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DANCING UNDER THE LASH

To see an African dance is to witness his cultural past and present. . . . For the African, the fullest expression of art is dance.

—Lee Warren, *The Dance of Africa* (1972)

The Middle Passage

SOCIAL dancing links African-Americans to their African past more strongly than any other aspect of their culture. This is hardly surprising because dance was (and is today) of central importance in West Africa. It is not only a routine communal activity, but an integral part of ceremonies that bind groups together as a people. It links one's personal identity to that of the group; events throughout the life cycle of the individual and the community are commemorated in dance: fattening **house** dances, fertility dances, and rite-of-passage dances.¹

Dance also serves as a mediating force between people and the world of the gods. Specific dances and rhythms were appropriate for particular deities; commonly, a specific rhythm is assigned to every mask and every step that the dancers perform.² Indeed, dance is

so much a part of the philosophy, customs, and sense of place that eliminating it would radically alter the African view of the universe.

Although dances unrelated to ritual exist today in West Africa, most traditional dances have been connected to or are performed during religious ceremonies. Since virtually all such ceremonies are public events, officials such as chiefs, elders, and priests must be able dancers. Those deficient in skill undergo several months of instruction before assuming office. We can say without exaggeration that dance competency, if not proficiency, is required of all individuals in traditional West African society.

The pervasive nature of West African dance inevitably drew it into the struggle between slavers and their captives. Capture and brutal treatment brought psychological and cultural transformation, but beyond that, European and American slavers hoped to destroy independent cultural expression among their new acquisitions. They attempted to appropriate dance and reshape it into an instrument of domination. This section is concerned with the slaves' ability to retain or transmute elements of their African cultures in their new environment.

Capture, branding, sale, and especially the dread "middle passage" across the Atlantic were unlike anything the captive Africans had previously experienced. The horror of the experience could only be increased by its unpredictability. Imagine the bewilderment of people herded together for a purpose and a destination they could only speculate about. Surrounded by a variety of African languages (Yoruba, Ibo, Wolof, Bam-

bara, and Bakongo, to name a few) plus that of the slave master, individuals were isolated, wrenched from their communities and ancestors.

Once on board the slaver, the Africans were controlled by terror **and** intimidation and treated as cargo. Concerned about profits rather than humane treatment, traders were interested in keeping slaves alive **and** fit for sale. There were two philosophies for loading slave ships: the "tight pack" and the "loose pack." The tight-pack slavers consistently exceeded the legal number of slaves on their ships, subjecting the Africans to a long journey under unbelievably overcrowded conditions. The loose packers obeyed the legal limitations or crowded **only** slightly. Neither strategy was humane. The actual space allotment per slave under legal conditions was "that every man slave is to be allowed six feet by one foot four inches for room, every woman **five** feet ten by one foot four, every boy five feet by one foot two and every girl four feet six by one foot."³ As a consequence of crowding and unsanitary conditions, slave mortality was high.

From the moment of capture, the slaves were under **siege**. The Europeans attempted to destroy their past and to crush their world view, particularly their religious beliefs, which held the keys to culture and personality. In the middle passage, captives were forbidden to practice their cultural or social rituals. From the beginning of the slave trade, captains and slave dealers debated how much African culture a slave should be allowed to retain. Some practices were condemned as immoral or uncivilized; others were forbidden for political reasons. The Europeans (later, Amer-

icans) recognized that controlling the slaves' culture helped ensure their subordination.

Traditional dance was, of course, forbidden on the slavers, but there is evidence that something called "dancing" occurred in the middle passage. What was it? It seems highly unlikely that a dance area as such existed on the deck of a slaving vessel. The writings of slave-ship captains are not explicit on the matter. Most captains mentioned dancing in a way that implies that slaves happily "danc'd on the ships carry ing them away from Africa, but some testimony points to purposefully deceptive language in these accounts. Thomas Clarkson, describing the intentions of witnesses called before Parliament to testify against a bill setting a limit on the number of slaves that could be transported per voyage, stated:

It was the object of the witnesses, when examined, to prove two things; first, that regulations were unnecessary because the present mode of transportation was sufficiently convenient for the objects of it, as was well adopted to preserve their comfort and their health. They had sufficient room, sufficient air, and sufficient provisions. When upon deck, *they made merry and amused themselves with danciny.*⁴ [emphasis in original]

Further on, Clarkson recounts the observations of less biased witnesses to this "dancing."

