

Dancers as Diplomats:

American Choreography in Cultural Exchange

Clare Craft, 2015

CHAPTER 2

Refusing Modernist Formulas of Second-Class Citizenship

*Arthur Mitchell and the Alvin Ailey
American Dance Theater*

What might make choreography—a term most broadly defined as the organization of motion—look “American”? This might be the most persistent question throughout American dance-in-diplomacy programs. While no answer ever satisfied the query, one artistic movement dominated the work sent abroad during the Cold War era: dance modernism, an approach to dance that spans both ballet and modern dance genres.

Dance modernism, like much of American modernism, strongly emphasized abstraction as a key—often the key—aesthetic element. As visual arts critic Clement Greenberg famously said of modernism, the “use of art [should be] to call attention to art.”¹ In dance, this meant framing bodies as forms in motion, not necessarily as people, and, even more so, not as people who came to the stage to share movements from specific historical, cultural, or geographic contexts. In dance’s modernist formula, codified by dance critic John Martin, dance was to strive for universal accessibility, which meant avoiding marking any element as from a particular culture.² As dance historian Rebekah Kowal has shown, the pairing then of universalist abstraction with American cultural diplomacy was a paradox, even contradiction.³ Yet the pairing was also a brilliant move in political rhetoric: if dance modernism could be universally accessible around the

globe and be marked as American, that would help establish an argument that indeed what was American was possible for—even good for—the rest of the world. This circular logic made dance modernism an ideal fit for an American cultural diplomacy working to persuade foreign publics of American superiority and the global adaptability of American ideals.

Any attempt to argue that American society is superior and capable of including all kinds of people, as a universalist proposal requires, had a huge public relations obstacle at mid-century: American race relations. In the early twentieth century, the black intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois had predicted that what he called the “color line,” the strict segregation of white Americans from all other Americans, would be the great problem of the American twentieth century. By the 1950s, Du Bois’s prediction had come painfully true, and the world knew it. As historian Thomas Borstelmann has shown, what was once an American domestic policy problem became, by mid-century, a foreign-policy problem.⁴ Black Americans had, at best, second-class citizenship in the United States, and when they protested this status they were met with more oppression and violence. Soviet-financed newspapers and increasingly available televisions relayed this reality to people in the strategically important, newly decolonized countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America,⁵ as they read about and saw the horrible actions white Americans and government officials took against civil rights activists.⁶

At mid-century, then, the State Department faced competing challenges: arguing for American social and government systems as the best while also somehow framing the ongoing violence toward nonwhite Americans as not entirely negative. The wide dissemination of information about the civil rights movement and the violence against black Americans meant that denying their systematic disenfranchisement was not possible. Polls conducted by the State Department’s partner in cultural diplomacy, the USIA, confirmed worldwide knowledge and disapproval of the United States for its racial politics in the late 1950s and throughout much of the 1960s.⁷ Given this, the strategy of arguing for American democracy as superior despite the country’s racism required framing American ideals as capable of addressing dissenting groups—those who felt disenfranchised could, over time, be brought into the American fold. American democracy could, at least eventually, offer everyone the possibility of inclusion.⁸

Black artists performing onstage in modernist art forms became the perfect vehicle for exporting this idea. Modernist abstraction offered a universalizing veneer for the performances. As historian Penny Von Eschen has shown in her work on jazz music, the presence of black performers

onstage simultaneously highlighted racial difference and absorbed that difference, through abstraction, into a color-blind American vision.⁹

Modernist aesthetics perfectly fit this political campaign. Modernism had a long history of incorporating Africanist elements but then reducing them to unnamed, merely formal choices.¹⁰ Think, for instance, of Picasso's use of the lines of African sculptures in Cubism, heralded only as evidence of white European genius.¹¹ Or, as dance historian Brenda Dixon Gottschild brilliantly revealed in dance, George Balanchine's incorporation of jazz music's rhythms and an Africanist "aesthetics of the cool."¹² Susan Manning has detailed a similar pattern of appropriation and re-categorization among white choreographers in American modern dance throughout much of the twentieth century, and she has also discussed the implications of this normalized racial appropriation for black artists.¹³

What, then, did black artists do in the face of modernism's legacy when they were tapped as official representatives for the United States in a moment when they were quite visibly second-class citizens of the country they represented? This chapter focuses on black artists' performances and the politics of self-determination within this aesthetic and political maelstrom, describing how black dancers, onstage and off, used modernism and American diplomacy for their own ends—at times exploiting their relationship with the idea of universalism and at other times claiming space for a performance of blackness *as* blackness.

These twin paths of strategic redeployment of universal rhetoric and black self-determination are illustrated in the stories of two artists associated with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the predominantly black company often sent abroad by the US State Department (figure 2.1). The first story comes from Alvin Ailey, company founder and choreographer, and the second from Sharron Miller, a company dancer in the late 1960s. Miller's is about her work on a 1967 State Department-sponsored tour of ten African countries. Ailey's story comes from the company's 1970 Soviet Union tour, when the Ailey company became the first American modern dance group to perform in the Soviet Union.

After returning from the high-profile Soviet tour, Alvin Ailey gave an interview to *New York Times* dance critic Anna Kisselgoff in which he adamantly refused her suggestion that the tour had anything to do with race. The Ailey company represented "American dance," he said, not blackness. The *Times* quoted Ailey as saying, "There was no special attention paid to the interracial nature of the company or its predominantly black membership . . . it wasn't a black thing: The posters said we were

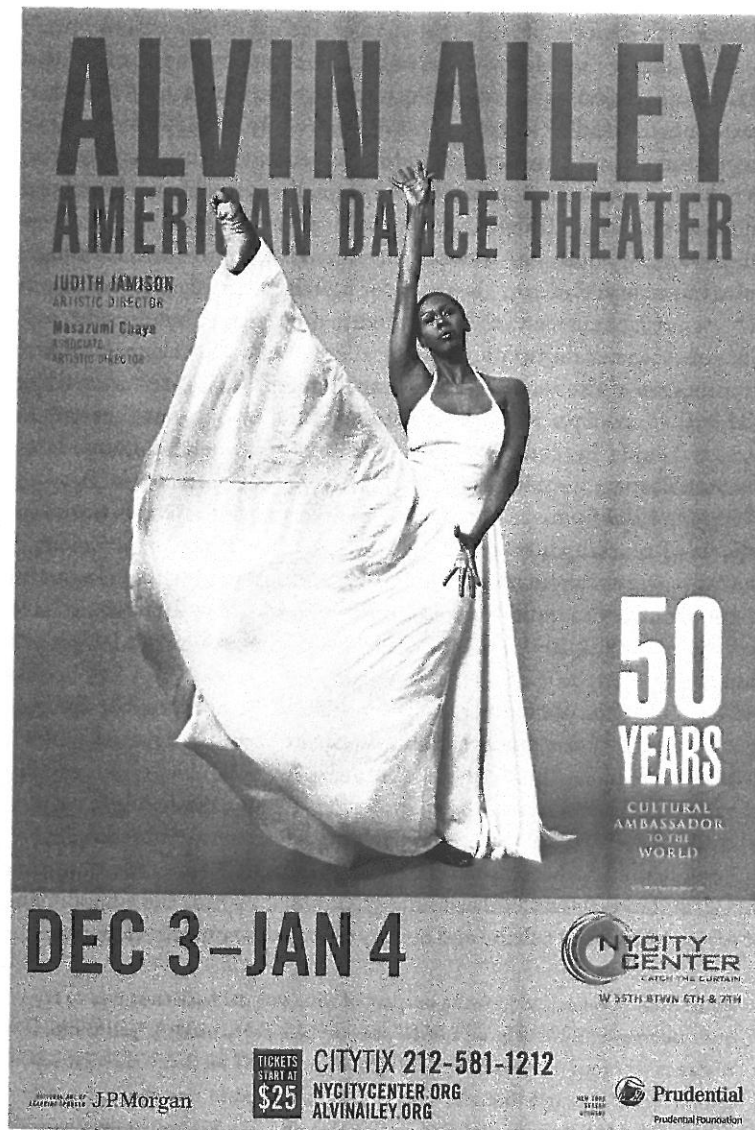


Figure 2.1
Judith Jamison of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater on the company's 50th anniversary poster, 2008, including the company's advertising of itself as "Cultural Ambassador to the World."

Source: Photo by Jack Mitchell. Courtesy of Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Inc.

an American dance company. There was no feeling of race whatsoever.”¹⁴ Ailey rejected being pigeonholed as a black company and insisted that all his work, including the State Department tour, represented American dance more broadly. In essence, Ailey used the intertwined logic of Americanness and universalism to his own ends. As a company touring on behalf of the State Department—especially as a company being presented to the Soviet Union as an example of American modern dance—Ailey was absolutely an American company. This was a hard-fought claim in modern dance at the time: for a predominantly black company to have not just entrée to the mainstream dance world but access to significant mainstream funding was rare. As will become clear, Ailey was not unaware of the racism, and also the homophobia, institutionalized within the American government. But he found ways to use these structures to benefit his company—most strategically when he manipulated the State Department into providing the company with crucial funding during its 1969 financial crisis. Ailey had always said that his work was capable of reaching a broad audience, regardless of race or ethnicity.¹⁵ The State Department gave him further justification for this claim and access to money to build his young company—funding that would have been less available in the 1960s had his work been, as he put it, “a black thing.”

Ailey’s strategic use of universalizing rhetoric did not foreclose the presentation of blackness onstage. Sharron Miller remembered dancing Ailey’s *Revelations* (1960)—the piece that chronicles American black life, remains Ailey’s most celebrated choreography, and that closed every Ailey program on the State Department tours—as a public performance of a blackness that Miller felt she had been taught to repress in her community and, importantly, in dance classes. Miller found great possibility for the embodiment of African American culture and history through dancing *Revelations*:

As an African American growing up, part of what you did back then was to try and rise above all the stigma, all the stereotypes, particularly if you wanted to dance. The idea of “Rocka My Soul” [*Revelations*’ last section] was what my grandmother was and that was something I had tried to rise above. . . . All of that [Miller gestures with her hand as though waving a fan while pumping her chin and darting her eyes]. So it [*Revelations*] was like going deeper into my heritage and my culture to bring that part back to my own personal sensibilities.¹⁶

Miller’s gesture was a direct physical quotation from *Revelations*’ choreography—choreography that allowed her to access the attitude and black

feminine swagger of her grandmother. Miller said *Revelations* allowed her to publicly embody part of her familial racial history that she had learned to suppress, partially through her ballet training in predominantly white Montclair, New Jersey. *Revelations* welcomed Miller’s entire identity onto the public stage, and in the context of the State Department tour, gave her the opportunity to perform as an American black woman all over the world. Being part of a government-sanctioned official tour that hoped to present blackness as ripe for assimilation into American identity did not mean that something else could not happen, too. Onstage performance always has the potential to exceed officially-sanctioned narratives.

