Gap| Mining the Third World for cultural transfusions or Afro-Billy and the search for meaning

Jeanne Christopherson

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Recommended Citation

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

**Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature**

Yes, I grant permission  

No, I do not grant permission  

Author's Signature:  

Date:  

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
The Gap: Mining the Third World for Cultural Transfusions
or
Afro-Billy and the Search for Meaning

by Jeanne Christopherson

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Interdisciplinary Studies
The University of Montana
Performance, Culture and Education
December 2000

Approved by
Chairperson
Dean, Graduate School

Date
ABSTRACT

This paper defines and explores the gap within contemporary American culture opened by the Euro-centric tradition in which mind, technology, literacy and material reality define existence, contrasted with the Afro-centric tradition of oral culture emphasizing the manifestation, transmission and retention of knowledge in embodied form. This gap, having been identified, is being filled for a significant number of individuals by dedicated study and involvement in the performance traditions preserved and practiced in the Pan African Diaspora. I will follow the entry of this embodied and oral tradition into the United States through the portal of its own dance culture, examining the perception of the body in Western society, which has placed dance and Pan African culture in a similar and related marginal position. While striving to identify the principles of embodiment and movement that have both attracted this interest and enabled its non-verbal transmission into a widespread presence in the United States today, I will also challenge our multifaceted use of the concept of 'primitivism,' and question what we are doing when we set out to encompass attributes from another culture.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ..............................................................................................................1
Definition of Terms ........................................................................................ 6
Review of Literature .........................................................................................8

Chapter One: Distancing the Body / Embracing the Body

1. The Price and Circumstances of Its Disappearance ...............................15
2. Conversation Across Cultures ...............................................................19
3. Kinesthetic Intelligence / Embodied Thought .........................................24

Chapter Two: America – Embodiment Hangs on in Dance Culture

4. Invisible in Plain Sight ..................................................................................34
5. Scholarship vs. Embodiment: Visibility in Print ........................................42
6. The Elusive Quality: Playing With Life’s Indeterminacy .......................48
7. Re-Opening the Portal: Dance Dynasties ................................................51
8. Primitivism: One Word, Different Meanings ..........................................56
9. Dance and the Anthropologist .................................................................65

Chapter Three: Africa Enters Through the Portal of Dance Culture

10. The Playing Ground: Black Identity and Embodiment in America .......69
11. The African Artists Arrive ........................................................................74
12. The ‘Very Real Principles” That Attract ...............................................79
13. Politics and Power Embodied .................................................................89
14. Recording the Community: Collective Memory ......................................91

Chapter Four: The State of Embodied Art - Where Is It Headed?

15. Dissemination and Commodification .....................................................97
16. Conversation Within Culture .................................................................99
17. Conclusion ..............................................................................................104

Bibliography .....................................................................................................109
INTRODUCTION

My choice of embodied culture as my subject matter and the academic requirement that asks me to translate embodied experience into symbols (written word) on paper immediately engage me in the paradox I set out to discuss in the following pages. The conflict begins in my first sentence, because the presence of literacy was the beginning of the end of ascendancy of oral culture in the European tradition (Abram 1996: 107).

In the midst of writing this paper I picked up a family copy of plays by Eugene O’Neill. The following speech leapt out of the book at me, a speech from his play The Great God Brown. There was my subject, in O’Neill’s (1925:315) words, stated poetically:

Speech by Dion:

“Why am I afraid to dance,
I who love music and rhythm and grace and song and laughter?

Why am I afraid to live,
I who love life and the beauty of flesh and the living colors of earth and sky and sea?

Why am I afraid of love,
I who love love?

Why am I afraid,
who am not afraid?

Why must I pretend to scorn in order to pity?

Why must I hide myself in self-contempt in order to understand?

Why must I be so ashamed of my strength, so proud of my weakness?

Why must I live in a cage like a criminal, defying and hating?”
I who love peace and friendship.

Why was I born without a skin, Oh God,
that I must wear armor in order to touch or be touched?"

The gap. Something not filled in. Something removed that might have been there before. Something missing. Reading it, the repetition of the question ("why am I afraid") and the rhythm suggest the call and response structure of the Cuban rumba songs, songs that, like the blues, frame painful questions in uplifting music in which an individual singer's pain is witnessed, supported and transformed by the chorus of singers that alternate their lines with the soloist. But in O'Neill’s play Dion is alone, isolated as he cries out. All the elements of the question of what is missing are there: the search for meaning, the difference between an expression of isolation alone, or in the company of others; the use of printed word to express the problem as contrasted with oral culture; the use of spoken, scripted theater instead of music and dance; the ethnic stretch and the projection it implies. Unified by the cry itself, the humanity it expresses and its expression in an art form.

My position is that the gap exists not between cultures, which was my original perception, but within Western culture itself, both for the community and the individual. This chasm is confronted when the search for meaning in life is brought up short at the doors of didactic Christian churches, scientific explanations of existence, the shopping mall and the institutional suppression of bodily impulses and expression through social conditioning. The dominant legacy of Descartes’ conceptual severance of body from mind, sensual from physical, established a mechanistic a disembodied view of the universe, which has permeated Western thought and dominated the structure that organizes European derived culture (Descartes 1662 cited in Gaukroger 1998). When these are added to the
dependence on the written word to communicate, educate and record knowledge, it results in the present of culture of split beings at best, half beings at worst, instructed that only the "concrete" is "real," that only the quantifiable has value. While this may be in the process of being challenged in the upper circles of academia, it has not reached the street, so to speak.

As people inevitably confront the issue of their place in the universe and their relationship to each other, (the 'search for meaning'), many find that they must go outside of their culture of origin to find missing information, practices and cosmologies that provide a sense of inter-relatedness between people, the natural world and the "invisible" world of energy and spirit. As musician Doug Goodkin puts it, following years of study in Western classical music, "I had to go next door to the house of jazz to touch some feelings that simply weren't in the Europe store." (1994:29). These sources provide explanations and experiences of phenomena that the Euro-American belief systems do not acknowledge, and often actively condemn. A related body of knowledge has roots in pre-Christian European culture, but was systematically suppressed, first by Christianity as it competed for dominance with "pagan" religions who used the body as an ecstatic channel for interaction with the divine (Lowell 1995:229; Lawler 1964), and then by the Protestant economic structure of capitalism that has interrupted the balance of self sufficient, nature based indigenous cultures wherever it has reached, including Africa. (Rodney 1974; Diamond 1974).

The intersecting factor is the expressive body, which provides a key to these relationships, as well acting as a repository and conduit of experience and knowledge. This embodiment of knowledge still occupies a pre-eminent place of expression in the
performance art culture of the African Diaspora, which concerns me here. Through this (and other) routes it is still available as a resource to those searching for a practice of embodied expression that has not been engendered openly in Euro-American or European culture for many centuries.

When Randy Martin wrote *Performance as Political Act* in 1990, he presented the idea that the realm of embodied performance has been ignored because the moving body is invisible in Western culture (Martin 1990:4,5). Because it is non-commodifiable, the realm of embodied performance is perceived as an un-empowered arena of activity. It is difficult to make dance pay, and it can be dismissed as frivolous, peripheral. In education and public life, the arts in general are treated this way. Even when the arts make their way into public consciousness or a budget, dance is often last on the list, with visual art, music and theater coming first. This has been my experience repeatedly for the thirty years I have danced in the United States, (in Oregon, Utah, Texas, California, New York, Minnesota and Montana). And so dance has been left alone, like a weed, to grow in its unimportant patch. So far it isn’t taking up coveted garden space, and therefore can be ignored. This has had its advantages, along with its disadvantages. While funding is short, for the most part, nobody bothers to tell dancers what to do.

In order to spin the web of relationship between embodied culture and the areas I see intersecting with it, I would like to establish the need for full human expression, with the body as locus, a grounding force. I am still mystified by the reasons behind the oppression and banishment of the moving body from a central place in Euro-centric culture, but that is not my subject here. It happened. The result has been what I would term the “disappearance” of the body, and the consequent loss of the general population’s ability to
‘read the body’ (Hanna 1979:4,5), along with the devaluation of kinesthetic intelligence. What interests me is its covert survival in the dance studio and the theater. I will discuss the re-entry of dance into Western “high” art through the efforts of several extraordinary women, and its role in hosting the emergence of Pan-African dance in the United States.

Before I can proceed with a description of the content of the Pan African performance traditions that have arrived in the United States, it is important to discuss the definition and meanings of the term ‘primitive,’ a word that is never far from the word ‘African’ in the minds of the American public, whether it is being used in anthropology or as a source of theme or fantasy by artists and popular culture. I am convinced that negative attitudes towards embodiment in Euro-centric culture are linked to the repression of Pan African culture, and that there is a relationship between the low status of the expressive body to the status of both dance and African-American culture. Finally, it is significant that there is a growing presence of African performing arts at this particular time in the cultural history of the United States. What is the present role of Pan African dance/music in the artistic and community life of Westerners? Beyond fantasy and projection, what are its ‘very real principles’ that are being transposed in the present into Western communities? Is it working, are people finding what they are looking for? ‘Afro-billy’ is a tongue-in-cheek term used by a loose community of non-professional drummers in Missoula, Montana to describe the culturally merged music they play in each other’s living rooms. As this has become an established practice over the years, they have become comfortable with what it has become – constantly using traditional rhythms as a resource, but not worrying about the authenticity of their renditions. “Leave us alone,” they say to me when I point out discrepancies. “We’re just playing Afro-billy.”
I am writing an interdisciplinary paper and will bring together here the intersecting ideas of historians, anthropologists, artists, educators, cultural practitioners whose writings I have pored over, whose classes I have attended, whom I have engaged in conversation and had the privilege of being on the receiving end of the transmission of living, embodied culture. We are all wrestling with the question of the gap, the internal division, compelled by that internal force which moves us towards insight and integration. We hope it will guide us, in the company of others, to wholeness. My hope is that, in the following pages, some of the connections I have found will contribute to that insight.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

I will be using the term 'embodied culture' to widen the commonly used term of 'oral culture,' because 'oral' tends to connote the use of words, spoken or sung, or music taught without being transcribed. In actuality, they refer to the same thing, knowledge encoded in a person's being, enacted by persons or communities through memory, and transmitted directly to others. Ironically, while we conceive of the body as being solid and physical, much of the knowledge encoded in persons is ephemeral and subject to personal variation. This is acknowledged in a court of law, where there must be at least two 'eye witnesses' to corroborate a story. The word 'tradition,' I am using as Schechner defined it, "what we choose to repeat" (1985). I will be using the terms 'Western' and 'Euro-centric' to refer to Western European derived culture anywhere in the world, specifying Americans (or ethnicity) and the United States when necessary. 'Pan African' or 'Afro-centric' refer to cultures dominated by African influences, primarily throughout the African Diaspora, including Africa, the Caribbean, Brazil and areas in the Americas peopled by African descendants. 'Dominated' is a key word. Currently it is the convention to abandon the
term 'dance' for the more inclusive one of 'movement.' I will use both. For me, the presence of expressiveness, awareness, spirit and kinesthetic facility differentiates 'dance' from 'movement,' whether it is at a football game at halftime or Lincoln Center in New York City, moving it from an athletic feat or gesture to an 'act of art.' I like Judith Hanna's definition of dance:

Dance is a conceptual natural language with intrinsic and extrinsic meanings, a system of physical movements, and interrelated rules guiding performances in different social situations...dance is human thought and behavior performed by the human body for human purposes...Just as humans reflect upon themselves through different forms of creativity - oral tales, written documents, sculptured forms, constructed edifices - they reflect upon themselves through dance (Hanna 1979:5).

'Kinesthetic' or 'bodily-kinesthetic' intelligence is a term used by Howard Gardner in his theory of multiple intelligences to describe the ability of the body to move well expressively or practically, manipulate objects or tools skillfully, execute tasks, encode patterns and interpret and respond kinetically to both internal and external movement cues (Gardner 1993). It encompasses skills in sports, dance, driving, craftsmanship, the technique of playing an instrument, affection - anything the body does. I would add language to his concept: the ability to speak with the body, remember with the body, and read the bodies of others, both symbolically and in daily interaction. Because dance is almost always accompanied by drumming and/or singing, I will use the term 'dance-drum-song' sometimes for that unified activity.

I am intentionally using the word 'we' a lot, to place myself and my fellow Americans in the center of the subject. If I am not speaking for you, feel free to absent yourself.
In the process of researching this paper I have found treasure. My own indictment of my culture of origin has been mitigated by my discovery of a layer of thought and intention in the academic world where I feel I am in good company, where the understandings that I have reached through my years of experience in dance and culture are shared, and expanded upon. The frontiers of thought are moving, and while they have not achieved transformation in the practices of the society at large, still I am encouraged. The shift of concepts and values that has occurred in the field of cultural studies since the mid-1980's is enormous. When, in 1995, the Dance Department at UCLA, known for its ballet, modern and jazz dance changes its name to the Department of World Arts and Culture, hiring teachers from Cuba and Bali, it is an indication that something very big has happened.

I can organize my readings to a great extent by their date of publication, so indicative is that of their style, subject material and angle of consciousness. Deirdre Sklar, a dancer/author, uses the word "trajectories" to describe the directions the mind workings of dancers take as they inscribe their way into the literature of words.

The shelves of the library at the University of Montana still hold many of the books I exhausted as an undergraduate twenty years ago, when they were the only available books being written on dance. They are still useful, such as Isadora Duncan's autobiography, which is as inspired now as it was then. Little can be added to her legend, her earnestness and vision. She was, for all intents and purposes, an 'evangelist' for dance. Ann Daly's Done Into Dance provides an insightful addition to the list of books on Duncan. It has been carefully researched, and uneartns the background of culture from which Duncan emerged,
as well the changes she effected. *Where She Danced* (Kendall 1979) has stood the test of
time, placing St. Denis and Duncan in perspective as young women who continued a path
of artistry and bodily emancipation that they were prepared for by the radical (bodily)
practices of their respective mothers. The older biographies of these women, along with
those of Katherine Dunham, are personality based, written in tones of great admiration,
often by people who danced with them or knew them personally, describing them as grand
dames, excelling in the art of performance. Books written more recently (including
Kendall’s) contain more critical evaluation and emphasis on cultural transition. *Alien Bodies*
(Burt 1998), writing in the emerging voice that combines scholarship with challenging
cultural evaluation, helps place the next generation of ‘modern’ dancers in context, digging
into their relationship with the art and psychological movements of the 1930’s through
1950’s.

I found a well of resources in the text and bibliography of Susan Reed’s “The
Politics and Poetics of Dance” (1998), a comprehensive review of literature and exhaustive
list of the recent writings on dance and embodiment such as: *Adversaries of Dance: From
Puritans to the Present* (Wagner 1997), “The Visible and the Invisible in Movement and
Dance” (Farnell 1995) and “Genre and Embodiment: From Brazilian Capoeira to the
Ethnology of Human Movement” (Lewis 1995). Most important to my present subject was
*Performance As Political Act: the Embodied Self* (1990), by Randy Martin, a dancer contemporary
of mine from the 1990’s in New York City. While he is not writing directly about ethnic
dance at all, he provides a theoretical framework for the invisibility of the domain of the
moving body, which for me is a key in explaining its presence, activity, power and yet
apparent lack of influence in the culture of mind that is dominant in the West while it is integral in many non-Western societies, notably those in the African Diaspora.

The quality that sets apart the writings of what I will call the first tier of dancer/writers or dance ethnographers, is their immersion in their subject. Maya Deren, Katherine Dunham, Margaret Drewal, Judith Hanna, Pearl Primus - all dancers, all women, all 'participant observers,' some before the term was coined, whose lifetimes are/were immersed in Pan African cultures. They provide a depth of insight and integrity on the experience of embodiment that is only improved by the scholarship of people indigenous to the respective cultures. They are in agreement about the importance and vitality of dance, and the central role it plays in the life of community, secular and social, whether their time was spent in the Caribbean, Brazil or Africa. Their books are written in a style that has gained more acceptance in the last fifteen years, moving back and forth between the experience within the body, and the observation or later reflection of the student of culture. It is the tone of books like these that have helped change the perspective and outlook on embodied arts, indigenous culture, and ethnography as a field. The information they provide is evidence of sophisticated, complex peoples who are engaged in performing and adapting an ancient heritage to their present situations.

Edith Turner's *The Spirit and the Drum*, is a revelation. It is the story, told in poetic prose, of her life in an Ndembu village as she raised her young daughter while her husband, the noted theater anthropologist Victor Turner, did ethnographic work there. She captures wonder, mystery and poignant social relations as well as the details of mundane living, punctuated with occasional conversations with Victor reflecting on village events. Another find on the subject of cultural content was Roger Bastide's *African Religions of Brazil*. It was
published in 1960, and aside from being a thorough and prolific source of information, it is decades ahead of its time in its nonjudgmental and respectful attitude towards its subject. His bibliography alone is extraordinary, listing sources in Portuguese and French as well as English. Researching the side of culturally biased literature yields such work as *The Africa That Never Was: Four Centuries of British Writing About Africa* (Jablow/Hammond 1970), *The Dance in Ancient Greece* (Lawler 1964), *The Lure of Africa* (McKinley 1974), and the introduction to the Norton Anthology of African American Literature (ed. Gates/McKay 1997). These books provide a backdrop for exploring the fictions that have circulated in Western thought and literature that Toni Morrison takes on in *Playing In The Dark* (1992), concerning the concepts of ‘primitive’ and ‘shadow,’ to which I add the ‘anthropological Other.’” I discovered John Blacking through his encouraging and passionate letters quoted by his former student Grau, and his convincing position that dance and music (and art) provide an infrastructure for human society. His own papers, published as *Music, Culture and Experience*, were very technical and left me wanting to read more of his letters to his students in the field.

*In Search of the Primitive* (Diamond 1974), again a precursor to a qualitative style of ethnography, is highly politically engaged, set in Nigeria during its years of transition from British to native rule in the early 1960’s. Diamond tells the story of himself as the Other in an African village, dynamically conveying with a storyteller’s skill the tangled web of multiple ethnicities, modernization, threats of cultural extinction, political danger, the liminal role of his native guide, and, what concerns us most here, the account of the Anaguta people, the object of his study, who live invisibly while face to face with colonialism. Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1974) was published the same year as Diamond’s,
part of a wave of books published for the newly emerging field of Black Studies that also helped lay a foundation for the shift in thinking about world culture that we are now experiencing. It is a well researched, detailed, historical look at colonial economic practices and attitudes that conflicted with, destabilized and restructured African society clarifying the value differences in world view between Africa and Europe.

**Genre and Embodiment: From Brazilian Capoeira to the Ethnology of Human Movement** (Lewis 1995) and *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (Browning 1995) share some wonderful insights on the dimension that is created by the activity of embodying the spirit – both able to describe palpably the shared state of altered consciousness that exists among people in Brazil engaged in celebratory drum-dance-song. Esther Dagan’s *The Spirits Dance in Africa* (1997) is a compilation of writings by both established and emerging dancer/writers including a wide mix of African, American, Hispanic and European men and women, as well as her own inspirational experiences spanning over 20 years of dance in France and Africa.