Their [the slaves'] allowance consisted of one pint of water a day to each person; they were fed twice a day with yams and horse beans,

After meals they jumped in their irons for exercise. This was so necessary for their health, that they were whipped if they refused to do it, and this

jumping has been termed dancing. On board most slave ships, the shackled slaves were forced to “dance” after meals.

The parts, says Mr. Claxton, . . . on which their shackles are fastened *are* often excoriated by the violent exercise they are thus forced to take, of which they made many grievous complaints to him. In his ship even those who had the flux, scurvy and such edematous swellings in their legs as made it painful to them to move at all were compelled to dance by the cat⁵

“Dancing” was believed to have a healing effect on slaves, and was prescribed to prevent both scurvy and suicidal melancholy. According to George Howe, a medical student who sailed to the west coast of Africa in 1880. “In the barracoons it was known that if a negro was not amused and kept in motion he would mope, squat down with his chin on his knees and arms clasped about his legs and in a very short time die.” On board this particular ship the remedy for diverting slaves from fatal melancholy was to give them rum and dance them: “The negroes seemed to tire of the monotony of things and some grog was daily distributed to the men and native songs and dances were constantly going on. The ingenuity of everyone was taxed to provide a new source of amusement.” Similarly, Dr. Thomas Trotter, surgeon of the *Brookes* in 1783, reported, “After the morning meals came a joyless ceremony called ‘dancing the slaves.’ **Those** who were in irons were ordered to stand up and make what motions they could, leaving a passage for such as were out of irons to dance around the deck.”⁶

“Dancing the slaves” was a regular activity, as evi-

denced by advertisements for musicians to work on slave ships. Usually several crew members paraded on deck with whips and cat-o-nine-tails, forcing the men slaves to **jump** in their irons, often until their ankles bled. One sailor explained to Parliament that he was employed to “dance” the men while another person “danced” the women. On ships with no designated musician, music was provided by a slave thumping on a broken drum, an upturned kettle, or an African banjo, or by a sailor **with** a fiddle, bagpipe, or other instrument. **As** they danced some slaves sang, incorporating their experience into their music. One commentator sarcastically noted that the ship captains’ descriptions of this “dancing” ignored the slaves’ evident misery.

We do all we can, insisted the captains, to promote the happiness **of** the slaves on board. They were brought **up** on deck for eight hours everyday, while their quarters were being cleaned out, and they were encouraged to dance—in chains. Encouraged, indeed, as other witnesses testified by the application of whips! Those with swollen or diseased limbs were not exempt from **partaking of** this joyous pastime, though the shackles often peeled the skin off their legs. The songs they sang of sorrow and sadness—simple ditties of their own wretched estate.⁷

Forced to sing as well as dance, **slaves** predictably chose somber songs. It is not known whether these were traditional or new songs. On some **ships** slaves were taught short songs to accompany their dances, and sometimes they were permitted to use instruments like tambourines that were brought aboard for

them. Some were forced to improvise drums from materials at hand. Some slaves apparently resisted less than others, willing to adapt traditional music and dances to these new instruments. One snip's officer commented:

Our blacks were a good-natured lot and jumped to the lash so promptly that there was not much occasion for scoring their naked flanks. We had tambourines aboard, which some of the younger darkies fought for regularly, and every evening we enjoyed the novelty of African war songs and ring dances, fore and aft, with the satisfaction of knowing that these pleasant exercises were keeping our stock in good condition and, of course, enhancing our prospects of making a profitable voyage.⁸

The slaves' point of view on such dancing is briefly expressed in a poem printed around 1790. "The Sorrows of Yamba; Or, the Negro Woman's Lamentation" presents the story of an African woman kidnapped from her village home and separated from her children, husband, and parents. The woman, Yamba, is sold to a cruel master and eventually converts to Christianity. The poem conveys the painful longing and sorrow that most slaves must have felt during these occasions.

At the savage Captainsbeck;
Now like Brutes they make us prance:
Smack the Cat about the Deck.
And in scorn they hid us dance."

