

The Black Male Dancer Physique: An Object of White Desirability

by

Lawrence M. Jackson, M.F.A.

(ljacks23@uwyo.edu)

Theatre and Dance, University of Wyoming

Abstract: The black male's physique streamed into Western consciousness as a desirable, yet dangerous exotic being. These perceptions eventually contributed to the objectification and exploitation of black male dancing bodies. This discourse will illustrate how the black body, from past to present, continues to be viewed by the white gaze as a sexualized deviant object of desire. Media representations of racial differences will be discussed, particularly addressing the first major crucible of raced representation in the United States: the minstrel show.

Keywords: objectification; exploitation; minstrelsy; black male dancer

Minstrelsy promoted the notion that black men were inherently violent, savage, oversexed and immoral beings. This construct of black male bestiality and primitivism fostered stereotypes regarding black male sexual prowess which simultaneously stimulated and intimidated the imaginations of White America. Within concert dance, the black, male dancer's physique entered white consciousness as a desirable, exotic caricature.

This essay will examine issues relating to the objectification and exploitation of the black, male dancer from a historical perspective to the current perceptions of African Americans. This article will primarily serve as a discourse on the black dancing body and the various ways black men are perceived and received by European audiences. Minstrelsy established the complex love-hate relationship that white Americans harbored towards black culture. Throughout the twentieth century, forms of minstrelsy provided a means of misrepresenting African Americans. Today, forms of minstrelsy are still present on concert dance stages.

Minstrelsy

“Even those of us who have no notion of what the auction block was can still feel it, as if the memory is handed down to us through our mother’s milk....It is there with me when I dance....My eroticism, my sensuality is often coupled with wild anger and belligerence...I am a person with history-and that history is in part the history of exploitation.”

-Bill T. Jones (Gottschild 228)

Minstrelsy, in terms of black-white acculturation, was an indulgence of a white fetish for black culture. Acculturation is the exchange of cultural features that results when groups of individuals from different cultures come into continuous first hand contact; the original cultural patterns of either or both groups may be altered, but the groups remain distinct (Kottak 209). Minstrelsy allowed the white, working class an opportunity to take the language, entertainment, and discourses of blacks and inflate their structures in a racist manner. Consequently, the minstrel proved to distort and imitate black culture in a way that still resonates today in the Europeanist perception of black performers. Black men, in particular, approaching the concert stage had to cope with public perceptions of the “Black Buck” or “Coon” formed by the minstrel stereotypes of the 1800s. “The Black Buck” was a racial slur used to describe a certain type of African American man. In particular, the caricature was used to describe black men who absolutely refused to bend to the law of white authority and were irredeemably violent. The “Coon” differed from the “Buck” in subtle but important ways. The “Coon” was depicted as a perpetual child, not capable of living as an independent adult. These portrayals, along with many others, have had a detrimental effect on how black men were, and are still, perceived by whites.

Minstrelsy underscored the white fascination with commodified “black” bodies. One of the primary functions of minstrels was to display the black, male body and to fetishize it. Minstrelsy represented a fantasy of exotic, hypersexual, and sexually-gifted Black men. While the stereotype could appear positive — after all, they are presented as desirable sexual partners — the flip side is that black men are also often presented as more animalistic and sexually aggressive than White men, a stereotype that has been used against them time and time again. By emphasizing the black body as a sexual deviant within the white imagination, there is a sense that these bodies are ignorant and animalistic, thus needing to be contained and enslaved.

Within the white aesthetic, the perception of the world as told by white people for white people, has never left room for “others” to assert themselves. Consequently, this causes white peoples’ images of other people to become negative. These negative images manifest themselves within subliminal racism. The “sublime” has to do with deep spirituality, a sense of elevation, and a sense of divine qualities. “Subliminal,” used as an adjective, is really a simple description of what is at the threshold of consciousness.

Therefore “subliminal racism” is something occurring below the threshold of consciousness that involves a pattern of stereotyping which occurs within the subconscious. Whether whites are aware of this pattern of exclusion of other races is argumentative. However, one aspect of the white gaze, viewing the world through a white person’s eyes, is that everything outside of the White aesthetic is considered animalistic, exotic, and erotic. The idea that blacks were naturally sexually promiscuous was initially reinforced by several characteristics of the institution of enslavement. Enslaved Africans were stripped naked and physically examined by a veterinarian rather than a doctor prior to being exhibited on the auction block. Supposedly, this practice was conducted to insure that slaves were healthy and able to reproduce. However, stripping and touching the slaves may be considered sexually exploitative in nature, which was not unsettling to whites, as they viewed Africans as inhumane.