This chapter focuses on how black artists, through the act of dancing, made some of their most significant statements about the peculiar bond among modernist abstraction, American cultural diplomacy, and race at mid-century. The chapter begins with a short history of modernism’s entanglement with American cultural diplomacy, including the shift from an initial object-based format in the visual arts to a focus on modernism as an embodied practice. Then I return to the tour that was at the center of chapter 1, the New York City Ballet’s 1962 tour of the Soviet Union, to examine black dancer Arthur Mitchell’s breakout performances within George Balanchine’s coding of race in the ballet *Agon* (1957), among other works. The Ailey company anchors the second half of the chapter: first through a discussion of *Revelations* as the pinnacle of African American self-determination in American cultural diplomacy, particularly when the company appeared on the African continent, and then, as the company, particularly Ailey himself, battled not just the racist but also the homophobic practices institutionalized within the State Department. This final section moves beyond questions of race alone to consider how modernism in American cultural diplomacy circumscribed both sexual and racial minoritarian identities.

MODERNISM AND AMERICAN IDENTITY: THE PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES OF PEOPLE

Dance theorist Mark Franko has described the animating force of modernism as being “a continuous reduction to essentials culminating in irreducible ‘qualities’” that facilitates the creation of a “depersonalized (‘universal’) embodiment of subjectivity.”¹⁷ This possibility—that a set of aesthetic choices can allow the fashioning of a universal subject that references nothing outside of itself—fit perfectly with the early goals of American cultural diplomacy: choosing and then sending into the world

art that could have universal reach. Post-World War II cultural elites, for instance visual arts supporter Nelson Rockefeller and dance leader Lincoln Kirstein, saw modernism's potential as American export, believing it could be an aesthetic route through which the United States could reach the world. These efforts began in the visual arts and, later, included the performing arts, too.

Historian Frances Stonor Saunders has argued that it was this generation of cultural gatekeepers who saw the possibility of modernism when it was linked with American identity. Modern art's brash, stripped-down aesthetic depicted the United States as "independent [and] self reliant" and distinguished American art from "European influence" and "Soviet realism."¹⁸ Abstract expressionism, for instance, Jackson Pollock's huge canvases slashed with color, offer the best image of the tone American cultural diplomacy sought to export, and indeed abstract expressionism was one of the strains of modernist art exported through American cultural diplomacy before and after World War II.¹⁹ With modernist art, the United States got an identity distinct from that of other countries but also could fantasize itself as elemental and bare—a palette others could (and should) imagine themselves into.

Even as modernist canvases seemed best for inviting others into the American experience, questions often arose about the relationship between people and objects in modernist visual art, either because the objects seemed too far removed from popular experience or because the people who made such art might not be of the American mainstream. High modernism, virtually antithetical in its aesthetics to American popular culture post-World War II, truly confused some audiences, and that confusion led to suspicion. In 1952, Congressman George Dondero famously pronounced on the floor of the House of Representatives that "all modern art [was] Communistic."²⁰ Modernism's abstraction offered no way in for many American audiences—no narrative to track as familiar. Later in the fifties, congressional challenges grew more specific as both the objects and the people who made them came under attack. These issues arose largely around abstract expressionism, peaking in 1959 when the USIA included paintings by Pollock and Mark Rothko in a Moscow exhibit as rumors of the two men's leftist political sympathies circulated in Washington. Congressional outrage reached such heights that only a public intervention by President Dwight Eisenhower prevented the show from being censored, even though the paintings were already hanging in Moscow at the time.²¹ Public censorship would be antithetical to what anyone wanted to export as "American" (a theme to which I return in chapter 3's discussion of congressional controversy around Martha Graham). It is surprising

after the controversies of the fifties that modernism would receive some of its greatest international circulation through American cultural diplomacy's then-just-beginning presentation of the performing arts, such as jazz music and modern dance. Yet it seems that the State Department's need to publicly embrace African American culture outstripped concerns about modernism because of modernist abstraction's complex presentation/non-presentation of blackness, especially in the performing arts. Having black performers onstage enacting modernist aesthetics in jazz or dance performances simultaneously championed and backgrounded African American culture.

The introduction of people, rather than art objects, created an even greater space in which diplomatic tours could simultaneously support the government's motives and challenge them. People, unlike art objects, can (literally) speak—speaking their minds and sometimes changing others' minds (or their own). Von Eschen offers many examples of black musicians, most famously Louis Armstrong, using the public stages provided by State Department tours to eloquently critique American civil rights policy.²² Dancers of color, like the musicians Von Eschen discusses, were also outspoken about policy.

Dancing itself, though, is also a way of communicating a critique. In the moment of performance, dancers make choices (of timing and focus, among others) that literally reshape and comment on the choreography they enact. For instance, in the *Revelations* solo "I Wanna Be Ready" (performed on Ailey's State Department tours in the 1960s and 1970s by James Truitte and Dudley Williams) the soloist moves through a seated exercise from Horton dance technique known as the "coccyx balance." In the exercise choreographer Ailey transformed into performance choreography, the dancer balances on the back of his pelvis, his knees bent and feet raised off the floor, while his arms move through a series of poses (figure 2.2). The dancer's measured exhalations and his sometimes open-eyed, sometimes prayerful gaze elevates the movements from an abs-strengthening exercise to a spiritual offering, a man signaling his willingness to give up the self, to give up the body.

Such performance choices infuse intention into a choreographic work that, like much of dance modernism, offers few clues to its larger cultural context. The male dancer in "I Wanna Be Ready" wears a white shirt and pants, (usually) does not appear in *Revelations*' preceding pieces, and dances in almost no light. The audience does not know where he came from, in what world he moves, or where he is going. The absence of contextual markers allows dancers to conjure multiple worlds for the solo depending on the moment of performance. Dudley Williams said that when he

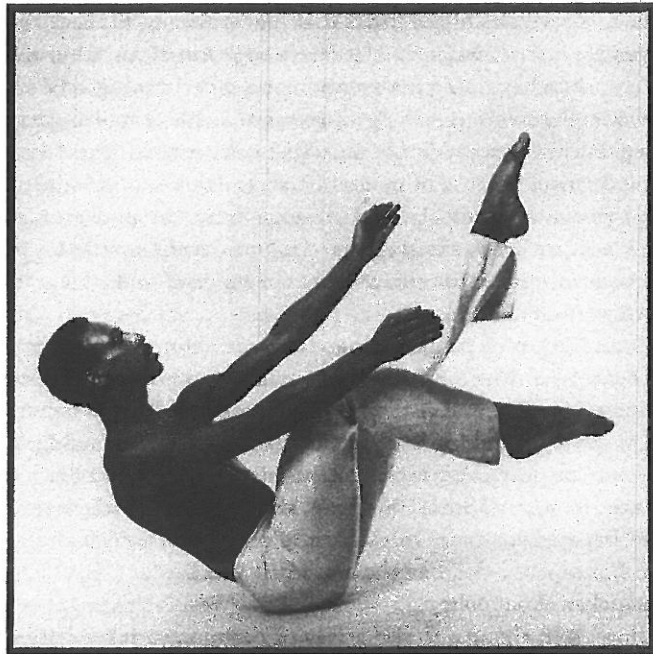


Figure 2.2
Dudley Williams in Alvin Ailey's signature masterpiece *Revelations*, 1969.
Source: Photo by Jack Mitchell. Courtesy of the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Inc.

performed “I Wanna Be Ready” during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, which hit the New York ballet and modern dance communities especially hard, the piece became a memorial for his friends who had died or were dying. When the solo was performed in the late sixties on State Department tours, it is imaginable that for some—performers or audience members—the image of a lone black man struggling against physical limitations and oppressive darkness might have evoked those widely circulated images of black Americans pressing forward despite violent backlash from white supremacists and federal, state, and local governments—images such as that of African American activist James Meredith pulling himself across a road after being shot at a protest in Mississippi. Through performance, dancers speak with their voices and with their bodies, potentially connecting with the social contexts modernism pretended did not exist. The remainder of this chapter focuses on these people, these embodied performances, and how bodies and motion became conduits for championing American modernism while resisting it, too.

MAKING RACE VISIBLE TO EVERYONE: AGON AND ARTHUR MITCHELL IN THE SOVIET UNION

George Balanchine's central *pas de deux* in the ballet *Agon*, created for Diana Adams and Arthur Mitchell in 1957, was an intensely physical, even sensuous embodied exchange between a black man and a white woman. The 1989 film *Dancing for Mr. B* includes archival footage from the 1960s featuring Allegra Kent and Mitchell, the couple that performed the piece on the 1962 Soviet tour, dancing an excerpt from the *pas de deux*. The dance's first long partnered phrase begins with Mitchell standing in a lunge, as Kent rests on his back and arms, her back touching his. Beginning to move, Kent wraps her leg around Mitchell's torso, nestling her pointed foot against his lower back. He steadies her with his arms and hands, and then slides his hands around her back. His biceps bulge slightly as he squeezes her—a squeeze that appears to be the catalyst for Kent to straighten her leg, circle it to the side and back, and lead the couple into their next partnered phrase (figure 2.3).²³

When Mitchell, a black man, and Kent, a white woman, performed the *pas de deux* on NYCB's Soviet tour, the choreography was potentially extremely controversial. Balanchine is known for partnering that intertwines women and men like vines climbing up tree trunks, and *Agon* may be one of his most entangled duets. The man and woman in *Agon*'s central *pas de deux* constantly wrap around one another, their physical relationship intensified by its contrast with partnering done in the ballet's preceding sections, where men and women touch only one another's hands and arms. In the *Agon pas de deux* the man and woman press against one another's entire bodies, stomach to back, pelvis to pelvis. The sensuality between the two dancers is clear.

