

Zita Allen, "What Is Black Dance?" In *The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance*. Ed. Gerald E. Meyers. Durham: American Dance Festival, 1988, pp. 22-23.

Has anyone noticed that since the term "black dance" snuck into our vocabulary several decades ago, it has remained undefined? Yet, in spite of the fact that this label has no clear definition, it has acquired a power almost as great as its meaning is obscure.

Major federal, state, city, corporate, and private funding sources have adopted guidelines with which to weigh "black dance" applications. Critics, wittingly and unwittingly, lump most African-American choreographers under this heading and make generalizations about the work of an entire segment of America's dance community.

In place of a thoughtful, thorough, and intelligent definition, we are given a glib grocery list of characteristics (or stereotypes). Black dance is "pop" (cheap), "entertaining" (lightweight), laden with "political overtones" (didactic), "angry" (provocative), and loaded with "literal gesture, trite narrative, and stereotyped characteristics" (simplistic).

It is important to note that from the moment this very controversial nametag was imposed on the African-American artistic community, those whom it attempts to describe have played a negligible role in determining the validity and scope of its use.

What is "black dance?" Is it Alvin Ailey's racially mixed company in his soul-stirring masterpiece "Revelations," but not American Ballet Theatre's performance of Ailey's more abstract ballet "The River"? Is it Dance Theatre of Harlem's percussive pelvic thrusts in Geoffrey Holder's "Dougla," or its distinguished adaptation of the classic Romantic ballet "Giselle," or the company's crisp neoclassicism in George Balanchine's "Concerto Barocco"? Is it Charles Moore's brilliant recreation of Asadata Dafora's "Ostrich," Pearl Primus' classic version of the "Fanga," or any other stylized reproduction of authentic African dances? Is it works whose themes reflect the unique African American experience, like Donald McKayle's "Games," Talley Beatty's "The Road of the Phoebe Snow," or Eleo Pomare's "Blues for the Jungle," but not more abstract ballets by these same choreographers? Is it choreographer Blondell Cummings' own "Chicken Soup" but none of her work with white choreographer Meredith Monk? Does the label apply to works by Bill T. Jones, Ralph Lemon, Bebe Miller, and other experimentalists who emphasize form more than content and make no thematic reference to the broad-based African-American experience? Is it "Shango," Katherine Dunham's theatricalized version of African-Caribbean ritual, or the original Trinidadian cult dances that inspired it? Is it white choreographer Helen Tamiris' "Negro Spirituals"?

Is it a black choreographer's work performed by black dancers? A white choreographer's work done by black dancers? Or a black choreographer's work danced by whites? Must it always have a "black" theme? Is it ever abstract? Is it modern, jazz, tap, and/or ballet? Is it found only in America, or does the label "black dance" apply to works in the repertory of Senegal's National Dance Company or Cuba's Conjuncto Folklorico or any other company consciously trying to preserve its African heritage? Or is "black dance" just an empty label devised by white critics to cover that vast, richly diverse, and extremely complex area of dance they know all too little about?

Does "black dance" really exist? And if in fact it does, just who is qualified to define it? Choreographer Rod Rodgers has had quite a bit to say about the subject:

“One of my works, "Tangents," contradicts critics' tendency to say that I create black dance. That piece was inspired by Watusi dancers at the World's Fair, [who were] working with sticks. Then, when I got into the studio there was a Chinese Tai Chi expert and he helped me incorporate Tai Chi elements. John Cage directed the music. Now, what you have when you look at "Tangents," is a dance inspired by an African dance form that also incorporates Asian elements, and is actually performed in a contemporary dance idiom. Now, is that black dance? No! That's contemporary American dance.”

Eleo Pomare expressed this same reluctance to have his creativity pigeonholed when he told me during an interview, "I don't think I create black dance. I think I create works that are hybrid forms of our experience as blacks. I personally don't limit myself to dealing with just black themes, black music or anything of that kind. ... No one would tell Pearl Lang that she was creating Jewish dance or Jewish art. white critics rave about white choreographers without imposing ethnic breakdowns."

But these are just two of the responses choreographers, dancers, and even administrators have given when asked what they thought of the relevance or appropriateness of this label. Though responses vary, they generally hinge on two key points -- an insistence on the freedom to define one's own culture, and a belief that the act of lumping all African-American performers and choreographers into one category and then institutionalizing this distinction (for example, through federal, city, and state funding sources) is tantamount to cultural apartheid.

If nothing else, this sentiment reflects the impact of the socioeconomic and political factors on the culture itself, because at the heart of the matter are issues of cultural imperialism versus the right to cultural self-determination, self-definition, or independence.

At the heart of the matter is the history of African descendants, a history with slavery at its core, a history without which this "black dance" question might never have existed.

Think of it! For decades minstrelsy could be said to have been both reality and metaphor for the fate of African-American dancers. Imagine the irony of it. In order to be accepted, black performers in the past had to imitate a distorted image and form created by white performer T.D. Rice when, back in the 1820s, he went on stage in greasepaint, tattered clothes, and comically oversized shoes and imitated a dance he happened to see an old handicapped slave do. A white performer's imitation of African Americans was the first image of African Americans to appear on the American stage.

In a sense, minstrelsy might even be seen as a metaphor for the "black dance" dilemma being discussed here, as African Americans continue to grapple with someone else's idea of what African-American culture is, of just what kind of dance African Americans are supposed to do.

