

On Reggie Wilson and *Moses(es)*

*a special section by
Susan Manning*



Reggie Wilson and the Traditions of American Dance

Susan Manning

“Postmodern Katherine Dunham”—that’s what I wrote in my performance journal after first seeing Reggie Wilson and his Fist and Heel Performance Group more than a decade ago at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.¹ The 2003 work was titled *Black Burlesque (revisited)*, a collaboration between Fist and Heel; Black Umfolosi, a company of Zimbabwean musicians and dancers led by Thomeki Dube; and the Noble Douglas Dance Company, a contemporary ensemble from Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. Creating the work over a period of seven years, members of all three companies had traveled back and forth between southern Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States, sharing dance and music. Watching *Black Burlesque (revisited)*, I found it impossible to disentangle what was traditional and what was contemporary, what was Africanist and what was postmodernist. Wilson’s collaborative work seemed to talk back to the choreographic canon. Whereas Dunham’s programs in the 1940s and 1950s had staged the African diaspora as a historical movement from Africa to the Caribbean to the US, Wilson and his collaborators staged the diaspora as endlessly circulating elements across the black Atlantic.

Let me define my terms: by “Africanist” I mean qualities such as polycentrism and poly-rhythm, angularity and asymmetry, dynamic suggestion, and an “aesthetic of the cool” (Thompson 1973)—qualities that artists and scholars from Zora Neale Hurston and Melville Herskovits to Robert Ferris Thompson and Brenda Dixon Gottschild have argued migrated with peoples of African descent to the New World. By “postmodernist” I mean choreographic devices such as pedestrian movement, task-oriented choreography, improvisation, chance

1. Three other articles by Susan Manning complete this special section of TDR (59:1) on Reggie Wilson: “Reggie Wilson in Conversation”; “On the Making of Moses(es): Notes from a Dramaturg’s Journal”; and “Zora, Zar, Ohad, and Nubia: Research Memos for Reggie Wilson’s Moses(es).” TDR online includes supplementary content: a 15-minute video on the making of Wilson’s most recent work, *On Fixing My Mouth to Say...Moses(es)*, by Nel Shelby Productions. — Ed.

Figure 1. (facing page) Reggie Wilson’s Moses(es). From left: Clement Mensah, Anna Schön, Rhetta Aleong (back to audience), Reggie Wilson, Dwayne Brown. *Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival*, 2014, Becket, MA. (Photo by Christopher Duggan at Jacob’s Pillow, courtesy of Reggie Wilson/Fist and Heel Performance Group)

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procedures, repetition, referentiality, separation of music and dance, inclusion of text and media that artists and scholars from Jill Johnston and Yvonne Rainer to Sally Banes and Susan Foster have identified as generating cutting-edge dance from the 1960s to the present. Encountering Wilson's work for the first time challenged my preconceptions, for what I had considered separate categories of Africanisms and postmodernisms collided, colluded, and collapsed in my viewing of his work. I was enthralled and immediately became a fan.

A few years later I received an invitation from the Centre national de la danse in Paris to curate an exhibition on African American theatrical dance on the 20th-century stage, titled

*Danses noires/blanche Amérique.*²

There was no doubt in my mind that Reggie Wilson belonged in the exhibit alongside contemporary artists Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Bill T. Jones, Ralph Lemon, Ronald K. Brown, Rennie Harris, and Savion Glover. What was implicit in the exhibition and catalogue for *Danses noires/blanche Amérique*, I now argue for explicitly: Wilson's inclusion in the canon of American dance. My focus falls on the choreographic method he has developed for full-evening works created since the turn of the 21st century—*Black Burlesque (revisited)*, the 2003 collaboration with Black Umfolosi and the Noble Douglas Dance Company; *The Tale: Npinpee Nkutchie and the Tail of the Golden Dek*, Wilson's



Figure 2. Members of *Fist and Heel*, *Black Umfolosi*, and the *Noble Douglas Dance Company* join together for the collaborative work *Black Burlesque (revisited)*. October 2003, *Dance Theater Workshop*, New York. (Photo by Julieta Cervantes, courtesy of Reggie Wilson/Fist and Heel Performance Group)

solo-authored choreography from 2006; *The Good Dance—dakar/brooklyn*, a collaborative work with Congolese-Senegalese choreographer Andréya Ouamba from 2009; and *Moses(es)*, Wilson's solo-authored work from 2013 for which I served as dramaturg.³