Between Richard Schechner’s *Between Theater and Anthropology* (1985) and Victor Turner’s *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982) we have groundbreaking work integrating anthropology and theater, again contributing to the context for the shift broadening the concept of performance in culture and developing language for its discussion. I return to Gardner’s *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1993) repeatedly to draw on his idea of a breadth of human abilities that are of comparable importance but cultivated and valued differently in different cultures. This is pertinent to this paper because of the heightened importance of embodiment in the form of music, kinesthetic and social intelligences for Pan Africans to a greater degree than Westerners. This is of core
importance linking the discussion of diverse learning styles and cultural diversity in education, echoed by David Goodkin's article on the diversity of qualities found in music from different cultures.

* African Art in Motion* (Thompson 1974) remains a definitive source on the unity of aesthetic relationship between African dance, music, visual and fabric art, quoted in almost every bibliography I scanned. The most recently published collections I found as resources of reflective and critical writing on dance and culture are *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* (ed. Desmond 1997), *Researching Dance: Evolving Modes of Inquiry* (ed. Fraleigh and Hanstein 1999), and *Human Action Signs in Cultural Context: The Visible and the Invisible in Movement and Dance* (ed. Farnell 1995). In them I find research, perception, dance and movement described from the inside as well as observed, and an incredible breadth of experience, insight and personal interest.

The concept of embodiment is being taken even further than the parameters of the body by writers such as Michael Jackson in *Paths Toward a Clearing* (1989), David Abram in *Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) and *Senses of Place* (ed. Feld 1996), who enlarge the concept of body connectedness to include members of a community forming a body as well as a web of connection to the natural environment and the world of spirit.

My subject is the active body, which broadens the focus from much of what is being written about the body currently – the body is not the focus, symbol, commodity or recipient, but an active agent. Possibly, movement itself is the symbol. In its introduction *Bodies and Persons*, in defining 'embodiment' says it “is supposed to obviate the issue of relationship by arguing that it encompasses both. Embodiment would thus be the term for
a state or a process that results from the continuous interaction of body and mind rather than their conceptualization as elements in a larger unity, the body/mind manifold” (ed. Lambeck and Strathern 1998). This still works within the idea of there being a body/mind duality, which is not accurate to the concept of a thinking body. For me, this is the experience of entering into an activity without prior thought and finding myself in the middle of executing it before I have a realization of what I am doing. While all of the discussion on the body is interesting, it is at once too general and too specific. These definitions determine the parameters of my sources.

Along with these literary sources, I am drawing on a lifetime of embodied experience, including formal performance training (dance, voice, theater, instrumental), a twenty year involvement in ethnic dance, and many conversations and observations. I bought my first Miriam Makeba record when I was fifteen, and learned every song off the “Wait A Minim” album, a maverick London review performed by white South Africans wearing raffia skirts and singing anti-apartheid satire, sandwiched between renditions of native music (both African and Boer). Much of the cultural information I have about both Western and Pan African dance has come via an oral culture that thrives among dancers. The dressing room, studio or theater, is an established site of serious discussion, information sharing and debriefing among dancers, as well as after class/rehearsal café sessions. Once information is shared concerning the history of a teacher or the meaning and context of a dance, once a movement is corrected and approved by a fellow student, the source is forgotten and the knowledge remains.
CHAPTER ONE

EMBRACING THE BODY / DISTANCING THE BODY

The Price and Circumstances of Its Disappearance

In these pages I am not setting out to say anything particularly new but rather something very old. I am highlighting a central aspect of human experience that appears to have been present in earlier times. It now exists in the European past only in what the archaeological record suggest to our imaginations (Blacking 1995; Redmond 1997). At this time, I postulate, the body was central to existence, and movement was acknowledged as synonymous to life. The body's agility, timing, expressiveness, subtlety, contact, power and health spelled the difference between survival or death, not only to a given individual, but to whole populations living year to year off the bounty and lean years of this planet. Its care, versatility and limitations created the boundaries and rhythms of daily life and acted as a grounding force. The body itself was recognized as the encoded site of many types of knowledge: survival skills, daily communication, music, dance, history and social interaction, embodying spirit as the corporeal link between the past and the time to come. It embodied culture.

I mean to champion the body as a repository of multidimensional knowledge, not only the cells of the brain, but knowledge centers in chromosomes, fingertips educated by repeated tasks, voices echoing songs passed from mother to mother to mother to daughter. The knowledge held without thinking, the knowledge of doing, received from having done and been taught by example and doing.

15
I also wish to underline and reiterate the importance of continuity, and the transmission of knowledge, body to body, generation to generation. The physical side of oral culture. As in, “I learned it from some body.” A person I knew. Learned what? How to crush garlic, knit, spit a cherry pit, play pat-a-cake, sew a seam, play an instrument, throw a boomerang or sing a song.

In the “information age” when so much knowledge lines library shelves and computer discs, assaulting us from television screens, when life takes place on a scale magnified (and restricted) by technology, what is the measure of sanity? I say it is the body. What it can observe, absorb, process, imitate, its limits of hunger, fatigue, need for movement, its affinity for touch and bonding, its expressiveness and ability to act without thinking are the balancing principles of sanity. It’s ability to sense and signal ‘overload!’ Without the body, we are lost: its’ kinesthetic intelligence, the door to all other intelligences, seen through eyes, heard, felt through skin contact, the telegraph of human energy; its’ ability to regenerate vitality through social presence, shared activity and intimate exchanges; its’ mastery of skills, speaking through word, movement and music independent of any gadget or device.

We are the heirs of a society that has chosen to actively bury the body knowledge, reduce age old systems of embodied culture to shells of their former function. It has co-opted these core values for greater control of its citizens’ time and labor and for the sake of the market place, and subjecting an increasingly dysfunctional population to waves of manipulative consumerism, restrictive laws, behavior codes and drugs (ridilin, prozac, marijuana, caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, etc.) to maintain daily functioning.
In the years since the fifteenth century, when European powers set out to establish colonies around the world, they have systematically dominated and attempted to subjugate countless indigenous peoples that they have come into contact with, many of which are embodied cultures. Indigenous peoples were defined in European terms, denigrating and idealizing with little accuracy. Then missionaries, educators and the World Bank set out to make them over in image of the West, a process that continues to this day. With the advent of ‘multiculturalism’ and increased talk of ‘diversity,’ some sectors of the United States have begun a shift in attitude – at the same time that affirmative action laws for higher education are being wiped out. Extraordinarily, some of these embodied peoples have preserved their continuity of culture in the face of continued efforts, both covert and violent, to convert them to a Western model. These cultures have attracted the interest of Westerners who are responding to a pervasive lack of kinesthetic presence in their culture of origin. I will be discussing Pan African culture as an example of embodied culture proper and as the source of dissemination of an embodied culture into a literate, technological one, specifically the United States.

Whereas many indigenous societies stress survival through continuity and bonding, the contemporary society of the United States seems caught in a cycle of novelty and obsolescence, when a tool, a toy, an article of clothing or a computer become useless at carefully planned intervals. In place of supported bonding with each other, we are taught to use objects and images to answer the impulses that propel us to connect with other people, replacing personal contact and bodily interaction. Having sexualized all touch, we have placed a taboo even on affection towards young children in their classrooms.

How far have we come from the body? As disembodied voices, we speak on telephones. Computers and fax machines subtract even the voice and reduce us to
electronic print. Letters? No one writes letters (snail mail) anymore. That would admit a social deficiency, which is preferably concealed: no e-mail address! Many of us spend staggering amounts of our time paying close attention to a black box projecting carefully programmed and commodified images, becoming spectators rather than actively interacting with our families and friends. We communicate across vast distances, ceasing to communicate with those physically close to us. During the nonverbal years when our children need the reassurance and communication of physical closeness, we have designed car seats and strollers to carry them away from the body.

Geography has become disembodied as well. While cars create the illusion of covering distances, in reality the body has been strapped into stillness. Airplanes jump continents while muscles atrophy and obesity is at a record level in the population. We purchase labor saving devices and then pay memberships in health clubs where we can "burn off calories" performing the work of lifting weights, and running on tracks that take us nowhere, even reading books at the same time so the mind can split off from the body.

We work to acquire rather than to produce. We live in an age when young people are considered to hold knowledge that is more applicable and useful than their elders because continual technological "upgrading" makes wisdom and life experience obsolete. When I spend time in the Native American community of the Salish tribe and am treated with respect because of my age, I realize that in contrast in my own community it is a liability.

The density of activity in the modern world made possible by technology has been welcomed without regard for its negative side. Automobiles are an obvious example. One would think that being able to travel quickly from one place to another would be an indisputable advantage. However, it is expensive to own, repair and fuel a car, and half of urban real estate is now taken up with roads and parking spaces constructed to
accommodate cars (Renner 1989:82. Then we pay to walk on treadmills at health clubs. When walking is the mode of transportation used, it doubles as exercise, time for reflection or socializing. It costs nothing, is non-polluting and, importantly, spaces activities through the reality of the time it takes to cover distances. Since it takes place outside, it is also a time for interaction with the natural world. Similarly, before telephones, contact had to be made person to person, which limited the number of people who could speak with each other in any given day. The body enforces life at a different pace. Now the telephone has become so intrusive, accessibility has to be buffered with answering machines and caller I.D. There is seldom an actual person on the other end of the telephone line.

Conversation Across Cultures

In the winter of 1999 I had an enlightening conversation at the University Center with Abdul Zulani, an exchange student from Saudi Arabia, that epitomizes the complexities and differences of cultural attitudes towards the body. I had met him at the Missoula Farmer's Market earlier that summer. He stood out as a foreigner, not only because of his dark skin and phenotypically African features in a primarily white town, but more markedly through a difference in body language. There was a formality in his upright posture that was accompanied by a contradictory ease in his movement. I couldn't place him as either African or American, and asked where he was from. We had continued to say hello occasionally, but this time he invited me to sit at a table and talk. He had questions.

“I want to know,” he asked me intently, “do you think that Americans are free? Do you think that this is a free country? Look around. These people are not free.”
I looked around the student union, trying to see the people around us - sitting, walking and conversing - through his eyes. What first struck me was the atmosphere of physical restraint, subdued voices and inexpressive neutral faces, minimal movement close to the body, restricted primarily to arms and legs, energy, downcast eyes and extreme conformity and lack of color in clothing.

I said, somewhat defensively, "We say we are free because we can write or speak whatever we think and express our political opinions freely. That is how we define freedom. We don't consider Saudi Arabians free because you can be put in prison in your country for expressing your thoughts."

"No, I don't agree" he said, shaking his head and gesturing emphatically with his hands. "Americans are not free, this is not freedom." I realized he was talking body, I was talking mind.

We were joined at that point by his friend Abdulai, another Saudi Arabian student, who was as white as Abdulai was black, broad where he was slender, straight haired where Abdulai's was kinked, and wearing glasses to add to the contrast. Yet they were countrymen, and agreed that if I were not sitting with them, they would be speaking Arabic. They discussed the celebration of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting which had just begun. Abdul agreed with Abdulai and, laughing, said that the part of Arabia that Abdulai was from, "people are very free. They sing, they dance, they express themselves." Abdulai laughed and agreed, and obliged us by singing for a moment.
Then they turned to me and asked, echoing each other, “Why don’t you have belly
dancing here? Belly dancing is good.”

I answered that it was considered too erotic, that movement in the pelvis and
shoulders in our Protestant culture was considered too sexual, and that was offensive and
not encouraged. It had actually been forbidden at the Farmer’s Market the preceding
summer as inappropriate for families (Kathleen Tauber, pers. conv).

Abdulai rolled his eyes. “No, no, no. I pass a sign on the street in the town, it says,
‘Nude Dancing, Twelve Girls Daily’ What is this? This is not erotic, this is not offensive?
But there it is.” He sputtered with exasperation and disdain, raising his voice as he made a
face and rolled his eyes, again gesturing widely. I was at a loss to respond. What are these
contradictions? Why do they exist here?

As I was growing up in a professorial, Protestant family in Montana, I felt what I
would define as a great loneliness of the body, a body that had been folded up and put away
in my upbringing. For me it burst out in childhood gypsy play with my neighborhood
playmates, packing tablecloths and bedspreads in wagons we hauled from yard to yard and
hanging improvised tents on clotheslines. Once we had set up ‘camp,’ we danced, clapping,
jumping and twirling in full, weighted skirts, bright kerchiefs on our heads. We spun till we
dropped, dizzy but fully engaged in our relationship with our bodies and the movement
forces of the earth, which wrestled us to the ground when we lost our vertical spoke. But
there was no one to teach us. We tried soccer and the baseball field, but what we were
looking for was not there. We tried piano lessons and little girl ballet, continuing to strike
out.

21
I experienced moments of full engagement when I began to train and identify myself as a 'dancer,' usually alone, improvising or choreographing in a studio, sometimes dancing socially to live music in nightclubs. When I moved to New York City and entered the serious circles of the 'Art Dance' scene, choreographers were presenting work that was increasingly alienated from music. It was considered immature, dependent and inappropriate to create dance that 'went' with the music. When music was used it was to create a 'sound environment' or provide, contrast or mood. Dancing to the counts was at best unoriginal and, to borrow a current slang term that was not in use then, "retro." Most of the music used (to this day) was recorded, with occasional instances of music being composed for the performance in question. Merce Cunningham, a major modern dance choreographer, and John Cage, a composer of contemporary music, made a name for themselves in New York by presenting music and dance simultaneously in performance that had never been rehearsed together. Cunningham says in a videotaped interview:

When John and I began to work together, that's the way we always worked. He could make the music separately and I could make the dance separately and then the music and dance would occupy the same time, the music for the ear and the dance for the eye. So it's not a thing about music supporting the dance... Independence was to be respected (Cunningham 1987).

Therefore in New York City in 1982, it was a completely realigning experience to walk into my first Afro-Haitian dance class with Haitian expatriate artist Serge St. Juste, and hear live music and singing that was integral to the dancing that was taking place. In the Pan African dance and music I have been exposed to, particular dances and songs are performed to specific rhythms. As years of study went by my body learned to respond to the changing cues in the rhythms, altering the step before my mind was conscious of the shift. Serge taught us "old school." He demanded relentless concentration, attentiveness and full
presence, from everyone, all the time. The intensity was a relief, a necessary component to
the depth and scope of the transmission of the dances. I realized over time that this was
more than an art form. Religion, history, commentary, myth were encoded in the dances
and music. They were both a manifestation and a record of the Vodoun culture, as well as
the repository, the reservoir of the energy it used to survive both the travails of daily
existence, and the unspeakable ordeal of cultural upheaval and slavery. This gave the work a
weight and significance that I had been missing in my corner of sometimes narcissistic,
personality driven, personal identity searching environment of the post modern dance
world. After several years I also began serious study of the rhythms, having realized they
were an integral part of the knowledge.

At that time I crossed a threshold that led to a rich and ancient embodied tradition
that has been my teacher ever since. As a dancer, I felt I had come home. Here dance was
an honored, integral member of all activities, expressing, celebrating, narrating. The
importance of dance within this tradition is described by Pearl Primus, an African-American
dancer who traveled to Africa in the 50's:

Here people still use their bodies as instruments through which every conceivable emotion or event is projected. The result is a strange but hypnotic marriage between life and dance. The two are inseparable. No child could be born, no man buried without dance. They dance the sowing of the seed and the harvest, puberty rites, hunting, warfare. They dance for rain, sun, strong and numerous children, marriages, and play. Love hatred, fear, joy, sorrow, disgust, amazement – all these, all other emotions are expressed through rhythmic movement” (Primus 1958:319).

I was continually confronted with the shattering of preconceived concepts of what
dance could be. Because of its place of primary importance in Pan African culture, dance
has evolved into a sophisticated, intricate, immense body of knowledge (pun intended).
Both the scope and actual technique of the movement vocabulary itself and its contextual meaning have unfolded, and unfolded since that time, revealing a depth of human experience, creativity, interaction and history that has lived and continues to live outside the record of the literate world, transmitted orally, body to body, person to person over centuries. I realized that I had found a body of knowledge that I could study my whole life and never reach the end of, and teachers to guide me in its acquisition. Rather than despair that I might never master it, I felt relief that I had found a task with such depth. I shall endeavor to describe it, although condensing these multi-dimensional qualities into words is a nigh impossible task. I echo dancer/author Barbara Browning when she says, “There are things I learned in Brazil with my body, and some of these things it has taken me years to learn to articulate in writing. But that is not to say that they were without meaning when I could only speak them through dance.” (Browning 1995:xii)

**Kinesthetic Intelligence / Embodied Thought**

This brings us to an important aspect of the body, which has been radically devalued in the present day: its ability to express, move, communicate, remember, manipulate and create.

Harvard professor Howard Gardner came up with the term “kinesthetic intelligence” to describe these combined attributes in his book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*:

A description of use of the body as a form of intelligence may at first jar. There has been a radical disjunction in our recent cultural tradition between the activities of reasoning, on the one hand, and the activities of the manifestly physical part of our nature, as epitomized by our bodies, on the other. This divorce between the ‘mental’ and the ‘physical’ has not infrequently been coupled with a notion that what we do with our bodies is somehow less privileged, less special, than those problem-solving routines carried out chiefly through the use of language, logic, or some other relatively abstract symbolic system (Gardner 1983:207).
This insight is echoed by Barbara Browning, who has spent decades dancing in Brazil:

Most U.S. scholars have an understanding of the meaning of dance that still fundamentally assumes a mind-body division. Significance is ascribed to the choreographic act: the art of designed motion. In Brazil, there are certain dances, which, in effect, write their own meanings. And there is an understanding of the possibility of a corporeal intelligence (Browning 1995:xii).

The ‘disjunction’ that Gardner defines between reasoning (mind) and physically grounded activities (body), the mind-body division that Browning refers to, are a major motivating source attracting Americans to cultural practices that are still manifested in societies that retain relationships to the rhythms of ‘physical’ existence and the natural world. The world we did not make, but have inhabited since the time of our beginnings. Cycles of birth, maturity and death, marking the passing of the seasons, worship, farming, hunting, courtship and expression of the self in the celebrated context of community – these are some of the meaningful life activities acknowledged in African performance forms including percussion, singing, storytelling, and dancing (Dagan 1997:122-127), as represented by contemporary expatriate artists in the United States.

Because of the areas lacking in our own culture, we must come to terms with the fact that as “civilized” people, we are attracted literally and metaphorically by the unabashed potency of art forms of Pan African culture as embodied by its physical vitality and complex expressiveness. This expressiveness wedds sophisticated bodily control with studied abandon, affirms sexuality and exhibits a secure relationship with the cycle of life into death into life. We are intrigued by a daily conversance with the world of living gods and embodied spirit in proportion to their degree of absence from our own present circumstances and culture (Deren 1953; Beckford 1979; Turner 1987). This is an attraction to very real principles, activities and knowledge, but subject to distortion because of our ignorance about the reality
of life in Africa and its Diaspora, and the projection by Westerners of their fantasies about
Africans both as “primitives” and as the (anthropologically designated) “Other”

Anthropologist Stanley Diamond went to Nigeria in the 1960’s to study an intriguing
ethnic group, the Anaguta who were still managing to maintain an intact culture. Comparing
the Anaguta with their neighbors the Igbo, who were much affected by centuries of contact
with civilization he wrote:

Igbo solidarity, egalitarianism, love of the land and highly developed social
reflexes have primitive roots, but the transformations in the Igbo society
had long since shifted their forms and functions. All that these Africans
fully had in common was the color of their skins. They still shared rhythm
and laughter and a certain ease of movement. I suppose that the
psychological precondition of these traits, though not the cultural cause, is a
generous and disciplined gratification of the senses in infancy. The more
civilized the person the less pronounced these traits (Diamond 1974:61)

The constant here is the body, the site that continually refers us back to a grounded
interaction of physical and energetic reality. The result of the neglect and suppression of
kinesthetic intelligence in Western culture is a population that is unable to ‘read the body.’
“Even in rare and specific contexts in which the body’s motion is acknowledged to be
communicating something, we have a limited notion of what that communication
comprises.” (Browning 1995:xi) Because the body is considered unimportant, its practices
have become invisible to the business of the society. Obviously people continue to use their
bodies, eating, sleeping, walking, copulating, performing technological tasks, birthing,
healing, exercising -- but at a low level of consciousness.

