

# THE BLACK DANCING BODY

A GEOGRAPHY FROM COON TO COOL

BRENDA DIXON GOTTSCHILD

palgrave  
macmillan



THE BLACK DANCING BODY

Copyright © Brenda Dixon Gottschild, 2003.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

First published 2003 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS.

Companies and representatives throughout the world.

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN 0-312-24047-3 hardback

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Gottschild, Brenda Dixon.

The black dancing body : a geography from coon to cool / Brenda Dixon Gottschild.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-312-24047-3

1. African American dance—History.
2. African American dancers.
3. Body image. I. Title.

GB1624.7.A34G68 2003

793'089'96073—dc21

2003041434

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Letra Libre, Inc.

First edition: September 2003

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

### THREE

## FEET

*My feet: long and bony, like my hands. Strangely, my big toes were angled inward at birth—maybe proto-dancer's toes, since so many of us wind up with bunions anyway. (It was my parents' choice not to have them broken and reset while I was a baby.) I have what is termed a high instep (that is, the lateral arch is situated closer to the ankle than the toes), which makes the dancing foot look nicely pointed, even though I don't have a high arch. My toes and ankles, like all my joints, are very flexible: good for plasticity in movement, bad with regard to making me prone to injury. (The downside of flexibility is lack of strength.) Early on I was made aware of the stereotypes around black feet: Big, flat, and inarticulate were frequent descriptors. Growing up I was too black, too tall, and my feet were too big—and, oooh, those crooked toes!*

*Dance saved me! At Mary Anthony's studio in lower Manhattan my body was valued for its elongated, lyrical line, and my feet were used as exemplars. They were neither perfect nor beautiful, but my use of them showed how ordinary feet could be put to excellent use. Anthony pointed this out to a couple of (Jewish) friends of mine who were dancing with her at that time (mid-1960s: back then I was the only dancer of color in the ensemble). These feet were fast and flexible. They did the job, after all. And me? I was in the thrall of the white dancing body—an oreo wanting to succeed as a white modern dancer in black skin.*

*I know my feet, all about them. It's like my feet are the drums, and my shoes are the sticks. . . . My left heel is . . . my bass drum. My right heel is like the floor tom-tom. I can get a snare out of my right toe, a whip sound, not putting it down on the floor hard, but kind of whipping the floor with it. I get the sounds of a top tom-tom from the balls of my feet. . . . [I get the hi-hat sound] with a slight toe lift, either foot. . . . And if I want cymbals, crash crash, that's landing flat, both feet, full strength on the floor.*

—Savion Glover, *My Life in Tap*

Feet are so important to dancers because they ground us, and we need to know where we stand. They give us security and are our launching pad for fast and furious or light and airborne movement. Whether black, brown, or white, on Broadway, the ballet stage, or the street corner, dancers spend a lot of time working—and working on—their feet.

Before Jews were considered white they, too, were characterized as people with flat feet, “bad” feet. It is remarkable how, once white skin privilege is bestowed upon an ethnic group, the stigmas attached to their bodies are miraculously erased. No one complains about the Jewish foot in the contemporary dance world. So what has changed? The feet? The perception? The acceptance? And why should this issue still be discussed with regard to black dancers? Although subjected to calumny in comic routines, these black feet were admired in minstrelsy and vaudeville for their speed and articulate clarity. Charles Dickens, commenting on the dancing of Master Juba in 1840s London, stretches to find the words to adequately express his enthusiasm for what he has seen.<sup>1</sup> The style initiated by Juba would ultimately be refined and finessed into what we now call tap dance, a form practiced as frequently and wholeheartedly by whites as by blacks; for, like all things American, no one ethnic group can keep exclusive claim on a cultural skill for long. As Le Roc, a 20-something British R&B singer put it: “White singers get more credit for being able to sing and dance black than black singers do.”<sup>2</sup> A dancer like James Brown, largely self-taught, brought footwork to new heights of achievement in his fast-paced, raw execution. But these pop styles of dance, even though appropriated by white practitioners, were looked upon as the rightful place for black dancers to hang out. The real problems arose whenever blacks moved toward mastery of “white” forms.

To draw this map of black feet I begin with a sketch of William Henry Lane and minstrelsy, fast forward to James Brown, stop by for a visit with Gregory Hines en route to the world of Savion Glover, and wind up at the feet of ballet and some roving myths.

### FEET, DON'T FAIL ME—MASTER JUBA

William Henry Lane was a youth who spent his entire life dancing, frequently in competition against white soloists in jiggling matches. Lane died in 1852 when he was about 27 years old. Yet, a rendering of him from a poster for his appearance at London's Vauxhall Gardens (in the Harvard Theatre Collection) looks like the portrait of a middle-aged man. Part of the aging appearance is due to the black, burnt cork and exaggerated lips in the depiction: He is made up and disguised in the minstrel mask. In the mid-nineteenth century, Lane would not

have been allowed to perform except in blackface. This artist was the link between black and white dance and dancers and black and white minstrelsy, a crosser of borders who was hired by the entrepreneur P. T. Barnum (later of circus fame) when Barnum's white minstrel, John Diamond, quit.<sup>3</sup>

Lane's sobriquet, Master Juba, conjures up images of an older African step dance, Giouba, brought to the Americas in Middle Passage, which, according to dance historian Marian Hannah Winter, "somewhat resembled a jig with elaborate variations, and occurs wherever the Negro settled, whether in the West Indies or South Carolina."<sup>4</sup> "Juba" was a common name for enslaved Africans that was associated particularly with dancers and musicians. Stearns and Stearns describe the Juba step as a "sort of eccentric shuffle," which, in its Cuban form, fused "steps and figures of the court of Versailles . . . with the hip movements of the Congo."<sup>5</sup> Another step, "Pattin' Juba," consisted of "foot tapping, hand clapping, and thigh slapping, all in precise rhythm."<sup>6</sup> This variation was the forerunner of the Hambone, a percussive song-movement form popularized in twentieth-century rural African American communities. Thus, it was a tribute to black history and traditions that Lane was dubbed Master Juba.

Although he has been all but forgotten, Lane was characterized by Winter as the "most influential single performer of nineteenth-century American dance."<sup>7</sup> There is little documentation of his work beyond a smattering of newspaper and journal accounts from the era, including a famous one by Charles Dickens from his *American Notes* (published in 1842) and several reviews from Lane's extended stay in London (1848 until his death there in 1852). By these accounts (and by studying the few extant renderings of him) we can surmise that Lane's contribution was in forging an original, innovative merger of Africanist-based torso articulations, footwork, and rhythmic syncopation with Europeanist steps characteristic of the Irish Jig and perhaps even the "steps and figures of the court of Versailles." This is why Winter characterized him as an artist of utmost importance: In merging these two streams Lane laid the groundwork for twentieth-century pop culture and its seamless fusion of black and white forms that is so definitively American.

Let us jump cut to Lane's feet and their significance. We can surmise that he utilized his feet as percussion instruments and introduced the speed, syncopation, and sophisticated complexity of African rhythms to the white popular stage, challenging the hegemony of white dancers who, themselves, imitated black street and plantation steps and movements in an attempt to enliven their routines. But Lane was the real thing, "the genuine article." As speedily and intricately as his most famous competitor, John Diamond, could dance, apparently Lane could outdo him. The *Illustrated London News* of 8 May 1848 asked, "How could he . . . make his feet twinkle until you lose sight of them altogether in his

energy?" Another critic commented that he had never before witnessed "such flexibility of joints, such boundings, such slidings, such gyrations, such toes and heelings, such backwardings and forwardings, such posturings, such firmness of foot." Still another clipping from that 1848 London season gushed, "The manner in which he beats time with his feet, and the extraordinary command he possesses over them, can only be believed by those who have been present at his exhibition," while another characterized his work as "an ideality . . . that makes his efforts at once grotesque and poetical."<sup>8</sup> So these feet were amazing in bringing to bear elements that left his critics speechless and grasping to create neologisms ("backwardings and forwardings") that could replicate his innovations. Dickens wrote of Lane's "single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-cut . . . presenting the backs of his legs in front, spinning about on his toes and heels like nothing but the man's fingers on the tambourine."<sup>9</sup> As an earlier, American handbill read, "No conception can be formed of the variety of beautiful and intricate steps exhibited by him with ease."<sup>10</sup>

The best living analogy I can think of for "twinkling" one's feet until they become a blur is the fantastic tap artistry of Savion Glover. I project Glover's feet onto the descriptions of Lane and realize that Lane is Glover's aesthetic ancestor. (Of course, there are huge differences, since each artist represents the culture, styles, and mores of his era.) The repetition of the word "such" in one review gives a sense of the rhythm, repetitive but syncopated, of Lane's offerings. And still the writer observes and comments that Lane is firm on his feet, a basic requisite for dancing excellence. Obviously the young man is technically accomplished, knows what he's doing, and is in control. Lane's energy is also cited. Recall that, in the chapter on definitions of black dance, an ineffable quality of energy was one of the characteristics given by several dancers. Juba's energy and ease add up to charisma. The man had "soul," and all indicators point to the genius that lived in his feet. A steady stream of white and black imitators followed on the minstrel stage and Lane's innovations were carried over into early vaudeville, which is how and why his legacy was transmitted down through the ages and can be tasted even today in the work of Savion Glover.