Writing as a critical advocate for Wilson's work, I hope to avoid what I have accused others of doing when writing on contemporary performance—flattening the complexity of earlier choreographers' works in order to highlight the originality of emergent choreographers in the canon of contemporary dance. In fact, I'm not arguing for Wilson's originality *sui generis*, but for how he remixes elements of earlier practices of modern dance and black dance. As a young choreographer, Wilson entered the arena of US dance at a time of tension and debate between

2. The title translates literally as “Black dance/white America.” In French, the title is “intentionally ambiguous [...] the slash [suggesting] opposition but also fusion and, above all, the many perspectives from which artists and critics have viewed the black dancing body onstage” — to quote the English original for the published French translation (Manning 2008:9).

3. See the accompanying essay, “On the Making of *Moses(es)*: Notes from a Dramaturg's Journal,” for an account of Wilson's creative process in his most recent work (2015b:34–54). Beginning in 1989, Wilson regularly presented work at Dance Theater Workshop and other venues in New York City. A decade later Wilson began touring his works nationally and internationally. In 2003 *Fist and Heel Performance Group* first came to Chicago as part of a multicity US tour, and Chicago presenters have also booked Wilson's subsequent evening-length works.

advocates of Black Dance, artists who came of age with the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and black postmodernists, young choreographers in the 1980s who found the construct of Black Dance constricting. (In this essay, Black Dance as a formation within the Black Arts Movement is capitalized, whereas other usages are lowercase.)

As I will argue, Wilson's choreographic method for Fist and Heel Performance Group mediates the tension between Black Dance and black postmodernism, a tension still evident today. Like the proponents of Black Dance, Wilson looks to African and African diasporic dance for inspiration. Yet he understands black vernaculars in the plural, never in the singular, and he is attuned to the admixtures of diverse cultures in vernacular traditions. Like the black postmodernists, Wilson looks to Judson Church and its progeny for compositional devices. Yet his postmodern sensibility has always coexisted with his commitment to a majority-black company and his determination to complicate what blackness means in American culture.⁴

Wilson accomplishes this mediation between Black Dance and black postmodernism by redeploying the research-to-performance methodology that Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, and Pearl Primus innovated at mid-century. Here I am drawing on VèVè Clark's formulation of a research-to-performance methodology in the works of Dunham in the late 1930s and 1940s, a methodology that re-performs ethnographic research as the embodiment of cultural memory (1992). Yet unlike his mid-century predecessors, Wilson does not translate his ethnographic research into theatrical spectacle. Rather, he treats his research as found movement, source material for his postmodern compositional sensibility. What results are works that challenge spectators' preconceptions about race, culture, and identity.

I

In fall 1985 Wilson moved to New York to attend the intensive three-year, year-round professional dance training program at Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. By the mid-1980s the skirmish between advocates of Black Dance and proponents of black postmodernism had erupted, and it did not take long for Wilson to sense the tension. In fact, he says that observing how his predecessors negotiated this minefield impacted his own career decisions.

In the US the term "Black Dance" emerged in the late 1960s to designate the aesthetics and politics of dancers affiliated with the Black Arts Movement, the cultural arm of the Black Power movement. Summarizing the Black Arts aesthetic, Larry Neal proclaimed: "The black artist must link his work to the struggle for his liberation and the liberation of his brothers and sisters. [...] The artist and the political activist are one" (Neal 1968:655–56). In 1970 dancer and critic Carole Johnson founded the monthly journal *The Feet* in the spirit of Neal's proclamation. The inaugural issue set out an ambitious list of goals, including creating more employment for black companies, taking dance performances into black communities, developing an archive on black dancers and choreographers, and helping black colleges find teachers. A subsequent issue defined the term "Black Dance" as

any form of dance and any style that a black person chooses to work within [...] Since the expression "Black Dance" must be all-inclusive, it includes those dancers that work in (1) the very traditional forms (the more nearly authentic African styles), (2) the social dance forms that are indigenous to this country which include tap and jazz dance, (3) the various contemporary and more abstract forms that are seen on the concert stage, and (4) the ballet (which must not be considered solely European). (in DeFrantz 1999:91)