Stereotypes

I remember doing a duet with a woman, and the choreographer came over to me, and she said, ‘You need to grab her like an animal, like you want to rape her,’...And I always got these parts where I was running around trying to get someone.”

- Ronald K. Brown (Gottschild 66)

Does Brown’s case not reinforce “The Brutal Black Buck” stereotype? “Bucks are always oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” (Bogle 16). In Brown’s account, he illustrates how black men continue to be represented in a sexualized and primitivist manner. bell hooks writes that “representations of black men in mass media usually depict them as more violent than other men, super masculine...these images appeal to white audiences, who simultaneously fear them and are fascinated by them” (hooks, 71). The myth of black men as sexual supermen continues to hold a central place in the white representation of black culture, as clearly stated in Brown’s anecdote. As Gottschild so eloquently states, “The animal equation, expressed or imagined, continues as a white construct for framing black endeavor. Ron Brown was reacting to the naïve, if not sensationalist, picture of sexuality imagined by the choreographer, a frame that played upon race tropes about the ‘savage’ black man’s lust for white women” (Gottschild 64).

Historically, representations of black men in concert dance, and the media in general, has been instilled negatively with a series of racist mythical ideologies. “Built upon flamboyant exaggeration, minstrel stereotypes added a theatrical distance between white audiences and black male performers” (DeFrantz 108). The minstrel mask defined the black man’s body as eccentric, strange, physically dynamic, hysterically out-of-control, and naïve. “Minstrel dance performances by black men amplified issues of body control, power, and physical expression embedded within the restrictions of segregated society” (DeFrantz 109).

Physique

Portrayals of black men in concert dance, choreographed dances for an audience, stem deeper than the stereotypes left by minstrels. There are also physical stereotypes about the black man's body, consequently causing them to be viewed sexually by the white gaze. There is still this notion that, in terms of stature, black men are seen as "brutes," or largely built men. Ron Brown states, "I've heard [white] people say, 'Oh, your male dancers look like football players.' Massive. Just big" (Gottschild 62). This is disturbing in that it reinforces the fear of the "giant, black man." It also creates a physiological stereotype that helps refuel racial and sexual stereotypes. The results of these framings of black men are that whites perceive the image of black men as hyper masculine. Whites rely on these images in order to situate themselves as vulnerable and helpless against the monstrous, black male within everyday life. This, in turn, produces a structure of violence against black, male bodies in the form of police brutality, racial profiling, etc. It is this image of black hyper-masculinity and the belief in black male prowess and violence that negatively affects and victimizes black males. The physique of a black male, however, is viewed as the object of desire and seduction. Black males thus, have a dual perception placed on them, which is that of the "Brutal Black Buck" and the "Coon." This ambivalence placed on them makes them objects of desire and repulsion simultaneously.

Sexual Voyeurism

"Tall, lithe, agile, and sexy, with the classically proportioned body of a dancer/athlete, Jones' physical gifts are as shocking as his talent is undeniable" (Kaplan 42). The adjectives used to describe Bill T. Jones linger on the verge of sexual voyeurism. These perceptions of the Black, male physique continue to keep audiences flocking to concerts to value the Black man's physique rather than his art. "African Americans are still exoticized ...presented as sex objects. African American companies are as guilty of these insults as anyone. You see too many men running around like studs in dance belts and women coming across like prostitutes. Because that sells, that's what we African Americans are supposed to look like" (Gladstone 19). African Americans are still, in a sense, selling minstrelsy. By either consciously or subconsciously continuing to feed into the perceptions and images that whites continue to hold of them for profit, blacks continue to sell minstrelsy. Eleo Pomare commented on the subject stating, "The 70s created a denial generation...I call what's going on today, 'neo-colonialist or nouveau minstrel. A lot of what is presented by the Ailey Company is what White people like to see Blacks do. That's not for me. If I ask you to dinner, you're not going to tell me what to serve" (Gladstone, 19). Thomas DeFrantz also comments stating, "Ailey's choreography formed fires of black machismo in a number of roles he made for himself which literally displayed his body and cast as the site of desire....As a dancer; Ailey created a persona which redefined popular stereotypes of the male black body on the concert stage to include the erotic" (DeFrantz 112).