Slaves as groups or individuals were also forced to dance to entertain the captain or his guests. The guest of a Dutch slaw trader described his host's mulatto

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slave girl: "When I dined with the Dutch general at the Mine. I saw her there, being brought in to dance before us, very fine, hearing the **title** of Madame Vantiukeline." In other instances, slaves inadvertently provided entertainment. In a narrative of a voyage to New Calabar River on the coast of Guinea, James Barbot, owner of the slave ship *Albion-Frigate*, which sailed in 1698 and 1699, describes the good **care** given to his slaves during the middle passage:

It is true, we allow them much more liberty and use them with more tenderness than most other Europeans would think prudent, as we had them all on deck every day in good weather. . . . We took care they did wash from time to time, to prevent vermin which they are subject to. Towards evening, the blacks would divert themselves on the deck, as they thought fit, some conversing together, others dancing, singing or sporting after their manner, which often made us pastime, especially the females, who being apart from the males and on the quarter deck and many of them young sprightly maidens, full of jollity and good humor, afforded us an abundance of recreation ¹⁰

Some Europeans were not content with vicarious pleasure and participated in the slaves' dance. The surgeon aboard the Brazilian slave ship *Georgia* leaves us this account from 1827:

On the first voyage out of Calabar we had not been out a week before I found that the captain and crew were desperadoes of the worst kind. Once off the coast the ship became half bedlam and half brothel. Ruiz, our captain, and his two mates set an example of reckless **wickedness**. They stripped them-

selves and danced with black wenches while our crazy mulatto cook played the fiddle. There was little attempt at discipline and rum and lewdness reigned supreme.¹¹

As the surgeon endured six voyages with the *Georgia*, he apparently found a way to remain aloof from these activities.

Slave trading became such an industry that something approaching standard practices developed for feeding, exercise, and containment of slaves. Techniques for "dancing" the slaves emerged as well, but they were shaped by the continual threat of slave mutiny. Some cautious captains allowed only women and children slaves to be unshackled while on deck; others unshackled and danced slaves only after lark, when the chance of mutiny seemed small.

Illegal slavers engaged in smuggling allowed slaves little time on deck, and "dancing" had to be scheduled with a watchful eye for patrol ships. Similarly, when the international slave trade was outlawed in 1807, methods for dancing the slaves were devised to guard against possible capture by either police patrols or pirates. One technique was to bring only a portion of the slaves on deck at a time. Capture by a patrol ship meant heavy penalties: the crew was arrested and the cargo confiscated. The slaves were either returned to Africa or auctioned off in the New World. If capture seemed imminent, captains avoided arrest by jettisoning the contraband. Sometimes the entire cargo, slaves and food, was dumped into the ocean.¹²

So few Africans left written accounts of their experience that little is known about their participation in the dancing. Harsh sanctions certainly discouraged

resistance. the rewards for exceptional dancing (such as an extra cup of water or trip to the slop buckets used as toilet facilities) might have encouraged participation. Liquor was sometimes used as an incentive for some dancers. Liquor and dance diverted the slaves' attention from their condition, and Europeans used them in combination. At the least, the opportunity to be on deck while dancing offered a brief period of relief from the hold.

We can only speculate about the degree to which the middle passage transformed dance for African slaves. Dance existed in a bizarre duality between the dancers and the slave traders. For most of the captive Africans, dance was a cultural vehicle used to mediate between mankind and the deities. African captives on slave vessels probably attempted to evoke deities who could assist them in **revolt** and escape. Indeed, they might have attributed their failures to their inability to perform ceremonies properly, with appropriate religious objects and the aid of the entire community.¹³

This forced dancing **may** also have been seen by the slaves as an opportune time to stage a mutiny or suicide. Creating noise and motion, slaves could distract at least a portion of *the* crew at one end of the ship. **The** elaborate precautions taken by ship captains indicate that slaves saw dancing as an opportunity to resist their enslavement. Slaves were watched constantly while on deck.¹⁴ Slavers devised strategies to prevent mutiny or suicide, and to regain control in cases of rebellion. Some **captains** aimed ships' guns at **the** dancing slaves to intimidate them.

