2
THE BODY
Divided and Conquered

The concert dance world has historically ghettoized ways of moving that are labeled “black.” Although attitudes are shifting, many mature dancers and choreographers grew up knowing the stigma of black dance and make conscious choreography decisions with that in mind. Different ways of moving certain body parts are still loaded with prejudices about race, class, and gender.

It is not inconsequential, nor is it happenstance, that Urban Bush Women’s image is of the strong black female body. Zollar embraces ways of moving that many African American women were and still are taught to deny. For those fortunate black women who have not been subject to this, she further affirms the aesthetic value, clearing the way for the next generation of black women to look at their bodies in a new, affirmative manner. Much of Zollar’s technique focuses on the isolation of body parts that enables the dancers to move various parts in different styles and tempos. Often, in class and in choreography, Zollar has dancers begin a movement in one style and switch mid-motion to complete it in another style. For example, a dancer might start a balletic rond de jambe en l’air. As she moves her leg to the back, instead of supporting her torso and extending forward to smoothly rotate her leg in the hip socket (often displacing the socket so that buttock sits back in it unnaturally but beautifully), an Urban Bush Women dancer might break at the waist, contract the torso, flex the foot, and exhale.

One cannot overemphasize the importance of individual body parts in Zollar’s work. Not only does her technique often require the dancers to isolate different parts, but many of Urban Bush Women’s pieces also thematically draw our attention to a particular part of the body. Zollar separates the parts to analyze the social significance of the body for black women. She acts like a scientist, putting a part under a microscope for examination and experimentation. She unpacks the history of coding and the connections between the body part and the process of identification, subjection, and objectification. As she asks us to take another, more considered look at the black female body, she pushes our knowledge and understanding about the power of ocularcentrism and the manipulation of the visual aspect of identity. Ultimately, Urban Bush Women moves toward putting the black female body back together, healing the old wounds and creating more complete, positive images of black women. As Zollar’s movement style is highly charged, by watching it we are forced to renegotiate and reconsider the power of the black female body. I asked her how she came to address the different parts of the black female body. She replied:

With Betty Mews, that year I had gone to Jamaica, Nigeria, and Brazil. One of the things I was really aware of is how easy the buttocks moved and how easy that movement was part of the dances. . . . Everyone did it. It didn’t have the [stigma] that this is bad. I used that in creating this work and then I started reading about Venus Hottentot and got pissed off about that and so then it became boxing movements. It was kind of an evolution. And the piece “Hand Singing Song”—even when I was in school, I wanted to do a piece based on an album that Bernice Johnson Reagon had made, called Give Your Hands to Struggle, and I always loved that. And then
Adam Clayton Powell had this speech called “What’s In Your Hands,” and... he talked about David and Goliath and the people—you’re facing this mighty enemy but you have the power in your hands.¹

Control over the images surrounding the black female body has been continually negotiated since the first slaves were brought to the shores of the Western Atlantic. A number of Urban Bush Women’s dances deal with different parts of the black body—hair in Hair Stories, the buttocks in Batty Moves, and the hand in Hand Singing Song. In this chapter, I examine these dances and discuss the work the choreography does to make audiences reconsider the black female body. Several theorists offer helpful frameworks to analyze the ways Zollar breaks apart the body to empower each part and ultimately put the body back together again. It is beyond the scope of this project to engage in all of the writings of each theorist. Rather, I will focus on the topics most germane to this study. Foucault’s thoughts on objectification and discursivity, for example, are particularly useful.² The basis of this work lies in a suspicion of claims to universal truth, utopian schemes, and essential human nature. More important to Foucault are the ways these ideas have been used as tools of power in society. The greatest influence comes from that which develops out of notions of subjectivity; it is crucial to examine the modes of objectification that are techniques to define who we are in the name of truth. In other words, Foucault is interested in the ways human beings become subjects, which is often through the exercise of power through discursive modes.

Paul Rabinow separates Foucault’s process of objectification into three distinct but interrelated modes. The first is “dividing practices,” in which the subject is separated from others and/or from her/himself. The second mode is “scientific classification”; this comes from modes of inquiry that try to give themselves the status of sciences. These disciplines function to order, label, and compartmentalize various ideas (like madness, health, sexuality) in the name of science and knowledge. Foucault points out, mainly by looking at abrupt shifts in certain systems of classification, how these practices serve power more than truth.