It is a fair assumption that Ailey capitalized on the stereotypes that were presented of African Americans. In an appearance in the 1954 Broadway musical, *House of Flowers*, Ailey performed a seductive pas de deux with Carmen de Lavallade. This musical also contained a host of other black, male dancers including Geoffrey Holder, Arthur Mitchell, Louis Johnson, and Walter Nicks. Brooks Atkinson, *New York Times* critic wrote, "Every Negro show includes wonderful dancing. *House of Flowers* is no exception in that respect. Tall and short Negroes, adults, and youngsters, torrid maidens in flashy costumes and bare-chested bucks break out into wild, grotesque, animalistic dances....[which] look and sound alike by the time of the second act" (DeFrantz 113). This show depicts black performers in the same light as minstrels. As Atkinson surmises, the audience is exposed to the caricature of the oversexed and animalistic buck.

In Ailey's third work, *Blues Suite*, these stereotypes are also reinforced. The setting of this piece takes place from the docks and the fields, saloons and bawdy houses. The bawdy house, or whorehouse, fits neatly into the stereotype of black men as eager, oversexed bucks. This piece aligned with several racial stereotypes, appealed to white audiences and became a crowd favorite. Although choreographers, such as Ailey, capitalized on minstrelsy, these works proved to be the only means of having their works produced and accepted by white audiences. One can only imagine how choreographers felt to have been denied the opportunity to produce heartfelt and meaningful works that reflected the reality of their lives in the black community.

The ballets performed by the Ailey Company such as *Blues Suite*, were, as Pomare termed, "nouveau minstrel" (Gladstone, 19). During the 1970s, the Ailey Company no longer relied on such works to appeal to white audiences; however, these works were still performed as part of the company's repertoire.

Bill T. Jones is an artist who has begun to confront the issues of stereotyping the black, male dancer's physique. Known for his vocal commitment to political issues, "Jones has emerged over the last decade as a powerful and symbolic figure who embodies the struggles and aspirations of the various embattled minorities for which he belongs" (Kaplan 42). Jones has an interesting perspective on black male musculature. "What is that about the big chest of a black man? These plates, the way that the chest is described, you know the weight in the upper arms. Now, all men have that, but there is something about the way that a black man carries his chest, and coupled with the fact that black men have the use of their lower body in a way that white men don't...none of these things are true anymore" (Gottschild 62). Most revealing about Jones' statement was how he believes that none of these things are true anymore. According to Gus Solomons Jr., "White men envy the definition of most black people's muscles. At least half of the trainers at my gym are black men. They look gorgeous and people want to look like that, so they run to those trainers. Black men's bodies are very much admired by white men and women..." (Gottschild 63). Solomon's comments address the theory that whites are attracted to and repulsed by black men for virtually the same attributes. They are attracted to the musculature of the black male, but fearful of the monster that this male represents.

Cornel West states, “Americans are obsessed with sex and fear of black sexuality. This obsession is motivated by the search for stimulation and meaning in a fast paced, market-driven culture. The fear is grounded in visceral feelings about black bodies and fueled by sexual myths of black men and women” (West 1). West’s views bring a sense of clarity and understanding to the “attract-repel” syndrome that White America holds toward black bodies. West’s views affirm how there still remains this love-hate of the black male body from White America. West, like Solomons, also makes reference to the belief that white men envy the black male body. “Due to a society obsessed by sex and the Afro-Americanization of white youth, the black male is viewed as a desirable sexual partner...” (West 81). What is astonishing about the black, male body is that its’ perceptions from whites have remained the same since the time blacks were imported from Africa. This body- fantasized, imagined, loved, hated, feared, and still remains the “other.” However, through all of its degradation, the black male physique still manages to remain the object of white desirability.

Media institutions and their representations consistently cast black men as the bane of this country. These negative accounts create powerful stereotypes within the hearts and minds of viewers. Black Studies scholarship may aid in exposing and ridding these stereotypes by further studying the experiences of the black, male dancer and the effect of society on them and their effect on society.

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