Dickens's comment about Lane's use of toes and heels like the fingers of a tambourine player are particularly telling. This observation is consistent with what we now call tap dancing, wherein toes and heels are played alternately, sometimes contrapuntally, like percussion instruments, and are as specific and sensitive as fingers playing an instrument. Clearly Lane had traveled beyond the conventions of the nineteenth-century Irish Jig and even beyond the complexities of the Africanist Jig as performed on southern plantations. As the Stearnses explain, Lane came on the scene at the moment when the specific meaning of the term "jig" as an Irish folk

dance was being amended to mean black dancing in general.<sup>11</sup> By then both Africans and Irish were performing step dances that were generically called jigs. The term later becomes pejoratively associated with African Americans as in "jig piano," an early form of ragtime music, "jig top," the segregated section of white rural carnivals and circuses, and "jigaboo," one of many white epithets for African Americans. Cutting his eyeteeth in New York City's notoriously raucous Five Points ghetto of poor Irish immigrants and free Africans, Lane absorbed, embodied, and re-created both traditions in his own ingenious dancing image. The observer who characterized his work as both grotesque and poetical is pointing out that Lane established an aesthetic that differs radically from the Irish Jig. He offered to white audiences a black aesthetic by deconstructing the ramrod straight torso of the Irish jiggers and replacing it, first, with a torso that bends, torques, and leans asymmetrically pitched off-center (as in the Vauxhall Gardens rendering) in a decidedly Africanist posture; second, with legwork that in the swing era (1920s–1940s) would be characterized as "legomania" and entailed exaggerations in bending the knees and twisting and spreading the legs in ways that were unheard of in the Irish Jig; and, third, with his fabulous ball-toe-heel syncopated footwork. These characteristics were considered ignoble postures until Lane, through his charismatic presentation, transformed the ugly into the beautiful, astounding audiences by presenting the grotesque as poetic—a metamorphosis that is achieved only through consummate artistry and a total engagement between the performer and the form, the dancer and the dance. Lane brokered contradictions through the force and power of his black dancing body.

Returning to the Vauxhall Gardens rendering, Lane's feet are the most beautiful, delicate, and detailed part of the picture.<sup>12</sup> He is wearing shiny black, low-heeled boots that end just below his knees. His feet are almost balletically turned out. His torso is asymmetrically poised in a jazzy position, one hip jutting out. His hands are coolly tucked in his pockets. The toes of his boots are finely tapered finials for his long, narrow feet. The boots, the feet, are the center of focus, attention, and energy. They look as though they were built for speed. Indeed, these are toes that look ready to twinkle and feet that look considerably younger and more plastic than the rest of the body, with the face the least expressive of all (which is the price paid for blacking up). Is this likeness an idealization on the artist's part? If so, that would be a radical way of portraying a black minstrel: Most nineteenth-century renderings were demeaning. Perhaps the visual artist was confronted with a classic dilemma of representation—namely, that it is most difficult to depict something unfamiliar. In this case, artists tend to resort to a familiar conception or idea, rather than what they see (namely, the new, strange phenomenon).<sup>13</sup> That's why many early Enlightenment renderings of Africans

were Europeanized to fit the ideal of the noble savage. In terms of facial features and bodily postures, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century portraits of Africans look like Europeans in modified blackface. The Vauxhall Gardens artist may have unwittingly neutralized some of Lane's distinctiveness—and blackness—through the fact of inadvertent ethnocentrism. Nevertheless, there is a force and energy in the depiction that attests to Lane's uniqueness.

If the Vauxhall sketch is an idealization, then by coincidence it runs parallel to the norms of traditional African art which is never realistic but always conceptual. The classical African artist works with what is *known*, rather than what is seen. Accordingly, there is no continental African standard of representational, naturalistic portraiture or landscape art. Instead, a sculptor may exaggerate the size of the human head in relation to other body parts to show that the person is a head of state; or the breasts to show that the individual is a nurturer. Thus, ironically, one might "read" the Vauxhall picture in an Africanist context: Since Lane's feet are the center of his gravitational pull, as well as the center of our attention, they are represented here symbolically, not naturalistically. Beyond these speculations what we can say, conclusively, is that this representation of Lane's feet reinforces their power.

Before leaving Lane, let us take a step backward for a brief glimpse at some of the Africanist forces that shaped him. We must look to the plantation era to theorize Lane's development as proto tap dancer.

Rhythm: African rhythm is the signature that separates Lane's style from the white styles of his era. The centrality of multiple rhythms (polycentrism) and multiple meters (polymetrics) is characteristic of almost all forms of continental African performance and is exhibited in song, dance, and music styles. In addition, these expressive forms were interconnected: African musicians also danced and sang. Lane himself was an expert tambourine player.<sup>14</sup> He was also the sum of all the African pasts that preceded him. His feet had a reason to be brilliant. Generations earlier, immediately after Middle Passage, African drums were outlawed in the United States (although not as definitively in the Caribbean and South America). The feet—as well as hands clapped together or patted on various body parts and "found" instruments such as spoons, buckets, or brooms—had to carry out the function of the drums. In addition, enslaved Africans were forced to give up their religious practices and become Christians. The Protestant denominations frowned upon dance, particularly fancy footwork. But African religions were danced religions. Practitioners embodied their deities through codified dance movements that involved not only footwork but also the articulate Africanist torso, which was alien to a Europeanist dance aesthetic based upon the vertical alignment seen in forms such as ballet, the Irish Jig, and English Clog dancing.



Fortunately, plantation-era African American Christian ceremony was segregated from white practice, enabling Africans to develop their own style and criteria that modified yet retained a host of African characteristics. Out of these restrictions enslaved Africans created a religious practice known as the Ring Shout (which will be discussed again in the final chapter). Instead of sitting still on upright wooden pews and facing a proscenium altar to listen quietly to a preacher, they preserved the African centrality of the circle, communal worship, and improvisation. In the Ring Shout practitioners moved in a counterclockwise direction (an African tradition) while singing, chanting, and improvising a cappella versions of Christian hymns that were embellished by African techniques of repetition and polyphony and accompanied by body percussion and rhythms on buckets, brooms, and other found objects. Improvised variations were their creative ways of moving to these rhythms and traveling in the circle.

There was a particular Protestant taboo about crossing the feet while moving (since foot patterns could be construed as dancing), sometimes expressed in rhymes to remind errant feet to watch their manners. (One such ditty warns, "Watch out, Sister, how you step on the cross, your foot might slip, and your soul get lost.") Honoring both African and European needs, enslaved Africans found ways to shift weight from heels to toes, to insides and outer edges of the feet, moving the feet in various directions, turning toes and knees in and out, sliding, gliding, shuffling, stomping the feet—without ever crossing them or lifting them from the ground. On top of this they articulated the torso and limbs in counter rhythms and different directions, adding syncopations and improvised movements throughout the body. Thus, they were not breaking white Protestant rules—not dancing, in a European sense! What they were doing, in an exquisite example of acculturation, was inventing a new dance form! What I have described would look like an early form of pre-tap dance called buck dancing. This is the form that Lane inherited, along with African and Irish forms of the jig. So the shuffling syncopation of the Ring Shout and buck dance and Lane's ingenious innovations were Africanist ancestors in the evolution and development of tap dance.

### DANCING AGAINST THE GRAIN—JAMES BROWN'S BODY

*Most of the entertainers out there, I taught them most of the things they know. But I didn't teach them all the things I know.*

*—James Brown, quoted In Selby, Everybody Dance Now*

Everything about James Brown's body personifies the full map of this book and the chapters in this section: His skin color, hair texture (and aesthetic adjustments

of same), facial features, and body build (filling the stereotypes of a muscular physicality, with a definitely prominent rear end) are the embattled territories where the black dancing body has fought to make a place for itself in mainstream culture. He deserves serious praise—"props"—for utilizing physical attributes which, when he started out in the 1950s, were seen as negative in the world of white pop culture. But Brown brought them—himself, that is—to the mainstream table and began the initial thrust that four decades later would result in appropriation of the hip hop body by white mainstream youth. He even managed to redefine old gestures that had been tainted by slavery. Thus he could bend, bow, fall to his knees (oh, please, baby, please!) in humility. An important point: Brown humbled himself in the name of love, and the love he calls for seems to beg for response from a black woman. I mention this point because, for whites as well as blacks, one of the most compelling aspects of Brown's work (and, later of hip hop culture—meaning graffiti artists, b-boys and break dancers, deejays and rappers) is that nothing "white" is implied in it. He lures white seekers with a grass-roots, unflinchingly black aesthetic that celebrates and reaffirms blackness for blacks: "Say it loud," he shouts, "I'm black and I'm proud!" Like Master Juba, Brown is the genuine article, and he extends an "equal opportunity, affirmative action" invitation to all comers to embrace blackness.

Brown is a wellspring of inspiration for artists and amateurs, not only on the dance floor and the popular stage but also in the clubs of the hip hop generation and the concert performance venues of postmodern dance. In *The Blues Brothers*, the 1980 Dan Aykroyd–John Belushi movie, he appears briefly as a singing, dancing preacher, the perfect role for him as a man then in his forties. He is at the center of a crucial dance scene in the film, not so much as the dancer but the reason for the dance, a function he has amply filled in real life. The wild, sexy, "in-your-face" performance style of white and black rock, punk, and hip hop artists would not be with us today were it not for Brown's radical, nitty-gritty innovations. By the late 1960s he had become a major factor in the invention of "funk," a raw, sweaty, gutsy, blatantly rhythmic style of music, song, and dance. His dancing style is as thoroughly extraordinary and influential as Lane's, and his work has been imitated by artists for decades, some of the most influential including Mick Jagger, Michael Jackson, MC Hammer, and Prince, all of whom are expert movers in their own right.

With Brown, as is the case with Lane and Glover, our attention gravitates to the feet. Tap artists call them "legs": If you tap well, you have "legs." And "legs," as well as the whole body, are important in Brown's dancing. Indeed, his body is an orchestra: Head, neck, little rounded belly, butt, legs, knees, feet—all are separate instruments in his somatic symphony. He is an integrative artist, and his

dancing is almost inextricable from his singing. As Brown quips in the video *Everybody Dance Now*: "I started dancing as a necessity back in 1941. [Brown was born 3 May 1933.] I was living in Augusta, Georgia. Times were very bad. I started dancing for the soldiers, and they got excited and started throwing quarters, nickels, and dimes. And pretty soon I had a lot of money on the ground. I realized that dancing was going to be a way of life for me." Using his feet as percussion instruments to keep the beat (the same means used by Lane and by rhythm tap dancers, but for a different end), Brown understood that rhythm was his basic strength. A self-taught mover, he danced faster and harder than anybody anyone had ever seen before.