The third mode of objectification, “subjectification,” is the most important to the study of Zollar’s work. It concerns the ways a human being turns him/herself into a subject. The difference between this mode and the others lies in the power of agency. The first two are processes of domination of the individual from the outside. The third implies agency for the individual, though the degree varies and is itself a negotiation of power. Rather than passively being divided and labeled, a person is an active participant in creating and understanding him/herself.

These modes of objectification can happen simultaneously or discreetly, and distilling the nuances of each category is probably impossible and/or maddening. What is important is to understand that all of these modes go into the creation and definition of self for the purposes of negotiating with society for power, in many arenas to varying degrees of explicitness.

The body is at the center of these processes because it is the location of much of the justification and consequence of objectification. It is from the body that studies and experiments base conclusions, and it is on the body that treatments, remedies, and beliefs about normality are instilled. It is primarily the body of the prisoner, patient, sexual being that must be ordered, understood, and controlled. The body is a thing to divide and conquer.

The black female body can serve as an excellent example to understand these processes and relations. Few would disagree that the black female body is a discursive site (a locus of ideological debate) of power struggles for the ability to control the process of objectification. Slave owners controlled not only the productive labor of their female slaves but also the reproductive labor. And though those women struggled to hold onto a modicum of power and dignity over their own bodies, the slaveholder and hegemonic forces controlled how this body was viewed and used. We are still negotiating the effects of hate, violence, stereotyping, and exploitation on the black female body. Since they stepped onto the slave ships, Africans in the Diaspora have been trying to regain control of their bodies.³ They have done this in many ways—among them, breaking shackles, running, fighting, defying fire hoses, sitting in the front of the bus or at the lunch counter, committing suicide, committing murder.

Again, these negotiations can happen in different venues: the work place, the neighborhood, school, etc. Dance, too, can be seen as a discursive site, an ideal one for these negotiations, I argue, because dance directly engages/enengages the body. To hold onto their senses of selves, slaves danced despite legal prohibitions. Early black female pioneers of concert dance (Edna Guy, Pearl Primus, Katherine Dunham) engaged in power negotiations from the moment they stepped onto the concert dance stage, and black female choreographers have been similarly engaged ever since, even those who create works not explicitly about race, gender, identity, or other such issues. However, those who try to assert the third self-empowered mode of objectification inevitably run into the other two, usually in the form of critics, scholars, and audience members whose role is often to divide and label, regardless of the choreographer’s intent. Much of this boils down to control. Control of the black female body has both a physical sense, in terms of making the body do something (like hard labor), and a representational one, in terms of how the black female body is perceived and what judgments are made about it. This is a political, social,
and personal struggle. Historically, control has not rested with black women. Many choreographers such as Zollar perceive that black women do not have complete control over their bodies and through choreography attempt to regain control by revealing the myths and the truths about the body. By exercising this kind of agency, Zollar promotes a relishing of the body, trying to take the body back.

Judith Butler's work is also pertinent to this analysis. Her philosophical treatises on agency, identity, power, and performance are persuasive, though controversial. Generally speaking, Butler is interested in the ways aspects of identity (particularly gender) manifest as products of power relations between individuals and hegemonic forces. She is also skeptical of the “universal truths” of identity and sees identity as a process of becoming through regularized and repeated norms and expectations. Like Foucault, Butler focuses on the body as the site of this process, and the facts and circumstances of materiality are at the crux of her analysis.

Two key concepts for Butler are “performativity” and “citationality”:

Performativity is thus not a singular “act,” for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. Moreover, this act is not primarily theatrical; indeed its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated (and, conversely, its theatricality gains a certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of its historicity). Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names... The process of that sedimentation or what we might call materialization will be a kind of citationality, the acquisition of being through the citing of power, a citing that establishes an originary complicity with power in the formation of the “I.”

If we push the statement “a performatible is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” to include unspoken language, particularly dance, we can translate this concept to Urban Bush Women's work. We can examine the movement of the body alongside the words spoken by the performers (and the music played) as acts. Speech act theory, such as nommo, claims that words do; so too movement, so too music. Through choreography, taking on centuries of counter-productions enacted and written on the body, Zollar attempts to produce that which she dances: the strong, whole, healed black woman. By analyzing the performativity of her performances, we can unpack how the choreography works. It is important to remember that performativity is not primarily theatrical, though we are looking at a theatrical site (the concert dance stage). There is a dual performativity at work, further complicating the analysis, since the negotiation for groups like Urban Bush Women is meta-theatrical. In other words, an aesthetic use of performativity in a performance site implies awareness and agency. We may examine artistic intent or outcome (citationality) as criteria, but the negotiation itself is most salient to this study.