When an individual, say a performer or an athlete, exhibits clear kinesthetic ability, it
is considered a fluke, an exception, rather than the birthright of each of us. A birthright to
have a body that is strong and beautiful and articulate as a result of daily use from gestation, confident not only to execute daily tasks but expressive, graceful. A body with a sophisticated, far reaching vocabulary of movement and gesture, that is a repository of knowledge that reaches beyond the conscious mind and is remembered and manifested through motion. How many Americans fit this description? Anthropologist Michael Jackson describes himself:

Until I was in my mid-thirties, my awareness extended into my body only to the extent that I grew hungry, experienced lust, felt pain or weariness, and did not resemble the somatotype of popular advertising. My body passed into and out of my awareness like a stranger; whole areas of my physical being and potentiality were dead to me, like locked rooms. . . . When I took courses in hatha yoga it was like picking the locks of a cage (Jackson 1989:119)

As a dancer and a teacher I am confronted daily with people's inhibition, lack of coordination, and the remedial movement skills of both children and adults when asked to move in patterns, or to do anything that involves being expressive in front of others. In adults the atrophy of years of inaction makes many movements seem impossible, while in children they are daunting because of their unfamiliarity. I have taught rooms full of grade-schoolers who cannot do cross crawl movement (oppositional movement such as moving the right hand and the left leg at the same time) which has been linked to the brain patterning integral to learning to read. This has raised an alarm, illustrating the inability of the right and left cortexes to work together, which is labeled dyslexia. We get interested when this impairs literacy, but ignore its implications of dysfunction in a myriad of other functions. Lack of coordination is simply accepted as a personality trait, instead of a symptom of what is missing in the developmental environment of a child. This lack of kinesthetic development goes unnoticed and is even culturally acceptable at some level,
though watching children sit for hours at computer screens and television eventually triggers uneasiness in parents. Possibly the children will be placed in soccer or dance or martial arts, with no modeling of skill or participation by their parents.

I encountered a disparity in the readiness of children of different ethnic backgrounds to participate in movement during the six years, I spent teaching dance in a private after school program at Friends Seminary in New York City from 1985 to 1991. Although non-white students made up only 10% of the student body (including children of East Indian, African American, Korean and Hispanic ancestry), they made up 90% of my dance classes. Often the only boys in the class were non-white. I was also teaching in an after school program at Grand Street Settlement House, which served a low-income neighborhood of Black and Hispanic population. There, everybody danced. At the same time I watched the children of my African, Haitian and African-American friends outperform myself and other adults in upper level dance classes regardless of age. This is a culturally ingrained attitude in the United States. Children who have no experience or modeling of embodied learning from adults in their family and social circles often grow up to be people who believe themselves incapable of any kinesthetically expressive activity (dance). They are missing a major portion of the equation of human interaction.

This is the gap. This is what the search is about. The search for the language of the body, encoded in movement. For an integrated, multi-dimensional self.

Irish ethnomusicologist John Blacking, an Irish anthropologist and musician who was on the ground floor of the formation of ethnomusicology as a field, has been a voice of innovation and insight in regard to the perception of music and dance. During the fifteen
years he spent in South Africa, both teaching in Cape Town and doing fieldwork with the Venda people of the northern Transvaal, he became convinced that music and dance are part of the infrastructure of human society. Together they compose a crucial body of knowledge in the education of children, integral to creating balanced individuals and social groupings. He considers that the production of dance, music and ritual is more important than economic production, language and kinship systems that ethnographers typically study. (This fits with my personal philosophy: “I don’t dance to eat. I eat to dance”).

There is little doubt that ‘music’ and ‘dance’ are species-specific behaviors that are part of the human bio-grammar and that as primary modeling systems of communication they preceded speech in human history. Thinking in motions, a mode of thought characteristic of the operations of the right hemisphere of the brain, appears to be phylogenetically as well as ontogenetically (in the behavior of infant children) older and more basic than thinking in concepts. The earlier species of human being, *Homo erectus* and *Homo Sapiens Neanderthalis*, had cultures and cultural traditions that were passed on from one generation to another, but they did not have speech as we know it. Verbal language is not a prerequisite of human thought (Blacking 1988 cited in Grau 1995).

Blacking also points out that this is the mode of being that children enter when they are born. They experience consciousness through their bodies. Unable to communicate in words, they are telepathic, intuitive, their sense of time is highly expanded, the world is tasted, felt, sounded, moved and recorded in the body. In many earth based societies, the children are carried on the body of its caregiver, communicating kinesthetically for years. Blacking considers this an “angelic state,” and is convinced that if children are involved in dance and music as they develop, they retain an awareness and access to that state (Blacking cited in Grau 1995).
Kineshetic intelligence (thought and awareness expressed through body movement and the execution of skilled action) is an immensely powerful force. It has the ability to catch our imagination and gives us faith in the body in an age when weapons have made skills of a warrior irrelevant. (as when a sword wielding adept is blown away by Indiana Jones’s gun in the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*). We see mythic portrayals in Star Wars of the Jedi knight – modeled on martial art, which is a body/spirit discipline. Compare this with a description of a Yoruba adept: “When the Yoruba speak of an individual with *ashe*, ‘*alashe*’, a person with authority, they usually mean one with innate metaphysical power who by virtue of this power maintains complete and awesome control over spiritual realms and, by extension, over social ones” (Verger 1964:16 cited in Drewal 1992:2003). However, for the Yoruba, this power is not fiction; it is a fact of life, learned and witnessed.

I am reminded of one of Joseph Campbell’s last interviews with Bill Moyers on a public television series in 1988 entitled *The Power of Myth*.

Bill Moyers exclaimed earnestly to him, “But is divinity just what we think?”

Campbell said simply, “Yes.”

Moyers asked, “What does that do to faith?”

Campbell looked at him quizzically and said, “Faith? I don’t have to have faith. I have experience” (Campbell 1988).

It has been a Western convention to undermine the realities of embodied cultures, discounting the experience of millions of the world’s people and our own ancestors by dismissing beliefs and occurrences as ‘superstition,’ religions as ‘cults,’ spontaneous healing as psychosomatic, etc. Members of my own family have dismissed my study of Vodoun culture as ‘devil worship.’ “African ancestral religions were equated with the devil (who was
black anyway), and it took a very long time before some European churchmen accepted prevailing African beliefs as constituting religion rather than witchcraft and magic” (Rodney 1974:273).

Yet in our media the body has become the site of cinematic magic. Here we encounter another aspect of the inherent resonance of embodied experience artistically employed and commodified through imagery to be marketed to disembodied populace.

The Star Wars movie series, along with martial arts movies and spin-offs of action/adventure/fighting films, respond to a hunger in their audiences for body engagement provide vicarious satisfaction through the use of increasingly sophisticated choreographed fight scenes, and the imbuing of their heroes, in this case the mysterious Jedi knights, with psychic and physical powers that border on magic. These knights, (all male, though of many different species), are born with special abilities and trained from childhood in a discipline modeled after Asian martial arts that fuse spiritual awareness with relentless training of perceptual and movement skills. The result, in these stories, is a being with extra-human abilities that border on the legendary. While guns are also present in these stories, many conflicts are 'hand to hand' combat, where these skilled warriors triumph over armed foes. The laser sword of the Jedi is wielded as a symbol of the personal power and confidence of its owner. The body is the site of ultimate power. It wins, even against technology. An increasingly overweight and inactive population pays to watch and sits, entranced.

These characters have seized the contemporary imagination and provided validation of the articulate body for a generation of children whose minds have received more attention than their bodies. It is my experience that these children live in the gap. They long
for the activities that allow for more than sublimation and fantasy of these kinesthetic impulses, their need to engage in meaningful bodily expression. This isn't just wrestling and brute strength they're attracted to. It is the infusion of awareness, intelligence and intention into physical skill.

In the past this kind of knowledge has been transmitted through the human family, body to body, person to person, cell to cell, over thousands of years. For reasons I do not grasp, this knowledge is no longer supported by the dominant culture, which undermines it actively, as well as through ignorance and neglect. Embodied expression survives because it is integral to human functioning, and is resurfacing in our own culture in present times. The amount of time children sit passively in front of a screen now averages thirty eight hours a week (Missoulian 2000:A11). School, where they also spend a lot of time sitting, occupies only twenty five to thirty hours). Let's do the math. Lets say sleeping, eating, bathing, homework and transportation take up 13 hours a day (91 plus 30 plus 38 equals 159)– this leaves a possible nine hours of the 168 hours in a week that might be spent doing something physical. Help!

Traditions that link knowledge and energy with movement do exist in some sectors but none of them could be counted mainstream. Sports training could include it but generally follows a medical/mechanical model of the body, almost defining itself by its attitude towards the body as an object. Martial arts in their purest form acknowledge the connection between spirit and body. My list would also include acting training in physical theater and any nonverbal performance, and unwritten music that is transmitted through oral culture.
However the most obvious domain of embodied awareness and knowledge in the United States is that of dance culture.
Invisible in Plain Sight

Dance culture is a broad term I will use to encompass everything from the 'Mary Jane School of Ballet,' (a type of children's dance studio that capitalizes on the willingness of parents to make mascots of their tiny daughters), to dance drill teams and cheerleading squads at sports events, professional preparatory dance training, creative dance invoking growing flowers, contact improvisation, dance therapy, social dance classes, nightclub dancing, Grateful Dead Festival boogying, hip hop, 'Riverdance,' gymnastic, skating and aquatic choreography, dance videos, post modern, professional performance companies, ethnic forms, spontaneous responses to music, romantic dance floor gyrations, 'dance numbers' inserted into theatrical productions, 'routines' performed by back up singers, nonverbal theater . . . The list is long and lacking in coherence. A 'good dancer' recognizes another 'good dancer' like a harmonic pitch matches another resonant note, regardless of the movement format. The common point of intersection is the moving body, with differing amounts of attention paid to what is being expressed. Standing ovations are almost guaranteed at almost any performance, the standard often rests at simply exhibiting the willingness to move publicly.

Who dances? The vast majority of dancers are female, and young. Many of the remaining male minority of dancers are undeterred by societal prejudice associating dance with homosexuality because they actually are gay. Men of minority ethnicities, particularly Latin and African, tend to dance more socially but are unlikely to study seriously or perform. Since dance lessons require tuition, those who advance to performance level
training are usually at least middle class. There are still residues of the attitude in upper class of considering dance part of a gentile upbringing for young women, but not a career option.

It is not an accident that dance is the poorest, least respected sister of the arts. In my readings I came across a book that minced no words entitled: "Adversaries of the Dance, From the Puritans to the Present" (Wagner 1997). Help! Yet another dancer writes:

It has been disparaged as a minor art unworthy of study in the West due to the survival of many obsolete prejudices. Those who saw dance in this way shared the Puritan distrust of body beauty and gaiety and allowed only an inferior status to theatrical performers. Dance, a play like form, was, in the Puritan ethic, the enemy of work and permitted only to children. Thus people repudiated the body and therefore, dance, equating it with the devil's handiwork, animal instincts, and lower forms of life (Hanna 1979)

The low status of dance has been a reality since the Puritan inception of this country. Adversaries of Dance relates a curious story about upper class Boston society in the 1790's. The Puritan community of Boston, after much soul searching about the possible soul corrupting influence of music, had installed a beautiful pipe organ in their church. They had to send to England for a musician to play it. The only respondent to their offer agreed to come only if it was stipulated in his contract that he could supplement his meager organists salary by giving private dance lessons. Of course, once his students learned their fashionable dances, they wanted to dance at their parties, which caused even more soul searching about the corrupting . . . Pandora's box had been opened (Wagner 1997:127).

It is true. Where there is music, dance is close behind. There are languages in Africa in which the word for dance is so broad it also denotes movement in the natural world, or includes dance, singing and drumming as a single activity (Dagan 1997:pp). In America, dance and drumming is acknowledged only when it is necessary to control or
suppress it. I have been present at countless social gatherings of dance and drumming, indoors and out, which were terminated by visits from the police. At a performance I attended by Cubanismo, a salsa orchestra direct from Cuba at the University of Montana in the spring of 2000, two bouncers were assigned to prevent audience members from dancing anywhere but on the slanted ramps on the far side aisle's of the theater. The orchestra leader, apparently puzzled by the lack of response, finally issued a direct invitation for the audience to come and dance directly in front of band, teaching a dance from the stage. The staging of a salsa dance orchestra in a theater shows a lack of cultural awareness to begin with. The awareness that people would attempt to dance was seen as a problem, and met with control and repression, rather than booking a venue where it would be appropriate (pers. exp. 2000)

I return to the low status of dance, which I perceive to be linked to the low status of the embodied knowledge in Euro-centric culture, and also to the low status of Pan African peoples and practices because, in part, they manifest the values of embodied culture. This is also related to the relative low status of its practitioners, being primarily female, gay and financially marginal, but I am not going to pursue those issues in depth in this paper.

Dancer Randy Martin, in *Performance as Political Act* has presented the thesis that Western European culture has obtained control of its population through consensual control of the mind, differentiating that control from coercive control (of the body) in totalitarian societies.

Modern civilization depends on the capacity of both executive authorities and culture to discipline the body. Techniques of control go beyond the coercive powers of the state institutions . . . Since the end of the sixteenth
In other words, our 'minds' enforce the current social order. We now actively accept that we need to acquire certain kinds of knowledge in order to 'make a living,' and spend our time acquiring, spectating, sitting, reading, computing – not a very kinetic existence. Security comes not from our confidence in our body's ability to negotiate life tasks and our established relationships to share survival and positive existence within human communities, but from money (purchasing power) and mental acuity.

Martin contends that once the mind is focused on the (insatiable) quest for fulfillment through the acquisition of commodities and the images linked to them, (including the created, commodified body of the health club enthusiast), the expressive, articulate body has become for all intents and purposes invisible. In this arena of invisibility a true freedom exists, because it is a domain in which the dominant culture does not perceive a threat. This domain, in which dancer and performers of movement or physical theater create and perform their work, work which disappears at the close of each performance and only manifests for the time span of the movement performed does not exist for the culture at large. It is, in actuality, a vast portion of the human experience, for, as Susan Langer so beautifully puts it:

Between the facts run the threads of unrecorded reality, momentarily recognized, wherever they come to the surface... the bright, twisted threads of symbolic envisagement, imagination, thought – memory and reconstructed memory, belief beyond experience, dream, make-believe, hypothesis, philosophy – the whole creative process of ideation, metaphor,
and abstraction that makes human life an adventure in understanding (1941).

Western culture, fixated on material reality, facts, and logical discourse, disregards its existence. The ability to consciously interpret embodied language, to read the body has been lost. We have a society of ‘kinesthetically impaired’ who have not been trained to interpret the nonverbal language of the body and its movement. “Even in the rare and specific contexts in which the body’s motion is acknowledged to be communicating something, we have a limited notion of what that communication comprises.” (Browning 1995:xi) Along with disregarding the wheeling of birds, the breath of wind, the passage of cloud patterns.

There is no doubt that the human body - in particular the moving body - has remained virtually invisible to the vast majority of socio-cultural anthropologists until recently. This due to a longstanding bias against the body in the western philosophical tradition which in turn has led to few social theorists taking the embodiment of persons seriously. (Farnell 1995:4)

Dance both suffers and profits from this blind spot. I would like to include an account of an event that illustrates the daily presence of these attitudes, and the irrepressible impulses that refuse to be suppressed.

The Dance Department at the University of Montana fosters a lively interest in choreography, and hosts a showcase of student work twice a year in which many levels of dance ability and interest are presented. Its sold out performances are attended by dance students, friends of the choreographers and performers, parents, and a smattering of community dance enthusiasts. All in all it is a very in-house audience, usually drawing little comment outside of its adherents.
In the Fall semester of 1999, a young woman presented an experimental dance piece with five dancers, (three men, two women). The dance had elements in its aesthetic approach that recalled *Butoh*, a Japanese form of modern dance that is sparse and meditative, relying heavily on the slow presentation of unfolding images and relationships between the dancers, performed at an incremental pace, often in the nude or near nude. The choreographer decided she wanted to costume the dancers in trunks only, leaving their chests bare. The dance faculty viewed the piece and respectfully approved her choice as appropriate to her dance. However, word got out that there would be two sets of bared breasts in this showcase, and suddenly the Dance Department at U of M was catapulted into visibility. The Dean of Fine Arts, who was new to the faculty, became alarmed that this would result in adverse publicity and prohibited it. News agencies seized on it as attention getting press and it made papers from as far away as Oregon. Then more discussions were held and precedence of other semi-nude performances cited and the dance was reinstated in the concert.

I attended the performance and found the dance to be modest (as in not-an-erotic-gesture-in-the-whole-dance), experimental, unfinished, interesting, and even innocent. The nudity conveyed an equality between the dancers that was not charged. It helped communicate a common quality of embodiment, simplicity and lack of artifice, a level playing ground on which the dances explored relationship, intersection, drama. It was unpretentious, a serious effort at a meaningful task. The attention paid to the dance was out of all proportion to it as simply a piece of student choreography, and subjected its choreographer to what I consider a damaging amount of adverse attention in what was a very personal and tender creative process. It was an assault by the culture on an individual
who violated the social construct. By choosing to bare the body in a serious effort of art and communication, dance became visible and threatening. I found the level of reaction very revealing, in light of the issues of embodiment and corporeal visibility/invisibility I am raising here.

What was the threat? Suddenly the inanimate, material body crossed over into the articulated domain of power. If a woman is a topless “exotic dancer” in a nightclub, her body acts as a projected image, and is controlled, commodified, by being reduced to a sex toy, an image. The dancer is not a person, she is an idea, an image. She is paid to play a role, and patrons pay to see her. Somehow the partial nudity in the costuming of the dance broke through the image level that was being projected and made the corporeal body, the body itself visible, as it exercised its true power as a communicating force, as the locus for embodied thought and expression. (Though oddly or aptly enough, none of the censors were interested in the content of the dance). It had threatened the social agreement that the body exists as only as an agent of the mind.