Agon's interplay of race and form, Mitchell's memories of the Soviet tour, and other dancers' memories of Soviet interest in Mitchell illustrate how choreography and performance exploded the modernist formula of using formal abstraction to obscure but not erase racial identity. State Department officials and members of the ANTA Dance Panel considered race and formal innovation together, seeking African American representation, while also stripping African American artists of their individual identities. Under the guise of modernism, *Agon*'s interplay of race and form can be reduced to “color and form” when necessary or convenient, just as the State Department could abstract the specifics of African American individual and community histories into symbolic racial harmony. Considering how the ANTA panel discussed Mitchell's presence in the New York City Ballet, how Balanchine's choreography

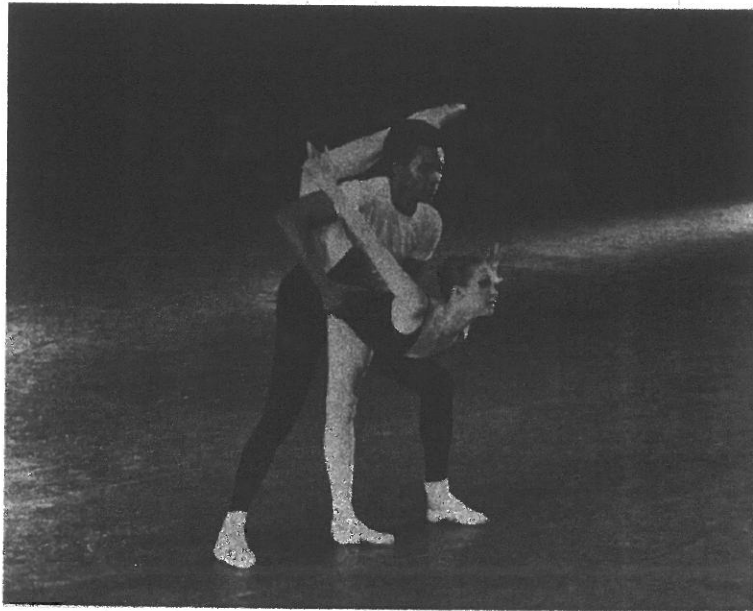


Figure 2.3
 Allegra Kent and Arthur Mitchell in one of many physically intertwined moments in George Balanchine's *Agon*.
 Source: Photograph by Martha Swope. Courtesy of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Choreography by George Balanchine © The George Balanchine Trust.

framed Africanist elements, how Mitchell physically manipulated his presentation of race, and how newspaper coverage of the tour discussed (and often ignored) race demonstrates how physical performance—even by one black dancer—revealed and challenged the over-valuation of choreographic formalism and whiteness that shored up modernism's value to American cultural diplomacy.

Agon is a supposedly abstract dance performed in practice clothes: black leotards and pink tights for the women and black tights and white t-shirts for the men. Mitchell and Balanchine made the male role a signature one for Mitchell in the City Ballet repertory, though a black dancer does not always perform it. As Brenda Dixon Gottschild has illustrated,²⁴ Balanchine's formalism was always entangled with race through its Africanist elements—elements made more visible when Mitchell danced Balanchine ballets.

On the 1962 Soviet tour, Mitchell was highly visible to Soviet balletomanes onstage and off because he danced a large number of principal

roles, including in *Agon*, and was the company's lone black dancer. Like all the dancers on the tour, Mitchell remembered the difficult conditions and enthusiastic audiences, but he also remembered feeling an intense personal burden. Returning from the tour, Mitchell's body forced him to reckon with the toll the tour had taken on him. Mitchell recalled the 1962 tour to me while sitting in his office at Dance Theatre of Harlem, the predominantly black ballet company he founded in 1968 in response to Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Mitchell sat behind his large wooden desk describing his experiences on the tour: the strain of performing in substandard conditions, fear about the Cuban missile crisis, and worry over how the company would represent Balanchine in his first return to the USSR. He recalled conversations with friends once he returned to New York:

They said, "Arthur, you're losing your hair." I said, "What do you mean?" [They said,] "You have this big bald spot in the middle of your head." I said, "What?" I didn't know that. And so I went to the doctor, and he said, "Oh, Arthur, you're having a nervous breakdown." . . . The pressure of all that was taking its toll on me, but I didn't even realize it at the time. Because, you know, artists can put themselves into a state where they can get through anything, but the pressure of it is something that you can't imagine.²⁵

The tour had, almost literally, undone Mitchell because he had the multiple responsibilities of performing as a representative of the United States, of Balanchine, and of African American culture—a third layer no other dancer on the tour experienced.

As Mitchell spoke, a photograph behind his desk reminded me of the larger discourse of modernism within which he danced. The photograph featured a young Mitchell, dressed in *Agon*'s male costume of white t-shirt and black tights, floating against a solid off-white background (figure 2.4). He soars, his knees pulled up in a ballet jump named *Cecchetti changement*. Mitchell's head is turned to the left, his chin high, arms open. Energy streams from his fingertips, exemplifying the gorgeous, open dancing spirit I recognize from films of Mitchell dancing. He is recognizable even though the photograph, with its blank background and unseen floor, which gives few contextual clues to the dancer's identity or location.

The picture exemplifies the modernist formalism that structures Balanchine's most abstract ballets, emphasizing the shape Mitchell makes with his body rather than the social forces within which he moves. Mitchell's performance style, however, refuses anonymity. As a performer and as a person, he interceded in a nationally sanctioned, color-blind

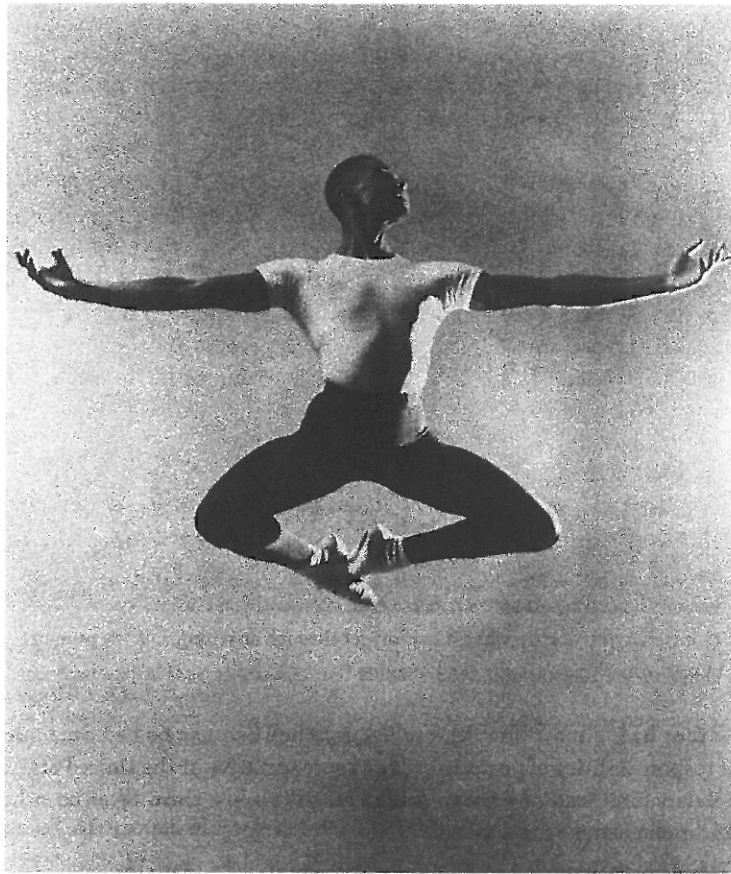


Figure 2.4
Arthur Mitchell leaps in an example of the physical freedom and modernist abstraction in George Balanchine's *Agon*.

Source: Photograph by Martha Swope. Courtesy of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Choreography by George Balanchine © The George Balanchine Trust.

narrative, keeping blackness clearly within the public view and refusing the largely white image of the United States offered by most American ballet companies at the time.

Balanchine's incorporation of Africanist aesthetics made his choreography well-suited for American cultural diplomacy's modernist project and ripe for Mitchell's danced critique of balletic modernism's overwhelming whiteness. Characteristics frequently used to describe Balanchine's work—speed, dense phrasing, articulation through the torso, and off-center

movements—are also attributes of Africanist dance.²⁶ Yet, the discourse around Balanchine often camouflages the Africanist elements, rarely fully acknowledging debts to African American culture. Dixon Gottschild notes that formally oriented descriptions of Balanchine's choreography frequently displace blackness; for instance, the word "jazz" replaces "African American."²⁷ It is not as though "jazz" does not signal African American culture at all, but making that connection requires more knowledge of black culture than would, of course, the descriptor "African American." The category "American," another label often affixed to Balanchine's work, then subsumes racial specificity—race, particularly blackness, is still present but unnamed.

In *Agon*, however, blackness cannot be so easily obscured. African American and Africanist elements are not subtext in *Agon*; they are the ballet's primary visual, musical, and energetic elements. According to Mitchell, in initial rehearsals Balanchine spoke openly about using Mitchell's brown skin to contrast with Adams' white skin.²⁸ One example of this visual contrast comes early in the ballet's central *pas de deux* when the two dancers link arms. The ballerina's white arm snakes over and through the man's darker arm, and then the two flip their arms up, an interlocked diamond of black and white skin.²⁹

Sonically, jazz rhythms lurk within Stravinsky's music for *Agon* and Balanchine's choreography. Baroque and jazz music contribute to *Agon*'s complex rhythms, and, as Stephanie Jordan has written, the influence of African American jazz can be seen in *Agon*'s "jazz-style freedom," including the choreography's "slightly 'offbeat' phrasing."³⁰ In a 2006 video filmed by The George Balanchine Trust, Mitchell teaches the *Agon pas de deux* by isolating the ballet's syncopation. As he coaches the dancers, Mitchell breaks down the music by singing in an almost bebop style, emphasizing the "offbeat" rhythm Jordan has identified.

Race is also a social question, even a controversy, in *Agon*. The central *pas de deux* between a black man and white woman, made in 1957—the same year the National Guard forcibly intervened to integrate schools in Little Rock, Arkansas (and the year the USIA first surveyed foreign nations about their perceptions of American race relations)—was a notable gesture for the time. Perhaps Balanchine's most radical choreographic choice was creating a *pas de deux* that required black and white dancers to share energy. For instance, in one phrase from *Agon*, Mitchell grabs Kent's arm as she pulls away in arabesque. Next, they switch positions, pulling in opposite directions, again achieving a shape through a tug of war of arms and legs. In both of these positions, Mitchell and Kent need each other to remain standing. Put another way, the black man needs the white

woman and the white woman needs the black man, a controversial relationship when interracial couples remained an absolute taboo. (*Loving v. Virginia*, the Supreme Court ruling that struck down anti-miscegenation laws across the United States, did not happen until 1967.) Historian Peggy Pascoe has argued that miscegenation posed a real threat to twentieth-century American society's cultural investment in the nonrecognition of race because defining miscegenation required a public recognition of race.³¹ By putting an interracial couple onstage, particularly an interracial couple that embodied the iconic sexualized taboo of the black man and white woman, Balanchine opened modernism's coat of abstraction, revealing the racial presence at its core.

Fully comprehending the stakes of Mitchell and Kent dancing *Agon* on a 1962 State Department tour requires rewinding to the mid-1950s, when the ANTA Dance Panel first began selecting dance companies. Panel meetings illustrate how the group connected formal innovation and racial politics when discussing values to be promoted on tours. In a March 1957 discussion about the opening of Berlin's Benjamin Franklin Theatre, the panel imagined its "ideal" program: an "American Indian dancer, American Negro dancers, American ballet dancers, and American modern dancers."³² With this racial and formal mix, this ideal cultural diplomacy program would present a picture of the United States as racially inclusive and at the forefront of modernism.