Scholars of theater and performance studies are fascinated with these concepts. They provide a way for us to interrogate the performativity of performance and meta-theatrical significance. Butler sees sex as a Foucauldian regulatory ideal; I argue that race is a regulatory ideal as well. Both of these produce the bodies over which they hold sway. For the performing arts, this means that audiences create the bodies as well as their readings of the bodies as they witness a performance. Since Zollar and Urban Bush Women are primarily concerned with the black female body, it is over this body that these ideals clash. Foucault and Butler help us understand that the materiality of racialized (colored) femininity is the effect of power. In other words, we might perceive that individuals are a particular race and gender (as well as other markers of identity) but what these theories suggest is that it is more the case that one does and is compelled to do race and gender.2 Butler is far more political than Foucault, however, and more likely to point out the destructive consequences of these processes. In many ways Urban Bush Women does black femininity. The company members perform in all senses of the word, create and construct gendered, raced bodies that trouble stereotypes, celebrate neglected strengths, and expose the social circumstances of many black women.

The scholar/artist Coco Fusco explores the relationship between the body and the mind for people of color on a transcultural scale. “It is historical memory that I live as both a psychic and bodily experience,” she says. This work is useful for examining Urban Bush Women in the context of the black Atlantic world, past and present. The dancers move through ancestral memory, often compelled by the force of past generations. The cultural divisions between African American, Caribbean, and African blur. As a postmodern dance company, Urban Bush Women participates in contemporary conversations on otherness in the arts. New struggles based on race and gender emerge on a global scale to attend to current oppressions. Symbolic visibility takes on new meaning, and the associations between art and political power shift. In her choreography, particularly the three pieces I analyze below, Zollar attempts to claim political power for women of color by healing the body physically, emotionally, and spiritually. She takes on the outside institutions of racism and sexism by championing the individual to resist all forces that seek to redefine her identity. Only by creating and knowing the self can the individual confront the other. This resistance is, of course, met with resistance. Fusco exposes the backlash against politicized art and theorizes on strategies for artists: “To focus on the
Hair Stories

And keep your heads nappy!
The Fugees,
"Nappy Heads"

The natural Respect of Self and Scale!
Sisters!
Your hair is Celebration in the world!
Gwendolyn Brooks,
"To Those of My Sisters Who Keep Their Naturals!"

We teach you to love the hair God gave you.
Malcolm X,
The Autobiography of Malcolm X

Urban Bush Women took to collecting hair stories while they were on the road. Company members and people involved with producing a show would talk about early childhood memories of getting their hair done or share stories about making personal choices in hairstyles that signified their life choices. Zollar decided to create a piece using these stories as the source material. The company started hosting more formal hair parties, in which men and women of all races could gather specifically to discuss the social significance of their hair, enter a dialogue about hair and life, and perhaps persuade each other to change their minds about hair. The parties continued after the piece premiered, making new ideas for the piece constantly available. They also served an end in themselves as part of Urban Bush Women's community work. The artistic end product is the piece Hair Stories. With this work, Zollar joins a larger company of artists who have addressed hair issues. The importance of this work has led Zollar and the company to be featured in the book Queens: Portraits of Black Women and Their Fabulous Hair by Michael Cunningham and George Alexander.

For Hair Stories, Zollar interviewed many women and men, and some of these interviews appear on-screen during the performance. These personal anecdotes make clear how much of our identity is braided into our hair. For some women, dealing with hair becomes a way to love oneself and create an identity, a way of creating beauty for people systematically made to believe they are not and never could be beautiful. In one example, a woman discusses how upset her father was when she decided to get dreadlocks. The decision became a way for her to take a stand as her own person.

imbalances of power and institutionalized racism has been deemed anathema to beauty, championed once again as the essence of art. Postcolonially identified artists know very well what to avoid and take a strategic approach as to how they present themselves in such a climate in order to survive and thrive. But some of them keep trying to go against the grain, to unleash the demons that others try vehemently to hide. The members of Urban Bush Women are such artists. They are exposing the demons by exposing the body.