During the late 1960s and 1970s all these forms of Black Dance flourished. In 1967 Eleo Pomare founded the Dancemobile to bring professional dance to residents of underserved

4. See the accompanying interview, "Reggie Wilson in Conversation" for the choreographer's intentions in creating his company (2015a:25–33). Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations and paraphrases of Wilson's views are from formal interviews and informal conversations conducted by the author from June 2011 to June 2014.

neighborhoods in New York. In 1968 Jeraldine Blunden founded Dayton Contemporary Dance Company (DCDC), the first of several notable regional companies to build a repertoire of works by black choreographers. In 1969 Arthur Mitchell founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem, a school and company devoted to training and showcasing black ballet dancers. In 1977 Chuck Davis created the DanceAfrica festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) to celebrate and bring together practitioners of traditional African dance in the US and abroad. Also in the 1970s the veteran tap dancers known as the Copasetics, led by Honi Coles, came out of retirement and resumed performing and, equally importantly, teaching a younger generation the foundations of rhythm tap.⁵

Proponents of Black Dance posited a significant continuum between these diverse forms. In 1983 BAM staged a four-day symposium and festival titled *Dance Black America* that, in retrospect, marks the highpoint of the movement. Among the many artists featured were Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, Eleo Pomare, Chuck Davis, and the Copasetics. Director Harold Pierson wrote in the program booklet:

The soul of Black people—unbound by the time, space and place concept—expressing itself. The role Black Americans played in shaping American dance and modern culture in general [...] springing from African roots. Reaching/inquiring. Searching/desiring. Crying/hoping. Trying/coping. A continuum whose spirit reveals where we were, where we are, where we will be. (BAM 1983:20)

Dynamic oppositions, expression of spirit, African roots, American modernity: these ideas crystallize the Black Arts consensus promulgated by *Dance Black America* and by the documentary film of the same title released the following year. The continuum of Black Dance was premised on the transmission and transformation of African expressive practices in the New World. As the program booklet noted,

Black dance [...] spans three hundred years [...] from the sequestered forms of the African and Caribbean slave dances, through the minstrel period and the Harlem Renaissance, to the emergence of the great Black concert dance movement and the present revival and celebration of distinct African tradition. (BAM 1983:4)

Yet not all artists and critics who attended *Dance Black America* concurred with the Black Arts consensus. In fact, a cohort of young black choreographers had already registered their dissent in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These artists were part of a larger cohort of black artists who came of age after the civil rights movement and after Stonewall, and in the midst of second-wave feminism and gay liberation. For many in this cohort, the Black Arts' emphasis on a shared racial and, to a lesser extent, class identity ignored other axes of difference, most especially gender and sexuality. For many in this cohort, the explosion of Black Arts had created a new set of expectations that felt nearly as suffocating as earlier stereotypes had felt to their predecessors. Prominent among these young choreographers was Bill T. Jones, whose exploration of same-sex desire in duets with his Italian Jewish partner Arnie Zane forced open a closet in the late 1970s, a closet that had protected many choreographers from homophobia at mid-century.

Looking back on his early career, Jones recalls “not wanting to be defined by skin color.” He continues, “I considered myself an artist who happened to be black, a countercultural point of view.” Summarizing his years with Arnie Zane in the 1970s and 1980s, he recalls:

We thought we were simply extending notions from the counterculture of the late 1960s and 1970s: breaking through social boundaries, redefining body politics, living the sex-

5. Evidence for my periodization of Black Dance and black postmodernism comes from the exhibit I curated at the Centre national de la danse in Paris. Since the catalogue for *Danses noires/blanche Amérique* is available only in French, I have posted a timeline of my research, “Black Dance on U.S. Stages—timeline and bibliography,” on the website of the Black Arts Initiative at Northwestern University (Manning 2014).

ual revolution, re-examining power dynamics, the relationship of men to women, men to men [...] and striving for transcendence in every way. (in Kreemer 2008:99–100)

Only after Zane died from AIDS in 1988 did Jones realize that “race was an important aspect of my creativity.” At first, “the white avant-garde didn’t quite understand what was going on.” Over the next few years Jones arrived at “a tough, though essential realization [...] that I have a right to have a black voice that could express all that I am” (2008:100). While still in the midst of this realization, Jones asserted to his peers, “I think the issue is what labels like *Black* mean in the context of the cultural environment” (in Osumare and Lewis-Ferguson 1991:58).