A January 1956 panel conversation suggested that Mitchell's presence in the New York City Ballet represented a perfect coupling of race and form. Kirstein told the panel that "a Negro dancer as soloist will appear with all the classic ballets, as just one of the dancers, completely integrated with the company,"³³ an idea that "the Panel approved wholeheartedly."³⁴ Unnamed in the minutes, Mitchell, City Ballet's only African American dancer from 1955 to 1970, is not a person, but an abstraction. A "Negro dancer" in the company presents ballet as becoming American—democratized even—in its integration of a black dancer as "just one of the dancers."

In the Soviet Union, however, Mitchell was not just another dancer or "the black dancer." By Mitchell's partners' accounts and his own, Soviet audiences were obsessed with him. In Tbilisi the company attended a performance by former Kirov star Vakhhtag Chabukiani in his ballets *Laurencia* (1948) and *Othello* (1958). Mitchell remembers a long pause after a Chabukiani solo, and looking around the theater only to realize that most of the audience was looking at him. Once Mitchell began to clap, the audience joined him.³⁵ His presence as a black man in the theater was such a singular event that it disrupted theater etiquette.

Almost all the dancers I interviewed said Mitchell had an equally strong effect on audiences when he performed, although the interpretations of the interest in Mitchell ranged widely from positive to negative. As Allegra Kent talked about the tour, she switched into a fake Russian accent only once: when she repeated for me what she heard while onstage dancing with Mitchell, Soviet voices chanting "Arthur, Arthur!"³⁶ Remembering dancing with Mitchell conjured those Soviet voices in Kent's mind. Gloria Govrin described Soviet audiences' reaction to the programs she closed with Mitchell in *Western Symphony*: "They were very taken, especially with Arthur. . . 'Arthur Mitchell!' they were chanting."³⁷ Violette Verdy remembered audiences chanting *chernyi* whenever Mitchell danced.³⁸ Translated literally, *chernyi* means "black," although the word is usually used in a derogatory way. Verdy, who was not fluent in Russian, interpreted the chant as positive, but what read as enthusiasm to the American dancers may have been fetishization or even taunting, as the choice of the pejorative *chernyi* suggests. Reviews of the company published in Soviet and Canadian newspapers corroborate the dancers' memories that Mitchell's reception was exceptional. Canadian writers did cover Mitchell's success, noting the Soviet "enthusiasm" for him in both his "sensuous duet" and his "freewheeling cowboy finale."³⁹

Most American newspaper accounts, however, offer only brief mentions of the acclaim Mitchell received. *Times* critic Martin positioned Mitchell as just further evidence of Balanchine's innovation. He named Mitchell twice in his review of NYCB's opening Moscow performance, noting that Kent and Mitchell's central *pas de deux* in *Agon* had elicited the "first sign of genuine enthusiasm" from the audience. In the same review, he said that Mitchell and Govrin's performance in *Western Symphony's* fourth movement "stopped [the performance] in its tracks."⁴⁰ After this initial review from Moscow, however, Martin shifted his focus almost entirely to Balanchine, attributing the unexpected success of the more abstract ballets, such as *Agon* and *Episodes*, solely to the choreographer's "genius."⁴¹ Because Martin was the only critic to travel with the company to all of the tour's five stops, his minimal coverage of Mitchell's success leaves a substantial historical gap. Abstraction and choreographer move center stage. Dancer and Africanist presence slide to the margins (at best).

Sometimes Martin's cryptic word choice seemed to refer to race without naming it. For example, Martin described the opening night performance of *Agon* in Leningrad as a "braintwister" that "carried the house along with it gratifyingly, even beyond the customary burst of enthusiasm for its curiously inventive *pas de deux*."⁴² Martin's "curiously" perhaps implies something more than formal invention. Perhaps he alludes to the *pas de*

deux's entanglement of a black man's and white woman's bodies. Again, race is relegated to subtext.

Dance reviews too frequently leave dancers unnamed or unmentioned, so some of Martin's erasure of Mitchell can be attributed to the genre in which he writes. Martin, however, wrote an unusual form of review on the Soviet tour, reporting more about Soviet audience reactions—when people did or did not applaud—than is customary in a dance review. Since there were no premieres on the tour, it seems an appropriate reportorial choice to see the Soviet perception of the ballets rather than the ballets themselves as the “news” of the government-sponsored tour. Martin's focus on the audience, then, makes his exclusion of the response to Mitchell seem a conscious omission (or, he unconsciously attributed it to Mitchell's blackness and therefore not newsworthy). Most other American newspaper reports about the tour followed narratives similar to Martin's: the tour was triumph for Balanchine. Newspapers' dismissal of the subject of race on the tour is probably not surprising given the era, but closer attention to Mitchell's performances would have flipped the script about what American modernism really said about American culture: that black people and black culture were present in anything deemed “American” but only enjoyed the partial benefits of American citizenship.

Mitchell's exuberant performance style and his self-professed consciousness of blackness as a performance not just phenotype—another physical reference he made in our interview—opposed modernism's positioning of African Americans as not important enough to be named. Mitchell's dancing, the attention he received from Soviet audiences, and the radical racial politics of *Agon's pas de deux* catapulted him beyond American cultural diplomacy's usual packaging of race in modernism. Mitchell's performances constituted what performance theorist José Muñoz has called “feeling brown.” Muñoz described performances of excess, especially by Latina/o performers, but also other minoritarian groups, as “specify[ing] and describ[ing] ethnic difference and resistance not in terms of simple being, but through a more nuanced route to feeling,” a route that separates a performer of color from “an official, ‘national affect’ that is aligned with a hegemonic class.”⁴³ By refusing to fade into a racially integrated collage—just another dancer in the company but one who happens to be black—Mitchell made his presence known and commented on the prevalence of white bodies and the performances of whiteness on the ballet stage.

Mitchell's explosive performances cracked the cool austerity of Balanchine's formal abstractions. He remembered a conversation with Govrin after a performance of *Western Symphony*. Mitchell said, “Gloria

said, ‘You bent over so far back, your head was—you went into a back-bend and your head was touching the floor.’ And I'm telling Gloria, ‘I'm in Russia; what am I going to do?’ And that's the extrovert part of me that comes into play, and the pride that you have that you're onstage with Mr. Balanchine.”⁴⁴

Mitchell went on to tie his performance style to an intentional performance of race. When principal dancer Conrad Ludlow was injured on the tour Mitchell had to perform *Divertimento No. 15* (1956) in Ludlow's place with little rehearsal. Lincoln Kirstein and Mitchell talked about how Mitchell would learn the forty-five-minute ballet quickly. Mitchell remembered Kirstein asking, “‘Arthur, what are you going to do?’ Mitchell responded, ‘Nothing. I'm going to go out and think ‘white.’”⁴⁵ As Mitchell told me the last line of this story, he sucked his cheeks in, puffed his chest out, and looked down his nose, showing me what it meant to perform “white,” demonstrating a body posture of rigidity and pretension. In that moment, Mitchell illustrated how he consciously deployed white and black as performative categories.

Mitchell's comments help return the burden of racial representation experienced by Mitchell on the Soviet tour to NYCB history. Difference did not just derive from Mitchell's distinction as the company's only black member on the tour. He used his performance skills to separate himself from the cast, making ballets' structures and demographics more visible. When Mitchell performed, he did so under a heavy burden of representation, but his efforts also meant that African American identity could not be overlooked—it was not just a category the State Department and the Dance Panel could include as evidence of American racial inclusivity. As was true with the photograph that drew my eye in Mitchell's office, modernist abstraction cannot entirely camouflage performances of blackness, nor can it frame blackness as only an object to be appropriated for hegemonic ends. Just one black dancer, Arthur Mitchell, had challenged a variety of frames that could have curtailed the public visibility of black power as black power, not *only* American power.

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER, AFRICAN AMERICAN MODERNISM, AND SELF-DETERMINATION

The racial makeup of the Ailey State Department tours was almost the exact opposite of the 1962 NYCB tour. Since founding the Ailey company, Alvin Ailey had made sure the company was predominantly African American, and also had Latina/o and Asian American dancers. Ailey

expanded the company's racial mix when a white dancer joined the group just prior to the company's first State Department tour in 1962.

Ailey's work—the choreography and the company members' dancing—always told a story of African American self-determination, even amid a modernist landscape.⁴⁶ The song lyrics and movement of Ailey's *Revelations*, which was included on every one of Ailey's State Department tours, depict African American people overcoming obstacles through individual will drawn from community strength. Seen through the lens of self-determination, *Revelations* is not just representative of modernist formalism, although that proliferates through its abstract scenic elements and dance techniques that emphasize making shapes with the body. *Revelations* is a quintessential example of African American modernism, too. Performance scholar Kimberly Benston has described African American modernism as artistic work that stresses “an autonomous black poetics” while also “seeking to situate black poetics within a larger, more continuous, and more textured field of expressive desire.”⁴⁷ Ailey's aesthetic fits within this reframing of modernist autonomy as still part of a specific community, while also commenting upon the larger cultural world in which black culture moves. Modernist aesthetics, with its tendency toward including but obscuring the specificity of blackness, helped get Ailey booked on tours. Making explicit modernism's debt to African American modernism made Ailey's choreography, particularly *Revelations*, a statement about African American self-determination that disrupted the progress narratives about African American life circulated in other USIA materials.

Self-Determination in Politics across the United States and Africa

Throughout the decades that the Ailey company toured most frequently on behalf of the State Department, Ailey clarified and expanded his choreographic vision of African American self-determination. The company was quite new when it first toured with State Department support in 1962. Compared to larger, better-supported tours, the small, young Ailey company sometimes scrambled to keep itself going on tour. The early Ailey tours were very small affairs compared to those of the big ballet companies in the 1950s and 1960s, or even in comparison to some of the tours by the Graham and Limón companies. For instance, Ailey's 1967 tour of ten African countries included only Alvin Ailey, an ensemble of twelve dancers, lighting designer Nicola Cernovitch, and USIA escort officer Harry Hirsch. Dudley Williams recalled that dancers “didn't have substitutes or

understudies.”⁴⁸ While the absence of extra dancers was not uncommon for State Department tours, the limited staff was more exceptional—and challenging for the young company. Dancer Lynne Taylor-Corbett recalled boarding planes and watching Ailey run across the tarmac as cassette tapes of the music used for the performances spilled from his bag. Now a well-known choreographer herself, Taylor-Corbett remembered this harried vision of Ailey and thought, “Imagine being responsible for all that and not having a support system.”⁴⁹

Tour repertory was quite expansive, representing a typical, mid-century Ailey mix of works by Ailey and other, mostly African American, choreographers all generally working within modernism—many of them African American modernist works. The exact repertory of the 1960s and 1970s tours is unclear, but the 1960s Africa tours definitely included Ailey's *Blues Suite*, Talley Beatty's *The Road of the Phoebe Snow* (1959), Geoffrey Holder's *Prodigal Prince* (1967), Louis Johnson's *Lament* (1953), Beatty's *Congo Tango Palace* (1960), and Paul Sanasardo's *Metallics* (1964). In 1970 most of these pieces were repeated in the Soviet Union with the addition of Ailey's controversial *Masekela Language* (1969), which caused a stir in the United States and abroad for its comparisons of racism in the United States and in South Africa.