The black body was first divided and conquered in the slave system. Slaves were institutionally alienated from the productive and reproductive fruits of their labor. Slavery literally attempted to dis-own the slave from his/her body. As Fusero puts it, "Black people's entry into the symbolic order of Western culture hinged on the theft of their bodies, the severing of will from their bodies, the reduction of their bodies to things, and the transformation of their sexuality into an expression of otherness." Much of the postcolonial project is reclamation of the black body. Zollar redvides and reconquers the black body through dance. She shifts the power dynamics through which we come to know the black body and reaffirms African Americans’ sovereignty over their own bodies.

Performatively, it is an error to dismiss the importance of hair in the creation and performance of black female identity. True, just about everyone has (or had) hair and a personal relationship with their hair or lack thereof. For many black women, though, hair is vitally linked to the experience of self in a unique way. Since the antebellum era, black women have had to figure out ways of dealing with their hair, and since they walked off the plantation they have spent much time, energy, and money on it. Be it wrapped, braided, twisted, relaxed, curled, or dreadlocked, the constant shifting of preferred styles tells us much about selfhood. Hair Stories tells us that black women are sometimes afraid to see the knots, the roots of who they are. They have asked and have been asked that telltale question, "Is that your real hair?" They have been trying to get rid of the nappy edges for over a hundred years and have only recently embraced them. Hair has been both a source of oppression and a symbol of freedom. For many black women, hair crowns the concept that the personal is political. According to Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, "Ever since African civilizations bloomed, hairstyles have been used to indicate a person’s marital status, age, religion, ethnic identity, wealth, and rank within the community. In some cultures a person’s surname could be ascertained simply by examining the hair because each clan had its own unique hairstyle." Hair Stories interrogates how hair affects black women’s notions of race, gender, class, sexuality, images of beauty, and power.

Black women have many strong opinions about and deep emotional connections to hair. There is a larger conversation about hair, and everyone from journalists to novelists to scholars to musicians to children’s book authors to film directors and, of course, choreographers are addressing the topic. On her motivation for creating the piece, Zollar has said, “I want to create a world in which every little Black girl, every little girl, every child can feel comfortable being himself or herself.”

Hair Stories had its world premiere at the Doris Duke Studio Theater in August 2001 as part of the Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival. The first thing the audience experiences when viewing a performance of Hair Stories is the familiar soulful beat of a James Brown song, which brings them back to a particular time and spirit—whether the actual 1970s or what we of the retro-flashback-postmodern era style as the spirit of the 1970s. We know that the tone of the piece will have attitude—negritude. What follows is a roller-coaster ride through the trials and tribulations, sociology, history, and drama that is the relationship black women have with their hair. Zollar and her dancers (with the help of director Elizabeth Heron) deconstruct black female hair in order to force us to reimagine the construction and performance of identity for women of color.

Hair Stories emphasizes the importance of hair for black women, the convictions and contradictions of ideology pertaining to who black women are and how someone’s hair can make a statement even if the person never utters a word. Images speak, and words act. Speech is not a luxury for black women; black foremothers fought to be heard in politics, academia, the boardroom, the arts. At the same time, black women today often feel pressure to constantly “speak for their people” and carefully select conversations in which to engage in order to keep safe. One powerful strategy lies in letting their hair speak for them. In Hair Stories, hair takes on personality; it becomes a metaphor for life. It is a key player in all aspects of life; it has a long, complex history that is both a disturbing socio-psychological paradigm and a testament to the battles won. The performance becomes at once a purging ritual and a house party.

There is, as Dr. Professor, the first character on stage, explains to us, a phenomenology of hair. Dr. Professor, played by Zollar herself, is a parody of a college lecturer and, as the redundancy of her name suggests, she is an über-scholar wrapped up in jargon that profoundly confuses common sense. She is both fascinating and full of herself. Though she is over the top and absurd in a sense, she does make a point. Through humor, Zollar seduces the audience into thinking about hair; they become students being asked by a professor to engage in dialogue. In this meta-academic mock lecture, Dr. Professor lays out some of the important issues for the audience to consider concerning race, class, gender, and the political mythology of “good hair” and “bad hair.” Ultimately, we come to understand that one’s personal appearance is a political statement, particularly for African Americans, and one’s hairstyle can advance a political and cultural agenda.