The pattern established on board the **slave** ship was reinforced **in** the plantation environment: dancing

was done under the strict governance and supervision of whites who legitimized violence as a means of controlling the slave population. **A**t the same time, resistance and dissembling became associated with dance aboard the slave ship. The African slaves learned to camouflage their hunger for freedom; an apparent accommodation to the circumstances of slavery, became a survival mechanism. Once the slaves reached North America, they exploited dance as an opportunity to resist domination.

The Plantation Environment

Once safely through the middle passage and purchased, Africans were expected to adapt fairly quickly to bondage. Life under slavery, repressive though it was, allowed some opportunity for community and cultural development. It seems astonishing that any African customs could persist, but owners did not control all areas of slaves' lives. Unregulated socio-cultural space provided Africans with some latitude in which aspects of African culture could survive.

At least two other factors help explain the survival of African-based traditions: first, some African cultural forms proved functional for the practitioners; second, they did not appear to threaten the slaveocracy. Once the African slaves left the ship and "settled in," they became part of the fabric of life in their new environment, with new acquaintances and group relationships. Shared customs cemented such relationships and unfamiliar ones provided material for new cultural amalgams. African groups were by no means undifferentiated, but they were culturally more similar to each other than any of them were to Europeans.

In the early days of the slave regime, the constant importation of new slaves served to shore up weakening cultural ties to **Africa**. Even after the international slave trade was outlawed, pirates and smugglers supplied a smaller number of Africans who probably renewed the vitality of African culture. The newly enslaved probably exerted a re-Africanization on plantation dance forms.¹⁵

The conditions of slavery in North America varied somewhat across time and region. Not all slaves lived on plantations. Some were house servants, urban laborers, or hands on small farms. On some plantations slaves worked in gang; or groups; on others they worked as individuals with **task** assignments. **Work** was the dominant feature of slave **life**, and the work pattern undoubtedly affected the model of culture that emerged. For example, the work song probably achieved a fuller development among slaves on work gangs than among those who worked alone.¹⁶ The dancing among skilled urban artisans appears to have differed from that of field laborers. The type of work determined the slaves' daily routine and consequently their cultural materials. Thus the model of culture—determined by the work routines and the slaves ethnic composition—varied from one region to the next. Just as one cannot speak of a national American culture early in the colonial period, African-American culture had not yet acquired its national character.

Whether they grew rice, tobacco, cane, or cotton, served in a household, or worked as an urban artisan, slaves had limited opportunity to establish independent culture. Whites, for example, attempted to elimi-

nate slaves' access to drums. Such measures were less than entirely successful, but they created an environment that hindered slaves' attempts to assert their collective identity. Slaves managed to develop models of culture that retained their African character for more than three hundred years, but these models endured because whites did not immediately recognize them as threatening.

As the African was transformed into the African-American, several significant metamorphoses occurred. Most important for an understanding of black dance culture was a distinction between sacred and secular. For most Africans, the social and religious community were the same, and political leaders as well as human ancestors mediated between the living community and world of the deities. Unlike the western God, African ancestral deities embodied a wide range of seemingly contradictory attributes. The clear dichotomy of good and evil that marks Judeo-Christian religious figures was unknown to West Africans.

The major African deities (*orisha*) were capable of performing great feats—and great harm to humans. Like the Greek gods, but unlike the Christian, their nature was inherently erotic. They required appeasement and supplication in the form of ritualized sacrifices and offerings. North American Protestantism came to define African religious beliefs as sinful and strictly forbade their practice, but even among the African-Americans who converted to Christianity, African traditions remained vital. Equally important, much of African religious style, fervor, format, and predisposition in worship persisted in secular vestment.

Over time, a clear demarcation emerged between

sacred, ceremonial dance and the secular dancing associated with festivities and parties. The split began in the middle passage, and by the time the first generation of slaves was born on these shores the process was well underway.