Given his heightened visibility, Jones already had a busy touring schedule by this point and was absent from a program of young black choreographers that Ishmael Houston-Jones curated at Danspace Project in 1982. Titled *Parallels*, the program featured, among others, Blondell Cummings, Ralph Lemon, Bebe Miller, and Gus Solomons Jr. In a program note, Houston-Jones explained his rationale for the title:

If there is an implicit “message” to be gotten from this series, it is that this new generation of black artists—who exist in the parallel worlds of Black America and of the new dance—is producing work that is richly diverse. (in Hussie-Taylor 2012:30)

Note how Houston-Jones opposed the lowercase “black artists” with the uppercase “Black America,” an opposition that pointed toward young black choreographers’ subtle defiance of the expectation that their works have a “message” (also in quotes in Houston-Jones’s quiet manifesto) in accord with Neal’s proclamation.

Given the subsequent careers of so many of the artists featured in *Parallels*—not to mention the 2012 Danspace festival and publication commemorating the 30th anniversary of the concert—it is hard to fathom the intensity of the reaction sparked by the young black postmodernists in the early 1980s. Solomons recalls appreciating how the concert “acknowledged me for being a black choreographer working outside the ‘black mainstream’—read Alvin Ailey heritage—instead of criticized for not being ‘black enough,’ as I often was back then” (in Hussie-Taylor 2012:49). Lemon has commented, “I was never invited to any of the black dance conferences that meet annually [...]. I suppose I am not considered a ‘black dance artist’” (2000:35). Along with Bill T. Jones, Houston-Jones, Solomons, Lemon, and their peers challenged the reigning conception of Black Dance.

But it was not only the young postmodernists’ challenge to the Black Arts consensus that some commentators found disturbing, but also how white critics had deployed the term “Black Dance.” In 1980 Zita Allen wrote at length about the contested meanings of the term in *Freedomways*, a leading journal of black thought and activism. Eight years later the American Dance Festival broadly disseminated Allen’s critique among white dance-goers:

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

empty label devised by white critics to cover that vast, richly diverse and extremely complex area of dance they know nothing about? Does “Black Dance” really exist? And, if in fact it does, just who is qualified to define it? (Allen [1980] 1988:22)

In 1970 Carole Johnson had confidently penned “an all-inclusive” definition of Black Dance. But in the 1980s, the term became problematic, and for Zita Allen “Black Dance” seemed another way for the dominant white culture to distort black cultural expression. In fact, these divergent perspectives clashed at *Dance Black America*, and the “controversy” led participants Brenda Dixon-Stowell, Sally Banes, and Julinda Lewis to organize a seminar at Dance Theater Workshop six months later titled, after Langston Hughes, “You’ve Taken My Blues and Gone: A Seminar on Black Dance in White America” (Dixon-Stowell 1984:37).

These issues continued to flare through the 1980s. Thus, when Wilson began his choreographic career, he found himself in the midst of strife between exponents of Black Dance and black postmodernists. “It wasn’t my fight,” he recalls, but a fight among his elders. Yet he says that observing how his elders—black postmodernists 10 to 15 years his senior—negotiated their careers impacted his own decisions. In retrospect, he says that he’s “very glad to have come up in New York” in the late 1980s, when “black choreographers in New York had such different approaches—Bebe Miller, Jawole Zollar, Ralph Lemon, Bill T. Jones, David Rousseve, and Marlies Yearby were all working downtown. Their wide range of examples gave me the permission to make work I wanted to make, didn’t have to fulfill a Black Dance checklist.”