Brown was almost a staple on the 1960s white teenage television dance program circuit, making numerous appearances on shows like *Where the Action Is*, and *Shindig!* (both on ABC-TV). On some of these programs (now available on video) he is the lone person of color to be seen amidst a sea of starched, well-behaved white adolescents. His presentation of self starkly contrasts with these spectators, and he is used as an exotic, often actually teaching them his moves in the way that Hawaiians teach tourists the Hula. (And, in a sense, these kids are tourists observing Brown's black planet.) In several numbers on *Where the Action Is*, filmed on 14 October 1966, he lip-syncs over his songs for only a few seconds and, instead of pretending to sing, concentrates his energy and focus on his fast and furious dancing. Thus, "Night Train," "Papa's Got A Brand New Bag," and "I Got You [I Feel Good]" become background music for his dancing skills.

Early on Brown trained as a boxer, which is apparent in his dance style. Frequently he uses his arms as though he were sparring his way over, around, and between the popular dances of the 1960s (Monkey, Frug, Boogaloo) that provide the body movement atop his flying feet. This trait is especially evident when the videos are run at fast-forward speed: He looks like he's in the ring. His famous cape routine was stolen from the antics of "Gorgeous George," the wrestler. (This act was developed for the hit song "Please, Please," Near the song's end, Brown falls to his knees, bent forward, begging his lover for forgiveness; his master of ceremonies, Danny Ray, comes over to throw a cape around his shoulders and usher him off the stage, but his "grief" is so deep that he shakes off the cape, rises, and continues to sing this slow, moaning ballad. Again he falls to his knees; again the cape is thrown around him. Finally he allows himself to be led out, usually to a wildly cheering audience.) The stage is Brown's boxing ring; his performing ensemble, the audience, and his own dancing body are his sparring partners. As he asserts in *Everybody Dance Now*: "When you're dancing against the grain, it makes it more dynamic, but if you flow, then you're not doing anything."

"The James Brown" is a dance step named after the master. To a continuous pulse set up by his feet, with legs close together, knees slightly bent and parallel, weight on the toes as the heels remain slightly lifted off the floor, the toes continuously grind or gyrate into the floor, while the heels and knees work in and out. Maintaining this perpetual motion, the feet are crossed and opened to accomplish forward, sideward, or even backward locomotion. It is like a speeded-up version of a fad dance known as the Skate (thus, the sliding movements) combined with the Mashed Potatoes, but faster, tighter, and figuratively even smoother than mashed potatoes. To accomplish this step Brown's ankles must remain incredibly mobile. Turning his toes in and out, he works all parts of his feet. This multifaceted use of the feet is similar to the way that Glover works on taps, often using even the inner lengthwise side of the foot for movement. Brown can turn while continuing the movement by crossing one foot in front of the other and swiveling for one or more full revolutions. There are two other embellishments that can be added to this basic step: Half-splits to the floor that, like a yo-yo, rebound back to a standing position; and a "super-bad" step—with one leg lifted forward and knee bent, Brown pulses the knee of the standing leg in a repetitive motion. He can do this in place or use this one-legged exclamation point to write his dance sentence across the stage.

In his London concert recorded at the Hammersmith Odeon in 1985, Brown at age 52 dances all the while he is singing, at times in place, at times across the floor, either keeping half- or double-time rhythm with one or both legs pulsating to the beat. Sometimes his tight, muscular buttocks are called into play and pulse backward on a back-back-back-back, "on-the-one" beat; or, adeptly maneuvering the microphone, he glides across the stage in a Skate—a step that hearkens back to Juba and minstrelsy and looks ahead to the slides and moonwalks of the hip hop nation. Of course, at this age, his dancing is more sedate, and he bides his energy to take him through these hours-long shows. With age he dances more with his torso and there is less fabulous footwork. Instead of breaking out into his skating, sliding variations on the band's solos, he is more likely to stand at the side of the stage with his back-up singer (here the wonderful Martha High, who worked with him for years) and in half-time they dance popular social dance steps in unison. When his lead alto saxophonist, Maceo Parker Jr., plays a beautiful, jazz-inspired solo, Brown dances, alone and in place, using his head and shoulders as a conductor's wand for leading his band as they back up Parker. This brings up an important point: Everyone dances in the James Brown ensemble—musicians, back-up singers, female lead singer. While standing in front of the bandstand, his horn section frequently move together in Motown-style unison steps as did his back-up male singing group, the Flames, before Brown went solo. There is a

sense of movement even from his seated musicians. This practice reflects Brown's indebtedness to the swing bands and dancing bandleaders—like Louis Jordan and Dizzy Gillespie—who were major influences on his early development.

Brown is a forerunner of the hip hoppers who made braids and cornrows—formerly female attributes—a badge of masculinity. In his whole-body dancing of the mid-1980s period—his face heavily made up (foundation as well as eye makeup), long, coiffed hair, and tight unisex suits in bright colors—he blurs the divisions between male and female, allowing his anima full expression. In “Cold Sweat” (the London 1985 version) he hypnotically repeats the phrase “rock your body,” which he embellishes with a continuous salvo of hip, shoulder, and belly rolls undulating sequentially through his torso. His legs are spread, knees bent, feet planted in one spot. As in his 1960s concerts, he is not afraid to fall down on his knees, to scream “like a woman.” He makes these actions the male domain; he owns them and allows them to empower him as though they are the gospel truth. And there is something almost religious about his performance.

On some songs (like “Sex Machine”) he is practically tap-dancing in place, shifting his weight from foot to foot, keeping his toes planted and lifting his heels and bringing them down to the floor in fast, rhythmic claps. Like “the James Brown,” this posture is another Brown staple. It's a sexy, wide-legged stance on top of which he layers contrapuntal rhythms through subtle torso responses in his pelvis, belly, rib cage, and that powerful backward-pulsing rear end—all playing tag with the rhythm established by his heel drops. As erotic as Brown's body (and sometimes his lyrics) may be, it is always a matter of innuendo, as opposed to the outright displays of the hip hop generation. For example, Brown's left hand often hovers near his genitals but there is never any crotch-grabbing or overt focus on the penis.

Now, to backpedal to his prime, two Brown performances out of many possible choices are my focus: his rendition of “I Got You,” the hit song that was his signature for years and was introduced in his film debut (1965) in Frankie Avalon's teen movie *Ski Party*; and his singular performance (even for Brown) in Boston the day after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

Accompanied by the Flames performing “vocal choreography” (tap artist/choreographer Cholly Atkins's name for the unison movement created for vocal groups) while they sing back-up, his performance in this film is another example of Brown's exotic-erotic pull with mainstream white audiences. The setting is a ski lodge. The guests, all white, are cozily seated on couches and pillows. Brown and his black ensemble are dressed in Nordic-patterned sweaters, a concession to the theme. His routine seems a bit toned down for this scene, but the signature moves are all there. Brown's body weight seems to have fluctuated at

various times in his career. Sometimes he's quite slim; at other times he is chunkier and more compact, although he never seems to be overweight. In this film he is at a thin point. His legs, clad in simple black, straight-legged pants, look particularly slim, allowing us to see his moves with extra clarity. His foot- and legwork are exquisite examples of improvised skill tempered by technical command and control. Light and lithe like a featherweight champ, his heels barely touch the floor as he swivels and slides on his toes, articulates the ankles to swing heels and knees in and out, and once or twice vibrates the legs in a quiver—so fast that his legs “twinkle”—as he covers ground in the small circle carved out for the performance. On top of this work his upper body spars, fists clenched, arms pedaling, while he allows his torso to respond with subtle hip and pelvic movements. He breaks with the break in the song after the first four bars by slipping in a fast turn and stopping short for a suspended moment, his arms frozen, mid-movement, in air. He takes a little jump to start up the footwork anew. As fast as his feet are moving (they are visualizations of the song's rhythms) he has enough control to speed up the movement to double time for a few seconds. He concludes by using his eponymous step to back himself upstage, descend into a half-split, pop up again, and bow.

In the televised Boston concert on 5 April 1968, the day after the King assassination, Brown was brokered as a political tool, part of a bread-and-circuses move to offset potential racial unrest following the murder. (He gave a similar concert in Washington, D.C.) Brown had already been a visible and vocal supporter of the Civil Rights Movement and had subscribed to lifetime membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. At this appearance, about halfway through the concert, the mayor of Boston (Kevin White, whom Brown calls “a hip cat”) appears onstage and makes a short speech. Boston's finest (that is, the police) were out in full force. That night Brown danced and sang up a storm. At 35 he was at his zenith, still light and lithe but a mature, secure performer who knew how to get the audience in the palm of his hand and keep them there—which is the reason why he was given this civic performance task. It is one of the most intense performances imaginable, and this comes through in spite of poor video technical quality. Of course, the gravity of the occasion filled everything he said and did with special meaning. His performance of the song, “Got That Feelin' (Feelin' Good)” was particularly poignant. Like many of his songs, it sounds like a gospel shout, and “feelin' good” takes on soulful, spiritual connotations. “We'll all get together, in any kind of weather,” he sings, repeating the line about four times. Then he screams that famous “like a woman” yowl, bursts away from the standing microphone in skate-slides that catapult him into the James Brown step at what seems like

triple-time, punctuated by a turn or two. Now he is on the side of the stage. As the music breaks, he does, too. He stops short, lifts bent arms shoulder height in a "stick-'em-up" Hallelujah pose and begins to pulse his torso in full-body contractions while standing in place, arms frozen in air. The audience goes wild, screaming in ecstasy, for these moments are ecstatic. The break—when music and movement break from one rhythm and suspend for a nanosecond before shifting into another gear—is the stuff of magic, the kind of magic that makes people "get happy," whether the moment is sacred or secular. Next, he Camel Walks back to the mike at center stage and resumes singing. He dances with his saxophone players, with his go-go dancer (a feature of the ensemble in the 1960s). He is riding high. He is preaching the gospel of James Brown with every part of his being. He is the essence of "soul." Indeed, he has earned his nicknames, "The Godfather of Soul," "Soul Brother Number One," and "The Hardest Working Man in Show Business."