Both sacred and **secular** dancing originated in an African worship system that included a wide range of praise methods, including a "party for the gods," or *bembe* as these religious parties came to be known in Cuba.¹⁷ (The Cuban **experience** can illuminate some aspects of dance in the United States). At least three *types of bembe* were observed among the Lucumi (Cuban Yoruba): *bembe Lucumi*, *bembe Lucumi criollo*, and *suncho*. *Bembe Lucumi* was more generally African than the other two. Its songs were sung in the Yoruba language, its drum rhythms were strictly traditional and were executed on the sacred two-headed bata drum. *Bembe Lucumi criollo* permitted a loosening of tradition; its songs were in a creolized language and its **rites** were more communal and simpler. The third **type**, *suncho*, appears to have been the true "Ocha party" or party for the gods. Unlike the other *types of bembe*, *suncho* did not always accompany a religious occasion. It appears to have been purely for enjoyment, with religion more pretext than a motive.¹⁸ Although there is no evidence that the *bembe* ever established itself in North America, similar elements were probably retained in "the shouts" held both openly and surreptitiously among North American slaves African religious elements—musical style, ecstatic behavior, spirit possession, and holy dancing—found expression in these shouts. Writer Frederick Law Olmsted leaves us this account:

On most of the large rice plantations which I have seen in this vicinity, there is a small chapel, which the Negroes use as their prayer house. The owner of one of these told me that, having furnished the prayer-house with seats having a back **mil** his Negroes petitioned him to remove it because it did not leave them room enough to pray. It was explained to me that it is their custom, in social worship, to **work themselves up** to a great pitch of excitement, in which they yell and cry aloud, and finally shriek and leap up, clapping their hands and dancing, as it is done at heathen festivals. The back rail they found to seriously impede this exercise.¹⁹

Apparently American slaves did not confine their African-based rituals and practices to purely religious occasions. As one commentator noted:

Tonight I have teen to a "shout" which seems to me certainly the remains of some old idol worship. The negroes sing a kind of chorus—three standing apart to lead and clap—and then all the others go shuffling round in a circle following one another with not much regularity, turning round occasionally and bending the **knees**, and stamping so that the whole floor swings. I never saw anything so savage. They call it a religious ceremony. but it seems more like a regular frolic to me.²⁰

During numerous African religious ceremonies, particularly those of the Yoruba, music is performed by a liturgical trio of sacred bata drums, namely, *okonkolo*, *itotele* and *iya*. The "three standing apart to lead and clap" mentioned **here** appear to be an adaptation of this traditional West African pattern to a new socio-cultural environment.

Though the ceremonial context and specific movements varied from group to group, the basic vocabulary of West African dance was strikingly similar across ethnic lines. As a result, interethnic assimilation in the new cultural environment was more easily facilitated in dance than in other aspects of the African culture, such as language.” Brought to the Americas in the motor-muscle memory of the various West African ethnic groups, the dance was characterized by segmentation and delineation of various body parts, including hips, torso, head, arms, hands, and legs; **the** use of multiple meter as polyrhythmic sensitivity; angularity; multiple centers of movement; asymmetry as balance; percussive performance; mimetic performance; improvisation; and derision. These esthetic and technical commonalities continued to **be** governing principles as dance moved from its sacred context to the numerous secular **uses** it acquired under slavery

In North America institutions sometimes minimally supported the retention of African religious culture. Some slave masters established “praise houses” and permitted their slaves to “shout” or engage in **secular** dancing, even though their peers often disapproved. **But** the benefits often outweighed the disapproval, as one master testifies:

I would build a house large enough, and **use** it for a dancehouse for the young, and those who wish to dance, as well as for prayer meetings, and for church on Sunday—making it a mile to be present myself occasionally at both, and my overseer always. I know the rebuke in store about dancing, but I cannot help it. I believe negroes will be better disposed this way than any other.²²

In general, however, slavery in the context of North American Protestantism proved more hostile to African customs than slavery under Catholic auspices. French and Spanish Catholics introduced their slaves to a pantheon of saints that the Africans came to associate with their own deities and so with their traditional religious practices. Thus, the African theological background to many of these practices (including dance) might disappear while the practice itself or a version of it survived, eventually relegated by the practitioners to the realm of the secular, magic, or folk custom. African-American dance, hoodoo, and folk medicine are clear examples. And as we shall see, a similar process occurred on a broader institutional level.