It is my contention that the choreographic method Wilson developed negotiated the tension between Black Dance and black postmodernism by redeploying the research-to-performance methodology black choreographers had developed at mid-century. Traveling to the Mississippi Delta to research the Shout, to Trinidad and Tobago to research Spiritual Baptists and Shangoists, to urban dance clubs and to more than 15 countries in Africa to research contemporary dance⁶—Wilson unwittingly retraced the travels of Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, and Pearl Primus from the 1930s through the 1960s. Yet, in contrast to his mid-century predecessors, he rarely attempts to recreate the originating milieus for African and African diaspora dance.⁷ For example, live drummers onstage—an essential component for Dunham and Primus—do not appear in Wilson’s work. Yet his soundscores—which he arranges himself from a combination of prerecorded music and live vocals—are profoundly rhythmic, as is his choreography. Costumes for recent works, designed by Naoko Nagata, gesture equally toward contemporary urban life in the US and toward imagined diasporas. Wilson’s movement also carries multidimensional resonances, evoking but never quite fulfilling our imagination of Africanist cultures.

This almost-but-not-quite evocation of Africanist cultures results from his distinctive studio practice, as detailed in the accompanying essay in this issue, “On the Making of *Moses(es)*: Notes from a Dramaturg’s Journal” (2015b:34–54). In the studio Wilson treats his ethnographic research as found movement subject to manipulation through postmodern choreographic devices, and the resulting choreography looks nothing like the found movement. Yet an aura, fragmentary and partial, remains. Nor is ethnographic research on African and African diasporic dance forms the only source of found movement in the studio. *Moses(es)* used found movement from a broad array of sources, including a Yupik traditional performance group Wilson met while on a teaching residency in Alaska, the dancers’ recreations of poses from ancient

6. To date, Wilson has traveled to—listed roughly in chronological order—Zimbabwe, South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia, Ghana, Senegal, Chad, Mali, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, Kenya, Tanzania, Morocco, and Egypt.

7. According to Wilson, the only dance he attempted to recreate onstage from his research was the Shout, a form that necessarily uses body percussion, given white authorities’ restrictions on drumming by enslaved Africans.



Figure 3. *In The Tale: Npinpee Nckutchie and the Tail of the Golden Dek—a title that displays Wilson’s characteristic wordplay—dancers explore rhythmic step patterns. From left: Paul Hamilton (behind), Michel Kouakou, Penelope Kalloo, Penn McCourt. February 2006, Dance Theater Workshop, New York. (Photo by Julieta Cervantes, courtesy of Reggie Wilson/Fist and Heel Performance Group)*

Egyptian sculpture at the Oriental Institute in Chicago, and the K-pop music-video sensation *Gangnam Style*.⁸

Wilson also departs from his mid-century predecessors by pursuing long-term collaborations with artists he has met through his research travel—Noble Douglas from Trinidad and Tobago, Thomeki Dube from Zimbabwe, and Andréya Ouamba from Congo and Senegal. In his collaborative works—*Black Burlesque (revisited)* with Douglas and Dube, and *The Good Dance* with Ouamba—Wilson juxtaposes his working methods and stylistic preferences with those of his colleagues, leaving the seams exposed. Wilson does not seek to create a fusion movement vocabulary or a clear narrative arc. Even in solo-authored works, such as *The Tale*, he combines disparate styles and doesn’t seek to integrate the elements into a seamless whole. Inspired by Chicago Stepping, which he encountered in a nightclub in his hometown of Milwaukee, *The Tale* encompasses innumerable variations on rhythmic step patterns, from the Suzie-Q, Black Bottom, and Charleston to possession rituals—all transformed nearly beyond recognition. As he once told an interviewer, “I’ve spent a lot of time researching different kinds of dance traditions in the African diaspora as well as contemporary dance, post-modern dance, musical theatre, jazz dance and ballet. I think they are all kind of equally balanced, so in my work I am trying to find ways that they can coexist in the space together” (in Lion 2007:18).

Reviews often highlight Wilson’s juxtaposition of disparate elements. Reviewing his first full-evening program at Dance Theater Workshop in 1990, Jennifer Dunning noted, “Both shuffles and strides were in evidence [...] along with some stylishly cool and ambiguous post-modernist sidles” (1990:C37). Reviewing the 1995 work *A Black Burlesque*, Julinda Lewis wrote, “African tradition meets postmodern artist with a bang [...] The individual elements may be familiar, but Wilson imbues them with a sense of mystery that is at once as exhilarating as it is unsettling”

8. Coincidentally, *Psy’s* video is the subject of another article in this issue of TDR. See “K-Contagion: Sound, Speed, and Space in ‘Gangnam Style’” by Marcus Tan.—Ed.