The State Department, which chose tour destinations, primarily placed Ailey in countries in the throes of building new governments after throwing off European colonial rule. For instance, the Ailey company first appeared for the State Department in Southeast Asia in 1962. Thinking back to that first tour, Dudley Williams and Carmen de Lavallade (de Lavallade shared top billing with the then little-known Ailey) remembered riots in the streets of Indonesia's capital during performances.⁵⁰

In the late 1960s, the State Department mainly sent the Ailey company to the African continent, a pairing of company and tour destination that explicitly brought together African and African American self-determination movements. The Ailey company (no longer appearing with de Lavallade) first traveled to Africa in 1966 for the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Senegal, a festival organized by Senegalese President Léopold Senghor to celebrate the global impact of black culture. The Ailey company was a last-minute addition to the American artistic roster, added when a replacement was needed for the ballet company Arthur Mitchell had begun to build. The 1966 engagement was a smashing success, in part, because Ailey's fluency in French made him an ideal American spokesperson in former French and Belgian colonies, including Senegal. The State Department sent Ailey for a longer African tour in 1967.

On the later tour, dancer George Faison and other dancers said they found their proximity to African anti-colonial movements palpable and poignant, knowing they were in the places that, as Martin Luther King Jr. famously put it, had moved with “jetlike speed toward gaining political independence.”⁵¹ The US government hoped African audiences, too, would be inspired—inspired by the Americans’ presence to bend African post-colonial movements toward American democracy.

The 1967 tour included several stops in newly decolonized African countries still in postcolonial tumult and where the United States worried about increasing communist leanings. For instance, in 1967, the United States had pressing interests in Ghana since a coup had dislodged the socialist-leaning Kwame Nkrumah the year before. Later in the tour, the company was in the Congo during one of several violently crushed rebellions that attempted to overthrow leader Joseph Mobutu, who the US had controversially helped put into place based solely on his anti-communist stance.

On some tour stops, the company found themselves sharing space with African leaders best known for their work in anti-colonial movements. A photograph taken by State Department staff (figure 2.5) documents the young Ailey kneeling before Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta, who (with Ghana’s Nkrumah) was an important leader in the Pan-African movement and a key negotiator of Kenyan independence in 1962. In 1967 when the picture was taken, Kenyatta was the newly independent country’s first president. The company performed for Kenyatta, as Judith Jamison (who made a huge impression on the leader) remembered, on the president’s lawn in 110 degree weather.⁵² The photo, taken at the president’s home, where the company gave its command performance, quite literally brought together Africans and African Americans invested in self-determination and reimagining democratic systems that would not just include black people but in which black people would be leaders.

Beyond meetings with visible leaders, the dancers did not always know about the larger historical contexts in which they moved, much as the NYCB dancers were not always aware of the Cuban missile crisis (see chapter 1). They often learned about ongoing tension and violence in mundane ways: a boy who helped carry suitcases at a hotel in Kinsasha, Congo, told Lynne Taylor-Corbett that forty people had been shot by government forces in a nearby square the day before.⁵³ More positive experiences, however, often overwhelmed stories of violence: on the same Congo stop, dancers mainly remembered being greeted by local drummers at the Kinsasha airport.⁵⁴

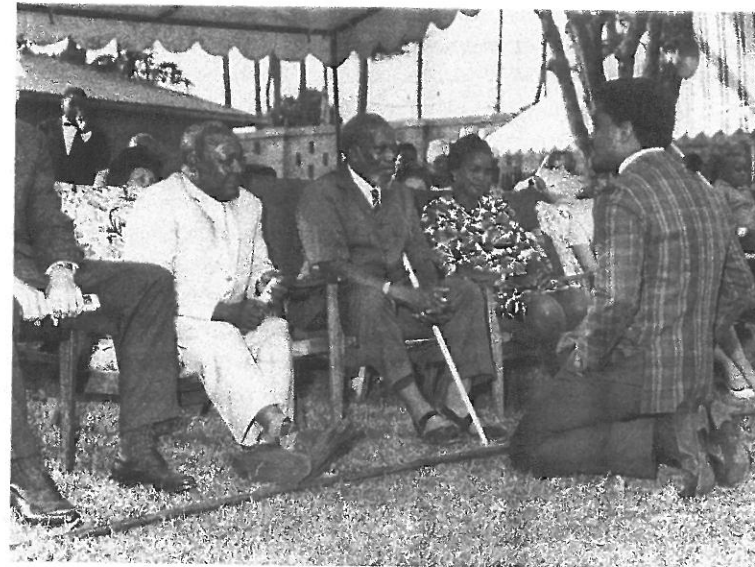


Figure 2.5
Alvin Ailey kneels before Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta, one of the best-known leaders of decolonization in Africa and the first president of Kenya. Mbiyu Koinange, Kenyan Minister of State, sits to Kenyatta’s right, and Mama Ngina Kenyatta, Kenyatta’s wife, sits to his left.
Source: Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Arkansas.

Though embassy staff planned meetings with locals like the one at the airport, the dancers say Ailey was often frustrated to not have access to more parts and peoples on the continent. In 1967, Ailey wanted the company to perform in South Africa, but State Department officials refused, saying it was too dangerous. The dancers, however, recalled another Ailey protest—to perform for local African audiences, rather than for elites and expatriates only—that was eventually heeded by the embassy and the USIA officers. Although the 1967 tour occurred as the State Department was beginning to expand all its arts tours to reach broader, often younger audiences,⁵⁵ Dudley Williams remembered that Ailey still had to fight for performances with lower-cost tickets: “He didn’t want to dance just for the people with gloves on. . . . He wanted to dance for the people, and the tickets were so expensive. . . . He demanded that we dance for the people and lower the tickets [prices] so people could come in.”⁵⁶ Taylor-Corbett noted that Ailey’s request to perform for “the people” in Africa had a racial dimension. She was often shocked when curtains would open at the beginning of a performance in an African country and all she saw was a “sea of

white faces.”⁵⁷ At Ailey’s request, the embassies added several informal outdoor shows to ensure that a wider swath of the local population could attend.

Performing Self-Determination: *Revelations*

On every bill, on every tour stop, *Revelations* closed the program. Ailey’s signature work may be best known for its boisterous closing dances as women in bright-yellow dresses fan their male partners with straw fans—the dancing Sharron Miller referenced in the anecdote that opens this chapter. *Revelations*’ combination of emphasis on the lines of the body and celebratory reenactment of African American culture made it one of the most popular exports for the State Department. Yet the role the Ailey company played in State Department programming becomes much more complicated if *Revelations*’ opening, more somber dances are examined alongside its happy ending, and in interviews dancers frequently pointed to these dances as absolutely crucial to understanding *Revelations*. (figure 2.6).



Figure 2.6
The full Ailey company in the early 1970s in the final joyous image of Alvin Ailey’s *Revelations*.
Source: Photo by Johan Elbers. Courtesy of the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Inc.

Revelations’ expressions of violence, sorrow, and struggle undermined the progress narratives of African American history being presented elsewhere in American cultural diplomacy in the 1950s and 1960s. Most USIA materials, particularly a series of pamphlets about African American history, positioned slavery as a long-ago event, the starting point in the story of American racial progress, rather than as a horrific historical event that still shaped American attitudes and practices. In contrast to these kinds of materials, *Revelations* offers a more layered temporality of the African American experience, intertwining trauma and celebration, past and present. Performance theorist Joni Jones describes African American theater as offering “a consideration of how a slave history has left psychic wounds on descendants of masters and descendants of slaves. The talk [or in this case, dance] with history is then a way of clarifying and contextualizing the present.”⁵⁸ Ailey’s live performances hurled the past into the present, making them ideally suited to comment on trauma’s fluid temporality and explode a high modernist formula that had no place for culturally specific trauma. *Revelations*’ opening section, “Pilgrim of Sorrow,” displays the ongoing effects of slavery’s trauma on people and their bodies.

By putting black people at the center of African American history, not just as one group upon which history has acted, Ailey also opened space for recognizing African Americans’ role in the ongoing struggles for equality. This recognition of African Americans as actors, not just victims, contrasted with the USIA materials that positioned benevolent, white federal legislators as the primary actors in the civil rights movement. USIA’s “educational” pamphlets, distributed across the African continent, emphasized racial integration as a soothing balm for the wounds of slavery. These include the 1950 or 1951 *The Negro in American Life*, and the 1965 pamphlet, *For the Dignity of Man*. Historian Mary Dudziak’s close readings of these pamphlets describe how each argues for American democracy as the ideal conduit for racial “reconciliation and redemption.”⁵⁹ The text of *The Negro in American Life* described the horrors of American slavery, but photographs projected images of racial integration as a smooth resolution of past horrors. In one picture, a black teacher leads a class of black and white children.⁶⁰ Another shows a group of black children standing in front of a newly constructed school.⁶¹ These pictures connect integration and education as evidence of an American promise of increasing equality. Dudziak explains how the pamphlet’s text moved from a description of slavery to an optimistic picture of African American life, where expanding educational opportunities “made ‘the Negro’ more worthy of equal treatment, and made him more likely to insist on his rights.”⁶² In Dudziak’s reading, the photographs and texts created a progress narrative that did not erase

slavery, but used slavery as a convenient starting point for a narrative of American progress—progress made possible because the now-educated African American could appeal to American government systems for “his rights.”

The 1965 pamphlet, *For the Dignity of Man*, resurrected a familiar theme: American democracy, here embodied by white male legislators rather than a racially integrated classroom, was the best system for achieving racial progress. The text described recent developments in civil rights history, including the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and began with a full-page photograph of President Johnson signing the 1965 legislation (figure 2.7).⁶³ The pamphlet’s many photographs told a story of the federal government’s promotion of racial integration as a pathway for African Americans to achieve success and happiness in which white leaders are equally important—perhaps even more important—than black grassroots movements and leaders. Those unable to read the pamphlet because of language or literacy barriers would draw conclusions about American life primarily from the photographs.

Pamphlet designers cropped out of the photo the civil rights leaders present at the bill signing, including Martin Luther King Jr., making Johnson, a white, elected leader, the image of social change.⁶⁴ Dudziak describes, too, how the pamphlet distanced the US nation from racial injustice by arguing that racism is a problem only for “some individuals and state and local governments.”⁶⁵ Seemingly, the President and the legislation he signed could curtail the impact of this misguided, racist minority.