We love to hate our hair, and, as Dr. Professor points out, a value construct is supported by the good hair/bad hair dichotomy: long, straight, manageable hair that can be tossed around like white women’s hair and run through by a lover’s fingers becomes desirable. Think of the Whoopi Goldberg character who puts a towel on her head and tosses it to and fro to pretend that she has “long, luxurious blond hair.” It is funny because it speaks truth for many black women. Good hair becomes associated with a constructed whiteness or the desire to be as close to white as possible. In contrast, nappy hair (or bad hair) is linked to default blackness. That is, of course, until the late 1960s and the rise to status of the Afro, when “bad” became “good” or “baaad.”

Many of the interviewees for the piece discussed early childhood memories of getting their hair “done” or “did.” One woman talked about “back in the day” when she got her hair pressed and a “big thick sister” would come at her, brandishing a hot comb. She recalled the smell of burning flesh, the sound of
the iron meeting grease and hair, the singeing, the itching, her inability to scratch—in other words, the beauty pain.

These tales inspired Zollar to create “The Hot Comb Blues” and “The Lock Down,” sections of the performance in which the dancers fervishly twitch to funk music. They perform a fervid combination in which they jerk their bodies wildly while patting and rubbing their heads like mad to get at the itch. The frenetic energy comes from the pain and the frustration of these early memories. At one point in “The Lock Down,” five women line up behind a young girl sitting on the floor, rev up, and pantomime pulling and tugging her hair as she writhes and screams in pain. They yell at her, “Come here, girl! You better give me your hair!” In this moment the young girl has the force of centuries of maternal history behind her, inflicting pain so that she can look presentable. Zollar comes running out on stage, the escaped child with her hair half done, fleecing the mother/torturer. She looks crazy: one side in tight braids and the other in a big ‘fro with a comb sticking out. At one point they send up the James Brown cape moment, the child’s mother entering on stage with a bright red towel and covering the exhausted child to bring her back onstage to continue the torture. The child acquires a few steps then turns dramatically and pleads with the audience to help her. The action is repeated until the child is brought finally onstage: this is all performed to “You’ve Done Me Wrong.” Interestingly, there is little actual dance in this section—the movement is more stylized pantomime. With this, Zollar lays out the movement vocabulary that will recur in more abstract, dancerly versions.

Many who address black hair issues focus on the experiences of children. Besides the pain of having their hair pulled, pressed, and/or tightly twisted, myriad beauty myths threaten the healthy development of young black girls. These focus on the belief that “good hair” (straight hair) will attract a man, lead to a good career, and in general symbolize privilege. Children’s book authors Carolinia Herron and bell hooks attempt to remedy this damaging image by promoting the beauty of natural hair in their respective books, Nappy Hair and Happy to Be Nappy. In her first autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou describes the pain of growing up as a black girl trying to discover who she is and the role that her hair played in that process. Like Herron, hooks, and Angelou, Zollar attempts to move beyond this pain. Hair Stories tackles the demons in some closets. By calling them out, Zollar hopes to create a space in which black women can undo some of this childhood damage, recognize self-hate, and conceive positive, healthy self-images. The underlying message of the piece is that we must move to a place that accepts a diverse beauty standard and promotes personal creative expression through hair that is loaded with meaning and thus celebrated, and this work must start with the youngest girls.

For Zollar, the story is far more complicated than the simplistic narrative that black women put themselves through hell to attain a simulacrum of the white female beauty ideal. Over time, attitudes about hair (for both the individual and the collective) shift. Later in the piece, Zollar reveals this by reminding us that the term “nappy” contains a negative connotation for some and simultaneously embodies strength and empowerment for others. Embracing and loving nappy hair becomes a means of reappropriating the tools of the oppressor. As Audre Lorde taught us, we cannot use the master’s tools to take down the master’s house. However, according to Zollar we can deny the tools the power to take us down. In other words, we can take that power, reverse it, and reinscribe it.

