

The Black Presence in American Dance

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Catalogue Description

This course is a chronological study of the function and structure of dance, and the principal dance events, developments and personalities—from late European Renaissance to the present—with an emphasis on the dance created and performed by African American artists.

Course Description

As a major form of cultural expression, dance both reflects and influences societal development. This course will focus on two major theatricalized forms of dance that have been particularly important in western cultural histories—ballet and modern dance. We will investigate the function and structure of dance, the ways dance forms relate to societal changes, as well as the principal developments and personalities in dance, with an emphasis on American culture and African American contributions and products. In addition, by closely examining African aesthetic qualities in diasporic dance and incorporating an understanding of European dance aesthetics, we will analyze cross-cultural borrowing, noting ways in which African aesthetics have shaped cultural production by the dominant Euro-American culture and ways in which the dance of African Americans has been influenced by non-black aesthetics. The primary question we will ask this semester is “Where is Africa in American dance?”

The Black Presence in American Dance fulfills the Fine Arts core requirement for general students and may be used to satisfy the Area A requirement for drama majors or drama majors with a concentration in dance.



Course Intention and Goals

My intention is that you increase your understanding of Western dance history, especially as related to the cross-cultural dynamics and workings of American concert dance. Through the study of assigned texts and other readings, and through lectures, discussions, videotapes, dance performances, written assignments, and classroom presentations, you will:

- become familiar with dance history in general;
- become knowledgeable about the major figures of concert dance;
- attain an in-depth understanding of the contributions of African Americans to the dance world;
- be conversant about dance and its cultural and social importance;
- attain increased appreciation of dance as an art form;
- increase critical and analytical thinking skills;
- increase capabilities conducting research;
- increase capabilities in writing and presentations; and
- increase skill in working within a group.

Objectives

Through class participation and the completion of course requirements, you will exhibit your ability to:

- relate developments in dance performance to developments in society;
- identify and discuss general West African dance characteristics;
- identify major African American and Euro-American dance personalities;
- discern black cultural influences in non-black cultural production and generally identify cross-cultural aesthetic influences;
- think critically and analytically;
- articulate your thoughts about dance orally and in writing;
- conduct historical research;
- work responsibly and constructively in a group.

4th Hour Justification

This class offers four credit hours for three contact hours per week. You will complete additional contact hours through attendance at two live dance performances—Spelman Dance Theatre's spring concert and an off-campus concert—as well as the Drama and Dance productions of Funnel Cake Flowers & the Urban Chameleons and Oedipus Rex, and work on a group presentation project.



Requirements

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire
Yeats

I include this quote because I view the learning process as an interactive endeavor in which you and I both have responsibilities. My role is to prepare assignments and facilitate class activities that I believe will be effective in the learning process, to evaluate your work in a timely manner, and to create a safe space in which everyone can be who she (or he) is and freely contribute to the class. Your role in the learning process is to complete all assignments on time, attend class sessions and out-of-class events, and participate substantively in discussions and activities.



Course requirements include:

♦ Reflective Online (Moodle Forum) Posts—reactions to, observations of and questions about course readings, class discussions, dances viewed, historical contexts, and related experiences or issues—including your reactions to the Drama and Dance productions of Funnel Cake Flowers & the Urban Chameleons and Oedipus Rex. We will use Moodle for these posts. You will respond to weekly prompts in an entry of a least 300 words, and occasionally, in a response of 200 words to a classmate's post.

♦ A Choreographic Description Paper—a 500-750 word paper (typed and double-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font) in which you describe what you saw and experienced in Edisa Weeks' dance, She Loves Me.

♦ A Choreographic Reflection Paper—a 750-900 word paper (typed and double-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font) in which you reflect on Alvin Ailey's dance, Cry, and its relationship to your life as a 21st century black woman.

♦ SDT Performance Critique—a 750-900 word paper (typed and double-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font) about Spelman Dance Theatre's spring concert (April 24-27). This critique is due by 5 PM Wednesday, April 30.

♦ A Choreographic Context Paper—a 1200-1500 word paper (typed and double-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font) in which you discuss Jawole Zollar's work, Batty Moves, as it relates to life for African American women.

♦ Dance and Society Group Project—a 15-minute creative presentation in which your group 1) identifies and outlines an issue or situation in American society; 2) explores how a choreographer, company, or dance work has addressed that issue or situation; 3) relates your chosen choreographer, company, or dance work to something else in popular culture, entertainment or art that is associated with or that comments on the situation or issue your group is exploring; and 4) speculates how your chosen choreographer, company, or dance work might contribute to positive social change.

Your group's presentation should offer a distinct and insightful perspective; include substantive information that is clearly articulated; it should incorporate technology and/or performance; and it should be created and presented equally by all members. This doesn't mean everyone has to do the same things. It does mean everyone should put in equivalent effort. As part of your presentation, each member of your group should submit (to me) a one-page statement about how your group approached the project and the role each group member played.

♦ A Mid-Term Examination.

♦ A Final Examination.