The emphasis on legislation credited only the white men of the federal government with leading the United States away from its racist past. Over half of the pamphlet’s pictures feature white leaders, including Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy, as well as Johnson, signing legislation. A photo of participants in the 1963 March on Washington (figure 2.8) is shot so that it seems the marchers appealed to Lincoln’s statue on the National Mall, not to the strength produced through their gathering.⁶⁶ The 1963 demonstration is the only civil rights protest pictured, and the pamphlet calls upon the photograph to emphasize that African Americans have the opportunity to appeal to civil authorities. The caption of the march photograph describes the protest as an “orderly demonstration” that concluded with a meeting between the leaders of the march and President Kennedy.⁶⁷ All of these choices, visual and textual, cohere to create the impression that the white leaders, on behalf of the American federal system, are the most capable of making change in and through American democracy. Virtually no space is given to recognizing the African American community’s work or courage. This is the modernist aesthetic formula reconfigured

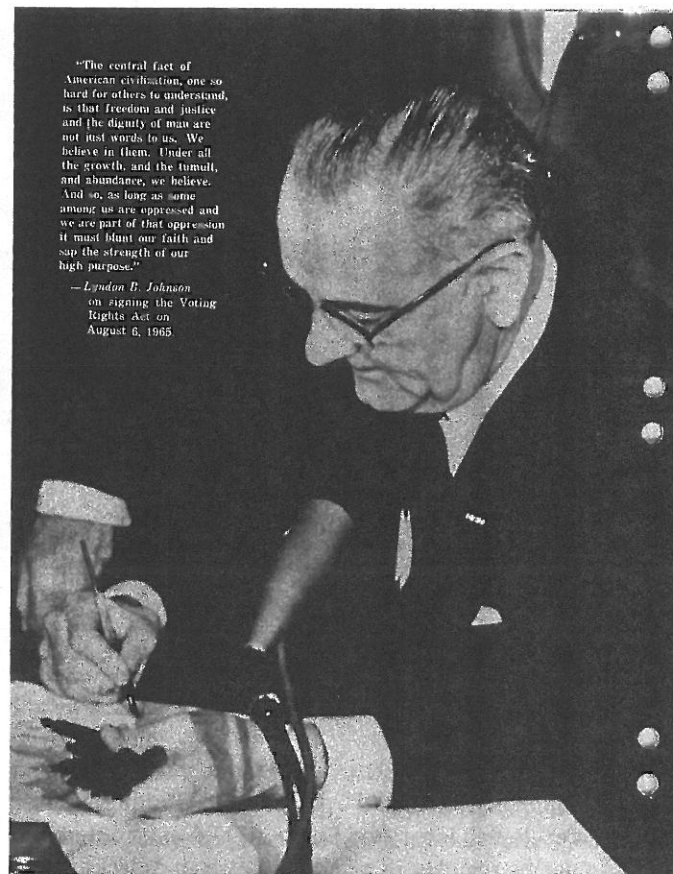


Figure 2.7
The inside cover of the USIA/USIS pamphlet *For the Dignity of Man, America's Civil Rights Program* shows President Lyndon B. Johnson signing the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders who stood around Johnson at the moment of signing were cropped from the photo.
Source: Courtesy of the Lyndon B. Johnson Library and Museum.

as a political strategy: American innovation and strength consume all nonwhite culturally specific markers, retooling the presence of black culture and black people into evidence of American democratic superiority.

When civil rights protests do appear in the pamphlets, they, like slavery, are framed as events of the past. For instance, in *The Negro in American Life*, one photograph shows African Americans eating at a lunch counter—a triumph over segregation secured, according to the photograph’s caption,

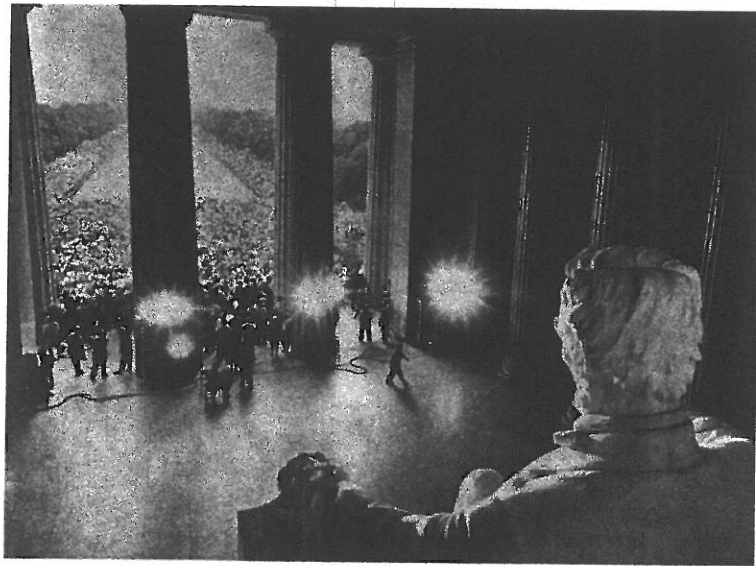


Figure 2.8
Image of the 1963 March on Washington from the USIA/USIS pamphlet *For the Dignity of Man, The Civil Rights Program*. Only the looming figure of President Lincoln is recognizable, whereas the thousands of marchers are an indistinguishable, barely visible mass.
Source: Courtesy of the Lyndon B. Johnson Library and Museum.

not by sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina and other Southern cities, but by the 1964 Civil Rights Act.⁶⁸ The pamphlet's remaining photographs depict happy scenes of an integrated America: children of different racial backgrounds playing together in a park and African American teachers working with white students.⁶⁹ According to the pamphlet, democratic, federal structures have ensured equal access for all Americans—a far cry from the truth of African American life in 1966, 1967, and 1970, when the Ailey company represented the United States on State Department tours.

Revelations' choreographic procession from depictions of pain in "Pilgrim of Sorrow," the work's opening section, to its final joyous moments does not completely dispense with the USIA pamphlets' progress narratives. The Dance Panel (no longer known as the ANTA Dance Panel, but rather as the State Department Dance Advisory Panel after 1963) definitely thought of *Revelations* as an optimistic work. In a 1970 memorandum in which the panel members expressed concern about including Ailey's relatively violent *Masekela Langage* on State Department tours, they described *Revelations* as "warm and lovely," a

suitable counterpoint to *Masekela*.⁷⁰ Dance historian Thomas DeFrantz has argued that *Revelations'* "economy of dance motion, brevity of musical selections, [and] the confident dispatch of its staging" softens its political potency for some.⁷¹ Judith Jamison noted that *Revelations'* joy is political, too: "Some people say 'Rocka My Soul' is a whole bunch of happy people onstage. That's not exactly right. It is the faithful understanding they have joy."⁷² Joy comes from surviving through struggle, but it does not erase that struggle.

In comparison to the USIA pamphlets, however, *Revelations'* choreographic politics are overtly radical. Violent images of slavery and the ongoing, painful effects of slavery and racism on African American people and their bodies are inescapable in *Revelations'* first three dances. The dancers' earth-tone costumes and the bare stage make "Pilgrim of Sorrow" *Revelations'* most abstract section. Rather than only invoking modernism's abstraction, however, the three dances in the section direct audiences to the haunting pain in the work's accompanying spirituals. The spirituals are not only anthems of African American Christian celebration in "Pilgrim," as they might be in *Revelations'* final dances, but, to borrow W. E. B. Du Bois's term, they are truly "sorrow songs." Much like Mitchell's joyous leap in the iconic *Agon* landscape, dancers' affective and physical performances exceed the framing of modernism's bareness, making the section an example of abstract formalism but also of African American affect, pain, and power.

In the movement vocabulary of *Revelations'* two opening dances, heaving torsos and jerking limbs reinsert images of slavery into American cultural diplomacy. The tempo of *Revelations'* opening piece, "I Been 'Buked," dramatically shifts from slow to fast as baritone voices sing, "There is trouble all over this land." With these words, the Ailey ensemble moves away from *Revelations'* well-known opening cluster, in which dancers stand shoulder to shoulder, palms forward, fingers flexed, chests and chins high.⁷³ An abrupt tempo change sends the dancers barreling out into space. Each dancer performs an individualized phrase as he or she moves away from the group. The diversity of the dancers' steps, coupled with their general spinning quality, produces an image of anxious chaos that contrasts with the sustained, heavy choreography of the opening cluster.

Throughout "I Been 'Buked," percussive, jerky dancing disrupts slow, somber postures. In the piece's final moments, the dancers return to the opening cluster. As they simultaneously stretch their arms slowly upward, it seems the piece will close with the sustained unison movement with which it began. But then, one by one, the dancers' arms go rigid at the

elbows, and then open into a “V.” Finally, in tiny spasms of pain, the dancers jerk their arms out and down.

The impact of slavery’s cruelty on people and their bodies reappears in the movement vocabulary of much of “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel,” the second dance in “Pilgrim of Sorrow.” Angry, tired sobs wrack the dancers’ entire bodies. Pain travels from the dancers’ arms into their hunched, pulsing torsos. Near the beginning of “Daniel,” the three dancers, one man and two women, squat in a deep second position, their bodies turned on the diagonal, giving the audience a view of their perfectly curved spines. With heads bowed, arms stretched forward, and hands clasped, the dancers’ posture conjures images of fields being plowed. But as the dancers pulse their bodies to the percussive singing of the word “Daniel,” labor turns to agony. The choreographic layers of physical activity and emotional response specifically refer to the physical and psychological toll working in the field took on slaves, just one instance of what DeFrantz has described as *Revelations*’ “reenactments of physical bondage.”⁷⁴ Another obvious, even more violent example of a reenactment of slavery comes earlier in “Daniel.” Just before the series of contractions, the trio of dancers stand, feet apart, arms high, wrists crossed as though bound, referencing the position of slaves, hands tied, stealing themselves for the strike of the master’s whip.

“Pilgrim” does not, however, only position black people as victims. *Revelations* also presents black people, as individuals and as a collective, fighting to overcome forces that oppress them. In “I Been ’Buked,” the dancers spin away in individual phrases, but they always return to the large group in the center. Moving in slow, controlled unison, they gather strength and create some of *Revelations*’ most iconic images of community power. Standing in the dance’s final grouping, the dancers jerk their arms downward one at a time—but they never drop their heads or chests. They stand, looking up in defiance, as the lights dim.

“Daniel,” like “’Buked,” ends with an image of bodies refusing to go down. In the music’s last phrase, the three dancers step forward, then spiral their bodies to the floor. On the final drumbeat, they press their hips up into a bridge and shoot their arms, fingers spread, straight to the ceiling. Throughout “Daniel” the dancers have been knocked down and their bodies have been wracked with pain, but Ailey created a final image of people refusing to give up. The moment illustrates dancer and director Judith Jamison’s point that *Revelations* is, all at once, about “struggle and the triumph of hope.”⁷⁵ By reenacting these images on every program on the State Department tours, Ailey and the company dancers challenged the dominant government narratives about African American life.