Another breast/body visibility incident took place at the “Carnival Against Capitalism, a Global day of Action” in Seattle the week of November 30th, 1999 during the closed meetings of the World Trade Organization. In response to arrests, tear gas, pellet guns and beatings by the police, a group of ‘radical lesbian mothers’ stood arm in arm in front of the jail facility being used to incarcerate demonstrators, bare breasted, with a letter painted on each woman’s chest spelling, ‘G A S T H I S’, accompanied and supported by chanting from the crowd. The police did not touch them. Sue Gregerson, who was present throughout the demonstrations, said there was widespread use of street theater, including giant puppets, colorful costumes, street bands and chanting (singing?) to diffuse hostile
confrontation and facilitate communication, drawing many spectators into the streets to become participants in body. While police confronted groups that were clearly ‘demonstrators’ with signs or sitting in the streets, they left the performers alone. A group called the Turtle Brigade wearing giant turtle shells strapped to their backs roamed the streets freely, crossing barricades and police lines, acting as cheerleaders and offering encouragement and humor. They were not stopped by authorities. I theorize this is because they kept moving. Another group, the Incessant Noise Band, with saxophones, kazoois, bongos, etc., played the part of a marching band (in suitable uniforms), and were not troubled.

...the mechanisms of consent remain silent in their control of the practices of the body... the mechanisms of consent to the dominion of capitalism are based upon an accretion of meanings portrayed in the cultural commodities that attempt to constitute a consciousness. While it must be stressed that this consciousness can only be partial and that it often reveals its own inability to deliver what it promises, alternative, emancipatory forms of consciousness are nonetheless forced to compete on terms bounded by domination... Moving from spectator to actor appears as a problem either of becoming more articulate, more expressive than the existing system of commodified meaning, or of occupying the margins, the aisles of social life (Martin 1990:7).

Considering how fundamentally challenging African culture is to European derived values, this invisibility may be an element in how it has managed both to survive where it was forcibly transplanted out of Africa (through) slavery, and managed to enter and disseminate its aesthetic throughout the United States, Europe, (England, France, Sweden, Belgium and Germany), Japan and Australia and elsewhere. For my purposes I will focus on survival and entry of Pan African cultural forms of dance and music into contemporary United States culture in the 20th century.
Scholarship Versus Embodiment: Visibility in Print

Writing about dance. What's wrong with this picture? For many years (until the mid-1980's) there has been a paucity of scholarly reflection in print concerning dance, either in the field of performance and art criticism, or anthropology. Dance ethnography has also been a much neglected field, lagging years behind ethnomusicology, although they are integral to one another, dance being almost always accompanied by some form of music, and music is seldom played without implying movement, even in embodied stillness.

There are several reasons for this, paramount being that dance is nonverbal and non-literate. There is a saying "a picture is worth a hundred words." I would add, "and a dance is worth ten thousand." Add to this the cultural blinders of many Westerners viewing dance, charged with negative Protestant admonitions and lacking skill in describing and interpreting movement. The outcome has left much to be desired.

"Scholars generally have a limited view of dance, although it is a nearly universal and often complex behavior. "Then they danced" is the common remark ad nauseam. Ethnocentrism reigns to such an extent that scholars call dances which differ from their ballet or jig a "lewd ambling" or "imitative fornication," Scholar's notions about dance in their own cultures influence their views of dances in other cultures: false dichotomies are drawn between "primitive" and "non-primitive," and they both often have comparable complexity in their movements and meaning and in the rules for combining these (Hanna 1979:8)

Another obvious impediment to a literature on dance is that scholarship and dance are each mutually exclusive full time occupations. Dance requires daily physical training, and stopping dancing to write about it is a 'catch twenty-two.' The temperament for dance and movement and that for academic pursuit are dissimilar, and perhaps herein lies our entire thesis. On the one hand we have the values of embodied (West) Africa, enacting a
life of daily labor, spending time and creative energy when not working to enact rituals and community observances that are known collectively, or remembered by designated individuals. On the other, there is the American culture of the spectator, the image, the mind, where the news bite of an event on television carries more weight than its actual occurrence, and volumes of literature and records are written down or stored, in text, electronically.

My first foray into dance scholarship came when as a freshman in college I used a book a former teacher happened to give me in Spain. I was using this pamphlet size book, *The Dance in Ancient Greece* (Lawler 1964), as a resource for an art criticism paper, using the dancers depicted on the Greek vases in the illustrations as subject material. As I read the text of the book I was repulsed by the condescending and insulting attitude of the writer towards much or the subject material. I was puzzled that she had gone to the trouble of mentally reconstructing dances whose celebrants had turned to dust thousands of years ago, when her descriptions were colored by a thinly veiled emotional vehemence, a negative moral twist, that detracted from the very existence of the dances and their rituals and uses. I put it away and pursued my important academic education, taking those unimportant dance classes on the side.

Years elapsed, and when I opened the book again, I had begun studying Haitian and African dance. Suddenly I realized that if the dated words of judgment and attitude were struck from the text, *The Dance in Ancient Greece* (Lawler 1964) was actually a very clear description of the dance and music I was studying from the African Diaspora. The role that dance and music culture played in Greek culture prior to the birth of Christ, perhaps even before 2000 B. C. was very similar to practices that continue to the present day in Africa,
and were disseminated wherever people of African ancestry live in the world. The condescending language and the assumption that the performers were unsophisticated, and the perception of percussion as ‘noise’ is very similar to European descriptions of traditional ceremonies in Africa as long ago as the 1600’s. This comes through even though Lawler is describing events thousands of years old that she has never seen. She is a good measure of the lens through which Europeans were predisposed to evaluate the community performance activities they were observing in other cultures. She writes:

> In its earliest form, the dance of the Cretes consisted undoubtedly of random, uncouth leaps, executed with as much energy as possible, and accompanied by blood curdling yells. Even in classical times certain Cretan dance-songs were notoriously loud. The dancers and spectators probably clapped their hands or beat sticks together to add to the noise. When the tribe learned the use of metals, the superior noisemaking qualities of metallic objects would instantly become evident, and cooking utensils, tools, axes, or weapons would be used as noise-makers... Other types of dance... are various hymn-like processions, simple and graceful dances of women, wedding dances and the old ecstatic Dionysic dance itself, with wild running, shouting, tossing of the hair, of thyrsi, and of torches, and the ultimate collapse of the dancers (Lawler 1964:31)

“Random, uncouth, blood curdling, notoriously loud, noisemaking, wild running, shouting, tossing of the hair.” This uncomplimentary description is about a dance that the author has never seen! Lawler comes from in a long line of scholars who for many years were not called upon to lay down their cultural blinders and acknowledge that the context of what they were seeing differed beyond measure from what they were accustomed to. We have finally come to a time when the diversity of meaning and the need to translate not only words but symbolic languages, (of which movement is one), are apparent.

Dance has the potential to be part of that human process by which meanings are exchanged through a common set of symbols. The
communicators may reside in the same world or, as in some belief systems, different realms. References to dance's association with indigenous and syncretistic religious systems abound in scholarly reports from sub-Saharan Africa. And yet they rarely discuss the reason for dance being a prelude to, concomitant of, or successor to other elements of ritual behavior. Usually 'then they danced' suffices (Hanna 1979:101).

Fortunately, the biases of the previous centuries are beginning to be addressed, at least in academic circles, as it is being recognized that:

How people classify the body itself and classify their actions, how they organize and assign value to the space(s) in which they act, and what such "doing" means to these individuals and groups in specific cultural and historic moments are of central concern. In sum, neither observation alone (objectivism) nor its subjectivist opposite in the form of an appeal to some kind of shared pre-linguistic but 'lived' somatic experience is any longer viewed as sufficient as the basis to an understanding of human movement (Farnell 1995:3).

The prejudice of Western culture, in general, and its scholarly tradition, in particular, against dance and the body has created a black hole in the study and discussion of culture. It is no secret that the Christian Church has waged a two thousand year campaign to suppress dance "as an expression of the body's wickedness and carnal nature" (Lawler 1964:142).

...Most scholars of an 'art' form have at least some minimal experience in it. Disparagement of dance discouraged participation in it. Besides, scholars tended to be men, and in Anglo-Saxon culture men's dancing has effeminate, homosexual overtones. Observers of dance were not acquainted with the body's use of space-rhythm-dynamics dance elements. Because dance appeared more complex than words and music, and often combined with both, observers felt not only dislike, shame, or curiosity toward the body but also detachment from it. Thus developed an inability to 'read' the dancing body (Hanna 1974:8).
This inability on the part of Euro-Americans to "read the body," is a factor in the lack of perception within Western theater tradition that there is common ground between the expressive vocabulary of dance, and that of physical theater. Even today across the United States, while some theater departments incorporate training in physical expression in their programs, the idea that dance is merely a necessary condiment in a musical production persists. The idea that dance is a serious performance art form in and of itself has not penetrated the mainstream of American culture. Jazz and ballet rule, and dancers are oftentimes admired like gymnasts or circus performers for the 'tricks' they perform, or for their fit bodies.

Why? Precisely because dance is an oral tradition and exists primarily encoded in dancers' bodies. Dancers are notoriously inarticulate when it comes to using words to express their ideas. Dance performances are rehearsed for months and disappear into the ether as soon as the show is over, each dancer taking only the fragment of her own role with her, possibly to appear years down the road as gestures in an unrelated work. Even when dances are labnotated or videotaped, when they are to be staged again, a member of the original cast is consulted if at all possible. Reconstruction of a dance with no living person to refer to is a highly specialized skill, and not attempted by many repertory companies. So dance remains low in status on this basis of preserved work, considered somehow inferior to theater because it has no body of literature and has only recently begun to develop written discourses of critical comment and research in any quantity.

Paul Spencer, commenting on the situation suggests that dance "has an elusive quality, which adepts and those who have known it all their lives find easier to demonstrate than to explain in so many words . . . so that, because we have no initial ideas about dance,
we ignore the opportunity that it provides, and because we ignore it the stock of ideas remains low and it continues to be ignored" (Spencer 1989 quo. by Aguilar 1997:89). While publications about dance and embodied issues has burgeoned since the 80’s, this is a very short period of time in comparison to the wider field of anthropology and even shorter if we date from Delsarte’s manifest in 1640. Let me express cautious optimism. What is important now is who will read these works, and how the new concepts will be applied.

I find myself on the defensive here, describing dance as deficient because of a lack of recorded work. It occurs to me that, on the contrary, it could be argued that this circumstance actually exposes dance as a more highly evolved art form because it is so multidimensional that no system has been devised that can effectively notate it. Therefore it must be encoded in the body, and transmitted from body to body, person to person. Its existence in the moment makes it is constantly available to reinvention and reinterpretation by whomever is re-enacting it, while still retaining important core identifying characteristics.

This was apparent to me when I observed particular dances from the Haitian pantheon of loa (gods) as danced in a variety of settings at separate times and by different individuals. I watched female loa danced by men, warrior gods by women, Damballah Wedo, the serpent god of life by everyone. Each performance was slightly different according to the personal temperament, body type and training, but there was a certain characterization, use of weight, use of energy, shaping of the body, the particular movement vocabulary used and the cadence of the rhythm played that left no doubt as to the identity of the loa being danced. Its plasticity, its mutable quality and the fact that it, like music, exists as it is manifested in the moment it is performed, is often thought of as a disadvantage, a limiting factor. Instead, it is actually evidence of its high level of evolution.

47
Again, we have that “elusive quality, which adepts and those who have known it all their lives find easier to demonstrate than to explain in so many words” (Spencer 1985 quo. by Aguilar 1997).

The Elusive Quality: Playing With Life’s Indeterminancy

This elusive quality finds itself at home in the embodied ritual life throughout the Pan African Diaspora, for example, in the “Yoruba sensitivity to the indeterminacy of life as lived and of ritual as practiced” (Drewal 1992). Dance is part of the language of expressed meaning, fused with music, song, mime and speech, in which members of a given congregation, village or ethnic group are fluent. Drewal emphasizes the improvisational elements that come into play within the enactment of ritual, exposing it as a veritable structure for improvisation whose variables are manipulated by individuals.

For example, a Westerner considers it an advantage that a play by an artist, such as Shakespeare, could be written down four hundred years ago and performed today using the same script. However the truth in application is, that while some Shakespeare productions are painstaking efforts at ‘historical authenticity,’ many actively strive to reinterpret, rewrite, edit, re-conceptualize and otherwise alter the text in the interests of relevance or artistic vision. These efforts are met with outrage, applause and endless critical discussion. Imagine if the text of a play was considered a score for improvisation and the performance was judged on the skill of the director and actors to alter and make appropriate changes in it. Any performance of ‘great’ plays could be (or are) improved by the spirit of improvisation. Taking Schechner’s point that even a first time performance is an attempted repetition of a real action, and that in truth nothing is ever repeated, but a continual new version of a
former performance (Schechner 1994), it is apparent that the African acknowledgment that each ritual or festival needs to be adapted and changed is an apt one.

While we treat material possessions as disposable, we continue to add to and preserve our data banks, our bodies of information. Not to be left behind, the field of dance scholarship has begun to make its presence felt in the media of the written word. Since the mid-1980’s new, articulate voices are being raised and this embodied art is being described, defended, explained and discussed in academic journals and conferences. Apparently it must be talked about in order to preserve a place for itself in the wider society. Let us hope this will help, and not sabotage its original impulse, to transcend word and time and bounded consciousness, to flesh out existence and unify our experience, within body and without.

There is a desire in Western culture to encode, capsulate, define and otherwise capture (commodify) events, which is reflected in the approach to ethnography and research. Therefore when a Westerner observes an event that he is told takes place regularly, a ritual or community observance, he looks for it to be the same. It has taken many years for dancers to take to the field of ethnography and use their skills in the minute and subtle perception of movement to record and evaluate the embodied languages of dance in other cultures. Now that this is happening, and dance is being meaningfully interpreted, it is apparent that there is tremendous variation within those initial accounts of “and then they danced.”

Eleanor Dagan, dancer/ethnologist, tells of her initial frustration being in the field in Africa and observing dances carefully enough to realize that they were being done
differently each time they were repeated. Her ambitious project of a comprehensive
documentation of dances in Togo, initiated by its government, proved impossible in fact.
This was due to those “elusive” variables, the human factor, the weather factor, the time
factor, the shortage of people to record music, costume, movement simultaneously, and as
well as the sheer volume of material and it’s the complexity and variation of dance in ritual
and festival function.

Each of the 252 dances was observed twice, in many cases three or four
times. We realized that whenever a dance or a dance sequence was repeated
some of its elements changed. The changes could be the modification of
either the steps, body movements, central axis movement, floor formation,
or alteration in the rhythm, songs, music or the energy invested in various
sequences of the dance . . . The improvisation in the African dances is an
extremely complex topic and requires in-depth research that, unfortunately,
during our survey we did not have time to focus on. (Dagan 1973:185)

I submit that there is actually a superior and daring quality in oral, embodied culture
that exhibits a sophisticated and confident ability to manipulate energy in the moment and
fashion art in the form of song, movement, word, image, interpreting and conveying
meaning in a fluid way that adjusts continually to the frame of the moment. Enough
structure exists in ritual to provide grounding and a point of departure for this kind of
improvisational enactment, and the experience and skill of those performing the ritual,
dance or observance has prepared them to make appropriate choices and changes.

Drewal relates a twist in a Jigbo mask performance at the 1986 Imewuro Annual
Rally in Nigeria. Usually the costume of the dancer consists of fabric, with palm fronds
draped around the neck. On the second day, one of the dancers came out wearing the
mask, the palm fronds, and a full dress tuxedo. The crowd laughed and called him "White
Man's Bush Spirit." When Drewal questioned the dancer later, he said he worked in it, and
wore it "just for fun."
There was no more explanation than that. Disrupting the signifier, in this case the Jigbo form, the performer opened the meaning to new interpretation . . . to what extent was the performer conscious of the implications of his manipulations? I cannot say. Artists in our own society cannot always verbalize exactly why they choose to do what they do. But the mere fact that the performer exercised this option to bring the materials from two diverse domains together, and others in attendance enjoyed it, tells us something about the openness of Yoruba ritual, the power of performers to improvise, and the willingness of the participants to entertain alternate possibilities (Drewal 1992:5).

Re-Opening the Portal: Dance Dynasties

In the intervening years (that was 1982) I became first a serious student and then a teacher of traditional Haitian, Brazilian, Cuban, West African and Congolese dance and music. I have since watched the dissemination of Pan African music (primarily drum orchestra) and dance of a variety of traditions in the United States, a growing subculture that has adherents in many major cities and scattered communities.

To understand the context of the growing interest in this non-indigenous cultural art form among both Americans who are not of African ancestry, as well as those who are, I need to first examine earlier examples of interest in non-European and/or non-contemporary cultural art forms in this country. I suggest that these examples have a direct relationship to the presence of Pan African dance in contemporary Western society, and are integral to any discussion of how it arrived and the context of its meaning.

Americans vacillate between a kind of braggadocio pride in everything new and modern, a reinvention of culture and a trashing and devaluing of all that came before, and a fascination with the Exotic, the Other, the Ancient. “Before,” and “Elsewhere.” In looking
back for the seeds of the present interest in Pan African dance and music, I am drawn back
to two dance ‘princesses,’ progenitors of change in the American dance scene in the early
1900’s.

Isadora Duncan, a San Francisco native born to a Dress Reform (i.e. uncorseted,
bicycle riding) mother in 1878, sought information and inspiration from the ancient and
exotic lineage of the pre-Christian Greeks as her source for an integrated form of
movement. She researched dance images encoded on vases or formed in statues, and was
able to re-embody them in the present, to the delight and enchantment of a generation of
theatre goers and future dancers. In a society of corseted and voluminously skirted women,
she appeared barefoot and bare limbed, dancing to the limit of the natural range of the
body. Her life work was to re-inject the spirit of dance into the world and have it
acknowledged as a serious and necessary art. She wrote:

Imagine we might succeed in introducing the true dance in Paris! We say to
our musician artists: play, play well! But dance at the same time! We say to
our great singers: sing, sing well! but for the love of God, dance at the same
time! To our professors we say: accompany your discourses with dance!
While dancing song or words we begin to live them; we begin to understand
what one sings or what one says; we begin to live the verbal or musical
emotions. (1914 cited in Alter 1994:22)

Isadora was a visionary and an inspiration, a breath of life in a body repressed
culture, her influence spanning the ocean, changing the course of dance for the 20th
Century. What would she have read in the bodies of dancing Africa where they “dance
apart and play apart (not in unison) to liberate their attention, as it were, for continuous
conversation between motion and music, instead of specializing in purely musical or
choreographic activity” (Thompson 1966).
She influenced all who saw her.

Few people realize to what an extent Miss Duncan affected the world, or that it is to her that we owe the wonderful Russian Ballet of the pre-war days, as seen in London and Paris. M. Mikail Fokine, a director of the Imperial Ballet School in Petrograde, after seeing Isadora Duncan dance, asked her to give a special performance in the Ballet School. From that time there was a definite split in their own art. Amongst these we find such names as Pavlova, Karsavina, Nijinsky, Mordkin and Vohnine Bohm, and many others, and it was these artists that gave us the Russian Ballet as we know it today (Elder 1918:6).

I include these names to give clues to the lineages of artistic descent that evolved into the dance companies in existence today. Each one is built on the embodied knowledge of a community of individual artists who collectively activate and transmit techniques of movement, metaphors, narratives, archetypal imagery, style, relationship to each other, the audience and the vocabulary, to add up to the entirety of what we call 'ballet.' Ballet is the encoded, contemporary version of centuries of court dancing, obviously linked to a musical and performing tradition that reaches back into pre-recorded times. They were not written down. Various cultural trends and dancers with powerful personal visions have altered the traditions along the way – it is important to document Duncan as one of the most recent, setting the stage, so to speak for a shift in cultural practices that effect the contemporary perception of movement.