Figure 4. Reggie Wilson and Andréya Ouamba reflect on the interconnections between the Mississippi and the Congo rivers in *The Good Dance*—dakar/brooklyn, a collaboration between *Fist and Heel* and the Dakar-based *Cie 1er Temps*. Foreground: Reggie Wilson. New York Premiere, December 2009, BAM Next Wave Festival. (Photo by Antoine Tempé, courtesy of Reggie Wilson/*Fist and Heel* Performance Group)

(1995:67). When eight years later Wilson recycled the title (but little else) in *Black Burlesque (revisited)*, Jack Anderson described the work as “a loving panorama of black folk, pop, blues and jazz musical and dance styles. Its two acts made no attempt to bind scenes together according to geography or history” (2003:E7). About *The Tale*, Deborah Jowitt wrote, “The music sets up two primary atmospheres you might think would be at odds with each other. In one, people dance, play games, get sexy [...] At other times, the live performers’ voices rise in praise [...] The musical styles cross-fade amicably, and the stepping slips easily between sacred and secular” (2006).

Reviewing the collaborative work, *The Good Dance*, Claudia La Rocco wrote, “It is often hard to tell where Mr. Ouamba’s sentences end and Mr. Wilson’s begin, though their movement styles are quite different. Mr. Ouamba’s is kinetically propulsive and steeped in improvisation, while Mr. Wilson favors a wry formalism that nonetheless pulls in rich, sensual skeins of history” (2009:C18).

Even reviews that are less than laudatory point out the juxtaposition of disparate elements in Wilson’s work. Reviewing the world premiere of *Moses(es)* at Fringe Arts in Philadelphia, Lewis Whittington describes “the mix” of elements, concluding that “how the choreographer uses fusion is most compelling, but, for me, too fragmented in a 70 minute work” (2013). Reviewing a subsequent performance in Chicago, Laura Molzahn writes that, “at times Wilson’s cheerful faith in postmodern hodgepodge betrays him” (2014). Whether critics voice enthusiasm or disappointment, few fail to notice the coexistence of postmodernisms and Africanisms in Wilson’s work.

II

Judging from reviews, awards, and venues, Reggie Wilson already has secured canonical status in American dance. Few choreographers have been as consistently well-reviewed in the *New York Times* as Wilson. Jack Anderson, Jennifer Dunning, Anna Kisselgoff, Claudia La Rocco, Brian Siebert, Gia Kourlas, even balletomane Alastair Macaulay have written positively about Wilson’s work. (Macaulay opens his review stating, “The dancer and choreographer Reggie Wilson seems to be constantly working to enlarge the meanings of the term African-American” [2008:E5].) He has received a Bessie, a Guggenheim, the Herb Alpert, and a slew of other grants, including the \$250,000 Doris Duke Performing Artist Award. He has presented his work at most, if not all, leading venues for contemporary dance in the US, including the Next Wave Festival at BAM, New York Live Arts (and its earlier incarnation, Dance Theater Workshop), Jacob’s Pillow in the Berkshires, International Festival of Arts and Ideas in New Haven, Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, Fringe Arts in Philadelphia, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, The Dance Center at Columbia College Chicago, Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, On the Boards in Seattle, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, and UCLA Live.

Yet Wilson's name is not as recognizable in the dance world as one might assume. Members of his company and I all have had the experience of excitedly talking about Wilson's work to colleagues who have never heard his name. And he has received far less attention from dance scholars than have his predecessors, peers, and successors. To date, only one extended critical essay on Wilson has appeared in print (Paris 2014), in contrast to the many books and articles citing Jawole Zollar, Ralph Lemon, Bill T. Jones, Bebe Miller, David Rousseve, Ronald K. Brown, Trajal Harrell, and Kyle Abraham. A few of these choreographers have written books themselves; most have not; yet all have accumulated bibliographies beyond performance reviews.