He also has earned another title: "The Keeper of the Dance."

### IMAGES PAINTED WITH HEART AND FEET<sup>15</sup>—SAVION GLOVER

*I can almost see what I hear. Any sound that you hear in the city, it can be done to dance.*

—Savion Glover, Savion Glover's Nu York

Tap dancing: an act of black beauty and power (even when white dancers do it, it's a black form). A hoofers' competition is an *agon* of bonding. "Ba-de-ah, ba-de-ah, doo-bop-de-ab-de-ah": The contest is the motional equivalent of verbal signifying—"bustin" on your buddy through the force of your feet instead of the power of the word. Its improvisational base is key to the aesthetic. Thinking on one's feet—the mind/body split healed through tapping feet. At one point in the television special *Savion Glover's Nu York*, his 1997 tap dancing ode to the Big Apple, Glover performs at the Church of the Master in Harlem with Kirk Franklin, the charismatic gospel artist, and Franklin's ensemble. As Glover concludes, Franklin throws a "cape" over the shoulders of the kneeling dancer. It is a precious moment: a direct reference and tribute to James Brown as one of Glover's aesthetic parents. Brown's work was landscaped by the R&B style; Glover's belongs to the hip hop nation. His tap artistry runs parallel to the rat-a-tat speed and syncopation of that speak-song style known as rapping. Glover actually gets more taps to the beat than a rapper can rap. In the swing era, Lindy Hoppers talked about packing their routines with as many steps as possible so their stuff would be too difficult to steal. How very difficult it must be to steal Glover's taps; they are so fast, so original, always changing.

At age 17 he was accorded the following "props" from the *New Yorker* magazine: "A tall drink of water bounded up from the front row and made his way to the stage. It was Mr. Glover, wearing slacks, a Bart Simpson T-shirt, and a necklace of golden links. He began to slouch and saunter around, casually pigeon-toed, just ambling. The only difference between him and any other ambling teen was that he somehow managed to produce so many tap rhythms so nonchalantly that even eyewitnesses couldn't quite believe it. Within a couple of minutes, he had shaken out a boatload of tarantulas."<sup>16</sup> Glover's boyish charm is infectious. Between 1991 and 1996 his frequent appearances on *Sesame Street* introduced and popularized tap for a new, very young generation. He appeared as a regular guy, one of "the people in the neighborhood."

Glover follows the fantastic lead set by Gregory Hines in popularizing tap dance for postmodern generations. In 1978, dancing as Hines and Hines with his brother Maurice, Gregory Hines appeared in *Eubie!*, the black Broadway musical. (*Eubie!*, the musical *Black and Blue*, and the film *Tap* are among the many choreographic credits of Henry Le Tang, master dancer-teacher-choreographer.) By 1985, at age 39, Hines was paying tribute to his swing-era mentors (Chuck Green, Jimmy Slyde, and Steve Condos) in the George T. Nierenberg film *About Tap*. He co-starred with Mikhail Baryshnikov in the film *White Nights* (also 1985, wherein he initiated a revolution by tapping to contemporary pop music).

In 1989 Hines starred in *Tap*, an incredible all-black film in which he both taps and acts up a storm. The film displayed a hip and street savvy dance aesthetic, using to great effect a powerful tap style in scenes that are contemporary challenges to Gene Kelly's classic sidewalk romp with the kids in *An American in Paris*. The stunning ending is set in a cabaret. While Hines's taps are amplified through the club's sound system, he first dances to a rock score and for his climax performs West African steps, *on taps*, accompanied by African conga drumming. This ending and the opening scene cleared the way for further re-visioning of tap. Had the cast been all white, this movie probably would have been marketed as the flavor of the month, and Hines as the next Astaire. But that kind of fame for a black artist is still not possible in Hollywood (and even Denzel Washington does not make it as a romantic hero with a love interest).

There is as little possibility of Glover becoming a Hollywood star as it was for Hines; however, in Hines's wake Glover has given tap dance a new pedigree. Like Hines, Glover pays glowing tribute to his mentors, acknowledging that he is building on their superb lead. These hoofers and troupers developed tap culture and spirit. Glover considers himself lucky to have had the opportunity, as a youngster, to hang out with them. They passed the legacy on to him and encouraged him to build upon it.<sup>17</sup> "The best," as Glover describes them, include Honi



Coles, Jimmy Slyde, and Hines. Coles's and Slyde's work was linked to bebop, the post-swing era jazz style; Hines experimented with updating tap by using pop-rock accompaniment; Glover dances to hip hop, New Age gospel, reggae, and more. Each change in musical partnership heralds changes in the dance technique. Hines's tapping to rock music is the bridge between the swing and bebop tappers of yore and what Glover does. In Glover's words, "I dance to jazz and old stuff and whatever, but mostly it's going to be hip hop, something with a funky bass line."<sup>18</sup> Hines says of Glover, "He can tap dance faster and harder and cleaner than anyone I've ever seen or heard of. He hits the floor harder than anybody, and to do it, he lifts his foot up the least. It doesn't make any sense. There must be some explanation, you tell me what it is."<sup>19</sup> Tap artist Lon Chaney—another revered Glover mentor and the reason why Glover began dancing—played drums before he became a dancer. So had Glover: From the age of three until he stopped drumming at age seven to begin tap classes, Glover had been a child prodigy.<sup>20</sup> This beginning may help explain the brilliant use of his feet as percussion instruments.

Glover has one short dance scene in *Tap*. As the adolescent son of the dancer with whom Hines is in love (played by Suzanne Douglas), the boy is left on his own at Mom's dance studio to teach a class of his tapping peers while Hines and Douglas go out on a big date. First he corrects the class by telling them their dancing is "good, but it's raggedy. When you dance, you want to dance clean, always clean, like this." He proceeds to demonstrate. Moving to a "smooth jazz" selection (that is, where the big-band sound ended up after the swing era), his performance is a demonstration in more ways than one. It is a compendium, a primer of what his mentors taught him (and most of them, along with Sammy Davis Jr., appear in the movie). He shows how he has mastered elements culled from the proficient footwork of Coles, Bunny Briggs, and Buster Brown, the acrobatics of Harold and Fayard Nicholas, the smooth, sliding grace of Jimmy Slyde, as well as Hines's youthful immediacy. This snippet represents the time before Glover developed his own style. His taps are clean, clear, strong, and intelligent beyond his years. Like all good tap artists, he accomplishes his work with an air of ease and nonchalance.

Later, Glover and Hines worked together in the George C. Wolfe Broadway hit *Jelly's Last Jam*, as the young and older Jelly Roll Morton, respectively.

Before taking a closer look at Glover's performance, I'll offer a word about rhythm tap, the tradition in which he was schooled. What defines this form is the use of the feet as complex percussion instruments that enunciate and articulate musical rhythms, allowing dance to function as music and music to serve as dance. This essence is captured in the opening scene of the stage musical *Black and Blue*

(1988). An ensemble of tap dancers is spread across the stage, facing the audience. Making a bass rhythm by their improvised vocal sounds, they create a voice orchestra to accompany individual dancers who come forward and dance solos, making counter-rhythms with their tapping footwork. What the torso does is secondary and an afterthought. The focus is the feet. What we are seeing is the community, the competition, and the democracy of tap—an African legacy evidenced in dance and other performance modes across the African diaspora. The group bears witness to its dancing members, egging them on, cheering or laughing or offering friendly but sometimes cutting put-downs. There also exists in tap a refreshing democracy of body image, as compared to ballet and modern dance. The fat, the tall, the slim, the small, young and old, even the physically challenged—all are welcome on the floor as long as they have “legs,” and something original to contribute. (Dancers like the one-armed, one-legged Crip Heard and “Peg Leg” Bates, who danced with one wooden leg, plied their disabilities as novelties during the swing era.) As mentioned in the section on William Henry Lane, tap has roots in the African-inspired plantation dances of the enslaved. Another African tradition, competition dances, is one of the basic teaching tools in rhythm tap. Skills are honed and new steps learned in the process of competing. And, most important, the technique of improvisation (if one can call it a technique) is called upon each time a dancer attempts to outdo his peers.

*Black and Blue* is a loving re-creation of the “good old days” of African American vaudeville. We are fortunate to have this video documentation of the work of tap dance legends like Lon Chaney, Ralph Brown, Bunny Briggs, and Jimmy Slyde as recorded for the Dance Division, New York Public Library, Lincoln Center. Slyde gives a luminescent dance rendition of the Benny Goodman/Chick Webb/Edgar Sampson song, “Stompin’ at the Savoy.” Briggs performs the softest, lightest, slowest-yet-fastest (to each beat) dance to the beautiful Duke Ellington ballad “In a Sentimental Mood.” He taps all the rhythms, the terpsichorean equivalent of John Coltrane on saxophone, not sliding *over* any moment but processing *through*, touching every idea before moving on. When Slyde and Briggs dance the title song, everything they do contradicts and nullifies the oppressive images in the words (“What did I do, to be so black and blue? I’m white inside . . .”), which is typical of black popular and vernacular forms: They contradict and transcend negativity by filling a stereotype with their individuality and *soul*. The 14-year-old Glover was part of the opening lineup of hoofers as the maverick—a coltish, long-limbed adolescent feeling his oats and obviously elated to be allowed to dance with the elders. When it’s his turn to solo, he does cutesy things: a little bit of Charleston on taps and some toe tapping too. Later he performs a stairway dance with Dormeshia Sumbry and Cyd Glover (not related to

Savion Glover). In one of the large group numbers he is part of the ensemble, doing the very Hollywood-type number that he would later critique in his soliloquy from *Bring in Da Noise, Bring in Da Funk* (1995).