During the performance, Zollar steps out and asks audience members for other definitions of “nappy.” In doing so she is asking them to move from being passive spectators to active contributors. She thereby cleverly implicates us all in the “phenomenology of hair.” We have knowledge of or are actively perpetuating the myths by which we define ourselves and others. When she asks the predominately white Jacob’s Pillow audience for other definitions of “nappy,” the spectators are hesitant to speak at first. Anxious thoughts probably run the gamut from “I don’t know. Is that bad?” to “I don’t know. Is that good?” to “I know a few, but should I say anything? Do I look racist if I say something? Do I seem ignorant if I don’t?” Women of color might be more comfortable speaking up in general, but the racial makeup of an audience at Jacob’s Pillow undoubtedly yields different vibes and different responses from the black women in it than an audience in Harlem with a majority black presence. Whatever the response, the audience is put on the spot, implicated, possibly even incriminated. As opposed to Dr. Professor lecturing at the audience, Zollar here turns the onus back on the spectators, challenging them to think about not only the different definitions but also the social influences that construct those definitions and their political implications. At the Jacob’s Pillow performance, Zollar received a few tentative responses: “woolly,” “bad hair day.” At Long Island University in Brooklyn, audiences were far more forthcoming.

This race-based anxiety is illustrated in one of the most comedic moments of the performance. This section is divided into two parts. In “Hair Hell Moment #1,” a black woman with a shaved head enters an elevator filled with white women. She turns to face the audience with the other dancers behind her. The air is thick with tension as the white women (played by the black dancers) discretely stare, wonder, and ponder this choice. Though the bald woman cannot see the others behind her, she knows that they are staring at her. She rolls her eyes, which the audience can see but not the white women. Opening up a dialogue about hair is untenable in this moment and probably not one
the bald woman wants to engage in at the moment. Instead, she deftly turns around and the white women quickly adopt oblivious attitudes. The comedy is in the truthfulness of this moment of interracial tension. “Hair Hell Moment #1” examines where that anxiety and curiosity goes when there is no hair to reach out and touch—it gets at the unspoken dialogue, the continued misunderstanding, and the reluctance on all sides to work it out because of anxiety, anger, and complexity.

The dancers turn around and adopt neutral stances. In “Hair Hell Moment #2,” the scene is replayed as the bald black woman enters an elevator filled with black women. As she announces that this elevator now contains black passengers, the dancers sharply sink their weights and adopt attitude, they roll their heads and openly stare as the woman enters the elevator. Here Zollar makes an important strategic move: she resists a simplistic message in which the black women create a supportive atmosphere and celebrate the diversity of hair options as opposed to the ignorant and oppressive white women. The black women begin talking to each other, loud enough to be certain that the bald woman can hear them. One wonders if there is a draft. Another replies that she feels a draft but wonders if “she” feels a draft. They begin subtly chanting, “You think she feels a draft? I know she feels a draft.” Again the woman rolls her eyes. The woman, fed up with the taunts, turns abruptly to face them, snaps a finger to silence them, and abruptly turns back with her own attitude. She folds her arms and rolls her head. The women behind her, after being snapped into silence, also roll their heads and softly continue to whisper their chant as the lights fade. The bald woman is just as tormented by the black women as she is by the white women, albeit more overtly. In both instances, she turns sharply to confront them with a powerful gesture. Through her choreographic choices, Zollar emphasizes the complexity of these negotiations, the impetus toward confrontation, and the difficulty of working through issues.

A poignant moment in Hair Stories occurs later, when Zollar reads a letter she has written to Madame C. J. Walker, the woman who introduced the French hot comb to African American women, became the first black female millionaire, and, some say, caused generations of African American women to despise and alter their natural hair. Zollar expresses the ambivalence many black women feel toward Walker and the idea of getting their hair “done.” Walker should be recognized and applauded for her accomplishments; it was no easy task for a black woman to become a success in the business world at the end of the nineteenth century. At the same time, her success is at the heart of much black female self-hatred. Zollar blames Walker for the burns on her scalp, ears, and neck but she also fondly remembers the rites of passage that occur in black beauty shops as important times for female bonding. While her hair was being fire and flattened she learned how to become a woman. Zollar imagines the little girl who tries to get her hair to go a way it does not want to go. Then she tries to imagine a little girl proud of the beauty in her nappy hair. It is a harder image to conjure. As the controversy over the teaching of Nappy Hair illustrates, African American women have very different opinions about nappy hair. At the end of this section, Zollar imagines a scenario in which Walker championed the different ways to wear nappy hair and sold the idea that black women should be happy to be nappy.

In the “Aunt Bell” section, Zollar further aestheticizes the performativity of ethnic identity through hair when she talks about visiting her Aunt Bell after having just cut off ten years of dreadlocks. She had decided to just cover her
hair with a scarf because Aunt Bell was “old school” and Zollar did not want to have to explain why she had nappy hair. More than any other, this section deals overtly with identity and hair. Making a direct link between self-determined identity and hair, she talks about giving herself the name Jawole. She is proud of having taken her own identity by naming herself, but she is also proud of, and uses, her given name: Willa Jo. People call her either or both, she tells the audience. Her family calls her Jody or Jody Pody MacAsody.

