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Sharpening dance style by embodying qualities of the Africanist aesthetic

by Zoey Russell

When Sakina Ibrahim guested in my history class last January, I decided I would consciously embody historical ideas about African dance and explore how those ideas live in the body today. I was particularly interested in ideas of polycentrism, polyrhythm, groundedness, and fluid torso articulation, as described by Brenda Dixon Gottschild's essay called *Stripping the Emperor: The Africanist Presence in American Concert Dance*, wondering how these principles challenge my Western concert dance training that emphasizes verticality, control, and single-centered movement. Her workshop gave me the chance to experience what it felt like to move with multiple centers and rhythmic layers in my body.

One moment in her workshop where history and dancing came together very clearly was during an exercise focused on undulation and spinal articulation. We initiated movement across the floor by leading downward with the chest while the head remained lifted, and as we returned to standing, the head was the last part of the body to come back up, creating a serpentine, wave-like quality. This movement required me to release my habit of holding my spine upright and instead allow the torso to ripple through space. I could feel how this embodied original Africanist principles of fluidity and polycentrism, where movement does not originate from a single vertical axis but travels through multiple parts of the body.

Another moment involved polyrhythm, where we held one rhythm by opening and closing one hand, while the other hand shook on a different beat, and the rest of the body continued moving independently. This required intense concentration and coordination, forcing me to separate my awareness across different body parts. Instead of counting a single rhythm, I had to *feel* the rhythms simultaneously, which connected directly to historical African diasporic dance traditions that prioritize layered rhythmic structures. Interestingly, thinking less and feeling more made it easier to stay with the rhythm.

We also explored a movement phrase that involved throwing the leg from attitude (a pose on one leg with the other leg lifted, bent at the knee to form roughly a 90-degree angle) front parallel to attitude back, accompanied by a natural bounce and swinging arms. While the shape reminded me of Cunningham technique (as mentioned by Ibrahim), the energy source was different. I had to channel groundedness, rhythm, and elasticity rather than control and grace. This helped me recognize how Africanist aesthetics exist within American concert dance forms, even when they are not explicitly named. Perhaps much of my training is rooted in altered forms of African aesthetics.

Finally, we explored a movement phrase that began with a pumping of the chest and head while deeply grounded, with my weight settling into the floor through bent legs and a low center of gravity. The chest initiated the movement forward and upward, with the head following. From this grounded base, we rose into a half turn that resembled a bourrée (a ballet traveling step made of very small, quick, even steps), traveling lightly across the floor while maintaining an

awareness of weight and downward energy. Unlike a classical bourrée that prioritizes elevation and poise, this version retained a connection to the floor even as the movement lifted and traveled. While performing this sequence, I focused on embodying the Africanist aesthetic that allowed for the conflict and contrast that Gottschild described. That African dance allowed for opposing movement qualities to happen simultaneously without needing to create a dominant aesthetic. So, I resisted smoothing the contrast between grounded pumping and elevated turning, allowing both states to exist in dialogue. I feel like this made my movement more revealing and more true to what I was feeling while doing it.

Through this workshop, I realized that dance history is something I can actively embody in the studio. By consciously applying Africanist principles to my movement practice, I was able to bring African aesthetic roots into my present-day dancing, deepening both my physical awareness and my understanding of dance history as a living, evolving practice.

Zoey Russell is a current junior at the University of California, Irvine, pursuing a BFA in Performance and Choreography and a BS in Biological Sciences, and expects to graduate in June 2028.