Contemplative Component

I believe everyone has an inner wisdom which, when coupled with their intellectual agency, expands their learning capacity and ability to contribute to others' learning. To help you access this inner knowing, I will include in the class several contemplative practices: centering silence at the beginning of class, a few moments of reflection during class, and reflective assignments in and out of class. I encourage you to take advantage of these ways of knowing, which may be new to you, and see how they contribute to your more familiar modes of learning.

A Note about Lateness

If you arrive for class during the centering silence, please wait quietly outside the door until it is opened. I encourage you to use this time to bring yourself fully present for this class.

All written assignments have specified due dates and submission processes. Some will be posted as Forum prompt responses. Papers will be uploaded to Turnitin links. An assignment's grade will be lowered one letter for each day it is late. Assignments received 72 hours or more after they are due will earn 0 points.

Attendance and Participation

Classroom participation is an essential element of this course and absence prevents participation. For attendance, I use Moodle's system: Present (2 points), Late (1 point) Excused absence (1 point), and Absent (0 points).

For participation, here's what's expected of you in class:

- asking questions
- answering questions
- making comments (especially relevant experiences and text-related comments)

These are even better contributions:

- responding to another student's comment or question with something said in the text, by me or another student
- constructively disagreeing with something said in the text, by me or another student
- relating our readings and discussions to those in your other classes

Behaviors to avoid:

- not listening
- pretending to listen while texting, cruising online or doing work for another class
- making fun of or otherwise belittling something another person says

One other thing: some people prefer to volunteer and others to be called on. My preference is to go with volunteers, though sometimes I call on people to make sure their voices are heard. Please send me a note if you would rather not be called on or you would rather not volunteer.

Here's how your participation is graded: I write notes regularly about who's doing what. During or after every class you should write down what you contributed—the question you asked, the answer you gave, the comment you made, etc. At mid-term I'll ask you to post the dates and the contributions you made on Moodle. I'll compare your record with mine and compute your participation grade to that point. I'll share this with you, along with suggestions for any needed improvement. At the end of the course, I'll ask you to post your contributions for the 2nd half of the course, and will again respond with my assessment and your final participation grade.

Cell Phones

Your full attention and presence are important and expected during this class. Inattention is disrespectful to me and to your classmates, and does not serve you well. As we will be together for only 75 minutes at a time, please turn your cell phone off—not to “vibrate,” which is still audible—and place it out of sight before you come to class. A ringing or vibrating cell phone is equivalent to a tardy. Obviously, text messaging and leaving the room to carry out a cell phone conversation are not allowed.

<u>Evaluation</u>			
Writing			
Description Paper	5%	<u>Grading Scale</u>	
Reflection Paper	10	A	95 and above
SDT Performance Critique	10	A-	90-94
Research/Context Paper	10	B+	87-89
Engagement			
Attendance and Participation	15	B	84-86
Moodle Forum Posts	10	B-	80-83
Dance and Society Project	10	C+	77-79
General Knowledge			
Mid-Term Examination	15	C	74-76
Final Examination	15	C-	70-73
	<u>15</u>	D+	67-69
	100%	D	64-66
		F	63 and below

Required Texts

Dixon-Gottschild, Brenda. Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996.

Perpener, John. African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

Additional required readings are posted on the course Moodle site.

Policies

Academic Integrity (from Spelman College Bulletin)

At the heart of Spelman College's mission is academic excellence, along with the development of intellectual, ethical and leadership qualities. These goals can only flourish in an institutional environment where every member of the College affirms honesty, trust, and mutual respect. All members of the academic community of Spelman College are expected to understand and follow the basic standards of honesty and integrity, upholding a commitment to high ethical standards. Students are expected to read and abide by the Spelman College Code of Conduct (see the current Spelman College Student Handbook) and are expected to behave as mature and responsible members of the Spelman College academic community. Students are expected to follow ethical standards in their personal conduct and in their behavior towards other members of the community. They are expected to observe basic honesty in their work, words, ideas, and actions. Failure to do so is a violation of the Spelman College Academic Integrity Policy. Violators will be subject to the sanctions outlined in the Spelman College Bulletin.

Student Disabilities

Spelman College is committed to ensuring the full participation of all students in its programs. If you have a documented disability (or think you may have a disability) and, as a result, need a reasonable accommodation to participate in class, complete course requirements, or benefit from the College's programs or services, you should contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) as soon as possible. To receive any academic accommodation, you must be appropriately registered with ODS. The ODS works with students confidentially and does not disclose any disability-related information without their permission. ODS serves as a clearinghouse on disability issues and works in partnership with faculty and all other student service offices. For further information about services for students with disabilities, please contact the ODS at 404-270-5289 (voice), located in MacVicar Hall, Room 106.