Offstage Ailey also confronted American racism directly, shifting agency from the white American presidents featured in the pamphlets’ photographs to the black-led grassroots civil rights movement. In a 1966 interview with the National Radio of Senegal during the First World Festival of Negro Arts, Ailey spoke about African Americans’ courage, explaining that his company allowed African Americans to celebrate American culture and self-determination. He said,

When I started to have a dance company, I decided I wanted to do something to show what the Negro had done. . . . In the United States, we have a little problem, as you know. They think we’re not first-class citizens. . . . They don’t recognize [our music and dance] for what it is. So I made a dance company mainly to illustrate to them what the Negro had contributed to America, . . . what the Negro made out of adversity, what the Negro made out of his sorrow, what the Negro made out of being held down in America. That’s what the blues are. . . . I’ve taken these beautiful things and put them in dance.⁷⁶

Ailey named the discrimination black people face in the United States and made fun of the dismissal of contemporary racial grievances with his ironic quip, “we have a little problem.” Building emphasis through verbal repetition—an astute rhetorical move for a radio broadcast—and making “the Negro” each sentence’s active subject, Ailey described “the Negro” as the source of overcoming, the source of creativity. He gave black people credit, and he gave them the stage.

Dancer George Faison remembered that, as was the case in the 1966 radio interview, Ailey was often critical of the United States—or at least truthful about the complications of American life for African Americans. Faison said of the 1967 tour, “[When] Africans asked Alvin, ‘Is this [your choreography] a clear depiction of what goes on in America?’ . . . [Ailey answered,] ‘No, because there is prejudice. There is segregation.’”⁷⁷ Other dancers reported that over time Ailey toned down his rhetoric in interviews, perhaps because he had been, as the next section discusses, warned about how, as a black, gay man, he should appear in public while on government tours.

Ailey’s choreography and his dancers’ performances of that choreography expressed the strength and depth of African American culture. The lyrics of “I Been ’Buked” were right: There was “trouble all over this land”—all over the United States and all over Africa. The wounds of slavery had not faded into a long-ago past, as the USIA pamphlets suggested. In the 1960s and 1970s, black people and other citizens of color continued to face racial discrimination and violence and to fight for equality and

representation on the streets of American cities—and on the stages of newly independent African nations.

MODERNISM OFFSTAGE

While Mitchell and the Ailey dancers found ways from the stage to challenge modernism's push of racial identity to the margins of representation, artists said such challenges were harder to sustain offstage. Strategic maneuvering was harder to accomplish offstage because oppressive attitudes around identity, namely racism and homophobia, were embedded in policies about how the dancers were to behave—and those policies more often came in the form of directives rather than discussions. Too, offstage the State Department Dance Advisory Panel and government officials exercised great power over how the tours were framed—in programs, publicity materials, and so on. Taken together, onstage possibilities coupled with offstage disciplinary structures formed what musicologist Nadine Hubbs and dance theorist Susan Foster have described as mid-century modernism's paradoxical entanglement of redemptive and regulatory forces.⁷⁸ When artists were offstage on the tours, they felt more regulation than redemption. They had to submit to what the State Department considered to be "good behavior," although many, particular Alvin Ailey, still found ways to manipulate the system even as they also suffered under oppression's weight.⁷⁹ These situations arose most clearly around homophobia and around Ailey's most controversial piece performed on State Department tours, *Masekela Langage*.

Dancing Through the Lavender Scare

While supporting Ailey in public, State Department officials reprimanded Alvin Ailey in private. The State Department knew Ailey to be gay because of information in his FBI file. During a routine background check preceding Ailey's 1965 visit to the White House, State Department officials learned of his 1950 arrest in Los Angeles for what was described as "vagrancy-lewd."⁸⁰ After this discovery, State Department requests for information about Ailey always referenced the 1950 arrest, and after 1967, also mentioned his arrest in Italy for "engaging in homosexual acts," thus criminalizing his sexuality.⁸¹ Every time Ailey worked on behalf of the government or was invited to the White House, the paper trail documenting his sexual life would again circulate. At a time when the State

Department and many other government agencies fired people who were under even the slightest suspicion of being gay, it seems remarkable that Ailey, who was relatively open about his sexuality with fellow dancers and documented as having engaged in homosexual acts, continued to receive State Department support.

To get this government support, though, Ailey had to navigate a terrain marked with racism and homophobia. A formerly classified State Department memo from June 1967, written to Cultural Presentations officer Thomas Huff, documents the department's suspicion of Ailey because of his sexuality and the department's attempts to control his behavior. The memo outlines Ailey's and dancer Miguel Godreau's arrest records (Godreau had been arrested for forgery) and mentions lighting designer Nicola Cernovitch's possible connection to a pro-Cuba group. According to the memo, government representatives briefed Ailey about their knowledge of the arrests, specifically mentioning his, as they called it, "lewd disposition." Officials told Ailey that the company, which was then preparing to leave on its 1967 Africa tour, "was to walk the straight and narrow path and that failure to do so could result in immediate cancellation of the tour." Ailey assured the officials he would "insist on proper conduct" from the company, which would "cooperate with the Department in every way."⁸² The conversation between the State Department officials or panel members (it is unclear who met with Ailey) and the gay, black choreographer must have felt like a threat, a reminder that on tour Ailey worked for an American government that considered him suspicious and held his company's future in its hands.

The private conversation with Ailey and the citation of his "lewd" arrests occurred within the larger context of the State Department's institutionalized homophobia. Of all federal agencies, the State Department fired the largest percentage of suspected homosexuals during the Cold War. As historian David K. Johnson has charted, since the late forties, congressional inquiries had led to the firing of thousands of federal employees suspected of being homosexuals because they were thought to be "security risks."⁸³ Senator Joseph McCarthy, among other vocal figures in the late forties and fifties, argued that homosexuals' "perversity" made them, particularly those in diplomatic roles, susceptible to blackmail by Communists.⁸⁴ (Of course, it was not their sexuality but the criminalization of their sexuality that would have made blackmail possible.) The federal government's most public sexual inquisitions had ended before Ailey began touring for the State Department in 1962, but the institutional barriers to homosexuals' participation in diplomacy remained. Through the late 1960s, the State Department's annual reports to congressional committees always included the number of homosexuals fired that year.⁸⁵ As late as 1966,

all male applicants to the State Department were asked if they had ever engaged in a "homosexual act."⁸⁶

How did a State Department saturated with homophobia in its personnel practices and written policies come to fund a number of dance tours led by only partially closeted artists, including Ailey and José Limón? One answer might be the entanglement of homosexuality and artistry in mid-twentieth-century popular culture. To support artists at that time meant not just overlooking homosexuality but consciously constructing codes to shield audiences from its assumed presence in the art world. The post-war generation inherited Hollywood codes that used the words "artist" or "poet" to connote a male character's homosexuality. (The former term was used in Alfred Hitchcock's 1948 film *Rope*; the latter, in the 1951 film version of Tennessee Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire*.) Homosexuality was not imagined as something that could be eradicated in artistic circles, but it could be obscured and/or managed.

On tour, the State Department charged the USIA escorts with the job of watching for homosexual activity, a monitoring system that allowed government officials to express their homophobia, although it also meant they endangered themselves by documenting their knowledge of homosexuality on tour. (By knowingly keeping homosexual artists in circulation with State Department funding, government officials associated themselves with gay people and thus could have been fired, too.) In one unsigned internal memo, a government official traveling on the Limón Dance Company's 1973 Soviet tour (most likely the USIA escort) dedicated several pages to a meeting with the company manager Judith Hawkins, lighting designer "Spence," and stage manager John Towland. The memo writer directed his primary ire over tour problems toward Hawkins but also noted: "It is only too relevant to this tale of company intrigue and backbiting to mention that Spence and Towland are flagrant homosexuals, whose appearance, demeanor and conversation detracted from the otherwise excellent public image the company projected."⁸⁷ Being a "flagrant homosexual" was the opposite of having an "excellent public image."

As late as 1975—the year the US Civil Service Commission removed "immoral conduct," another euphemism for homosexuality, from the list of disqualifications for federal government employment⁸⁸—Foreign Service officers strained to keep dancers' homosexual activity under wraps while abroad. In a report for the State Department about the Joffrey Ballet's Soviet tour, the tour escort wrote, "By Vilnius, homosexual contacts of Company members with Soviets were obvious, and actions taken have been communicated to the Department."⁸⁹ The author did not specify what "actions" he took, but the phrasing suggests that it was not so much the

homosexual encounters but the fact they had become "obvious" that created the problem. "Behaving well" meant keeping homosexuality private. The statement shares the negative attitude of the earlier memo about the Limón employees, but it also raises questions about transnationally institutionalized homophobia. Being arrested for an "obvious" homosexual act in 1975 in the Soviet Union would have both embarrassed the State Department and possibly led to a scary fate for the American in question. Sexual acts between men had been illegal in the Soviet Union since 1936, and the ruling Communist Party remained staunchly anti-gay well into the 1980s.⁹⁰

By 1966, when the State Department discussed "good behavior" with Ailey, the federal government had begun to make strides in more equal hiring practices. According to Johnson, the combination of "affirmative action toward racial minorities [and] liberalization of policies concerning heterosexual conduct" and the continued "hard-line toward homosexuals created a great deal of frustration."⁹¹ Liberalizing race politics may have been a factor in the government letting Ailey off with a warning rather than a dismissal. Being black and leading a predominantly black company may have helped Ailey continue to receive government funds given State Department concerns about American race relations' effect on foreign policy. But being told to "walk the straight and narrow path" had higher stakes for the black Ailey and his predominantly black company than for a largely white arts organization. The NYCB and Graham dancers also remember State Department officials warning them to behave well on tour, and the NYCB sent one dancer home after he caused a drunken scene in a Moscow hotel lobby.⁹² But what counted as acting out—looking suspicious—for dancers of color, and particularly gay dancers of color, was different than for white dancers.

The possible consequences of being black and not walking "the straight and narrow path" in 1967 became painfully apparent when Ailey briefly returned to the United States at the end of the company's European tour, before traveling to Africa. While dining with friends near Lincoln Center, Ailey was arrested by two policemen, who had mistaken him for a bearded black man who had murdered four policemen in Cincinnati. Ailey spent a night in jail and was beaten by police officers.⁹³ Ailey biographer Jennifer Dunning described the arrest's effects on Ailey, noting that it illustrated the "specter of imprisonment [that is] part of the racial unconscious of black men."⁹⁴ Ailey's arrest for "homosexual acts" in Milan only a month earlier must have made that specter all the more intense. Ailey rejoined his company in Athens, carrying a conscious reminder of the possible consequences of attracting suspicion and aware that no artistic engagement

could overcome the real consequences of American racism, or the domestic and international consequences of homophobia.