I can't pretend to have all the answers. My goal here is simply to open an important discussion with some thoughtful observations and comments of my own, based on discussions and interviews with choreographers, dancers, and historians during my years of writing dance criticism and studying dance history.

I first came across the term "black dance" in 1972 in dance critic Marcia B. Siegel's collected essays, *AT THE VANISHING POINT*. Siegel followed a dance-book tradition and lumped virtually all African-American choreographers she mentioned into a 38-page chapter of the 320-page book. The chapter was entitled "Black Dance: A New Separatism."

For years, books purporting to survey America's vast dancescape dumped all black choreographers and dancers into a single tiny chapter, slapped on titles like "Negro Dance" or "The Black Dance," offered a few glib generalizations, slurred several obligatory names -- Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, Alvin Ailey -- and moved on. "black dance" was not defined, but projected as any dance done by blacks.

But Siegel is not the subject of this discussion. In fact, critics cited here are merely reflections of a kind of systematic problem. Siegel was not alone.

In a May 1979 *DANCE MAGAZINE* review of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, critic Teresa Bowes asked, "Is there such a thing as black dance?" before plunging into a muddled attempt to answer the question. "Black dance, Balinese dance, modern dance, flamenco dance and ballet are different from one another, but have movement and basic dance concepts in common," she wrote.

NEW YORK TIMES critic Jennifer Dunning alluded briefly to her own notion of "black dance" in a review of Dianne McIntyre's *Sounds in Motion* dance company by explaining that McIntyre was "one of the few black choreographers who work within the mainstream dance style while still incorporating the 'jazz and character style that has come to be thought of as black dance.'" Later, Dunning unwittingly pinpointed one of the key misconceptions here -- the assumption that ethnicity predetermines culture -- when she asked, "Does anything other than race identify the black choreographer?"

Though Deborah Jowitt of *THE VILLAGE VOICE* didn't have all the answers, she at least seemed aware of one of the major pitfalls involved in this dilemma when she wrote that "The term 'black dance' doesn't cover all dances made by black choreographers."

An interesting variation on this theme appeared as far back as 1940 when *NEW YORK TIMES* critic John Martin announced, in an enthusiastic review of Katherine Dunham's Broadway debut, that her arrival indicated "a bright future for the development of a substantial Negro dance art." What was the "Negro dance art"? Well, Martin provided a catalogue of characteristics, but no definition: "It is debonair and delightful, not to say daring and erotic," and "there is nothing pretentious about it: it is not designed to delve into philosophy or psychology but to externalize the impulses of a high-spirited rhythmic and gracious race." While some of this might seem complimentary, it is actually the flip side of some pretty dangerous generalizations. Martin's view of "Negro dance" derived from the prevalent romantic notion of the Negro-as-noble-savage,

a popular concept during the early part of the 20th century. As Dunham said when I asked her several years ago about Martin's assessment of her work, "He was trying to be helpful." Back in 1938, Katherine Dunham said something else that still seems valid today: "The one big problem is still this stereotyped idea of what the Negro should do."

I think it is presumptuous for any one person -- black or white -- to define "black dance" for the entire field of African-American choreographers and dancers. Yet, since its existence was declared decades ago, far too many critics have taken the term and its murky definitions for granted. Instead, what is needed is a dialogue among those artists and scholars creatively involved with dance and the broader components -- the socioeconomic, political, and cultural matrix. What is needed is a discussion similar to the prolonged and often heated debates that engaged African Americans in theater and literature as they wrestled with definitions, searched for appropriate structures, and identified the style and function of their art during the introspective 1960s.

In the 1960s and early '70s, there was a brief flurry of activity as black choreographers and dancers dealt with these fundamental questions in an attempt to seize control of the critical and funding mechanisms, that often held the key to their survival. A small group formed the Black Choreographers Association. Another founded THE FEET, a magazine designed to serve as a forum for the discussion of such questions as that which occupies us still -- "What is black dance?" And, as the exciting climax of this activity, there was a Black Dance Conference held at the University of Indiana's Bloomington campus. But eventually, the Association fizzled. THE FEET also folded, and the Black Dance Conference turned out to be nothing more than a dream deferred. But hope has not faded.

Several years later, SUNY took up the gauntlet with a Dance: Black America conference at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, which promised to revive the forum for this much-needed discussion, but it has suffered a similar fate as the Bloomington conference. Periodically, conferences and convenings, which have kept this dialogue alive, have been hosted by such stalwarts as the American Dance Festival, with its annual gatherings of dancers, choreographers, and scholars at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, or Joan Myers Brown, founder and artistic director of the Philadelphia Dance Company, affectionately known as Philadanco.

In 1992, the conference Black Choreographers Moving Toward the 21st Century brought together a national group of outstanding artists, including Chuck Davis, artistic director of the Chuck Davis African American Dance Ensemble; Ann Williams, director of the Dallas Black Dance Theatre; Rod Rodgers, founder and artistic director of the Rod Rodgers Dance Company; Jeraldyn Blunden, artistic director of the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company; Cleo Parker Robinson, founder and artistic director of Cleo Parker Robinson Dance; and Bernice Boseman, artistic director of the Oui Geometer Dance Company, among others, to grapple with this and many issues affecting African-American dancers and choreographers.

The black dance controversy continues, and its central question, "What is black dance?," still needs to be answered. That task will be accomplished at gatherings like these, at which choreographers, dancers, critics, historians, and others offer their solid knowledge of the history and undying love of the art.