*Savion Glover's Nu York* allows us to see the artist dancing the ordinary-extraordinary of his hip hop urban reality—transcendent events in quotidian settings: at a street festival in Spanish Harlem; a church and boulevard in central Harlem; a midtown dance studio; Battery Park; and under the Brooklyn Bridge (where the Twin Towers backgrounded his performance, giving the scene a special poignancy). Energy is spilling over the top as Glover taps to Wyclef Jean's rap version of "Guantanamo." Jean laces the song with clever, ironic references to today's issues in English and Spanish, thereby preserving the social relevance of this protest song. Call-and-response: Glover begins as a spectator, singing and swaying as he stands in the youthful crowd until he is called to the stage by the rapper. Call-and-response is going on in about five different directions. Glover, Jean, the spectators, the back-up musicians, the cameras—all are given the opportunity to both initiate (call) and react (respond) in this form of repartee that is characteristic of all Africanist performing arts—from traditional West African drumming to African American sanctified church services to hoofers participating in a jam session. (When one dancer comes out to offer a challenge, he is responding to the call of the previous dancer as well as making a call to which the next dancer will respond.)

Later, when we see Glover and Kirk Franklin at the Church of the Master concert, Franklin describes Glover's feet as the biblical "good and perfect gifts." Franklin has popularized and commodified hip hop gospel music, which is right up Glover's alley. With young people as performers and spectators, the reason for the concert at the Harlem church is to celebrate Christianity through generation-friendly art forms. As they enter the sanctuary, Glover says, in voiceover, "You don't 'have church' on the outside; you have it on the inside." One can see the truth of this adage in the way he performs. He rejoices. His stance: shoulders hunched forward, head tilted down, legs spread, knees bent. He is "workin' it," "hittin'," "rockin',"—in other words, dancing righteously and truthfully: "When you're straight layin' it down, communicating, saying something, expressing yourself, getting on the floor the rhythm you live by, that's hittin'."<sup>21</sup> His arms and torso follow through as responses to the call of his feet. James Brown personified *soul*. Glover is a manifestation of *spirit*: Paradoxically, by the intensity of his inner focus and almost meditative concentration, he reaches out, out, out. At times he looks like an old man, as though he is the conduit for releasing the muscle memory of his cultural/spiritual history, the vessel and medium for bringing it all to bear in the danced moment.

Perhaps the most clairvoyant example of Glover-as-spirit is near the end of the film when he teams up with Stevie Wonder, the superman of sung spirituality. The song they have chosen to work with is Wonder's *Ribbon in the Sky*. Their combined performance brings us up short in the face of the power of art to transcend and transform. Glover taps ribbons of sound around Wonder's transported singing. The message is one of faith: that we cannot lose with God on our side; that there is strength to be gained from our pain; that we'll survive through the power of love. Their rendition offers the catharsis that is associated with great art. Both men reach out by the power of their interior focus: Glover's gaze, inward and concentrated; Wonder wondrously ensconced in his dark glasses. With feet and voice they each personify the inner life of the spirit as it reaches out and flows forth, blurring the separation between Self and Other.

Whereas *Tap* presented tap dancing feet as salvation, they represent doom and downfall in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*. Besides serving as its choreographer, Glover has an important role in this film; he and Tommy Davidson play two down-and-out performers who ultimately meet their doom when Damon Wayans as a buppie television executive (Pierre Delacroix) uses them as the foil to carry out an intricate "lesson" that was intended as a satirical joke but is taken seriously all around. The film is a broad, brilliant satire on race, a topic that we Americans hate to analyze or talk about. Davidson (Womack) and Glover (Manray) are obliged to "black up," as did the nineteenth-century minstrels, and perform vintage routines. Glover's name is changed from Manray to Mantan, reminiscent of the comedian Mantan Moreland, whose work in Hollywood films of the swing era cast him in demeaning, minstrelized roles; Davidson is renamed "Sleep 'n Eat," indicating the things his stereotyped character likes best in life and recalling the dimwitted antics of Moreland's even more stereotyped (and darker-skinned) contemporary, Stepin' Fetchit.

As Mantan, "the uneducated Negro, but with educated feet," Glover performs old styles of vaudeville tapping. Before they were swept up by the media, Manray and Womack had danced for their supper on the sidewalks outside the skyscraper that housed the TV network's offices where Delacroix is employed. Unable to afford real taps, Manray stuck metal bottle caps in the soles of his shoes. Lee had good researchers working with him for this detail: Not only had caps served as taps for dancers of yore beset by hard times; there was even a swing-era eccentric tap team called Slick and Slack who danced barefoot, holding bottle caps between their toes as taps.<sup>22</sup>

Irony, parody, and grotesque satire are working at full tilt in almost every scene. There are several fine dance episodes, all centered on Glover. In one, Manray (soon to be transformed into Mantan) is in the office of the white

producer Dunwitty (Michael Rapaport) along with Delacroix and his assistant Sloan Hopkins, (Jada Pinkett-Smith). To show his stuff he jumps on the large executive table and begins to tap. He is literally kicking rhythms in the face of the white mogul seated in a chair at the table's edge, looking up at the dancer. This is Lee's take-off on many movie musicals wherein the dancer performs on tables, walls, chairs. It is also reminiscent of Charles Dickens's description of William Henry Lane, who "finishes by leaping gloriously on the bar counter and calling for something to drink."<sup>23</sup> The symbolism is unmistakable. The black man's feet kicking at the head of the white man in power: The feet (the body) belong to Us; the head (the mind, or more apropos here, the manipulation) belongs to Them. Satire is girded by an underlying sadness that pervades the film. This sobriety is palpable as Glover and Davidson prepare the run-through of their minstrel show before a live TV audience. We witness a parade of dancing minstrel stereotypes: Rastus, Aunt Jemima, Mantan, and Sleep 'n Eat, tap-dancing in blackface, wearing their traditional costumes. In caustic contrast these demeaning but demanding antics are performed to a millennial jazz score (by Terence Blanchard). Led by Glover, the ironic play of their exterior, ugly stereotypes against the beauty of their jazz-tap sensibility deepens our sense of loss at the waste of black talent wantonly spent on this white-engineered form of popular entertainment whose taint remains with us. It also calls to our attention the contested narrative, the conflict between self and stereotype that existed in the minstrel dancing body. Beneath the burnt cork and reddened lips were human beings—artists of great talent. How to reconcile the person with the mask?

As the film nears its climax, Mantan rebels. The minstrel show has become a big hit, to the dismay of its black cast and creators and the joy of the producers and black and white audiences. Finally, instead of performing his minstrel act, Mantan goes on stage in his hip hop, Glover persona, announces to the audience that they, both black and white, need to join him in saying, "I'm sick and tired of being a n— —!" The crowd sits in stunned silence. Glover begins to tap, a capella, more taps per second than ever before. He taps a spray of figurative bullets in a seamless net woven to protect his sanity. But this is not meant to be the end of the movie, for this is a social satire. The film turns grotesque, with several leading characters murdered. Glover-Mantan-Manray is obliged to tap as fast as he can to escape the real bullets aimed at him—smashing the metaphor of tapping for safety that he had created in the previous scene. Lee's message for black dancing feet—and, by extension, the black dancing body—is a sobering one that admonishes all of us, black and white, to beware the minstrelization and exploitation of blackness that we have come to know and accept, if not love.

To conclude this section let us examine the work that marked Glover's artistic coming of age and for which he earned a Tony Award for choreography, *Bring in Da Noise, Bring in Da Funk*. Glover has a particular way of using the word "noise."<sup>24</sup> To "bring the noise" means to do your best. "Noise" means excellence, a virtue that is achieved not by entertaining (dancing to please/placate the audience) but by "hittin'" (dancing righteously, and if the audience is pleased, that's a perk). The show is the quintessence of its title, and it "hits." Glover's memoir claims, "It changed the stodgy world of Broadway theater forever, opening it up to hip hop culture for the first time."<sup>25</sup> In creating a semi-autobiographical musical about the history of a people, Glover manages to use dance to tell the story, rather than making up a story as an excuse to dance. In 15 scenes the play (subtitled *A Tap/Rap Discourse on the Staying Power of the Beat*) moves us through the geography of the Africanist experience, using tap dancing feet as our guide from Middle Passage through slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow segregation, urban migration, the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights era, and the present—and evocatively seduces us into this new way of telling African American history. Throughout, the interpretation of what tap is extends to include tapping rhythms with hands, body parts, sticks, pans, chains, chairs, stairs—percussion as music and dance are melded into one. Tap is even part of the beat in the voice of the narrator and the singing of composer-vocalist Ann Duquesnay. Tap is Glover's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and rhythm—the beat—is its signifier.

The opening scene introduces us to the dancers as themselves (Glover, Jimmy Tate, Baakari Wilder, Vincent Bingham)—contemporary hip hop nationals in their indigenous "baggies" and knit caps—before they assume an array of historical roles. Their wide-legged style of tap is reminiscent of the posture of the South African boot dance, itself a form of tap dance, as well as James Brown's signature stance. Their arms semaphore, twirl, windmill in response to energy vectors set up by the feet and legs. They have surpassed a slew of Europeanisms and gone straight to the heart of black matters. In "Middle Passage," a solo, Glover is all in white, dreadlocks free, knees pulled up to his chest while he sits on the floor rocking gently. He slowly rises and dances a gorgeous tap to pure African rhythms, reminding us of the precedent set by Hines in the final scene of *Tap*. Thus, *Noise/Funk* begins where *Tap* ended. "Som'thin from Nuthin'" is about making do. It compares transforming the white man's edible leftovers into black feasts and transforming the absence of the drums into "the beat singin' rhythms through our feet" (as explained in this chapter's section on Master Juba). We are offered a dazzling display of plantation-era pigeon wing and buck and wing steps.

