Alvin Ailey, James Truitte, Don Martin, Myrna White, Ella Thompson, and Minnie Marshall in "I've Been 'Buked" from Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*, 1961. Photograph by Jack Mitchell

Black Modernism

As object, the back body epitomizes modernism.
As subject, the black body offers a failed site of modernism.
It must be abject.

Music theorist Craig Werner points out that neoclassical discourse focuses largely on the concept of universalism, in which "certain themes, images, and techniques express fundamentally 'human' concerns that transcend the limitations of any particular set of circumstances."[24] Although the actions and artistry of African Americans may indeed express "universal" truths, the black body itself never achieves this transcendence in any discourse of the West. Marked even before it can be seen, before it can even exist, the black body carries its tangled web of work and sexual potentials, athletic and creative resources, and stratified social locations onto the stages of the modern.

Black bodies offered a cipher of "not-ness" that enabled whites to articulate modernity in the first part of the twentieth century. Toni Morrison writes persuasively about blackness in literature, to remind us that the white American modern could not exist without its opposite of the black African primitive, and for American writers engaged in the construction of modernist literature, "a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness."[25] Morrison's examples encompass a century of authors who encountered blackness as an oppositional presence, by design or default, and in the process imbricated blackness and the primitive in the conception of the modern.

In concert dance, the most celebrated first-generation modern choreographers—Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman—struggled with the figuration of dancing black bodies in their work.[26] These artists could not—and did not—ignore black bodies altogether, but by and large they imagined blackness as an alternative to monotonous, everyday whiteness, as a site of ecstatic release to be summoned when needed. As dance theorist Brenda Dixon Gottschild reminds us, in 1930 Martha Graham quipped: "We have two primitive sources, dangerous and hard to handle in the arts, but of intense psychic significance—the Indian and the Negro."[27] The "psychic significance" of the Negro and the Indian refer, of course, to the formation of white subjectivity within modernity, but Graham's recognition of "danger" and "intensity" in Africanist expression predicts an enormous potential for black bodies on public stages in any expressive idiom.

In 1961, Graham's teacher, Louis Horst, published a small composition and analysis primer, *Modern Dance Forms*, which included reference to "primitive" shapes that look remarkably like the preferred angular stances and impulses of then contemporary African American social dances.[28] Black dance gestures arrived in modern dance works through compositional techniques like those set forth by Horst as referents of primitive movement. Some white artists, such as choreographer Helen Tamiris, attempted to choreograph the outward shapes and ecstatic release of black dance in works like *Negro Spirituals* (1937), but of course, these dances avoided actual dancing black bodies.[29] Black movements may have been untidy and dangerous to some white viewers because their aesthetic imperatives were largely inscrutable. How black dance gesture conveyed more than its iconography mystified even those who recognized its power; in her autobiography, Isadora Duncan suggests avoiding all African impulses because of their potent modernist appeal.[30]

For example, consider the critical response when Agnes de Mille created "Black Ritual" for the New York Ballet Theater, the precursor to American Ballet Theatre, in 1940. Performed by a cast of sixteen women to a score by Darius Milhaud, the piece intended to "project the psychological atmosphere of a primitive community during the performance of austere and vital ceremonies."[31] This was not a classically shaped ballet, but its cast had received dance training in a specially established, segregated "Negro Wing" of the Ballet Theatre school. Critical reaction to the piece was muted, and the dance was considered unsuccessful, at least because, under de Mille's choreographic direction, the Negro dancers were not performing authentic Negro material. After viewing the work, dance writer Walter Terry called for "a Negro vocabulary of movement . . . composed of modern dance movements, ballet steps, tap and others

. . . [which] should enable the Negro to express himself artistically and not merely display his muscular prowess."[32] By 1940, black dance movements and aesthetic principles, seldom viewed on concert dance stages, were considered in and of themselves "antimodern."

