteristics of African-based aesthetics in contrast to European-based aesthetics and pointed out their exemplary occurrence in the Americanized ballet style of George Balanchine.[20] If we take the African-American presence as the foreground and look at European-American performance from this perspective, we begin to see the Africanist influences in places we didn't dream it existed, such as ballet. My intention in all my examples is to show that the Africanist aesthetic is part of the air we Americans breathe—part of the negative/positive space continuum to which we all are born as Americans, black and white.[21]

Intertextuality goes hand in hand with inversions/reversals. This theory, developed and utilized by Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Derrida, and others, can be summed up in a phrase that is reductive but bears repeating: all texts are intertexts. That is, forces, movements, motifs, trends, languages—text, in other words—of previous and contemporary societies influence us, live within and around us, and constitute the threads through which we weave our "new" patterns. They are the anonymous, unauthored codes of a given culture. What this implies is that there really is nothing new under the sun, only variations on prior patterns and processes assimilated and reconfigured in any present moment. Every culture, then, is a panoply of quotations from a wide spectrum of past and present conditioning forces. Also implicit in the theory are, first, the idea that the anonymous, unauthored, multifold sources feeding into any given text are so thoroughly

interwoven that their origins are difficult, if not impossible, to sort out, and, second, the assumption that the fusion process is unconscious and automatic.

My contentions both affirm and depart from intertextual theory. I agree that there are forces afoot which interface with other forces and that the process of interchange/intertextuality is largely subliminal. However, in the case of the Africanist influence in American culture, it is wrong to assume that sources and influences cannot be attributed and that the formulae are anonymous. My contention is that, indeed, we do not need to reduce the intertextuality of the African-American/European-American equation to a laundry list of sources and influences, but we desperately need to get beneath the convoluted web of racism which has obscured the affirmation and celebration of the fact that African-based culture is, indeed, an interface touching almost every part of American life. In the case of the black/white American equation, intertextuality is more than an anonymous field of generalized sources and influences. We are able to trace threads and see the jazz aesthetic in the art deco architecture of Miami Beach and in the inspiration for works by Jackson Pollock and George Balanchine, alike. We see the codes, formulae, rhythms, patterns, and fragments that derive from the Africanist aesthetic as a frequent visitor in European-American endeavor. The concept of intertextuality invites the application of reversals and inversions, for no text is unaffected by other texts, and thus it can be regarded from a number of perspectives.

In suggesting these ways of keeping oneself off balance in order to rebalance, let me return to the concept of the subjunctive as a working model to replace the declarative nature of most research. We need modes of inquiry that are intersubjective, intertextual, subjunctive, phenomenological, processual. For those who have used these approaches—now and even before the existence of the literary and aesthetic jargon we have adopted to designate them—it becomes evident that previously assumed boundaries have been ruptured, and performance falls between boundaries and between genres. As writers and historians we can choose to communicate process and contexts instead of following the traditional, deterministic route of Europeanist scholarship which looks for linear, vertical flashpoints—trends and hierarchies—in the evolution and development of our histories. Indeterminacy is a valid approach. We don't need the answers: we need the questions; we need the dancing, not the dance.

Afterword: Whose History?

I was shocked when a dance writer who had read the conference version of this essay approached me to inform me that she was "sick and tired" of my complaints about irresponsible writers, and that she wanted me, next time, to

address "the critics who have been writing responsible criticism for the past twenty-five years." In my defense, and to orient the reader to my perspective, let me make myself clear. Of the numerous articles and conference papers I have published, this essay and one other[22] are the only ones that focus on the myopia of particular European-American reviews of specific African-American choreographies. I am not a one-issue person. In fact, the above essay is not a one-issue statement. It reflects the multilayered convolutions that power plays and hierarchies have wrought upon our cultural potential as Americans, black and white.

As far as I know, there are no mainstream dance critics who have been "responsible" to world cultural practices until the past few years, when deconstruction theory, Afrocentricity, and related new developments forced their hand. I do not even consider myself—an African American schooled in European-American institutions in New York, dwelling in environments and moving in circles dominated by European Americans where I am often the only person of color—as having practiced responsible criticism. The irony is the fact that, regardless of color, class, or gender, those of us who were educated in traditional, Europeanist institutions hadn't the slightest suspicion that we were not responsible. And we still have much to learn. I look back at the reviews I wrote even ten years ago and see how I, too, evaluated African-American modern dance groups using Europeanist criteria as the sole frame of reference. It should have been clear to me that the African-American aesthetic (as evidenced in the work of a choreographer like Dianne McIntyre, for example) fuses and integrates forces and influences in a way that begs a knowledge of Africanist aesthetic threads in order for the work to be appropriately assessed. But, like this angry woman, I too was raised and programmed to recognize only one stream—conveniently tagged as the mainstream—even though our American context and the dances we critique represent multiple currents.