Next Raymond King and Jared Crawford, "The Pan Handlers," do just that. (And this is one of the minimalist aspects of the piece that is so satisfying: The terse

titles lead, rather than mislead.) These amazing young musicians have pots and pans attached to their torsos. They "play" each other, sticking out body parts to accommodate the sound making, and continue their jamming on a metal "kitchen orchestra" suspended from a frame. This scene reminds us of Glover's (and Chaney's) beginnings as a drummer. "Levee Blues," danced by Wilder, moves from a slow, sensual tap on a wooden plank atop a bale of hay into a swift, abstracted one that mimes a lynching, while Duquesnay sings "The 1916 Fifty Negroes Lynching Blues." Next, "Chicago Bound": In this Glover solo, a beautiful slow tap evolves while he dresses, slipping one leg into his trousers while keeping the standing foot tapping, never missing a beat as he dons vest, jacket, and hat. Then the beat accelerates with his mounting excitement (about leaving the South, goin' North). He taps atop his humble suitcase. Indeed, he dances the hopes and aspirations of the African American nation at the possibility of new life. Of course, delusion sets in. "Urbanization" follows, looking uncannily like the Diego Rivera work murals at the Detroit Institute of the Arts come to life. This is one of the high points in a work of impeccable artistry, with the tapping done in mechanized fashion to beats that sound like the clangs and whacks of factory equipment. In "Dark Tower/The Whirligig Stomp," more disillusionment, but from another segment of black society: the "niggerati," to use Zora Neale Hurston's epithet. In full evening dress Glover and his crew give a brilliant, tapped interpretation of the compendium of the era's dances, including quick takes on social dances like Truckin' and the Suzie-Q, as well as the *That's Entertainment* style of flash tap that was so popular with swing-era audiences. To pull this one off illustrates, again, how much Glover has soaked up from his mentors. (One of them, master choreographer Henry Le Tang, fondly nicknamed him "The Sponge.")<sup>26</sup>

"Where's the Beat," the next scene, makes a grim comment on the African American tap-dance style shaped and nurtured by Hollywood and here pejoratively termed "grin and flash." This scene greatly upset some elder members of the tap community, including Fayard Nicholas (of the Nicholas Brothers), who interpreted the critique as a personal insult. Indeed, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and his white film partner, the child actress Shirley Temple, are sent up in a disparaging burlesque that presages the deeper level of satire that would occur in *Bamboozled*. In spite of protest and hurt feelings, the scene is not a frontal attack. It rings true in recognizing the degree of personal compromise involved for blacks to survive as working artists. It is about the sacrifice of rhythm's purity—the loss of "noise"—in order to gain visibility in the white world.

"Street Corner Symphony," a two-part scene, limns the tension in urban black enclaves, circa 1960s–1980s. In the second part, the crack-cocaine scene, Glover shows us the flexibility of tap. Like the black dancing body, it can accom-

moderate to multiple needs. Accordingly, his slow, tentative, "crack tap" is just right for the task. It is not emotional or indulgent, just working, hittin', doing what needs to be done to fulfill the task. If ever anyone doubted that tap dance was an art (as they doubted that blacks could "do" ballet), those doubts must be dispelled by the masterful achievement of *Noise/Funk*.

The "Yo, Taxi" scene, another high point, shows four very different classes of black men trying to hail a taxi. None succeed: neither hip hopper, college student, corporate businessman, nor military man. The message is clear: Race trumps class and cash. The final scene carries the voiceovers of the dancers, as themselves, commenting on who they are and what is important to them: "My favorite thing about being black is . . . ," "My faith, my family, my future . . . ," "Tap saved me." As in the opening, they are back in everyday clothes. They perform a hip hop tap that says everything about who they are in solo improvisations that burst forth from the call-and-response jamming that is the signature and keynote of this art form.

Midway through the piece Glover performed another solo, "Green, Chaney, Buster, and Slyde," a soliloquy danced in front of a full-length, two-sided mirror, with Glover facing the mirror, his back to the audience, and the audience observing his reflections. As in "Where's the Beat," this scene ruffled some sensibilities in the tap community. All in black—baggy pants, loose T-shirt—he offers a glowing homage to his mentors (Chuck Green, Lon Chaney, Buster Brown, Jimmy Slyde) in the spare, unselfish style that has characterized the piece as a whole. As we hear his voiceover, he delivers the goods, dancing in the particular style of each of these four masters as he describes to us, in words and taps, their influence on him:

Hollywood, they didn't want us. They wanted to be entertained. Chaney and Slyde—they were educating people, not entertaining. Hoofin' and rhythm tap are like music. If you can do an eight-bar phrase with your feet, and another person, not a dancer, can understand what you just did, you hit, you expressed yourself, you made a statement. Hoofin' is dancing from your waist down. People think tap dancing is all arms and legs and all this big old smile: naw—it's raw, it's real, it's rhythm, it's us, and it's ours. . . . Chaney hittin' [he demonstrates]. . . . Chuck Green, he does that slow [demonstrating Green's graceful movements, as Glover's body expands to embody Green's lefthand and height]. . . . I started doing Chaney and Slyde . . . all their steps . . . changing my style . . . lost all the big wings. . . . I just started hittin', reaching for rhythms, reaching for different tones in my taps, making



music . . . never did go back to flap, flap, shuffle step. There was nothing there for me since I was 13. That's not even tap dancing. Now that I know what hoofin' is I don't see how people would want to see that old style of tap dancing when they know what's some hittin' going on over here, bringing noise with it.

Glover's appropriation of Slyde's legendary slides/glides across the stage are remarkable. He transforms his mentor's bebop sensibility into short, hip hop bytes: quick, sideways, one-footed, two-footed slip-blip-slides. As La Meira, a New York Flamenco, commented about the show, "I wish somebody would do for Flamenco what Savion did for tap." He has explored new territories, rediscovered old routes, and made a new map for tap.

### THE BALLET AESTHETIC—FEET AND MORE

*Now it's more about the dancer's body rather than about the race of the dancer's bodies. Because the bodies now can do the same things, and because they can do the same things the musculature has become similar.*

—Gus Solomons jr

We now take an artistic leap and move from those venues where black dancing feet were supposed to be, to that place where they were taboo—the world of ballet. Let us approach this revered edifice by an unmarked side door. This entrance takes us back to an incident recounted in Shane White's and Graham White's work, *Stylin'*. They open their chapter on dance with an anecdote about Anthony Burns, an enslaved African who ran away, was apprehended, and brought before a judge and a volunteer lawyer. The author Richard Henry Dana (best known for his *Two Years Before the Mast* [1840]) happened to be the lawyer. In the courtroom Burns is child-like, docile, shrinking inside his large physical frame—in a word, slavish. Dana assumes the worst: that the guy is fearful and meek and will opt to return to his master rather than face proceedings. Then the tables are turned. Friends visit Burns and convince him that Dana can be trusted. On their next encounter, Dana meets a changed Burns: "self possessed, intelligent," and exuding "considerable force both of mind and body."<sup>27</sup> The authors make the point that this example shows how kinesics—communicative bodily movement—determines how we are interpreted, what we project, what we hide or reveal. Further on they talk about the "reclamation of the body"<sup>28</sup> that was a part of shaking off the shackles of slavery and moving forward into the dominant culture. Applying this idea of the changing black body to dance, we can address kinesics as a way of reclaiming movement and reshaping the

body in the post-Civil Rights era that paralleled that process in the Emancipation era. In dance and in life the black body has demonstrated incredible flexibility (as well as durability) in the face of adverse circumstances ranging from slavery to aesthetic segregation. Its mutability makes it ludicrous to assume that the black dancing body couldn't kinesthetically find its way into ballet: a piece of cake, compared to the life-threatening odds faced by Anthony Burns!

As in the Burns case, kinesics can be a sophisticated system of self-defense. When we factor in the concept of stereotype threat, we come up with an equation that may illustrate Bush's "soft bigotry of low expectations" on the part of those in power as well as those on the outside looking in. Failure may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. And after generations of having been inculcated to believe that ballet, this last bastion of white dance primacy, was off-limits for people of color, both blacks and whites bought into the myth.

It is noteworthy that the feet seem to hold a key to understanding the dance values of several cultures: African American tapping feet; Indian slapping feet; ballet's arched feet. To do the dance of each culture correctly does not require an adept to spring fully trained from the womb; instead, enculturation at an early age is the route to success. In each example the feet can be educated and disciplined to the "correct" aesthetic position. To conclude this chapter on the feet we return to the reigning concert dance aesthetic of the millennial era—namely, ballet and ballet-influenced concert dance forms such as modern and postmodern dance. The voices of the dancers tell much of the story—their story—as it is played out on the contemporary concert dance circuit.

Meredith Monk offered some interesting observations on the ballet body:

I feel like the western European tradition has a lot to do with shape and the outside of the body. In ballet it has to do with the kind of geometry of the human being relating to a larger geometric form. And so that's why they want the long bodies, these certain lines in space. It has to do with the positivist way of thinking about the human being as being higher than nature. In my opinion, this is where everything went wrong. Like Newton. It has to do with that kind of conceptual illusion, that man is above nature, that man controls nature. Descartes' idea, "I think, therefore I am," has to do with the body separating from the mind. And in ballet and other art forms during that rationalistic period [we see] the beginnings of specialization: Dancers are only dancers; singers are only singers; musicians are only musicians. . . . So there is a standardization within each voice and on top of that each person is only supposed to perform one function in art, or otherwise how could he or she be good?



*Challenging positivist premises.* Meredith Monk (in *16 Millimeter Earrings*—Music, Images, Choreography by Monk, 1966). Larry Fink.