Accounting for scholarly oversight is always fraught, especially in the field of dance studies, where so many significant artists, past and present, have not (yet) been written into the canon. However, there do seem at least two reasons why Wilson has received less attention from scholars of black performance than have his colleagues. First is Wilson's own sense of priorities: he consistently has placed advancing his creative process over investing in infrastructure for his company. In contrast to the fulsome websites maintained by his colleagues, for example, the *Fist and Heel* website contains information only on the current production, not on past productions and their rave reviews. Second, and more consequential, is the way that Wilson's choreography confounds critical categories. Mediating between Black Dance and black postmodernism, his work cannot be subsumed under either rubric. In this sense, perhaps, his work is too postmodernist for advocates of Black Dance, and too black for proponents of postmodernism.

Nor does Wilson's choreography fit the preexisting critical categories of African American dance and contemporary African dance. Wilson arguably has worked as much between Africa and the Americas as have African-born choreographers now resident in North America, such as Nora Chipaumire and Zab Maboungou. Yet these choreographers are considered as part of the transnational movement of contemporary African dance. Milwaukee-born Wilson is not, although he has always believed that "black is not just African American. It's the African diaspora and all the international influences upon it" (in Howard 2007:18).

In another way too, Wilson's choreography does not fit preexisting assumptions. The hugely influential work by Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, for example, created an expectation that gay choreographers who came of age after Stonewall would foreground dissident sexuality in their work. Dissident images of gender and sexuality are present in Wilson's work, but they are not necessarily foregrounded. In their introduction to the volume that includes the one critical essay published on Wilson to date, editors Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez note that "queer texts of black performance arrive in implicit abundance, often as gestures or subtext of omission" (2014:12). In that essay, "Reading 'Spirit' and the Dancing Body in the Choreography of Ronald K. Brown and Reggie Wilson," Carl Paris highlights the queer subtext of Brown's 1995 work, *Dirt Road: Morticia Supreme's Revue*. Of the Wilson work under discussion, *Black Burlesque (revisited)*, Paris describes "one male-to-male couple, which appears to have no particular significance" (2014:111).

Paris, a dancer who came of age during the heyday of Black Dance, now works as a critic and scholar of black postmodernism. (He was writer-in-residence for the Danspace platform commemorating the 30th anniversary of *Parallels*, and his online blog provides invaluable documentation on the festival [see Paris 2012].) Addressing the presence of "spirit" (quotation marks in title of essay), Paris draws attention to Wilson's "postmodernism" (also in quotation marks within the essay), his use of "conceptual and experimental choreographic strategies of downtown dance" (2014:108). Paris highlights "a tension between the expectations that Wilson's use of black cultural material engenders and how he chooses to frame this material in his choreography" (108). He asks, "So how can we reconcile these aspects of Wilson's work with the notions of spirit? [...] Or is it the case that these aspects simply crowd out the potentiality of spirit?" (109). In the end, Paris resolves the issue of how Wilson "unsettles our expectations"



Figure 5. In *The Good Dance*—dakar/brooklyn *Andréya Ouamba's* improvisational style came together with Reggie Wilson's research-to-performance methodology. Dancer: Marcel Gbeffa. New York Premiere, December 2009, BAM Next Wave Festival. (Photo by Antoine Tempé, courtesy of Reggie Wilson/Fist and Heel Performance Group)

by turning to Michael Wade Simpson's notion of "cumulative spiritualism" and Kariamou Welsh-Asante's concept of "holism" in African dance (109). Pursuing a descriptive analysis of *Black Burlesque (revisited)*, Paris concludes that Wilson's "holistic use of elements (texts, music, and movement) and [...] his personal investment [in the black church...] constitute a cumulative and imminently potential embodiment of spirit in the performance event" (109).

I do not disagree with Paris's astute analysis, but I do land somewhere else. Whereas Paris concludes that an Africanist notion of holism integrates the postmodern devices in *Black Burlesque (revisited)*, I remain with Wilson's intentional troubling of spectators' expectations of what constitutes Africanisms and postmodernisms. For me,

his confounding of spectators' preconceptions is precisely the point. His works demand that spectators confront their own preconceptions, question their assumptions, and search for alternate perspectives that make more sense of what they have experienced in the theatre. In fact, Paris undergoes exactly this process in his essay, first emphasizing what seems "unsettling" in *Black Burlesque (revisited)*—he borrows the term from Julinda Lewis's 1995 review—and then expanding his understanding of "spirit" to encompass Wilson's challenge.