The important aspects to remember here are that she was an advocate for the knowledge of the body and had the ability to read, encoded in the body postures of artwork remaining from the (pre-Christian) dancing age of the Greeks and recapitulate those arrested images into a moving art form. We will never know how accurate she was. What is important here is that she reached through time for a tradition to embody. Whether she
was of Greek ancestry or not is immaterial. Her source was outside her immediate culture. When she first emerged performing her own vision, her own choreography, she kindled the interest of a highly diverse audience including upper-class women, realist artists, abstract artists, communists, anarchists and progressivists. She was able to do this because “at the moment when her aesthetic was still new, and not yet completely readable, or fixed, its codes, her spectators could move with her in a liberating space without definite boundaries” (Daly 1995:177). We are talking about that the domain of the expressive, moving body. She redefined movement and the body for the next century. She was able to do it because she was dancing. Then she started talking about what she was doing, and she got in a lot of trouble. She even had her American citizenship revoked.

Ruth St. Denis, (also born in 1878 to a Dress Reform mother), whose stage career began as a cart wheeling teenager in vaudeville shows, found her way into the expatriate East Indian community of New York City. She studied Yoga and appropriated the costume of the Hindu Nautch dancer, a full skirted, veiled and bejeweled courtesan, to create her own version of an exotic performance with ancient roots. She was a show-woman and used foreign cultures as theme material for her productions with no effort made for authenticity in movement, capitalizing on the fantasies and stereotypes of the American public about the exotic, past or present, whether it was Egypt, India, Palestine or the Orient (Kendall 1979).

Both went on to train a dynasties of dancers, St. Denis in the United States and Duncan in Europe, and to mount theatrical performances that evoked a world of something lost, something novel which the modern, progressive, work-a-day world of automobiles, streamline clothing and mobility looked at with both nostalgia and a sense of superiority.
However the security of the modern present is contingent on the belief that there was once a safe place in the past, where the future is already behind us, completed. Where everything was in balance and everyone spiritually attuned and living in harmony with the earth. Never Never Land is more likely. Perhaps the myth is that if it existed in the past, then no matter how much has been lost, destroyed, altered, that somehow we can choose at any time to restore it, to get back there. Or an unwillingness to believe that life has always been as it is now—fulfillment coupled with struggle, loneliness in counterpoint to love, uncertainty to boredom, calamity to opportunity and novelty to daily obligation.

Is it this idealized place in which we think we will arrive when we enter a course of study from another culture we identify as more primary than our own?

St. Denis’ importance here lies in the fact that she trained Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, who left her employ convinced that the projected exoticism of the dances they were performing had no relationship to their personal (or national) identities. Transplanting themselves from the Denishawn school in film crazed Hollywood to New York City in the late 1920’s, each set out to find an “American” and “modern” way to dance. They were each determined to find a way to dance authentically if they had to lock themselves in their respective empty rooms for years to do it. In characteristic Western fashion, each did this alone. At the same time in Germany, overlapping with the Americans and also working alone was the intense and experimental Mary Wigman, whom we will discuss later.

The age of Modern Dance was launched as these choreographers and others opened schools, trained dancers and presented work that was, for the first time viewed and critically discussed by the intellectual community. It was recognized as artistically rigorous
and valid art form, as the choreographers collaborated with fine composers and well known artists and designers. It established a place for the expressiveness of the body again, in a culture where it had suffered forcible expulsion centuries earlier.

Women, young women, far outnumbered the men, (although those men who were involved had staying power: Limon, Cunningham, Hawkins and Taylor). There was little money and they served almost as acolytes to their high priestesses in the more successful companies, which established performance lineages, artistic family trees. They established a context for dance that was later to serve as an entryway for artists from the older dance traditions of other cultures to enter this country. What is the saying? “From the belly of the beast.”

“Primitivism:” One Word, a Myriad of Meanings

Ironically, the choreographers still couldn’t stay away from religion or the past. In 1931, Humphrey mounted a dance she called “The Shakers,” reconstructing the dancing worship of the religious society by that name. Later she chided herself for her choice of material.

That same year Graham presented a production of “Primitive Mysteries,” based on religious practices of the Penitente Indians in the American Southwest. Like St. Denis, she made no effort toward authenticity, but used her onetime observation of them as a point of departure for her own choreographic conjecture. She was reviewed by The New York Times’ John Martin: “Its simplicity of form and its evocation of the childlike religious elevation of a primitive people never falters for a moment” (Martin 1937 cit. in Armitage 1966).
Martin expresses a sentiment typical of the time – idealizing the concept of primitivism and linking it with (also idealized) a “childlike” nature. It is unclear to what extent Graham would concur with this sentiment, but this is how her work was perceived, and it stood uncorrected.

There is more. In Paris a talented Black American dancer and singer, Josephine Baker, hit the entertainment circuit, capitalizing on the African stereotypes of her age:

In the short pas de deux of the savages, which came as the finale of the Revue Negre, there was a wild splendour and magnificent animality. Certain of Miss Baker’s poses, back arched, haunches protruding, arms entwined and uplifted in a phallic symbol, had the compelling potency of the finest examples of Negro sculpture. The plastic sense of a race of sculptors came to life and the frenzy of the African Eros swept over the audience. It was no longer a grotesque dancing girl that stood before them, but the black Venus that haunted Baudelaire. The dancer’s personality had transcended the character of her dance (Acocella / Garafol 1991:74).

Savage. Animality. Haunches. Phallic. Potency. Frenzy. African Eros. Grotesque. Black Venus. Then “the dancer’s personality” transcends the “character” of the dance. It is unclear what is being said here. We have a long list of words describing the Western, highly sexualized projection of the primitive African and then its sudden retraction, saying in place of the “grotesque” quality of the African, there stood a (civilized, acceptable) figure of Venus. “That haunted Baudelaire.” In other words, his fantasy. Baker occupied a confusing niche in the European performance world. Capitalizing initially on the novelty of the European associations of the frenzied, unfettered, erotic primitive, as the years passed and she emerged as an increasingly sophisticated artist, trained in voice and dance, recognition was not as forthcoming. When she came to the United States as a headliner for the famous Ziegfield, Follies she was panned, both for her African pieces and her singing show numbers, both for being the writhing African dancer, and for aspiring to
more. There was no room for her to be a complex, evolving individual artist. When she stepped outside, the stereotype of the primitive African, there no one knew where to place her. She was not alone. In Europe, she had a more freedom and success, but her African ancestry continued to be a key to that success as well as a factor in confining it.

Here we enter a realm of confusion as the word 'primitive,' linked with dance, surfaces to describe a myriad of different meanings. It is important to explore and clarify its continued use in projecting these meanings, because it has continued to shape and prejudice our thinking up to the present day. Sigmund Freud used it as a psychological term, which is part of the confusion.

The most influential theories of the unconscious linked it with notions of the primitive. Writing about the 'id' in 1915 Freud called it 'the primitive mind' and identified it with 'savages', while consigning 'primitive' people to the same innocent, unsophisticated state as children and the mentally ill. On one level 'primitive' dances were thought to reveal the backward, childlike, simple nature of the 'savage' (Alter 1994).

It is one thing to use the word 'primitive' to describe conditions and relationships to oneself and stages of development or consciousness within European culture; but then it was projected onto whole populations elsewhere in the world with whom Dr. Freud would have had no contact and no knowledge.

Graham has an interesting mix of cultural heritage. She could purportedly trace her ancestry back to the Puritan Mayflower. As the daughter of a pre-Freudian analyst, and a student later on of Karl Jung, she was no stranger to psychology. At the same time that she was drawing on what she considered her inner primeval forces through the newly
discovered “unconscious” and identifying it externally with Indians, her contemporaries in the visual arts, Jackson Pollock, William Baziotes and Wolfgang Paalen were using Native American artifacts as inspiration for their painting. Their interest was not anthropological, but psychological, and this is a very important point to be made.

There has been immense confusion caused by the mixing of language and the projection of this “image” of the primitive, the primordial and identifying it as synonymous with the experience of real people conducting actual religious practices that have been evolved, codified and handed down for countless generations. The Indians that Graham evokes in her dance are fictitious. Which is not to say that there may not be internal promptings that might be identified similarly culture to culture. Simply that it is presumptuous and insulting (and ignorant) to appropriate the external form of a cultural tradition. However, this continues to be an acceptable practice in contemporary art, where this difference is still not discernable to many people and often escapes comment by the most well meaning people.

For example, several years ago a young choreographer at the University of Montana was quite taken with a tape of exciting, passionate Spanish Gypsy music written to accompany Flamenco dancing. Quite innocently she dressed up her dancers in long skirts, got men and women to do some clapping in a circle and proceeded to make up steps to the music. It never occurred to her to go to a local dancer who has spent 50 years doing Flamenco dance, to get authentic instruction in clapping, which is a very specific music, or dancing. She apparently had no awareness that if a person from the Flamenco tradition was in the audience, they might be offended by the co-opting of the music and image of Flamenco. The Dance Department put the dance in a showcase and, because no one from the minority culture it evoked was in the audience, it was never challenged. This is only
possible when minority cultural groups are not represented in circles of influence. (That seems like a redundant statement, because that is what makes them minority in the first place). This is not an isolated incident, and the truth is, I performed my own versions of a number of ethnic dances (Irish, East Indian, African and Gypsy) for years until I traveled to more diverse communities and found teachers schooled in these traditions.

This is the case in the Euro-American Art-Dance (a term I use to encompass modern dance and post modern dance up to the present, to represent it as a separate category from entertainment dancing) scene that parallels symphony orchestras, ballet companies and art galleries in American society. These art forms are sufficiently intellectual, abstract and removed from the body that they do not excite more than token interest or participation from minority groups. This is the “high art” that is supported by corporate donation, institutions of higher education and the unimaginably rich. It is the lens of cultural evaluation that looks at African cultural art as substandard.

I attended a lecture demonstration at the Connecticut College Dance Festival in 1977 by Arthur Mitchell, who had the distinction of being the first black dancer to perform in an American ballet company, Balanchine’s American Ballet Theater. Mitchell had at this time just founded his own company, the Dance Theater of Harlem, a ballet company comprised of African American dancers. He told a story of the company’s first trip to Paris, where everyone had expected them to do ‘primitive African’ dancing. He illustrated his statement by gyrating on the stage in an insulting parody of African dance. The audience laughed. He then described the surprise of the Europeans when the company performed sophisticated and elegant ballets. Apparently he felt he had to insult his own ancestry to make his point, accepting the bias of European superiority in order to strengthen his status
as a serious ballet artist. (However, he was not above using African themes in his choreography, interpreted artistically).

The word "primitive" was also used to describe the work of Mary Wigman, a dancer in Germany who overlapped both Duncan and the experimental modern dancers. She performed dances of whirling, reminiscent of dervish dancing, and often used masks in both solo and group dances. Jack Anderson, a reviewer, describes her work:

Wigman's art appealed to the instincts. A stocky, muscular woman who fitted no one's idea of prettiness, Wigman created sombre, macabre, almost demonic dances that hinted at the primitive drives still lurking beneath the veneer of civilization. Wigman felt she was in contact with primordial forces that took possession of her as she performed, and she often wore masks in order to escape her ordinary personality and yield herself to these powers. So awesome were these forces that occasion that Wigman, convinced that the mask represented a spirit attempting to consume her utterly, became terrified by her own choreography (Anderson 1974)

Again, as with Graham, there was an association both in the mind of the choreographer and her public that somehow the intense psychological and personal material she was presenting could be extrapolated to some authentic link with "primitive" peoples, less evolved, unconscious and unaware. Even when this is meant to be a compliment and an enviable state, it is insulting. The truth is, it may be argued that contained within the oral tradition of the Yoruban and Vodoun religions is a detailed map of "collective consciousness" and an embellished understanding of archetypes that would have saved Carl Jung years of research and brain racking conceptualizing. There is nothing unsophisticated, unconscious or "primitive" about this knowledge. This is a map of the interior of the human psyche as it interacts with both the 'visible' and 'invisible' worlds, embodied in the dances, songs, tales and daily living of African culture. Were similar dances being called up
by Wigman and Graham, resurfacing from their own embodied cultural past? We could discuss that point endlessly, but whatever the results of that discussion, we would still be left with the inappropriateness of associating those conclusions with the actual practices of Africans (or Native Americans or Australian Aborigines or Siberian shamans) to give it validity. Or even “Primitives” in the abstract.

This brings me to another cultural construct that is more abstract and constantly a factor when we are dealing at any level with someone we perceive as different from ourselves, which is the projection of qualities that we ourselves do not possess onto other individuals and cultures. Perhaps it is not even the fact that projection occurs, because it appears to be almost unavoidable, apparently an integral part of humans relating to each other. Rather, it is our lack of awareness that it is taking place, followed by over-confidence in its accuracy to the point of taking irrevocable actions and using it to cement our worldview.

What Martha Graham and Mary Wigman experienced while performing work derived from primitive ritual was not a primitive fusion of image and reality but an encounter with the Other – not regression to the primitive as pre-modern, but an experience informed by modern psychoanalytic ideas. When Graham titled her autobiography *Blood Memory* she was referring to Jung’s notion of the collective unconscious, describing herself as someone who brings back things from the past, retrieving them “from our common blood memory . . . There are always ancestral footsteps behind me, pushing me, when I am creating a new dance, and gestures are flowing through me. You get to the point where your body is something else and it takes on a world of cultures from the past.” (my italics; 1991qu. by Burt 1991:167).
The confusion about our interpretation of own inner nature and reality projected onto others, individually or as a whole people, is a continual factor in dealing with people different from ourselves. The study of African dance and music acts as a cultural lab, where work in progress is conducted concerning these issues. People are attracted to it for a myriad of reasons – novelty, beauty, sexuality, musicality, agility, complexity, community, curiosity. The difference is that the work is being taught by real people, and the material is culturally selected and sanctioned, which takes it out of the mind and imagination into the experience of embodied reality. Person to person, the Western concept of the primitive is being debunked, and we strive to progress to a more realistic, respectful and workable way of regarding and evaluating diverse cultures.

The term ‘primitive’ has largely been abandoned by anthropologists. Its underlying evolutionary implications are unsound, since it is impossible to justify the idea that such pan-human lifeways as marriage, kinship, sex, religious beliefs and behavior, recreation, art, music, dance, food habits, and interpersonal relations are relatively more or less advanced. The word ‘primitive’ has been used as a synonyms for: savage, old-fashioned, primeval, quaint, simple, unsophisticated, archaic, artless, rudimentary, lowly, non-literate, lower, nor civilized, isolated, arrested in development, money-less, a-historical (Aschenbrenner 1979-80).

Our continued use in the media of the term ‘developing nations’ continues this incorrect hierarchical attitude, designating certain peoples of the world as existing in less evolved state than ourselves. This creates an inaccurate idea about cultural identity, based on the degree of entrance into the capitalist economy model and their status as a ‘nation.’ These ideas are Western constructs, and are finally being discarded by those who study culture. The continued attitude toward non-Western cultures as being at best novel and romantic, at worst, crude and unsophisticated is detrimental to our functioning as informed and respectful neighbors.
We need to separate the use of the word 'primitive' from any association with traditional societies. There is no time line, and we have much to learn from the information they have managed to preserve and transmit over generations, often in the face of cruel suppression or neglect. Even 'friendly' attitudes towards art forms and benign intentions can cause misunderstanding and inadvertent damage to the cause of cultural respect, authenticity and survival. Referring to Western artists who have used traditional cultural forms as a point of departure for their own work and mis-identified that relationship. Susan Hiller says in *The Myth of Primitivism Perspectives on Art*:

In borrowing or appropriating visual ideas which they found in the class of foreign objects that came to be labeled 'primitive art,' and by articulating their own fantasies about the meaning of the objects and about the peoples who created them, artists have been party to the erasure of the self-representation of colonized peoples in favor of a western representation of their realities. While anthropology tries to turn the peoples who are its subject matter into objects, and these 'objects' into 'theory', art tries to turn the objects made by the people into subject matter, and eventually into 'style'. Both practices maintain, intact, the basic European picture of the world as a hierarchy with 'ourselves' at the top (Hiller 1991:2-3).

Very few choreographers had the insight that Doris Humphrey showed when she commented retrospectively on her use of Shaker rituals in her piece *The Shakers* in 1931:

"One thing I vow I will not do again: imitate in an art form the rituals of the faithful. No more Shakers. *I am ashamed of the poverty of my age that it sent me sniffing around people and things that are none of my business.*" (my italics; Siegal 1993).

I do not mean to discount the work that Humphrey, Graham, Wigman and their colleagues have produced, simply to clarify that what they invented was their own. It doesn't need to be linked to existing ethnic traditions. It should be regarded as an invented
or original, a living link in the lineage of the expressive movement life we call dance, and we
do not need to question its authenticity beyond that. But – let us not use the word
“tradition” lightly, or associate these efforts of personal interpretation, however substantial,
with those unbroken traditions, whose lineages reach back through the ages and whose
spirits are still called by name.

The role taken by these women is an interesting one. They were raised without a
cohesive, living tradition of movement. They each had a deep, compelling drive to dance,
to train, and to make deep connections between the body and its expressive spirit in a
culture that did not nurture and support this interest, never mind instruct and cultivate that
calling. A culture that actively obstructs and belittles dance.

Dance and the Anthropologist

For a number of years the Pan African/ethnic performance scene was dominated
by Katherine Dunham, an African American dancer/choreographer who was also an
anthropologist. This gave her a unique position in what I would call a major transitional
point in the thinking about both dance and Pan African culture. Firstly, Dunham’s mother
was a white Canadian and her father was a black American, so she was a child of mixed
culture. While considered “Black” in the United States, in Haiti she was a “mulata,” which
gave her higher status than those with darker skins and consequently opened some doors
for her. She was an academic, studying to be an anthropologist. And, she was a trained
dancer, able to “read the body,” having studied in Chicago with Ruth Page and Mark Turby
fill (Beckford 1979:25). Her skills, position and ethnicity put her in a unique position both
to enter the traditions she was studying, and perceive, participate and analyze them in a way

65
that was very new for her time. The story of how she received a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1931 is a case in point.

Dunham received an invitation to appear before the endowment committee by Mrs. Rosenwald herself, after having seen one of Dunham's performances. Dunham describes being torn before the appointment by whether she would be more convincing if she spoke or danced. Putting dance clothes on under her suit, she showed up for the meeting. She made her verbal presentation to the committee, frustrated by their polite reserve. Then she announced she had something to show them, stripped off her outer clothing (a first for the committee), and launched into a demonstration of ballet and modern dancing. “This,” she said, “Is what is being taught as dance across the country. This,” she added, “is what I would like to study and teach,” and began dancing in an African style. The committee burst out in discussion as she left. She was unanimously awarded the money she used to make her first trip to Haiti (Beckford 1979:28).