Monk continues, describing her youthful "body battle" to conform before she gave up and created her own mode of movement-theater: "The thigh-hip thing was very hard for me. I think that's why I became anorexic. . . . I was scared, I was 16, I was trying to get a body like a ballet dancer. And how could I ever?! I've got big, wide, peasant hips, that are good for picking; I've got short little legs and short little thighs—very good for picking beets in Russia. . . . If I was 90 pounds, I'd still have a tush. . . . So I just took my body away to make it better."

Clearly, it is not only about the feet, nor only about the black dancing body. Dancers of all callings are expected to have mastered. In some fields, like Broadway show dancing, ballet is the fundamental training technique, along with studio forms of jazz dance. This is borne out by Gus Solomons's statement about who is admitted into the dance program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, where he is a master teacher: "The bodies that get into Tisch . . . the first thing that confronts them in the audition is a ballet class. And if they don't do the ballet class like a ballet dancer, they don't get through the audition."

Ballet is accorded a holier-than-thou position and, despite its potential for change, reserves a strict attitude about the look of the dancing body. The only contemporary forms of American stage dance that are not in ballet's thrall are African American forms, including hip hop, club dancing, tap, and the R&B, funk world of MTV and touring, singing superstars. That the ballet aesthetic, feet and more, spills over into every aspect of concert dance is an accepted fact of life.

In addressing the black (male) dancers in Trisha Brown's company, Gus Solomons gives us a sense of the tight grasp held by these criteria: "When Trisha stretches her foot relaxed, there's still a lovely arch in the ankle. If Keith [Thompson] stretches his foot relaxed, there's an acute angle there. So it doesn't have the same visual energy that goes beyond the limb, and it looks stubby. Stacey, on the other hand [Stacey Spence, a second African American male in Brown's company] does have more articulate connections. . . . [H]is body doesn't look like a white body, necessarily, because it's elongated in the shins and the front, but he does have articulate feet."

Which brings us back to feet. The difference that Solomons perceives in Brown's and Thompson's feet is not a difference in ability or flexibility, but an aesthetic preference for a high lateral arch—a culturally conditioned visual preference that dominates concert dance. As stated earlier, it's not always about what the (black) dancing body can *do*, but what the observer wants to *see*. Zane Booker's take on the issue drives this point home: "I had decent feet at a young age [he began ballet training at eight years old]. . . . Some black people don't have feet, and some white people don't have feet. And even [all] feet with [high] arches aren't beautiful. . . . You can see a foot with an arch

and it looks just as dead. . . . Lots of times you can have a natural arch, but then you can also have a flexible ankle that points. . . . I have a huge running joke with a white guy who was a good friend of mine in Ballets Monte Carlo. He'd always talk about my feet. And I would tell him, 'My feet point. Your feet don't point.' And I really would wonder if he saw my feet. I said, 'Do you see my feet? They work. They use the ground, so just what are you looking at?' I wonder if he saw what was there . . . because there are a lot of white kids who don't have feet."

Booker points up the issue of the stereotype. His feet had been worked, since childhood, to meet ballet criteria, but because blacks are purported to not have ballet feet a white dancer looking at Booker's excellent feet sees not those particular feet but the larger stereotype of generically non-workable feet. As the Buddhist saying goes, "The eye cannot see what the mind doesn't know." Indeed, we can be blinded by our presuppositions, particularly when they are racial; and that is the juncture at which assumptions become prejudices. Like its counterpart in the larger society, the black dancing body has been demonized by blind-sighted observers.

Shelley Washington tells an anecdote that runs in a similar vein: "I always get a kick out of going to these ballet companies and sort of being this modern dancer who comes in and is teaching these works [she sets Tharp's works on companies around the world] and getting down and doing all of this stuff, and then one girl will have a point shoe, you know. Two or three weeks into [rehearsals] I'll just go over and say, 'Can I put that shoe on?' And it's 'Oh, be careful,' and, you know, 'La-la-la,' and I just put the shoe on [and go on point] and everyone just goes, 'Wow!' Because there is this perception that black people's feet just don't point."

An insidious memory about the feet emerges from an experience that I had soon after moving to Philadelphia from New York in the mid-1980s. I was at a regional dance conference. For the luncheon I was seated next to a revered dance teacher, white, who had run a dance studio in the largely black middle-class Germantown section of the city for a couple of decades. Somehow we started talking about blacks and ballet. Sure enough, this teacher who was loved by the black dancing community said to me, "Well, their feet are getting better [meaning black dancers' feet] because more and more of them are mixed bloods." Needless to say, I was floored by this unanticipated bias from a bastion of the dance community that I had just entered. Her assumption was an ancient and deadly one: Blacks are only as good as the white that rubs off on them. A quote from one of the informants in John Gwaltney's brilliant black oral history, *Drylongso*, is in order here: "They [whites] can't stand the idea of anything good



*Feet that do the job! Zane Booker. Carlos Asunción.*

being black. If a black person does something good, they say he did that because of the white in him."<sup>29</sup> Dubbed the "mulatto hypothesis" by the authors of *The Color Complex—The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*, this belief rests on the proposition "that light-skinned Blacks were intellectually superior because of their White blood."<sup>30</sup> The dance teacher's statement was doubly blind, since black dancers of mixed ancestry were certainly not a new phenomenon in the 1980s. But old stereotypes die hard.

Having studied ballet since she was about six years old, Wendy Perron developed a medical condition known as "military back" (that is, a near curveless spine, especially in the shoulder area) by attempting to rid herself of her hyperextended spine and concomitantly prominent buttocks (which she terms a "hikey ass"). In her view, "It did seem like a lot of black dancers had a hikey ass. It did seem like blacks tended to have less arched feet than whites, but also men tended to have less arched feet than women. . . . A lot of white dancers can't quite point theirs, either. And I had all that ballet training, but I never got really beautifully arched feet." Later in our interview she recalled, "Early on, I did see Virginia Johnson [former principal with the Dance Theater of Harlem] do *Giselle* . . . and she was beautiful. She was as beautiful as any Giselle that I've seen. So I feel like, well, that argument [about blacks doing ballet] has been won."

In the same vein, Shelley Washington adds a revealing point or two:

My biggest thing was my lack of confidence because I couldn't stand at a barre like 99 percent of everybody else and have my legs rotate out [she refers to turnout, a basic integer in the ballet technique that can be seen in the ballet dancer's waddle, or duck walk, that carries over into everyday life]. And at some point in my life I had somebody say that that's a black thing. Then when I went to see Dance Theater of Harlem in 1970 . . . they came to where I was studying, and I watched a class, and I saw skinny girls like me with narrow hips with legs that were turning out. . . . When people said . . . black people don't have good feet . . . that's when I started putting my feet under this piano ledge thing, and I kept working those feet. . . . There are only two ways you get good feet. Either your parents give them to you, or you use them. You work them and use them: that's it.

Washington's bit about putting her feet under a low ledge is one of the many mechanical ways that ballet and ballet-influenced concert dancers work on increasing their point. The dancer sits on the floor, legs together, knees slightly bent, toes hooked directly under the low edge of a heavy sofa, piano, bureau, or

**MASTER** Stretch  
the ultimate stretch  
athletic device

**PRO** Arch

by Artform

**T O R D E R C A L L**

for EUROPE: ARTFORM s.r.l. (I) - tel. +39 055 706447  
**WWW.ARTFORM.IT INFO@ARTFORM.IT**

for U.S.A.: DANCE DEPOT - tel. +1 949 713 9047  
**WWW.DANCEDEPOTUSA.COM INFO@DANCEDEPOTUSA.COM**

for AUSTRALIA.: PILATES EFFECT - tel. +61 03 9725 3366  
**WWW.PILATESEFFECT.COM.AU INFO@PILATESEFFECT.COM.AU**

*Working toward the ideal.* Foot-Improvement Device as advertised in *Dance Magazine*. Courtesy of Victor Uygan.

table; next, she slowly straightens the knees; this simple action forces the arches and toes to fully (and painfully) stretch due to the pressure of the ledge across the metatarsal. The position is held for some time, with a number of repetitions. If this “therapy” is practiced over a period of time, it works. Rumor has it that Mel Tomlinson, who was a principal with the Dance Theater of Harlem, exercised on point to develop his feet. There are similarly extreme techniques for increasing turnout that involve different kinds of manipulation.

Returning to the larger picture of the ballet body criteria, the issue of weight is a prevalent one. Both Booker and Francesca Harper began their ballet studies before age ten, and already they were aware that “thin” was good. Booker recalled that “fat was the only thing that was really negative.” Harper began her



ballet studies at the Robert Joffrey Ballet School [1979–82] in Manhattan, “and I think I was probably the only black there. . . . I remember already thinking that to be a little too curvaceous wasn’t good, that you had to look slim in your pink tights and your leotard—it was just a nicer line.” Harper continues, “And then I went to DTH [1988–91], and . . . there were a lot of eating disorders going on, and I knew that was also the case when I went to the School of American Ballet [1982–84]. . . . [T]his kind of obsession with being rail thin, about being the sylph—that was the term. . . . In the ’80s it was . . . Balanchine and that was the look. . . . [I]t was hard for me because I have strong legs . . . I was always a little self-conscious of them.”

As Meredith Monk mentioned, above, the geometry of line is an all-encompassing obsession in ballet, an ideal that must be worked toward in every part of the body—from feet to head, and everything in between. Ballet may be the form that is most concerned with external line, even above the concepts of mass and space. Here is a portion of the interview with Wendy Perron, wherein I attempt to interrogate ballet’s rigidity and offer the idea that even ballet values are a changing landscape:

WP: There’s certainly as many fabulous black dancers as any other kind of dancers, but I never thought particularly [in] ballet would you find as many, because ballet is a certain type of body and as I said, I didn’t have the turnout for ballet. Would you get as many of that type within the black community as in the white community? I don’t know.

BDG: Well, isn’t it about training?

WP: Well, obviously it is because I trained in that way, you know: I flattened my ass, why can’t anyone else flatten their ass?