Slaves performed a wide variety of dances, including a few adopted from their masters, but the majority were distinctly African in character. Among the dances they created were wingin' and twistin' (which would later form the basis of the twist), the buzzard lope, breakdown, pigeon wing, cakewalk, Charleston, "set de flo," snake hips (the basis for all later African-American dances requiring sharp-popping accents demarcating each line of movement as in the jerk and the breaking style known as "pop locking"), and the shout, which unlike the others retained both a sacred and secular character. Many of the dances consisted of a basic step and a series of improvisational embellishments, which usually initially imitated motions of the work routine. Former slaves frequently mentioned "pitchin' hay," "corn shuckin'," and "cuttin' wheat" as embellishments in the cakewalk.²³ In this regard too the slaves were relying on African traditions in creating new dances; a large number of African dances cele-

brated through imitation significant environmental factors such as herd size, events in the life cycle, or physical labor and work routines.

The amalgamation of traditional African dance principles and the slaves' responses to their New World experience can be seen in the dance known as "set de flo'." Set de flo' took a variety of forms, but in the most interesting a circle was drawn to make an area in which the competing dancers performed. The musician, usually a fiddler, would call out complicated step routines for the dancers to negotiate without stepping on or outside the drawn circle. Dancers often demonstrated their dexterity by placing a glass of water on their heads, performing as many steps as possible without spilling the water.

The challenge posed by the fiddler-caller, familiar to West Africans, calls upon the dancer to perform difficult combinations of steps. The best performers are those who can meet the challenge while maintaining control and coolness. In the African esthetic, balance is achieved through the combination of opposites. Although dancers may be performing a fury of complex steps or figures, they must never lose equilibrium or control. This principle of asymmetry as balance can be observed among many West African groups. Shango, or thundergod devotees, sometimes dance with a container of burning fire balanced on their heads. Among the Egbado Yoruba people, gifted dancers with delicate terra cotta sculptures on their heads demonstrate raw energy in the movements of arms and torso.²⁴ This principle was later demonstrated in the foot-flashing repetitions of tap dancers like Jimmy Mordacai as well as in break dancing.

Unfortunately, little is known of the secret and well-hidden dances of slaves, but their observed activities indicate that they did not substantially modify the African dance vocabulary or all of the meaning, particularly the qualities of derision and resistance.

The outlawing of the international slave trade in 1807 increased the difficulty of importing Africans to the Americas; after the mid-nineteenth century, most blacks in North America had been born there. This change affected the development of African-American culture in two ways. First, it meant that each new generation would be further removed from contact with indigenous Africans or African cultural practices. Second, blacks in North America, unlike those in the West Indies or parts of Latin America, were not numerous enough to sustain specific ethnic traditions in their cultural complex. Thus, the conditions in North America encouraged the interethnic blending of African customs. Particular traits and habits were subsumed or absorbed, while sustaining something of their original character, and became the initial outline for an emerging African-American cultural complex.

Equally important in the emergence of an African-American culture was the increasing use of the cotton gin. The enormous growth in cotton production early in the nineteenth century gave the South a more homogeneous work culture than it had previously known. "King Cotton" blanketed areas that had primarily grown tobacco, rice, or indigo. Cultural historians have yet to examine the ways in which the new dominance of cotton synchronized work rhythms across regions that had differed significantly. It affected language, daily routines, and yearly schedules.

It changed the environment and modified the tools as well as the materials from which the folk culture was created. From Virginia through Texas, slaves had the new experience of a universal force acting on their cultural lives. While southern culture was never homogeneous, it was overwhelmingly dominated by the cotton plantation. The plantation system generally and the demands of individual masters affected the development of African-American culture.

On the plantation, slaves danced for themselves as celebration, recreation, and mourning as well as for their masters' entertainment. As in the middle passage, dancers were sometimes rewarded with money, extra food, or a pass to another plantation. Yet slaveholders were well aware that dance could function as a form of social intercourse, cultural expression, assidation mechanism, and political expression. Because it was a means of solidifying the slave community, dance could threaten white dominance. Indeed, slaves used dance to camouflage insurrectionary activity. Masters who permitted slave dancing did so with care, and did so hoping to pacify the slaves' desire to rebel.

Still, most masters recognized the usefulness of allowing at least some dancing among their slaves. Almost all slaves were allowed to celebrate Christmas, and some form of dancing was usually part of the celebration.²⁵ An article in a southern journal describes the holidays on one plantation:

Holidays—We usually have two, one about the 4th of July and one at Christmas. The one in July is celebrated with a dinner and whiskey. The Christmas holiday is a very different thing. It lasts