Over my 10-plus years of viewing Wilson's work, I have undergone a similar process. As my shifting terminology in this essay attests, what at first seemed the collision of Africanisms and postmodernisms now appears as their overlapping and interwoven coexistence. Watching *Moses(es)* over and over in rehearsal and in performance, I never tire of noting the multiple layers in the work, the ways that elements that can be read as Africanist also can be read as postmodernist. Watching Wilson's works over the last decade has eviscerated my earlier assumption of a divide between Eurocentric and Afrocentric traditions, and compelled me to see the two traditions as complexly interrelated.⁹ In contrast, it seems that watching Wilson's work has compelled Paris to expand his vision of Afrocentric traditions.

Is the difference between Paris and my interpretations an example of what I have historicized in *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (2004) as "cross-viewing"? That is, am I (a white scholar and dramaturg) catching a glimpse of a perspective from a social location (Paris as a black dancer and scholar) different from my own? That may well be the case. During my three years working as a dramaturg on *Moses(es)*, I often heard black spectators, including mem-

9. It was the work of Bill T. Jones and other black postmodernists of his generation that first challenged my assumptions, as I note in the preface to *Modern Dance, Negro Dance* (2004:ix). Not only has my engagement with Wilson's work over the last decade broken down my preconceptions of Africanisms and postmodernisms but it also has pushed me to see the global circulation of modern dance practices. In this regard I plan to follow Wilson's lead in future research and writing.

bers of the cast, interpreting the work in terms of diaspora subjectivities. But when I further probed reception of the work during its Chicago run, as recounted in the accompanying essay on “Reggie Wilson and the Making of *Moses(es)*: Notes from a Dramaturg’s Journal,” any generalization about the difference between black and white viewing broke down. Yet this does not preclude the dynamics of cross-viewing in my experience of Wilson’s work, my sense of witnessing how some black spectators view the work in terms of cultural memory and diaspora identities. I still distinctly remember one black spectator, Caribbean-born, exclaiming after a performance of *theRevisitation* (2012), a preparatory work for *Moses(es)*, “that’s exactly what my grandparents did in church!”

In his extended essay, Paris implicitly canonizes Wilson by placing him in the tradition of African American choreographers who capture “spirit in the black religious and cultural sense” (101), a tradition that also includes “Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, and Alvin Ailey” (102). In this essay, I explicitly canonize Wilson within traditions of American dance, the tradition of Judson Church as well as the tradition of Dunham and Primus. Within both traditions, Wilson stands out for his distinctive research-to-performance methodology, his almost-but-not quite evocation of Africanist cultures, and his confounding of critical categories.

Recalling his early days in New York, Wilson explicates these multiple traditions:

It was such a fertile place for dance. Bill T. Jones, Twyla Tharp, Mark Morris, Ohad Naharin—these people weren’t performing museum pieces; they were creating entirely new material, and I was energized by that. Living in Brooklyn, I had access to a large African community—Nigerian, Ghanaian, Senegalese, South African; a large Caribbean community—Jamaican, Haitian, Trinidadian; and a large African-American community, and that allowed me to imagine the choices my ancestors made by seeing how black Americans adapted to life here. Nowhere else could you have such a rich sampling. (*New York Times* 2003:64)

Nowhere else, perhaps, except in the work of Reggie Wilson.

III

In an important sense, Wilson’s work resonates with recent scholarship gathered by DeFrantz and Gonzalez in their coedited collection *Black Performance Theory*. In that volume, Carl Paris, among other scholars of color, reclaims the power of blackness and the poetry of African diaspora dance after the anti-essentialist critiques of the 1980s and 1990s. That, I would contend, is exactly what Reggie Wilson has done in his works since 1989 and, in this way, his work anticipates the recent turn in *Black Performance Theory*. Twenty-five years into his choreographic career, Wilson continues to make stunningly thoughtful dances. The coexistence of Africanisms and postmodernisms has never looked so gorgeous.

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