There was a governing paradigm of thought at the time (Social Darwinism) that Western culture, being so inherently superior and the evolutionary end of human development, would swiftly efface all other inferior cultures, who would gladly apprentice themselves to their superiors in all things and drop the backward beliefs and practices of their ancestors and get on with the business living in the modern world. Dunham’s professor at the University of Chicago, Robert Redfield, belonged to this school of thinking that “saw the process of contact between ‘primitive’ and ‘peasant’ peoples and modern urban culture as one of acculturation, as the ‘weaker’ culture became assimilated into the stronger tradition of modern Western society ” (Burt 1998:169). Along with this idea was the assumption that native culture would soon be extinct, which put anthropologists in a panic, as they believed it was their job to record these cultures before they all disappeared.
However, Dunham also studied at Northwestern with Melville Herskovits, who
“controversially proposed the idea that people of African descent in America and the Caribbean
were not a ‘weaker’ social group but possessed a distinctive and non-assimilable culture through the
retention of Africanisms” (Herskovits 1958; Burt 1998). I would agree, and cite the role of
embodied knowledge as a significant factor in this non-assimilability. The domain of the mind does
not attempt to assimilate the body because - it does not recognize its existence. Dunham had a wide
grasp and experience of the relationships between body, mind and spirit. Not only a dancer and a
student of culture, she was a critical thinker, an artist and a practitioner of what she discovered.

Coupled with this spiritual revelation is the physical, facilitated in its
responses by a body well muscled and in classic balance. The Body is a
built-in part, a necessary part of the full realization of our own rhythmic
pattern. There is a great sense of arriving, of invincibility, when flesh and
body are together in this truth. Every movement of the body is in harmony
with spirit. There is an eternal choreographic pattern sometimes taking
external form, sometimes remaining within, but always there. This is what
dance has meant to me, every day, each split moment of every day I dance
(Dunham 1972 qu. in Rose 1990).

Until this time there was an unstated convention that to do African or Caribbean
dance, one had to be of African ancestry. Let’s leave out all the Judy Garland Caribbean
fashion fever movies, and theme park treatments of the “Primitive.” One notable exception
was Maya Deren, a red headed, Russian-American anthropologist who initially hustled
herself a job as Katherine Dunham’s secretary.

Deren went to Haiti as an avant-garde filmmaker to shoot footage of dance, only
to find that it was simply one aspect of the complex, engaging and embodied religion of
Vodoun. She put her cameras in the closet and began asking how to get initiated. In her
book, *Divine Horsemen*, Joseph Campbell describes her on her return from Haiti in 1951:
“When the anthropologist arrives, the gods depart.” So declares, I am told, a Haitian proverb. Maya Deren, on the other hand, went first to Haiti as an artist, thinking to make a film in which Haitian dance should be a leading theme. But the manifestations of rapture that there first fascinated and then seized her transported her beyond the bounds of any art she had ever known. She was open, willingly and respectfully, to the messages of that speechless deep, which is, indeed the wellspring of the mystères (1953:xiv).

*Les mystères*. (The mysteries). As in Langer’s earlier passage, “... between the facts ...”

More later.
CHAPTER THREE

AFRICA ENTERS THROUGH THE PORTAL OF DANCE CULTURE

The Playing Ground: Black Identity and Embodiment in America

There is a very important link here, one that I missed until I began writing this paper. That is, when Africans came to the United State in the latter half of the 1900's, and began their legacy of sharing culture, they did so by first entering the dance world. This was the scene that had been created and maintained by American dancers starting with Graham and Humphrey in converted warehouses and cheap industrial lofts, anyplace large enough to gather a crowd of dancers together with space enough to teach them to writhe, roll and leap. Low rent was a prerequisite to the establishment of any studio, the days of endowments were far in the future.

At this time ballet, modern and some jazz or musical comedy dance were the main fare of dance studios in New York, with ethnic dance fitting in around the edges on a kind of novelty level. Some ethnic dancers taught in their homes. When the African artists I will be referring to arrived in first New York, and later other American cities, this was their 'port of entry,' these were the rooms they danced in. Interest in the music that accompanied the dance grew, and music classes were also held in the dance studios to train accompanists. Ironically, to this day there is a large degree of separation between ethnic or traditional dance and contemporary dance, in spite of the fact that they often share physical space. This will be discussed later in further detail.

It is important to refer to the ethnic social history of the period of entry because it was and continues to be an issue, both in the role in the culture of dance in general and Pan
African dance in particular. The Africans did not enter a blank slate situation. There was already an Africanist presence in the United States, manifested both by the actual descendents of Africans, and in a construct of thought in the dominant white culture about the meaning of darkness and the (inaccurate) connection in the between the two.

In the 1960's the Black empowerment movement which included 'Black is Beautiful,' and African 'Roots' began to break down the negative image in the public mind associated with African ancestry. This image, the product of a centuries old propaganda campaign to justify the subjugation of dark skinned people as slaves, representing them as inferior human specimens, loyal as dogs, simpleminded and irresponsible as children by such revered minds as David Hume and Immanuel Kant. A centuries long emasculating portrayals of dark skinned men in cartoon-like handbills and vaudeville as impotent buffoons, at the same time they were feared and lynched for projected potency.

The rejection/envy relationship between white and black is an integral phenomenon in this issue. Why do Euro-Americans want to emulate African culture? We have spent centuries denigrating and ridiculing people of African ancestry, shaming them for their appearance, color, values, their entire culture. The esteemed Scottish philosopher David Hume writes, in his essay “Of National Characters:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient Germans, the present Tartars, have something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if
nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men (Hume qu. by Gates and McKay, ed. 1997).

Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, responding to Hume’s essay, went even further, after echoing Hume’s assertion that Africans were an inferior race, writing, “So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color” (Kant qu. by Gates and McKay, ed. 1997).

To this day these words linger in the consciousness of the dominant culture, in the face of the efforts of many, White and Black to disperse and alter their power. This painful, historically documented fact of slavery and the promotion of the idea that the white race was superior and possessed a mandate to dominate, exterminate or otherwise transform other less technological and non-literate peoples. How does this effect our subject? Is it possible to make a clean, clear, respectful choice to be a student of the African tradition in the face of such a history?

Somehow, there are descendents of Africans who have managed to retain and bequeath elements of their original embodied culture to their own children and, in their role as nursemaids, nannies, cooks and servants serving as unappointed mentors to generations of European descendents. Their influence has been felt in the wider culture in unseen, unacknowledged ways. Again, the body holds the knowledge. Again, the knowledge somehow persists because, sitting in the body, unspoken in words, it is invisible. Elusive. Transmitted without speech. Body to body. So powerful that dance is forbidden. Drums are seized and burned. But when conversation is needed with the forces beyond the physical, for a loved one in trouble, a healing, a desire to be fulfilled, those with this locus of knowledge in their bodies are sought out, begged to manifest it with its dance, songs,
rhythms, dissolving barriers between visible and invisible. Then the body remembers. 

The power to make things happen. A power that is also misunderstood. And feared.

Novelist Toni Morrison in a small, compelling book of critical essays, *Playing in the Dark*, discusses the relationship between white and black in the United States. Because, as she points out, ‘American’ means white, and assumes male unless otherwise specified, I will point out that she is of African ancestry and a woman. She writes that while African American studies, integration and affirmative action have made a place for themselves in current times, there has still not been a discussion and critical appraisal of the impact of what she terms the ‘Africanist’ presence in specifically white American literature. I find many of her arguments about literature extend into the wider culture, implicating dance, music, visual arts and theater. She looks at what is not said, what is avoided, what is assumed, insinuated, inferred.

She makes a case for the silent presence of the ‘darkie,’ the ‘black,’ the negro,’ the ‘nigger,’ as the shadow other that is integral to the formation of the self concept of the ‘white.’ This is linked to the prior discussion of ‘primitive,’ and provides insight highly relevant to the choices that non-black people make in selecting to participate in a black culture. The Africanist persona must be examined in order to speak accurately about what is currently taking place in the dance culture.

I will take this one step further, in saying that the Africanist presence is linked to the concepts already introduced as the invisible body, and that the property of invisibility has to do with these nonverbal, energetic, physical, palpable qualities that are the legacy of African heritage.
Morrison herself specifies that she uses the term 'Africanism' in a concept of Americanism, not to refer to the large body of knowledge about Africa, but as a “term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions readings and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people . . . an ‘invented Africa.’” She examines specifically American literature for evidence of the effects of this significance, how it has marked the dominant culture, from the point of view of the writer, choosing shaping, interpreting – and yet missing the point. “as a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, or perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work not to see this.”

Romance, an exploration of anxiety imported from the shadows of European culture, made possible the sometimes safe and other times risky embrace of quite specific, understandable human, fears: American’s fear of being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness; their fear of boundarylessness, Nature unbridled and crouched for attack; their fear of the absence of so-called civilization; their fear of loneliness, of aggression both external and internal. In short, the terror of human freedom – the thing they coveted most of all . . . and terror’s most significant, overweening ingredient: darkness, with all the connotative value it awakened (Morrison 1992).

As with the passages on ‘primitivism’ referred to elsewhere in the text, these ideas exist within the psyche of the beholder and have little to do with the reality of African existence. Although, being human, the Africans themselves are wrestling with these same questions, and coming up with different answers. Can we sort out fact from fantasy and make use of more effective solutions? And if so, is this why, after all the bad press, so many individuals from the civilized world choose to pursue African music and dance culture?
The African Artists Arrive

Let us return to the early 1960's, as African Americans are redefining themselves, shedding the term ‘Negro’ and referring to themselves openly and proudly as “Black.” The Black Panthers face off with white police and shatter the myth of Black impotence. African Americans began a renaissance of interest in African dress and aesthetics. Their new empowerment and pride, grounded in the extraordinary events of the Civil Rights movement changed the African-American community’s perception of themselves, and won admiring converts in the dominant white community, as well as increased surveillance by the FBI and a polarity of repression in the South. At this time, expatriate artists from Pan African traditions began to make their presence felt in some of the larger urban centers (New York, Washington D.C., San Francisco). Their students at that time were primarily of African and sometimes Hispanic or mixed ancestry.

One of the first major African artists to immigrate to the United States was Ladji Camara, a legendary Guinean drum and dance master, who came to New York in the 1950's on tour with Les Ballet Africaine du Galou. He was struck by what he perceived as the subservient role and self-deprecating attitude of the African Americans he met in the United States. He read their demeanor (their bodies), and the social climate and it became clear to him that African Americans did not have pride in their identity and lacked awareness of the magnificent history and content of their ancestry. He decided his life work was acquainting Afro-Americans with their rich cultural heritage and took up residence in New York in 1959. “Chief” Bey, an influential member of what was soon to become the Black Power movement took him in and helped him to begin teaching in Harlem.
He was a powerful resource for the Black Pride, African Roots movement in the Sixties, training generations of musicians, dancers, performers and teachers in authentic Guinean performing arts. Among them is Denise Bey, Chief Bey's daughter, whom he trained from childhood, as is the African custom. She currently lives and teaches in Tucson. Along with countless performances and recordings of his own, he toured and recorded with such diverse groups as percussionist Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers and Olatunji, a Nigerian politician turned performer who has been promoted and popularized by the Grateful Dead. Now close to eighty, he continues to teach.

Jean Leon Destine, a Haitian master dancer, was commissioned by the Haitian government in the late 1940's to create the National Dance Company of Haiti. In 1954 he exchanged teaching positions with an African-American dancer, Lavinia Williams. The arrangement suited each of them so well that Williams remained in Haiti running a school and company, and while Destine set up residence teaching and performing in New York. Between them they also trained generations of dancers. My teachers Serge St. Juste, Pat Hall-Smith, and Mona Estime Amira and John Amira were all former company members of Lavinia Williams' company. I had the opportunity to study with Destine while he was still teaching in his seventies in the 1980's.

Malonga Casquelourd, a Congolese dancer drummer, left New York for East Palo Alto in California in 1972 and, with Titos Songpa, is a grandfather of the burgeoning ethnic dance scene (including Cuban, Haitian, Guinean, and Senegalese traditions), in the Bay Area. There are now teachers and performing groups in Oakland, Santa Cruz, Sacramento, Los Angeles, San Diego and Arcata. At this time countless major cities have attracted major Pan African artists in residence, and there are extended dance and drum camps in Nevada City,
Susanville, Calgary, Seattle, Oakland, Maui, North Carolina, New Mexico and Woodstock, with the list still growing.

It is important to point out that the dissemination of Pan African Dance/Music in the US is a grass roots movement. It has spread to a great extent without the benefit (or detriment) of institutional support, dancer by dancer, teacher by teacher, community by community. It has been housed in the marginal realm of the dance culture, which hosted it as a sister dance form and included the music as its partner. It is engaged in by many people who have no other dance background or musical training, but have been attracted by specific characteristics that African dance and drum heritage have to offer.

Like other dance revolutions that have come before it, there have been social repercussions in the wider society. There have been waves of interest in the African aesthetic in clothing and jewelry paraded exotically in fashion shows by elegant black women, as well as a line of African inspired patterns in catalogues of fabric stores selling authentic African prints.

While there is a long history of covert (as in unacknowledged) African influence in American music, (blues, jazz, rapp), world beat music has become a growing commodity in the music industry, in sales of recorded music, instruments, and live performance. Some of the artists (Baba Mal, Los Munequitos de Matanzas, Toure Kunde, Boukman Experience, Buena Vista Social Club, Salif Keita, to name a few of the best known), are the “real thing,” highly trained, successful and respected in their own cultures. Kendrick Freeman, a professional touring jazz kit drummer with a twenty year background in Haitian drum lore, reports that at festivals now it is not unusual for a bands to have replaced their kit drummer
with a someone playing a djembe drum and percussion. A parallel development has occurred in the mainstream vocabulary of both popular and theatrical dance (notably in hip hop, which is done to rapp music), which shows increasing influence from African movement styles adding an aesthetic of full and abandoned use of the body, isolations and incorporation of the pelvis, shoulders and chest movements, poly-rhythms (body parts simultaneously following different rhythms), and percussive attack (light on the feet).

When it has emerged in public visibility (or audibility), it has been subject to Christian alarm and shut down by police (personal experience) and suppressed by communities. In 1994, the city council in Ashland Oregon issued a regulation concerning drumming in its city limits, after Native Americans, African music enthusiasts and the local drum circle combined forces in outdoor jams. Subsequently, any drumming was prohibited (including drumming for traditional Native American Pow Wows) except for between 4:30 and 6:00 pm on Wednesdays. A particularly vocal individual was specified by name and prohibited from playing at all (Rayelle pers. conv). In spite of this type of harassment, it has been spread by students turned teachers and kept going by cells of practitioners, who have formed a variety of performing groups, jams and full moon drummings. Pan African dance and drum has been a regular feature of Rainbow Family Gatherings since the 1980's, and thousands of Americans now own drums, made both in the U.S. and Africa. Seattle sponsors the “Rhythm Festival,” a widely attended world music festival emphasizing the common thread of strong rhythmic presence in music from many different parts of the world, as well as American permutations of it.

Fred Simpson, an African American musician who became involved in the African drum and dance tradition almost from its inception, recalls that the African American
romance with African roots ended with *Superfly*, a movie that came out in 1972. This media event shifted the image of black “cool” to the urban Shaft, flashy cars, disco music, men wide brimmed hats and brightly colored three piece suits, their multiple women in nightclub glitter and spike heels. A dedicated core of Pan African cultural practitioners remained after the fad had passed, a politically and artistically aware group of artists forming performing groups, traveling to Africa, studying religious traditions linked to the dance and music and teaching their own and other children. There also began a slow infiltration of other Americans of non-African ancestry interested in the indisputably vital, time tested African performing traditions.

Ironically, while the attitude of the African Americans was very possessive of the African tradition, with an undercurrent of hostility towards specifically Euro-Americans (other ethnicity’s ‘of color’ were acceptable), the teachers who were native to the traditions welcomed broad participation. Most performance groups had an unwritten code that a brown skin of some shade was necessary for membership as a dancer, while white was occasionally acceptable if there was a shortage of drummers. This included Asian, Hispanic, Arab, and any type of Indian. Djoniba Mouflet, a choreographer from Martinique residing in New York City who has a company of mixed ancestry, receives booking stipulations that only black dancers appear. Serge St. Juste’s Nago Dancers, a Haitian company I was a member of in New York from 1986 to 1988, was unusual for its variety in ethnic makeup – Spanish, Swedish, Jewish, Black, West Indian, White, Japanese as well as native Haitian. Members of the Haitian expatriate community (40,000 strong at that time in the New York area), were thrilled at the show of interest in their culture and showed up at performances to cheer us on.
At some point in the 1980's the balance of ethnic orientation in participants shifted and the percentage of students of non-African ancestry had surpassed those of African ancestry. Classes in Pan African dance proliferated and became very lucrative for a number of expatriate teachers. There is no doubt that it has been the interest of middle class Euro-Americans that have made this boom economically possible. Dance teachers began to organize group tours of students to their native countries, (Guineau, Senegal, the Congo, Brazil, Cuba, Haiti), that included courses of study in dance and drum, and native artists began to have an increasing presence in university and college dance programs.

The ‘Very Real Principles’ That Attract

Having discussed the pitfalls of projection, stereotype and fantasy in the guise of ‘primitivism’ and the shadow in relation to involvement in Pan African culture, I would like to deal with the inarguable principles that exist within it. They are not present in the same way in contemporary European culture, although it appears that if we go back far enough in time to our preliterate, earth based ancestors, they are well represented.

The role of dance and music in the embodied performance forms of the African Diaspora that I am focusing on (with no slight intended to other highly evolved traditions existing elsewhere in the world), is paramount. They are intricately connected. As I am discuss Pan African culture I will often refer, broadly and specifically, to dance and danced events as an embodiment of it. By this I mean the culture is expressed and manifested by the person(s) performing, their bodies, the movement (its rhythm, quality, length of time, context, sex and age(s) of participants, purpose, season, clothing, artifacts, location, life stage, repetition, improvisational – to name a few cultural considerations that will be
exhibited in conjunction with dance. I am expanding the term of ‘dance’ to include procession, ritual movement, children’s games and collective movement in work, often accompanied by singing, such as the laying of track by Black American chain gangs. Also, the term ‘dance’ will encompass both formal and informal events where the making of music (vocal, instrumental and body sounds such as clapping) and speaking or singing while the body is moving or not moving also occur.

I would expand the term “music” here to include sung lineages, storytelling composed and related to the accompaniment of instruments or body percussion and voice. Movement and music in this context constitute language, and are used fluently and improvisationally by members of a given community to interact with each other socially, commemorate events, for conflict resolution, worship, invocation of ancestors and deities (those forces that rule the natural world), personal expression of joy, grief, anger, pride, friendship or maturity. To name a few.

While these activities cross over into what would be considered as ‘theater’ or ‘concert’ in Western classification, I consider that in reference to its use in Pan African events, they are all danced. The term ‘performance’ might sometimes be more accurate, except that the roles of spectator and performer in ceremonies, social events or community observances are not bounded and shift and merge. An audience often sings and dances to accompany and respond to a lead singer, dancers may enter a circle to solo and then retreat back into the crowd, spontaneous participation may arise at any time with people changing places and roles. In *The Spirit’s Dance in Africa* Mario Aguilar contends:

... it is finally possible to argue that the word ‘dance’ in the African languages assumes more than just a phonetic or linguistic use, but it reflects
modes of thought and cultural perceptions. The same word for dance, therefore, could be used by different people of the same linguistic groups to symbolize or convey different meanings (Aguilar 1997:86).