In spite of her status and renown, this woman was isolated, angry, frightened, and threatened by my essay. Her response may have worked in her favor, because, since her encounter with me, she has noticeably expanded her range of inquiry in examining dance. The important point is that there is some change in her perspective, and she has listened. She is called upon far more frequently than I am to talk about dance and culture, and she has cleverly incorporated a multicultural approach in her recent work. I hope I am around to witness the time when people of color will be called upon as frequently as she is to consult, give presentations, and publish; and when the organizations and institutions that call upon them are not chiefly European or European-American gatherings, but include a proportionate representation from people of color, as both presenters and sponsors.

Notes

The original version of this essay was prepared as a presentation for the University of California–Riverside conference, Choreographing History, 16–17 February 1992.

1 Jill Johnston, "How Dance Artists and Critics Define Dance as Political," *Movement Research Performance Journal 3* (Fall 1991), pp. 2–3.

2 John Lahr, "The World's Most Sensational Absence," *New York Times Book Review* 84 (June 1990), p. 10.

3 For example, see L. Humphries, "How Ideas Take Shape," *Yellow Springs Newsletter*, Fall 1986, pp. 6–8.

4 The methodologies of some phenomenologists and ethnographers consciously aim to approach subjective/objective as a continuous, reflexive process. For a succinct discussion of how these efforts (by scholars Maurice Merleau-Ponty, James Clifford, and Clifford Geertz, among others) are put to use by contemporary dance scholarship, see Deirdre Sklar, "On Dance Ethnography," and Sondra Fraleigh, "A Vulnerable Glance: Seeing Dance through Phenomenology," *Dance Research Journal* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1991), pp. 6–16.

5 For example, see "Reports," "Performance Studies International," *Dance Research Journal* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1991), pp. 55–57.

6 Victor Turner, "Dramatic Ritual / Ritual Drama, Peformative and Reflexive Anthropology," *From Ritual to Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), pp. 89–101.

7 Susan Foster, conference organizer, preliminary materials for Choreographing History conference.

8 Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), p. 275, as quoted in Molefi Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Temple University Press, 1987), p. 114.

9 I use the terms *Europeanist* and *Africanist* throughout this manuscript. The term *Africanist* includes concepts, practices, attitudes, or forms which have roots or origins in Africa and are found in the diaspora of African peoples. My precedent for using this term is set in recent scholarship. For example, see Joseph E. Holloway, *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), and Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). I coined the term *Europeanist* to use as its counterpart and to denote concepts, practices, attitudes, or forms which have roots or origins in Europe.

10 Robert Greskovic, "Garth Fagan Dance," *Dance Magazine*, February 1991, pp. 112–15.

11 Ibid., p. 112.

12 Ibid., p. 113.

13 Michael Kirby, "Criticism: Four Faults," *Drama Review* 18, no. 3 (September 1974), pp. 59–68.

14 Ibid., p. 61.

15 Ibid., p. 67.

16 Johnston, "How Dance Artists and Critics Define Dance as Political," p. 3.

17 Peter Wood, in conversation with the author, American Dance Festival, Durham, North Carolina, June 1988.

18 Eric Foner, "Morning Edition," National Public Radio, 3 November 1989.

19 Naim Akbar, "Morning Edition," ibid.

20 See Brenda Dixon Gottschild, "Stripping the Emperor: The Africanist Presence in American Concert Dance," in David Gere, Lewis Segal, Patrice Koelsch, and Elizabeth Zimmer, eds., *Looking Out: Perspectives on Dance and Criticism in a Multicultural World* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995).

21 See Brenda Dixon, "The Afrocentric Paradigm," *Design for Arts in Education* 92, no. 3 (January/February 1991), pp. 15–22.

22 See Brenda Dixon (Stowell), "Black Dance and Dancers and the White Public: A Prolegomenon to Problems of Definition," in Gerald E. Myers, ed., *The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance*, American Dance Festival publication, Durham, N.C., 1988; reprinted in *Black American Literature Forum* 24, no. 1 (Spring, 1990), pp. 117–23.