Situating the State Department's request for Ailey to act appropriately within the context of 1960s homophobia and racism demonstrates how the department held Ailey more responsible for his actions than other artists the State Department employed. Ailey was an excellent representative of America in many ways. Reports from Africa and the Soviet Union praise his engagement with local dancers and audiences. After the 1970 Soviet tour, tour escort Joseph Pressel described Ailey as "going out of his way" to attend local dance rehearsals and sitting on the edge of the stage to greet audience members after shows.⁹⁵ On other tours, however, Ailey's struggles with drug abuse and bipolar disorder made him a difficult (and perhaps sad) figure with whom Foreign Service officers had to contend. An unsigned, handwritten letter to the State Department, apparently written by the USIA tour escort on the company's 1974 Eastern European tour, described Ailey as "an unhappy, moody, caustic, and solitary figure" whose "offstage leadership sets either negligible or negative" examples, even as the author described the company's "outstanding success" as a "very personal tribute to Ailey."⁹⁶ Ailey contributed to his problems on tour, but he also moved within a complicated web of institutionalized, social oppression.

Even in this difficult climate, Ailey managed to get the funding he wanted for his company. In late 1969, Ailey announced that the company did not have sufficient funds to pay the dancers, in DeFrantz's words, "cunningly" leveraging the State Department's recent choice of the Ailey company for a fall Soviet Union tour to obtain more government funding.⁹⁷ In response to the announcement, the State Department found the funding for several weeks of rehearsal and a North African tour, which kept the company together until its departure for the Soviet Union. The government's paternalism could not thwart Ailey from his goal to keep his company going.

Regulating *Masekela Langage*

Behind closed doors, however, the Dance Panel, with State Department support, repeatedly tried to regulate Ailey's performance of identity and critique, in both his personal identity and in his choreography. The most blatant examples come from discussions preceding the 1970 Soviet tour. The State Department expressed concern over Ailey's *Masekela Langage* because of its violent depictions of racism and Ailey's insistence that program notes frame the piece as a comparison between racism in the United States and in South Africa. Created to the music of South African

trumpeter Hugh Masekela, *Masekela Langage* unfolds in a lower class roadside bar, where the dancers flirt, drink, and cavort. Their socializing is interrupted when a bloody, beaten man rushes into the bar and performs a heartbreaking solo. The group, previously splintered, coheres around the man and seems poised to retaliate against those who have beaten him (a group never seen onstage). The ballet has an open-ended feeling at the end: the man dies and at least one dancer steps over him as though the death will be ignored, but tension lingers and proliferates. Whether outrage over the violence will be the thing that initiates a black revolution seems to be the question at the work's end.

The dance panelists eventually agreed that the piece could travel, but wanted the program notes changed. Longtime panelist and dance critic Walter Terry sought ways to reframe the piece as race-blind modernist abstraction. He told Cultural Presentations administrator Beverly Gerstein that Ailey's description could be deleted because, while the piece looks like "a sultry South African town . . . it could be anywhere in the world." Another panelist, William Bales, said the reference to the US (the program note compared South Africa and Chicago's Southside neighborhood) seemed inconsequential. Bales suggested that Clive Barnes, an English critic who was thought to "know Russia" be consulted. Ultimately, Terry and Bales, two white men, agreed to excise Ailey's remark about *Masekela's* racial politics. Language highlighting race had to disappear, and the panel comfortably chose their politics over Ailey's.⁹⁸

Similar arguments arose over program notes for Lester Horton's *The Beloved* (1948), which categorized the central character as "an unliberated female." Terry argued to Gerstein that the character is "nothing more than a high class servant," dismissing the gendered commentary. Terry suggested that instead of using the notes submitted by Ailey, Gerstein should find "old reviews from John Martin, Clive Barnes or himself to describe the work."⁹⁹ Terry wanted the words of three white, male dance critics instead. Terry continued, making a more damning point, noting changes in the program notes need not be discussed with Ailey. The memo recounts Terry's reasoning: "Since it [the program] will be in Russian, Ailey will never know."¹⁰⁰

Through a logistical accident, Ailey did find about the program note changes, and he regained some control. The State Department sent the panel-approved program notes minus Ailey's South Africa-Chicago comparison to the Soviet cultural bureau, the Gostkoncert, for printing. The company arrived in the USSR to find the printed programs riddled with obvious errors: a photo of the Paul Taylor Dance Company in Taylor's *Three Epitaphs* was on the cover, and all the program notes had disappeared.

The program notes then became an issue, and so Ailey saw the State Department's notes with their English translations. Ailey judged the revised notes "inadequate." He also disliked Gostkonzert's description of the Ailey company as an "ethnic dance" company rather than, as Ailey preferred, a company versatile in "nearly all the modern styles of dance." Ailey wrote new program notes, which were never printed but were read as a pre-performance announcement in each city. There is no documentation of Ailey's script for these announcements, though given what he said in the *New York Times*, recounted earlier, it is likely that he wrote out any references to black culture and inserted the label "American" where he could, and potentially also wrote racial and gender politics about *Masekela* and *The Beloved* into the announcement as well.¹⁰¹

The controversy surrounding *Masekela* extended beyond the program notes. While the State Department implored Ailey to submit to their model of morality while on tour, USIA officials bristled when Ailey submitted to—even briefly—another authority. Mid-tour, Gostkonzert protested that *Masekela* and Paul Sanasardo's *Metallics* be removed from the repertory. Gostkonzert criticized the former for being "unintelligible" to Soviet audiences, and the latter as "too sexual."¹⁰² Reports sent to the State Department during and after the tour describe the standoff over the programming as difficult because of what tour escort Joseph Pressel saw as Ailey's tendency to acquiesce to Soviet demands. From Moscow, Pressel wrote, "Alvin is too easy on the Soviets and lets himself be moved too easily by their objections, only a few of which have any basis in fact."¹⁰³ Once the Soviets began protesting the programming, Pressel again complained of Ailey's tendency to submit. Pressel wrote, "Curiously, one of the problems in resisting the Soviet importunings [*sic*] was Alvin Ailey's own desire to please. This caused him to be far less obstinate than one might have wished. To be sure as time went on Ailey became rather more willing to stand his ground."¹⁰⁴

The 1970 tour was, like all the Ailey State Department tours, a great success, although the *Masekela* controversy continued after the company's return home. Ailey seemed interested in keeping the scandal and thus his work visible. As he did in 1969 when he got more State Department funding, he used the public stage (rather than being used by the State Department as a spectacle for the public). In the *New York Times* article quoted earlier, Ailey told Anna Kisselgoff about the Soviet objections to *Masekela* and *Metallics*:

Masekela is the most negative piece I've ever done. . . . It was certainly not the kind of positive image Soviet dance companies present in their own works abroad. . . . It's almost as if the Russians were concerned for us. If you're in

a foreign country and you see all those tacky people in *Masekela*, you think that's America. It looked like contemporary America, a piece de genre, which in America, you know it does not. You know those are very down people, right? But when Russians see it, they say that's the way America looks today. But I told them I wanted them to see every aspect of what we do. Negative works as well as positive ones, to see the variety of styles our company could dance in.¹⁰⁵

Just as he had done in the initial *Masekela* program notes, Ailey described the piece as a critique of a community he thinks will be recognizable as American. Ailey commented on the State Department's inclusion of such a negative depiction of the United States as a good thing. By including a range of opinions, the United States differentiated itself from "the kind of positive image Soviet dance companies present in their own works abroad."

The State Department felt differently, according to an internal memo circulated two days after the *Times* article appeared. The memo described *Masekela* as though Ailey did not understand its roots, marking it as a piece with potentially African, but not American roots. The 1970 memo goes beyond the Dance Panel's concern about the comparison of American racism and African racism, describing *Masekela* as a critique of "poverty, frustration and despair," traits described as having "universal application" but not necessarily representing American reality.¹⁰⁶ The memo also clarifies that the State Department did censor *Masekela*, forcing the removal of the final scene; everything violent was cut, including the dying man's solo, his death, and the ensemble's painfully ambivalent response: "Dept [*sic*] officers and the Department's Dance Panel auditioned the dance and did not feel that it depicted any relevance to the American scene, as long as the last sequence of the dance was dropped." The last scene posed a danger—connecting a representation of the United States to apathy and violence that probably came too close to images of urban race riots erupting across the United States at the time, and thus tossing off the necessary veneer of universality. A dance work could inch toward a political stance, but must always stop short of placing its politics in too specific of a place or time.

This rejection of a piece that publicly illustrated African American retaliation against oppression was not without precedent. As Constance Valis Hill has shown, Katherine Dunham, touring abroad without government support in the early fifties, faced similar censorship from government officials. Embassy officials, first in Santiago, Chile, and later in Paris, France, pointedly asked Dunham to remove her piece *Southland* (1950) from her company's program because it depicted a lynching—not the image of African American life the government wanted to promote—and ended with a black male dancer stabbing the stage with a knife. Embassy officials

found the explicit violence of the hanging “intimidating,” and the implicit violence of the final scene threatening.¹⁰⁷

Even though the State Department took every opportunity to soften and censor Ailey’s political critique offstage, it was Ailey’s words and his choreography that received the most public attention, not the State Department’s internal spin. In the end, as Ailey demonstrated in his interview with Kisselgoff, artists retained an impressive ability to conceptualize how they were a complicated force within the State Department programming.

CONCLUSION

According to Judith Jamison, perhaps the Ailey company’s most famous dancer on tour (Lynne Taylor-Corbett remembers African audiences responding to Jamison “like she was an absolute queen”),¹⁰⁸ representing the United States abroad as an African American dancer meant reminding audiences that “African American culture *is* American culture . . . everything was influenced by us [African Americans] [emphasis added].” Jamison continued: “I think it’s a terrible mistake when people don’t understand that as African Americans our culture originated so many things that are considered to be from this country [the United States] and that when we go abroad we take what we have as black people.”¹⁰⁹ Jamison, like Ailey before her, always described African American culture as having wide appeal and representing the United States very broadly. But this wide reach does not erase the important presence of African Americans as people, as modernist aesthetics often sought to do through the relegation of Africanist elements to the margins or background of cultural representation. Jamison placed African American performers at the active center of American culture. She noted that African Americans “originated” much of what came to be known abroad as American and argued that sending African American artists abroad corrects a “terrible mistake”—what she perceived as a widespread misconception that African Americans had not shaped American culture. Onstage and off, Jamison and other dancers were active, powerful African American figures with the ability to reshape American narratives about race. Listening to the historical record of the tours from the perspectives of African American dancers and, in some cases, dancers with minoritarian sexual identities tells a story not of cultural appropriation, but of self-determination.