BDG: I’m just thinking about something that Richard Thomas has said . . . that the one thing about ballet is that it can change bodies.

WP: And so can modern dance. But I never got the turnout that I wanted. I trained and trained and trained, but I never did. [Note the similar reflection by Shelley Washington.] And now I feel like, well, that’s probably good. Because if I had really forced it, I would probably have hip replacements.

This is a real danger in dance, besides knee, back, and ankle injuries. Even those ballerinas with idealized bodies, like Suzanne Farrell, Balanchine’s muse, are subject to the same injuries as thwarted ballerinas like Perron and Washington. Farrell had both hips replaced by the time she was 50 years old. The career of a modern dancer can be just as perilous.

Solomons acknowledged the changing shape of the ballet body and its concomitant aesthetic in the following assessment:

My opinion has changed radically with experience and the evolution of the field. Back in the day when DTH started [1969], people asked me did I think that black bodies and white bodies could do ballet equally well, and I said no, because black bodies are built differently. *I think I was saying more that they didn't look the same doing it, but I don't think I meant that because they didn't look the same, they looked less . . . it's just different.* And now it's less different because of the training and the evolution of bodies. . . . My opinion has changed on the basis of what I now know about training as well as what I see in dancers' bodies as they evolve and self-select. . . . As I so wish that I had understood and/or had a teacher that understood, because the state of knowledge was not that great—you just did it with muscles. Because then I wouldn't have broken my body trying to change the shape. [Emphasis mine.]

Solomons's comments return us to the visual tyranny of ballet. His point is not that blacks couldn't do ballet but that "they didn't look the same [as whites] doing it." But in the more than three decades of DTH's existence he states that a combination of training and self-selection helped change his opinion. However, it is noteworthy that DTH was the culmination of a long tradition and the "coming out" of that tradition into mainstream white America. African Americans had been studying and performing ballet since the 1930s, but with black ensembles, teachers, and schools in black communities. A particularly strong black ballet community existed in Philadelphia with the schools of Essie Marie Dorsey in the 1930s and Marion Cuyget and Sydney King from the 1940s through the 1970s. The tradition continues today with the ballet training at Joan Myers Brown's Philadelphia School of Dance Arts. Probably black and white dancing bodies are looking more alike because of similar training in *integrated* classes. This is a major move: The black ballet dancers of the 1940s were trained in racially segregated classes by teachers who had also trained in racially segregated classes. This would be comparable to white dancers studying African dance in segregated white communities with all white students and white teachers who themselves had been trained by white teachers of African dance. Even in these examples it is important to point out that the issue is *not* the color or ethnicity of the dancers and teachers, but whether or not the dance form—ballet or African dance—is learned in its indigenous cultural and aesthetic context. Thus, contemporary black dancers like Virginia Johnson or the

Pennsylvania Ballet's Meredith Rainey—unlike those of the pre-DTH era—will teach ballet from the native, white cultural context in which they studied and performed. And, as Chuck Davis said, white bodies can do (and teach) African dance if they have been trained in the African cultural context. In every instance, the cultural riches are diluted by segregation from the cultural source, resulting in an artistic vacuum and an aesthetic loss.

Regarding self-selection: Since the bodies are more the same and the understanding is clearer about what those bodies are supposed to do, Solomons and Perron (and Monk, by implication) assert that those who feel they cannot make the grade opt out. However, it remains primarily a visual issue: Part of the reason that Monk dropped out was because she didn't have "the look," regardless of how well she might have executed the form. Yet, Francesca Harper's reflections on working in a major German ballet company offer hope for a different future—the shape and complexion of ballet to come. During a layoff from DTH Harper was invited to perform with the Frankfurt Ballet (William Forsythe, longtime artistic director, is American). She worked with that ensemble from 1991 to 1999, enjoying a range of roles that had not been offered to her with any American ballet company: "That was a different kettle of fish. . . . [T]he reason I joined the company was because I saw this variety of people. . . . Kate Strong was this huge, fat woman who had been trained at the Royal Ballet School but just moved like the wind, you know. Then there was this really tall, very thin black man, Stephen Galloway. Then there was this short woman . . . [with] tiny hips. . . . He purposely chose people who were different, and it looks so beautiful. . . . I was cast in lead roles all the time. . . . At one point it was literally half and half: There were 10 to 12 black dancers." In 2001 Forsythe was described as "the choreographer who is most important to the present and future of ballet, because he has immeasurably enlarged our notions of what the art form can do both physically and theatrically."<sup>31</sup>

Adding another piece to Solomons's comments: Aside from the changes in training and the phenomenon of self-selection, ballet in subtle and sometimes overt ways has been opening itself to black cultural influences. In Balanchine's Americanization of ballet, part of that process was an *African* Americanization, with Africanist principles of energy and performance motifs "integrated" into his choreography for his almost totally white ensemble. (For many years before he founded DTH, Arthur Mitchell was the only African American in the New York City Ballet, which numbered about 65 dancers during Mitchell's time, the 1960s, and has since grown to its present size of about 90 members.) With Balanchine's influence a pervasive element in the development of ballet nationwide, other choreographers followed his lead, modernizing the ballet vocabulary with jazz-

inspired Africanisms as well as black-flavored pop-rock themes and scores.<sup>32</sup> The logical next step would be to integrate black dancers into the mix at more than a token number. We are still waiting for this to happen. The training has changed; the dancers have self-selected. For a long time ballet languished, missing what people of color had to offer. The future of the institution, like the ballet body itself, will depend upon its flexibility.

From the accounts given in the literature and the interviews carried out for this study, it is assumed that flat feet, thick thighs, and big bottoms are either "peasant" or non-white attributes, and arched feet, long limbs, and an overall slim frame are aristocratic and characteristically "white." These are the myths that we live by, at least in the dance world. They still hold sway, in spite of the fact that we know better: Again, Newton trumps Einstein. Sometimes the stereotypes are limited to African peoples; sometimes Jews or Italians are included. Bill T. Jones related an incident that occurred early in his career: "I remember the first time that I had to go to a foot doctor . . . at Binghamton (SUNY Binghamton, where he attended college) . . . and [he] told me that black people, 'just like the children of Israel,' had naturally flat feet. He said, 'Well, you know, I'm a Jew. . . .' So I remember reading what had been said about blacks and classical ballet, and I began to look at my body and look at the bodies of ballerinas, wondering if maybe there wasn't some sort of biological boundary."

Yet, Jones sees in his own company that these traits aren't simply biological. Seán Curran relates this story about working with Jones: "Bill would say, 'This is not a company that's known for its pretty feet,' and it was actually a white dancer named Damian Aquavella who had very wide feet, and his toes kind of spread out, and they didn't point too well, and he [Jones] looked at him and said, 'Those feet were not made for ballet, they were made for working in a field.' . . . So we all used to joke that we had 'working in the field' feet. . . . We used to call it a Fred Flintstone foot."

Merián Soto recalled an incident in which "the choreographer I was working with at the time said that this one black dancer's feet were like big slabs of meat."

Ron Brown recounted comments made by the white male who was teaching a (Martha) Graham technique class at the Mary Anthony studio while Brown and another African American male, Cary Gant, were company members. "Gant," Brown said, "didn't have really nice arches, so R— — — [the teacher] was really on him. You know, 'What are you doing with those clubs? You've got to learn how to point those feet' . . . in front of the whole class [which is the way and place that most criticism from dance teacher to student occurs]. I felt like he

was describing a black foot and a problem that we would have as black people with these feet. And I think the thing that came in my brain was 'I have good feet; I don't have the normal clubs that black men have.'"

Whether delivered in jest or anger, these responses register the way the dancing body, black, brown, or white, is demeaned in dance class by teachers, black, brown, or white. According to Curran: "We have a joke, we say 'stretch those hooves.' That's not aimed at a black person. I mean, I have short, fat, flat feet, so it's a joke I use in class."

Obviously, there are lots of black feet out there that meet the ballet standard and lots of white feet that don't. Shelley Washington said, "The other day I was in a yoga class here in New York, and there were four of the most beautiful black women in the world in this class, and two of them had feet that went over and hooked around and did like this [demonstrating, with her fingertips curving inwards toward her wrist]. And I was like, 'O.K., well, there you go.' . . . There are people who have feet that will never point, and you don't notice it because they somehow dance from their ankles up . . . and there are people with beautiful feet but you don't care."

Chuck Davis had a similar comment about Mary Hinkson's feet: "Have you ever seen that woman's point? It starts here and then it breaks and just keeps going until her toes come back to touch her heel!"

But, again, it's all relative. Desiring a reading from another cultural perspective, I contacted Ananya Chatterjea, dance scholar-choreographer and former student of mine (while she completed her doctorate at Temple University). She began studying dance at age five in her homeland, India, in the Odissi tradition. Here is her response regarding feet in Indian dance aesthetics:

I had no idea that flat-footed is bad. We use the forced arch position a lot in Bharata Natyam, Odissi, or Kuchipudi, and I think people just say, "whatever your foot is, it is—doesn't matter." The foot has to be super articulate to do all the footwork, but since we never work with relevé the arch issues don't even come up. I certainly never felt a lack until I arrived here and a fellow student, in my first week of classes at Columbia said "God, Ananya, those are the flattest feet I have ever seen in my life!" Then I realized it was an issue. Since the women [in India] are walking so much barefoot or in slippers (high heels are a "western" introduction), flat feet seem to be quite normal, I think, and probably help in the floorwork. Because the sound—which is based on the relationship of the foot to the ground, a giving in to the gravity, wholeheartedly—is important. Further the heavy bells emphasize a solid (vs.

ballet's tentative) relationship to the ground. So while flat-footedness may not be an articulated aesthetic, it certainly comes to be used.<sup>33</sup>

Our bodies are simultaneously fixed and mutable. We are who we are, but we are also agents and mediums for change when granted the latitude to respond to what is needed. Like that of Anthony Burns, the black dancing body is a "considerable force both of mind and body."