Eventually, some white artists moved beyond the outward shapes of the "black dance" to try to get at the impulses that drive it. Among neoclassical and postmodern choreographers, George Balanchine and Twyla Tharp absorbed Africanist aesthetic devices of downward-directed energy, insistent rhythmicity, angularity of line, percussive rupture of underlying flow, individualism within a group dynamic, and access to a dynamic "flash of the spirit" that confirms simultaneously temporal presence and ubiquitous spirituality.[33] But again, these choreographers often worked without the dancing black bodies that first explored these dimensions. Overwhelmingly, black presence in the construction of modern dance has been positioned implicitly as an antidote to (premodern) classicism, but explicitly as an afterthought or footnote. Paraphrasing Morrison, modern dance in the United States has, for the most part, taken as its concern the architecture of a *new white woman.*[34]

If the modern dance emerged to explore white female subjectivity, there was likely little space for black innovation in its early years. The critical record for early concert dance is largely white, and few artists or authors paid attention to the permutations of form that black artists inspired.[35] The audience, too, for concert dance mirrored the readers of American literature, and, as Morrison reminds us, "until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white."[36] For white audiences and critics to understand African American excellence in modern dance, their work had to be read as "universal" in theme.

Ailey positioned his work among the Afro-modernists of the 1950s, both writers and choreographers, who explored "universal" aspects of human experience. Werner notes that "only those black writers whose work can be presented in terms of the 'universals'—[Ralph] Ellison is perhaps the most obvious example—receive 'serious' (if extraordinarily narrow) attention and financial rewards."[37] Ailey, like Ellison and choreographer Donald McKayle, sought a broad audience for his work, and he sought a committed African American audience for modern dance as well. For Ailey, dance had to be "modern" in that it had to offer a unique synthesis of similar choreographic ideas that preceded it, but it also had to satisfy an impulse to honor ancestral legacies of performance. *Revelations* managed to achieve both of these tasks.

Ailey's goal and achievement was to make black bodies visible, if not dominant, in the discourse of modernist American dance. He did this in selecting his company of mostly black artists, but also in the very real establishment of a solid, African diaspora concert dance–going public. This accomplishment of visibility carries mixed fortunes because, as performance theorist Peggy Phelan points out, "there is real power in remaining unmarked; and there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal."[38] Ailey did identify a community of black dancers and allowed his work to address black audiences and, through this increased visibility, set in motion increased opportunities—social and political power—for African diaspora dance artists. But the overexposure of visible black bodies Ailey engendered in works, in-

cluding *Revelations*, collapsed representation and identity to such a linear and mimetic extent that stereotypes of pious and exuberant black bodies threatened to emerge from the black churches of Ailey's "blood memories." For generations, any African American concert dance artist might have been expected to make a *Revelations*-style dance.

Still, *Revelations* fits into the project of the modern because, in its first gestures of oppression encoded in the opening stance of immobile tension, it highlights freedom. As music historian John Lovell notes, "The I of the spiritual is not a single person. It is every person who sings, everyone who has been oppressed and, therefore, every slave anywhere."[39] The opening posture of the dance implies physical bondage and slavery, and, as Morrison writes, "Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness *and* enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me."[40] This is what audiences—all audiences, by 1960—are invited to contemplate. The not-me-ness of the dancers highlights difference. Not-me as black dancing body; not-me as slave archetype; not-me as rural worshiper. Not-me as abstract expression of the spiritual, because I am, in fact, religious and spiritual; not-me as enclosed within a hermetically sealed community, because I am seated in an integrated concert hall witnessing modern dance. I am made visible by the dance; strikingly, its gestures provide corporeal narrative of my memory of pain.

This memory of pain is actually what I feel as I witness the dance. How the world of "I've Been 'Buked" *hurt*: its subjects imprisoned by an essential subjugation reflected here in attitudes of deflected focus and a lack of visual connection. Here, dancers rarely look toward each other or the audience. They are sorrowful, beaten, without individual agency. The modern enervates them, saps their bodies of dynamic potential. Significantly, as *Revelations* becomes more jubilant, its movements migrate from (white) modernist abstraction to (black) vernacular dance structures. The dancers escape the dead confines of abstract dance that expresses inner turmoil to inhabit the living representation of people dancing for and with each other.

If modernism fails on black dancing bodies, it is because the act of performance supersedes its implications in the Africanist paradigm. Or, what the black body *means* in stillness on a Western stage is transformed by its motion through what it *does*. When dancing black bodies connect to their audience, they are never abject. They are the initiators of vital communication that is ancient and traditional, ephemeral, and, in some paradigms, *modern*.