The constant is that the moving body is the locus for all of these manifestations; the body, animated by the force that the Yoruba call *ase* or *ashe*. "The principle of all that lives or moves...everything which exhibits power, whether in action or in the winds and drifting clouds, or in passive resistance like that of the boulders lying by the wayside." (Verger 1964 quoted in Drewal 1989).

*Ashe*, the power to make things happen! Both the thing that is happening and the potential, sitting silently in still form. This is similar to the concept of *kundalini* energy in the Hindu religion, visualized as a serpent sitting coiled at the base of the spine. It is called into active form, invoked with song and dance. They are powerful symbols of its manifestation, as well as its culmination and its instrument.

In Yoruba thought, there is a direct correlation between the dynamic qualities of both dance and oral performance and the power known as *ashe/ashe*. According to Beier, "Yoruba believe strongly in the power of the word, or rather in a mysterious force called *ashe*... that quality in a man's personality which makes his words - once uttered - come true." (1970). In and of itself, *ashe* has no moral connotations; it is neither good nor bad, positive nor negative (Verger 1964 cit. by Drewal 1989). It is absolute power and potential, present not only in utterances, but in all things - rocks, hills, streams, mountains, leaves, animals, sculpture, ancestors, gods, and actions.
This idea may have other names across Africa, but it is widespread in the indigenous animist religions in West Africa and the Congo, which are central to the dance practices that are currently making their way into American culture. Ashe explains the presence of the vital energy present in the dance, music and word of Africa, grounded in an ancient and successful religious tradition that can also be translated into joyous secular celebration.

In African tradition, the body is not separated from other pursuits. The musician dances as he drums, sings as he dances. The dancer sings as she moves and carries or wears percussive instruments on her waist, ankles, hands or costume, as she enacts meaningful gestures and stories. The griot (historian) plays the kora (African harp) as he relates parables, historic and mythic tales. Even the spectators become performers as they sing and dance in sympathy with the spectacle, sometimes entering the center as individuals to contribute movement or providing choric support with movement, voice or hands. While the musicians train from childhood and develop expertise on drum, flute, harp, ogum (bell or scrap metal), gourd, kora, balafon and countless other instruments, the participation of every member of the community requires simply the presence of their bodies, voices, and the embodied knowledge to initiate and respond to the events at hand.

Dance events play an important role in community bonding. Dunham saw this in Haiti, observing that communality was engaged in and enhanced by “the large ‘danse collé’ (literally meaning stuck or glued together). The closeness and compactness of the mass engenders social cohesion, while at the same time the gregarious/recreation impulses and desire to externalize and share experiences draws people together in mass form” (Dunham 1941:175). The interdependence of individuals in human society is acknowledged and
protected. This is true not only on the level of material survival, but in life passages. The qualities of individual expression, competition and self-promotion that are so admired in the West are perceived in this context to threaten the balance of the larger community. Needless to say, they are not encouraged.

However, an outlet for the individual to shine is provided in the dancing ring when the interior space in a crowd is cleared for solo dancing. For the duration of these (typically short) solos, the dancer receives the attention and appreciation of the whole community. The dancer is free to dance simply, as many older people do, or to pull out all the stops and dance at high speed and rhythmic complexity, challenging the drummers. Then they fall back into the crowd and another person takes the spotlight. This happens even in nightclubs. I have been present many times in mixed-ethnic social situations when Africans will clear a crowded dance floor in a nightclub, party or workshop and then, standing on the edge in a circle, begin a dance circle, which gives each person who desires it the space and time to dance to their fullest energy, performing with the full attention and support (cheers and whistles) of the crowd.

Another enormous cultural difference is the role of men in dance. African men dance! As children, at circumcision celebrations, in wrestling competitions, in their secret societies, at parties and sacred observances. Lawler, in *The Dance in Ancient Greece* (1964:38), mentions that dance was considered imperative in training of an able warrior in ancient times, echoing African practices. Kings danced as part of discharging their duty at the head of their people, priests dance to conduct their rituals. A large percentage of the African dance teachers (and almost all of the musicians) in the United States are men, though equal numbers of women are trained to perform in the national touring companies. This is also true in Africa and Haiti, where women are overcome by child rearing and family survival
obligations at an early age, often before they have become established artists. While everyone continues to dance, professional opportunities conflict with family responsibilities and are not open to many women. In any of companies that tour, the moment a young woman reveals she is pregnant, she is sent home. Few women would choose to give up the status of childbearing to have a Western style career. Mabiba Baegne, a Congolese musician and dancer, freely admits that her success and ability to pursue her teaching lifestyle has been made possible by her choice to marry late and remain childless (pers. conv. 2000).

Dance is an acknowledged arena to exhibit strength, beauty, expertise and attractiveness, an excellent opportunity for courtship. African men are allowed a wider spread of qualities and personality expression than Westerners. As my teacher Naomi Gedo of Liberia said, explaining how a man could perform a dance that had qualities we Americans would consider feminine, “We don’t have a problem with a man being gentle.” Many dances are characterized as specifically feminine or masculine, but they are danced with full expression by both men and women. In Cuba, men put on full skirts to portray the female orishas (saints) Oya, Yemanya and Oshun without a moment’s hesitation, while in Haiti women strut in top hat with fat cigars to denote the masculine loa (god) Guede.

This opportunity to fully manifest the character of a wide spectrum of possible human and divine energies – portrayed as saints, gods, elements or historical figures – was one of the most exciting aspects that drew me to Haitian dancing. It is also what motivated Graham, Humphrey and Dunham as they cast around for raw material for their dances. The single-personality based choreography of the Art Dance world seemed very limited when I examined it next to the collaborative history of an entire people. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that two genres are still perceived as being so separate.
The depth and complexity of an art/social form with a lineage reaching back possibly thousands of years in unbroken transmission – this is a formidable body of knowledge to come into contact with. Music professor Dorothy Morrison, upon her return from her first trip to Guineau with Mamadi Keita in 1997 to study djenbe drumming, remarked that it was again established for her that the traditional rhythms were immensely powerful. In a way, they cannot be improved upon. They have been played over centuries, and distilled to their essentials; transformed when the times called for it. Because they are not written down, they are responsive to cultural cues for change, as well as the subtle shaping of each generation of musicians.

Another factor is the complex fusion of dance, music, storytelling, mime – embodied depiction, and the interactive relationship of each to the other, the joy of dance conversation with live, responsive musical accompaniment. When I was attending the Tambacunda dance camp in California in 1993, a griot who played the kora, (an instrument strung like a sitar and plucked like a harp with a large gourd resonator), appeared each evening to regale us with songs, parables, joke and sung/spoken commentaries. I understood at a different level what television has robbed us of – this collective night-time sharing that we hear about, the time after dark when in so many cultures people gathered to confer, enjoy, grieve, instruct, invent, remember . . . and interact. The activity and the art are interwoven with each other, contrasted with their status as separate categories, skills, moments or places - in the European tradition. Could anything have been willfully devised that would so intrude on and disrupt the intimacy of the home space and the embodied and oral transmission of culture as effectively as the television induced trance of passive watching?
I cannot avoid another major area that lurks on the periphery but is actually central to the body, and that is the Africans’ open acknowledgement, celebration and play of a sexual nature. Let’s talk attraction/repulsion. In African dance, pelvises move, gyrate, vibrate. Hands touch parts of the body never referred to in polite American society. Whole dances are devoted to flirtation, seduction and simulated mating. Sometimes the dancer is shielded by the impersonation of a deity, but often simply represents him/her self. These dances are engaged in by everyone, publicly, from small children to old grandmothers to potential marriage partners. There may be shyness, but there is no shame. This is one of the hardest but most coveted attitudes that an American dancer can come up against in being part of the community. Aside from Christian assertions of the deities being devil, this open sexuality “the body’s wickedness and carnal nature” (Lawler 1964) is at the top of the list for reasons to suppress Pan African cultural expression.

The deep strain of Puritanism in American life that tended to turn sexuality into prurient interest was a constraint that serious black performers had to break through. By means of skilled choreography, Katherine Dunham was able to convey to her audiences that sexuality as expressed in some aspects of African and New World black tradition has symbolic meanings relevant to fertility as well as to sexual satisfaction, and that ostensibly erotic dancing can be cherished for the sheer joy of the bodily movement and display of dancing skill. She sometimes used the Martinique dance, the beguine, to emphasize this point. While interpretation is in the mind of the beholder, meanings can change, grow and expand along with the viewer’s conceptions (Drake 1979 qu. in Aschenbrenner 1980).

While there are many different African religions represented in the Pan African traditions that are currently being taught to Americans at the present time, there are a number of intersecting beliefs that are intricately connected to the embodied dance/music forms. While much of what is being taught are the secular social dances and music, there is not clear line between them and they ‘overflow’ into one another. Central to this common
ground is the belief in reincarnation, "a belief which dissolves the primacy of time. For a single dramatic example, among the Ga of Ghana when a person is possessed by an ancient spirit she 'looks quite young while dancing,' while the marks of old age resume when she steps back into real time. Vanina calls this timelessness, this unity with the ancestors and the sources of vitality 'Great Time.' Ancestral presence in the dance diminishes the destroying force of time" (quo. in Thompson 1974:28).

It places the current generation in time between the ancestors and the children to come, with a clear understanding that dance provide an opportunity to honor and sometimes, through possession, to embody spirit, either in ancestral or deified forms, to be transformed and express that transformation.

Invocations, praise poetry, music, and dance are essential to nearly all Yoruba ritual in which spiritual forces are actualized. Invocations and drumming performed before the onset of possession trance both in Yorubaland and Brazil serve to bring Ogun into contact with devotees. Through dance, spiritual forces materialize in the phenomenal world... Among the Yoruba, possession trance states are expressed through the medium of dance. To my knowledge there is no instance of possession trance among the Yoruba which does not occur as dance or in association with dance... (Browning 1995:25).

Esther Turner, the poet/partner of Victor Turner, describes her experience living in a Ndembu village in Zambia with her young daughter in 1953-54. Accepted as peer mother in the village, she was included in a rite of passage ritual for a girl preparing for womanhood and marriage. Forty years later she wrote:

Initiation prepares a girl for her future as a sexually mature woman. It takes her through a stage at which all her feelings are strange; it lifts her, so to speak, across the gap between childhood and womanhood, and in order to do so it uses ritual that works, as myth does, in the realm of the imagination. When I experienced the ritual, much of which has never been recorded, it became clear not only that the women of this society possessed something akin to religious genius, but also that the ritual I was performing - this concretized poetry - was saying something that
words could not say, and was achieving a pleasure and social unity that symbolic action alone could encompass.

These powerful practices and principles combine to invite participation from the ranks of disaffected Americans, searching for ways to interact meaningfully with each other, unify fragmented selves and share experiences that result in a bonded community. Everything in our lives is so mental, so abstract, that we long for palpable, physically actualized, ‘concrete’ experiences that express embodiment, often confusing the solution with a need for sex or a commodified approach to the (hard) body. Sometimes it leads to increased rejection of the body and immersion in non-embodied religion.

One of the ‘American Dreams’ of success is often to win the lottery – meaning the possession of unfathomed wealth out of the context of earning (work, inheritance, deservedness) accompanied by infinite spending power. Another is to become a movie star, an impeccably beautiful (or handsome) impersonator of cultural images, again rewarded by a life assumed to be untroubled by normal human problems and with limitless material wealth. The American Dream does not include becoming a person admired for virtue, wisdom, fecundity, spiritual evolution, not only fine in appearance also accomplished in dance, speaking and singing, raised in community standing, and respected for integrity and insight. These ideals are institutionalized in the dance cultures of the African and bear such integrity that they are magnets of sanity in contrast to the restrained, material and bodily-disenfranchised environment of Western influence. Being included in a community, not just by words and ideas, but physically, palpably, through inclusion in communally danced and sung observances is a validating experience for the individual – if it is understood sufficiently to be inclusive and not threatening. Contrary to the Western license to the artist to live a decadent existence outside propriety, in which substance abuse, promiscuity and
economic excess are commonplace, in Africa it is considered that you would “improve your character to improve your art. Art and goodness are combined. The road to social purification and destiny is predicated upon a process through which the person takes on the essential attributes of aesthetically defined perfection in order to live in visible proximity to the divine” (Thompson 1974:1).

**Politics and Power Embodied**

This brings me to a powerful illustration of the history of repression of Pan African culture. For centuries, as European and other “imperialist’ cultures have moved beyond their own lands to economically exploit and subjugate other peoples with simpler (weapons) technologies, indigenous forms of dance and music have been suppressed, codified and otherwise limited. Their power in raising and sustaining energy, and binding community, have been recognized as too potent.

There is an extraordinary, true story of the ‘Women’s War’ that took place among the Ubakala Igbo people of Nigeria in 1929 (Hanna 1979:173-78). I will relate this in detail because it is, I think, an example of the formidable political power inherent in this creative dance and music tradition, to focus a group and facilitate social change.

At this time the British were in their heyday of ‘administering’ their colonies, and having decided not to send white colonists into Nigeria, they appointed local Africans as their representatives, and set about disrupting the complex indigenous economic system of barter to introduce a cash economy. One of the first steps was the imposition of taxes upon the male population, partly a strategy to force them into what would effectively be wage slavery and the growing of cash crops. In order to impose these taxes, a census had to be taken.
The women of this part of Eastern Nigeria had traditionally had a power base of solidarity as a result of their market networks and kin groups. This included a system of communication that cut across local boundaries because married women move to their husbands' village group, thus spanning two communities. A schoolteacher in Oloko who was in charge of taking the census had an argument with a woman in her home that became physical. She reported this to her village meeting and an alarm was raised, sending palm leaves to other women in outlying areas as a sign of distress and a call to gather for a protest. This was in keeping with a tradition of public theater that Hanna calls ‘dance plays’ when the community comes together and sings and dances to introduce, resolve, rehearse or re-enact an issue that has been raised.

The protest took the form of what is called ‘sitting on a man.’ This was done by creating an encampment outside the house of the offending man and singing dancing, eating and drinking palm wine all day and night, preventing the man from sleeping. They did not want to be counted, and composed a song about their grievance. They took an oath, invoking the power of Ndém, the Mother of us All.

The White man wants to count us, but there is only one of us. Ndém is one, uncountable upon uncountable, but still one. Undivided. With one voice, with one heart, with one birth canal through which everyone enters this world, with two breasts that suckle the whole world, squatting as we do when we deliver our babies, by the cord that binds us to our unborn infants, by the afterbirth through which we dedicate them to the Land, we swear, if ever we should backtrack or double-deal, or double-cross, or double-talk on the rest of Ndém, if we should in any way breach the solidarity of Ndém, may we be strangled to death by the umbilical cords of the babies we are birthing – in this incarnation, and in all our future reincarnation (Echewa 1992).

The British administrator appeared and reassured them that they would not be taxed. They did not believe him and asked that the school teacher and the village chief be
arrested and tried. The rampages spread and continued for a month. In Umuahia the women forced the warrant chief to surrender their caps, their symbols of authority. "the riots spread, involving about ten thousand women in two provinces. Destruction was directed primarily toward warrant chiefs and buildings representing this detested authority." There were 32 deaths when police fired on women in Opobo. However, the women succeeded in destroying the warrant chief system. While their victory was temporary, it remains as a striking example of the cohesion and active potential of a people who regularly engage in public, embodied interaction, a situation in which "the body overflows socially constructed restraints" (Martin 1996:vii)

Recording the Community- Collective Memory

The Euro-centric desire to capture and define events, reflected in approaches to ethnography and research, is also true when it comes to the recording of events in writing and in the mania for snapping photographs and videotaping everything from concerts to football games to children's birthday parties, as well as storing millions of facts in newspapers, books, etc. in libraries and cyberspace. We rely to a great extent on disembodied sources to store and transmit knowledge (as well as a lot of miscellaneous information).

In the oral tradition of Africa, memorable events, personal histories, songs and dances are also recorded – they live in collective memory, and in the beings of a hereditary class of persons called grixs. In the past, grixs were paradoxically members of the slave class, at the same time they were considered to be of high status because of their special skills and indispensable role in the society. Their full time occupation was to serve kings and villagers with their embodied memory, training their children (through the matrilineal line) from
babyhood to continue the tradition, unbroken. Karamba Dioubate, a griot who has performed and taught in Missoula, carries a business card that reads:

Karamba Dioubate
GRIOT
Keeper and transmitter of the musical traditions
of the Melinke people of Guinea, West Africa

Karamba's family now serves the current president. "When my grandfather needed some money," he told me in a conversation in Missoula in 1996, "he went to see the president. He did not need an appointment."

These events or histories are then replayed or remembered actively, sometimes over centuries. They are not only seen but experienced kinesthetically, through recounting in song, story and re-enactment during communal gatherings or ceremonies.

The limitations of temporal time define what the culture can retain based on:

1) What the griot can humanly commit to memory (often a staggering amount by our standards), and

2) How often and how frequently the community can spend time witnessing/participating in the enactment of the historical, social or ritual observance.

In oral tradition, what is enacted continues through generations. Material that is not used may vanish in a generation. There must be someone living who can remember a particular ritual, celebration, song or dance, to transmit it to the next generation. Sometimes
a remembered description will suffice. This can be done with amazing accuracy. Brazilian Canjambé ceremonies have preserved the language and action of its Yoruba origins so faithfully that modern day Africans journey to Brazil to study its form as it existed in Africa several hundred years ago. This is comparable to the remote Appalachian communities that were found to be speaking Elizabethan English in the 20th century.

In Afro-Brazilian culture, dance is acknowledged as a significant cultural activity. Those who possess a superior knowledge of dance forms are seen as repositories of tradition and as scholars. As in the Western academy, their scholarly prestige may be determined by a combination of a grasp of the tradition, an ability to interpret or theorize it, and a personal capacity for innovation (Browning 1995:xv)

The body provides a cultural boundary defining what can take place and grounding the quantity of information and the time available in such a fashion that a kind of reasonable limit is maintained. This provides an anchor, an organizing point around which cathartic or ecstatic events can take place, reaching out into the world of spirit ancestor and altered states, rite of passage or joy of community.

For example, the length of an event is extended or curtailed based on how long the dancers and musicians can keep their energy going, how many people can take time off from farming, how much food can be gathered and prepared for a given number of people. The environment also provides boundaries when certain events can only take place during the full moon because there is no electricity to provide floodlights, or during the dry season because it must be held outside. When it is time for an observance the number of participants are limited to those who can travel the distance to the site of the event by geographical limitations, because motor travel is not available. The event is celebrated collectively because everyone is on the same calendar, the same daily schedule sharing the
same survival needs. Contrast this with our own communities where it seems impossible to assemble a dinner party or a committee meeting because everyone keeps a different schedule, work shift, commute, vacation time, etc.

Collective memory is an integral part of building, and sharing culture, it puts everyone 'on the same page,' as literary thinkers love to say. When a given group of people experience an event together, it gives them a common point of reference from which to relate past and future events. This is a very powerful bond. Currently in the United States the technology available to commodify and store information through the symbolic medium of writing and the visual, audio mediums of recording has created a prolific body of information that exists outside of human memory. It is so vast that is has strained the bounds of collective memory. Aside from quantity of input, each person's memory contains such different recollections and points of reference that the binding effect of collective memory has been weakened. Computers have magnified this phenomenon.