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A DANCE CRITIQUE

View the critique as a description and analysis of dance works and an expression of your experience viewing them. Write it in a formal voice and as if the reader did not see the concert. It should be based on what you experienced, including what you saw and heard as well as what you felt or thought. Remember, however, that your goal is to analyze choreographic statements, not judge performers' skills. You may determine the format of your paper, but, **at the beginning of your critique state “who, what, when and where” you saw.** Give a brief overview of the performance as a whole, then discuss one or two pieces or sections that made the greatest impression on you. Use the following questions as guidelines for writing your critique. You need not respond to all questions. Refer to those that seem most significant and influential in determining why you had certain reactions to a dance. Remember, **both content and form are important.** Make your ideas clear, using **details** and **descriptions** to support them, and always make good use of grammar. **Capitalize and underline, italicize or make the names of dances bold.**

1. **MOTIVATION** - What did the choreographer intend to communicate? Was there an idea, emotion, or thought as the basis for the dance? Did the piece tell a story or deal with a real life event? If so, what? Was the piece abstract? Did it deal with energy or movement and not an idea? How?

2. **MOVEMENT** - Movement is emphasized because it is the most important element of dance. Most of your focus should be on the movement you see. What types of movements did the dancers perform? (Movement names are not important, movement descriptions are). Were there steps or gestures that were repeated or stressed (e.g. leaps, runs, waving arms)? Was the head held a certain way or was the focus directed to a specific point? Was the movement large and expansive or small and confined, flowing or sharp, linear or curved, light or heavy, free or bound? How did it help communicate the idea of the piece?

3. **MUSIC** - What kind of music was used—popular, classical, jazz, soothing, eerie, loud, none? What was the relationship between the music and the dance? Did the dancers move rhythmically to the music or against it? Did they ignore it? Did the music enhance or detract from the idea of the dance? Why?

4. **SPACE** - Did the dancers travel through space or stay in place? What use of directions and what pathways of the dancers did you notice? What special groupings of the dancers did you see, (e.g. solo, quartet, duet against a group, etc.)?

5. **VISUAL IMAGE** - What else did you see? Describe what took place visually. Were there special or dominant colors, shapes or patterns in the costumes or set? Was the lighting bright or dark? Were any props used? How did these add to or detract from the dance? Did all the parts of the dance work together to form an integrated whole? Did the dance conjure up any personal images in your mind's eye? Did any aspect seem unnecessary?

When writing the critique, the two most important things to remember are **provide enough information to give an accurate picture of what took place, supporting your thoughts with DESCRIPTIVE DETAILS** and **include an analysis of the choreography—not the performance—that includes your understanding of the work's meaning.** Your critique should be 750 to 900 words and must be submitted via the Turnitin link **by 5 pm May 5.**

The following essay may be helpful as you prepare to write your critique. It is from A Primer for Movement Description by Cecily Dell, published by the Dance Notation Bureau, Inc., New York, NY, 1970.

What Can I Say About a Dance?

Someone moves. You want to describe the movement. What can you say? You could start by saying what the person did. You can choose from among the many intransitive verbs in your vocabulary—he ran, he stopped, he turned, he jumped, he walked, he sat. Or the person might have done something involving an object, allowing you a larger choice of transitive verbs—he threw it, he picked it up, he broke it, he tossed it, he brushed it off, he laid it down. You might want to become more specific, describing which parts of his body moved in the action, or even which direction he moved in, or how the direction of his movement related to various other people or objects surrounding him.

If you say this much and no more, you will get something similar to the script of a play, with perhaps a few stage directions included. But, when reading a play, you can never know the varying intonations, colorations, emphases, hesitations with which the actor delivered the lines in the live theatre event. In the same way, a description of movement, no matter how detailed, when limited to the action itself, yields little information about how the mover really moved. You know what he did but you don't know how he did it. Did he run with a tight, condensed motion or in long, free strides? Did he turn abruptly or very slowly? The thing he picked up - did he brush it off lightly, or slap his hand over it, and if he laid it down, did he just drop it down or was he paying attention to where he was putting it?

There are many verbs in the language which combine these two ideas—what someone does and how he does it. For example, to fling, toss and hurl are all various ways to throw something, each with a slightly different quality. To tap, jab and punch are different ways of quickly exerting physical pressure on someone. To pull something, one may jerk at it or tug it.

Adverbs, such as hurriedly, carefully, calmly, smoothly, and adjectives like gently, soft, weak, lively, forceful, are rich resources for conveying the shades of movement quality. Below are three paragraphs, all concerned with the same basic movement action. The first describes only the action itself, while the second and third add qualitative description. The latter two show only two of hundreds of possible variations in quality within the same action.

- He came down the stairs and stopped, walked to the door, put his hand on the knob, turned it and opened the door.

- He came bounding down the stairs and stopped abruptly, walked slowly and hesitantly to the door, put his hand firmly on the knob, turned it fiercely and flung open the door.

- He came softly down the stairs and stopped, suspended, walked firmly to the door with a swinging forward stride and dropped his hand on the knob, turned it with a tightened grip and, bracing himself, opened the door.

An adequate everyday vocabulary serves perfectly well for describing actions, both quantitatively and qualitatively

African American Dance Development Visual Representation