Television and radio took the place of collective memory for a period of time when the number of stations was limited so that everyone was watching the same programs. Now, with thirty plus stations available, and people choosing home video programming, the only common ground may be newscasts, which cover similar news events. As a child in school without a television I was often asked by a classmate, "Did you see such and such a tv show?" When I answered "no," the classmate would abruptly turn away and go in search of someone who had shared their experience and could discuss the particular show they were referring to. The novelty factor is high and a convention has been set that seeing something new is better than repetition, so there is no agreement on what to retain and continue to cycle. If we accept the definition of tradition as "a process of the selection of
not necessary - but desired continuities,” involving choice-making (Williams 1982), we understand why we in the United States consider that we do not have ‘tradition.’ We do not have continuity. That leaves us to search it out in cultures we perceive as older, more commonly focused, or in some way more coherent than our own.

There is a discussion taking place in the United States today concerning the ‘cultural content’ of American education. Two writers, E.D. Hirsch and Alan Bloom had books on the bestseller list in the 1980's concerning the need for a common body of cultural knowledge that would be covered in schools nationally. At issue is something referred to as ‘cultural literacy.’ The assumption is that there is cultural information that is needed by anyone who wants to participate fully in American cultural life. Special mention is given to those from minority cultures who seek to enter ‘mainstream’ society at the level of economic opportunity and social mobility. It is considered that they are somehow culturally handicapped by not having listened to different music, read different books, heard different lullabies or laughed at different jokes. How will they fit in to the corporate, academic, political, etc. life of the dominant culture?

The assumption is that somehow a consensus can be reached on what this cultural information is and then it can be taught in a meaningful way to young people to whom it will provide a foundation of common reference and presto! This whole issue of tradition and cultural unity through collective memory will be solved.

Leaving aside the issue of cultural chauvinism exhibited by the Euro-centric content proposed for this curriculum, may I point out that this idea that culture can be defined from the top of a hierarchical pyramid, arrived at through primarily mental processes of selection ignores the integral role that knowledge in the body, embodied, knowledge plays in the role
of the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next, and as a grounding force that gives context and meaning to that knowledge.
Dissemination and Commodification

If we work with the point of view of Euro-centric culture as a culture of commodities, perpetually unfulfilled because continuous acquisition is necessary to maintain balance in an attempt satiate the appetite generated for commodities, there are aspects of the interest in African embodied art that point to it being yet another commodity on the list of acquisitions in Western culture. When Westerners perceive the image of ‘Africa’ and all it symbolizes, (discussed earlier in the sections on the “primitive’ and ‘shadow’), as desirable we set about moving towards it. Since our training is to fill the ‘gap,’ between ourselves and what we feel is lacking in our existence through purchase, we pay for classes, buy music, instruments, books, clothing and access to individuals with embodied knowledge. Can what we are searching for be acquired in this way?

Since my original subject is dance and music that have not been recorded, its first dissemination was through the avenue of oral culture, a direct transmission from a person, usually teacher to student. At the present time this is no longer true. For instance, a number of Western musicians have recorded various traditional Pan African rhythms and distributed them through booklets, audio and video tapes and the internet, with some musically literate and enterprising native artists following suit. Westerners also rely on their own recorded and written notes to learn and remember material. Dancers videotape their teachers and themselves, as well as purchasing performance and teaching videos. This has altered the hierarchy of access to traditional material, and allowed a commodification of the
art forms. The significance of the material out of its cultural context has consequently been altered. This is an element in the spread of both interest and specific vocabulary, and has created a large group of Westerners who have access to the material with no personal contact with a teacher from that tradition. This leaves it more open to being given a projected meaning. It has become public domain.

We have here another dichotomy. When Americans engage in the cultural practices of an African nature, are they embodying the values of the culture of origin, and deriving similar benefits, or is it being translated into a co-opted commodity of image and sound that can be bought and sold?

I would say that both things are happening. Training, information and initiation into African traditions are not being controlled by any one source, even disregarding media sources. It has, yet again “overflowed societal constraints.” Many of the connections for teaching and performance are the result of individual Africans and Americans meeting and making mutual use of each other. The Africans are usually paid for teaching music and dance, while Americans feel they are purchasing knowledge that is rare, meaningful and valuable.

There are a number of partnerships of professional association, friendship and marriage that have grown up within the drum and dance scene. Some of the resulting children are being raised to dance and play music from childhood, as is the African tradition. These children, born in the last 25 years or so, are the young virtuosos of the scene. I consider this a true measure of cultural fusion, when it produces a generation transformed by the fusion of cultural influences, through both ancestry and practice.
There is no question that the embodied African art forms are being altered as they are being disseminated. Traditional forms have gone through a process of theatrical transformation from village to national company, from choreographers to dancers, master drummer to orchestra, director to actor, from Pan African teachers to American acolytes, from Americans to fellow Americans. This is the beauty of embodied transmission. To trace the path of knowledge from person through person, creating a lineage. This is the context that has been created. The drum and dance culture, that links people from all over the United States to the African Diaspora, bonded by a shared activity. It is really a cultural development of staggering magnitude. Herskowitz's contention that 'Africanisms' are unassimilable (1958 cit. in Burt 1998:169) may have not gone far enough. Perhaps, given time, they are dominant.

Conversations Within Culture

In the process of examining these issues, I conducted interviews with seven Montanans who had been involved in the study of Pan African performing culture to gain insight into their relationship with African culture. Four of these individuals had traveled to Africa, Cuba or other parts of the African Diaspora. For all but one the primary contact with these cultural forms had been in the United States, initially with an American aficionado. Everyone had followed up this initial contact with study with native teachers.

Their answer to the question, “What attracted you to this art form from another culture, and has your contact given you what you hoped for,” there was a resounding “Yes, and more.” Cited at the top of their list of “hoped for” was the experience of community, formed by a meaningful common activity. Connection to traditional knowledge with
palpable depth (*les mystères*), and the involvement of the whole being came second. Everyone expected to continue to their study, playing or dancing throughout their lives, as a source of growth, enrichment, accomplishment and bonding.

I also asked if these needs could be met from within the culture of their own ethnic ancestry. There were some flat “no’s,” but four cited traditional Irish music and dance as a comparable pursuit that had provided a similar sense of community and sharing. These four had been involved with it formerly, but had ceased with the dispersal of given groups of practitioners. This had taken place during the 1970's, a minor golden age for acoustic traditional Irish and bluegrass music. I would like to point out that by my criteria, Irish music and dance also constitute an embodied cultural expression. Apparently, as interest and momentum fell away with a shift in the popular culture away from the counterculture and toward urban styles (disco, techno music), African dance and music became available to fill that gap. This is an important point in the current involvement in African performance art – it has become widely accessible. It would be interesting to see if there is a correlation between the falling interest of Euro-Americans in Irish heritage and Afro-Americans in African heritage, and if this was when the crossover took place with Euro-Americans beginning to enter Pan African dance classes.

Is this dissemination in any way harmful to the parent culture? There is always concern when knowledge of a sacred, secret nature begins to make its way out of the ceremonial hut and into the wider society. Will it be properly respected? Who should have access to it?
When an outsider chooses to go through another culture's motions, she may believe hotly in her actions, but the possibility of translating them means they are and are not the same. The possibility of translation divides experience. And yet the act is what one hopes will heal it . . . Slavery brought specific, real pain to the bodies of women and men, and misapprehension of cultural practices, including in an international context, continues to threaten tradition (Browning 1995:xviii).

Africans come by this knowledge through proximity and initiation, through apprenticeships that may involve serving the teacher or paying money and/or goods to a priest or priestess. Much of what is taught is considered safe for public consumption, having already been processed through lavish stage shows of the touring national companies many countries sponsor, from Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, Guineau, Senegal, Liberia, the Congo, the list is much longer. I am aware of two exceptions to this open approach. The first concerns bata drumming, the sacred music of the Lucumi tradition in Cuba, descended from the Yoruba people of present day Nigeria. In the 1980's I was told by drummers in New York City that anyone who wanted to learn bata drumming had to convince a master of their seriousness of purpose by acting as a kind of household servant and by persisting in their requests, service and interest for possibly a year or two before any real instruction began. Access was controlled and restricted to hand picked and dedicated individuals. However things have changed, and at this point in the year 2000 I am aware of Americans teaching bata to anyone willing to pay for a class in San Diego, Los Angeles and Arcata, California, and have seen bata rhythms charted on the Internet.

The second instance is that of Mamadi Keita, a Guinean master drummer who is an especially popular teacher of djembe music in Europe, Japan and the United States. According to Fred Simpson, who has been trained by Keita, Mamadi has been reprimanded by his elders for teaching rhythms that they consider restricted. Mamadi has responded by
saying he doesn’t teach the whole rhythm, inferring that if he withholds a crucial information, he was somehow preserved its sanctity. This is another aspect of ‘invisible in plain sight.’

It is true that out of context, many Westerners do not know what to make of the cultural material placed before them. Blacking makes the point that if we are not trained or acculturated to read movement symbols or recognize chant formats, or discern shifts in rhythm phrasing, if we are given incomplete information – we never effectively possess the encoded knowledge we think we are being taught (Blacking 1995:175). It is a way of its practitioners retaining control of this information while seeming to cooperate in disseminating it. Even if we are taught the information in its entirety, our lack of acculturation makes it irrelevant or ineffective to our practice of it. The next step is for its meaning to go through a cultural translation to close that gap between the embodied knowledge we seek and its lack of context in our current situation.

It follows that Westerners cannot resist applying their skills in musical literacy to reinterpret and systematize Pan African music. This is what we know, what is familiar to us. Tape recorders and notebooks abound in any class or workshop. The most successful native teachers are artists who have caught on to Western style thinking and structured their classes accordingly, even going as far as learning to classify and count out rhythms. This is initially an alien concept, for most native teachers. Jean Robert Morisseau, a Haitian master drummer who was my mentor in New York in 1988 to 1991, was asked in a class how many beats were in a phrase of a particular rhythm. He counted the number of times he hit the drum and said, with a perplexed look on his face, “eleven.” Questions about pulse, time signature, counting, etc. may be met with blank stares, as complex phrasing and the
polyrhythmic intersection of parts have been taught orally, through song and phrasing rather than mathematically.

I personally was taught drumming through feel, sound and repetition. I have never forgotten anything I was taught in this way. Once I begin to play, the knowledge unfolds without the conscious effort of thought. My body remembers. This music is taught in its indigenous setting as language, often listened to and sung in vocables (and danced to) for years, before ever attempted on an instrument.

This reformatting is also true of dance. Dance is not an activity that requires special preparation in its indigenous settings. It grows out of the daily life of people who are physically fit because of the demands of their daily lives – walking, carrying, bending, pounding – and these are reflected in the movement vocabulary used in the dances.

The practice among rural women of carrying loads on the head results in a walk in which the undulations of the ground surface are taken up in the flexibility of the hips and knees whereas the ankles remain and the head remains in a consistently upright position so as not to upset the objects carried. This practice strengthens the muscles of the neck and back, contributes towards the habit of a straight back and torso...and develops a marked flexibility in the pelvic region. These and many other occupation patterns of movement are reflected in the basic body position, which recur in the many forms of Nigerian dance. A characteristic body posture in dance consists of a straight-backed torso with the legs used as springs, the knees bending and stretching in fluidly executing the rhythmic action patterns of the dance, and feet placed firmly on the ground (Harper 1969:288-9).

While Africans have conditioning and strengthening activities they engage in for their body maintenance, it has been my perception that these are done individually rather than in groups or classes. In 1987-91 in New York, I watched Ladji Camara come half an
hour before he taught a dance class and do a personal stretching regimen that would put a yogi to shame, but he never taught any of it to his students. However, Americans are put off, even alarmed, if they are asked to simply get up and start dancing vigorously without some sort of ‘warm up,’ preferably including conditioning exercises and stretching, believing that otherwise they will be injured. The most successful native teachers have devised fitness style warm-ups or enlisted the help of American dancers to teach a warm up sequence at the opening of each class. After this American ritual, the real dancing begins.

Conclusion

In the process of researching and writing this paper I have made many connections between embodied forms that I had initially perceived as separate. Blurring the lines of culture, style, discipline, time and it was possible to see the relationship of the orphaned colony of dance that has survived and developed in the United States to its cousin in the African Diaspora. The many traits of Western society that exist as a constant effort to compensate for the lack of embodied fulfillment were highlighted by their failure to contain the body, that wonderful phrase of Martin’s “dance and theatre as two closely related art forms . . . in which the body ‘overflows’ these socially constructed constraints” (Martin 1990:vii). I refer here both to the dichotomy of mind and body in the sense that the body can surpass what the mind can observe, but also the split between what the body is really doing and experiencing, and the culture of fantasy about Africa and primitivism. The unity of human life that is the common ground on which we as humans meet, speak, eat, mate, and make complex ritual and performance to transform our existence through shared art, balancing our configuration in this present moment on this mysterious planet like tightrope
walkers crossing not one line, but a diaphanous web, our survival contingent on our continuous connectedness to each other.

I experienced this for the first time in 1986, as a participant in an event that marked my inclusion into the Pan African ethnic community. After having danced in the Haitian ethnic community in New York City for two years, I had the privilege of meeting and dancing with Lavinia Williams, whom I have introduced earlier. She was seventy two at the time, a peer and lifelong friend of Jean Leon Destine and a teacher of all my other teachers. Two months later she was dead, from eating 'bad fish,' in Haiti. Jean Leon Destine felt it was important to hold a memorial for her in New York. He invited her lead drummer, Ti-ra to come from Hain, and circulated an invitation for local dancers to come to St. Peter's Church for a rehearsal. As I was sitting, waiting in the church, Ti-ra walked in carrying a Voudoun drum painted bright yellow, with veves (religious symbols) on it. Ti-ra was a black, black man, with a long waist, short legs and long arms, resembling the small brass statues I have seen from Africa. He stood at the right side of the room, looking in great depth and intensity at... I couldn't tell what. I had a palpable feeling that there was a world before his eyes in the space in which I saw... nothing. He straddled the drum like a horse, securing it to his leg with a rope, and began to play music I had never experienced before as he stood, riding the drum, bagætte (a hammer drumstick) in hand.

Fifty of us came to dance for Lavinia, and as we rehearsed a simple beautiful procession, dancing Yanvalou and singing, I realized this was not a performance for anyone to watch. We were all in it. There we were in a Christian church, dancing, honoring spirit, grieving, resolving, celebrating. Little was said. Mostly people sang and danced. The drumming was unlike anything I had ever heard before, like a choir singing. I realized that it was the first time I had been asked to come and dance just as myself, to be a member of this
collective dancing body with nothing to prove, simply to be present. It was remarkable. It has set me on the path of embodied performance as an integral part of community observances.

Since then in Missoula, Montana and Chico, California I have been part of numerous community observances. Various members and combinations of drummers and dancers have performed for the Festival of the Dead, Mardi Gras, the Wild Walk which opens the International Wildlife Film Festival, the Hemp Festival, Martin Luther King Day, music festivals and other community events and fundraisers. Participation is the key, minimal amounts of money change hands. Interestingly, in speaking to other dancers and drummers I encounter at workshops, there are Pan African performing groups in a number of comparable communities that play a similar role, appearing at parades, fairs and holiday observances — in Eugene, Arcata, Olympia, Nevada City, Chico, Patagonia, San Diego, Salt Lake — to say nothing of the semi-professional groups that come out for events in San Francisco (which holds its own full scale Mardis Gras parade in May), Los Angeles and Seattle.

Starting in 1984, when I began including African Dance in my workshops in Missoula each summer when I returned to Montana to balance three seasons of life and dance in New York City, I was startled by the sudden swell of interest in the African forms. Eventually this operated to the exclusion of contact improvisation, modern dance and choreography, the other work I also found important. Soon, all we were doing was Pan African dance and music. It was apparent to me at the time that I was acting as a bridge, not a source, of this knowledge, and the past fifteen years have proved me right. Now almost everyone I have ever taught who has a serious interest has had contact with native teachers, many of them traveling to the countries where these traditions originate. The novelty of the work has subsided, the fad is over, and many of those involved are
knowledgeable and respectable artists. The drum has become a permanent fixture of counterculture gatherings, and is played frequently, in schooled or unschooled manner.

The increasing numbers of Africans teaching and performing in the United States are expatriates. They are choosing to live abroad at this time for diverse reasons, but it remains that because whatever life they had in Africa, with all the virtues extolled here, was not enough to hold them. Their presence among us is evidence that this is a time for a cultural merger. We need what they have to offer, and they also seek something that resides among us. That is another paper. Obviously technology and literacy will not go away. At the same time it is imperative to recognize and cultivate embodiment as our original state, and to preserve, multiply and enhance opportunities to give it its crucial place in the lives of our children and ourselves. It is a key in our continued movement towards a balanced, grounded existence in which technology and literacy act a allies, not dominant, restricting forces, in effective, creative and connected living.

In addressing these issues, writing a paper was not enough. As part of my graduate work I collected images of cultural power and irony, texts from anthropology, the bible, poetry, scenes from daily practice, musicians, actors and dancers, traditional rhythms and ceremonial movements to create a performance expressing the depth, complexity and humor of these cultural circumstances. The show was a review, also called “The Gap: Mining the Third World for Cultural Transfusion,” or: “Afro-Billy and the Search for Meaning.”

Writing about embodiment has been an arduous, though necessary task. The growth of a body of literature about dance and embodied knowledge is probably imperative to the its survival at some level. However, it is not a replacement for it, and if anything, this process
has convinced me of the importance of working fully in the realm of embodiment. To be able to walk into a room to teach needing nothing but my embodied self, it's experience, responsiveness, intelligence ... knowing that within there is 'ashe,' the power to make things happen. No televisions, no books, no props. Maybe an instrument or two. It seems to me that teaching this empowerment is an opportunity to restore some of the balance that has been lost in my native culture.

I see performance as a continuous embodied format for the examination, manifestation and enjoyment of this marvelous, stimulating and sometimes wildly humorous cultural merger we are in the midst of. I am also convinced that diversity has always been with us, and not only can we handle it, but with the help of the body to keep us in the present, sleeves rolled up and all senses engaged it is, as Blacking expressed, the infrastructure of human society. It's what we’re here to do.

The search for alternatives is often considered a utopian project. But when utopia is crafted from the concrete present rather than the idealized future, it can both inspire and point to directions for change made possible by present circumstances. In this sense, art can be a utopia, not as a presentation of the future but as a selection from among certain aspects of the present (Martin1990:7).
BIBLIOGRAPHY

TEXTS


Drewal, Margaret Thompson (Verger 1964:16) *Dancing for Ogun in Yorubaland and Brazil,*


Missoulian Newspaper. Nov. 18, 2000. “Study: Kids Spend 38 Hours a Week Consuming Media,” A11. quotes “Kids & Media @ The New Millenium” by Kaiser Family Foundation


Smetanka, Andy. 2000. “Paris In the Northern Rockies.” Missoula, Mt: The
Missoulian Newspaper


VIDEOCASSETES