She then becomes a little girl learning the children’s game “Zing Boom”:

Pull it up
And Snap it Back
Zing Boom!

She stands in the center of a circle of friends (played by the dancers) as they sing, “She got nappy nappy nappy hair! “Zing Boom,” the audience learns, is Aunt Bell’s description of nappy hair. It describes what happens when one pulls on nappy hair (“zing”) and snaps it back (“boom”). The children wonder “how you gonna be happy with your hair all nappy.”

The trajectory of Hair Stories demonstrates Zollar’s skill at taking an audience on a dramatic journey, even without a conventional plot. By giving us lighter and comedic takes on hair issues in earlier sections, Zollar eases us into a comfort zone so that in the “C. J. Walker,” “Grief,” and “The Zollar Sisters” sections she can take on these matters more seriously.

In “Grief,” women briefly talk about the pain of having hair fall out due to harsh chemicals or cancer. It is at these times when we most realize how important hair is to us; the whole discussion of what to do with one’s hair is rendered moot, and the devastating loss must be reckoned with instead. In “The Zollar Sisters,” Zollar recounts a personal story about growing up with her sister Donna Rae, whose hair was significantly shorter than her own. It is a painful account about the search for dignity and identity. The dancer playing Donna Rae desperately pulls her hair to make it grow; the movement is hunched over and persecuted. Though Zollar tries to comfort Donna Rae, it is clear that hair issues have created a wedge between the sisters. They are pulled apart; as the chasm that separates them grows, they reach out longingly to each other. The dancer playing Donna Rae is deeply afflicted. She hectically alternates among a blonde wig, a redheaded wig, and a wig with dreads—desperately trying to fit in, find a positive identity, be accepted, and attain the ever-elusive beauty ideal. She is ultimately overcome and defeated, and the audience is left with a bitter reminder of just how deeply these wounds cut.

Other issues tackled in the piece are Afrocentrism; hair as a marker of the one drop of black blood that many whites, like former president Clinton, may have; spiritual awakenings and beauty images articulated in self-help talk shows; and dreadlocks. Ultimately, Zollar here tries to get at the complexities of black female identity made manifest by hair. Although many experiences involve physical and emotional pain, the hair stories are also filled with fond memories of deep female bonding, stories of empowerment, and tales of economic success. Hair Stories attempts to embrace the positive experiences, expose the negative, and create dialogue about the controversial in order to foster healing so that all hair stories can have happy endings. The solution to the pain and anxiety is implied. Though not overt in its politics and ostensibly a celebration of the ability to choose one’s hairstyle as an act of agency, the piece does implicitly advocate a politically informed attitude about hair, particularly “natural” hairstyles. Though the hair parties foster fruitful discussions, the company members have to negotiate two important balances: the degree to which they promote the non-altering of hair and the amount of argument between participants about good and bad they allow before the discussion becomes unproductive.

The piece promotes a natural approach to hair care and styling, one without chemicals, which does not privilege approximations of white styles. This
message is not unproblematic, however, and is played out in other examples. The rhetoric that natural hairstyles are positive, life-affirming choices exists in many forms. Zollar is less adamantly prescriptive than many, yet she too posits a natural approach to hair and life.

"Natural" is a vexed concept, however, particularly in terms of political economy. Much time and money is spent on Afros, twists, braids, dreads, and other "natural" styles. It may be argued that though fewer chemicals are used, these hairstyles are still manipulations intended to attain an ideal. This belief system as the "solution" to black female identity issues is, I maintain, unresolved and dialogic. By layering internal and intra-racial dialectics on hair and gender, Zollar runs the risk of "airing our dirty laundry" for white audiences. Close to this fear are the beliefs that black women need to mount a unified front and that external obstacles take precedence over such quarrels between black women. In essence, by making an intra-racial conversation interracial, Zollar takes on an even more complex task. Ingrid Banks received this criticism for her book Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness. One of the women she interviewed claimed that she was just adding to the controversy, implying that such discussion is dangerous, since people other than black women read the book. Zollar's varied audience bases guarantee a multiple and complex spectatorship. To give these audiences opportunities to more overtly enter the dialogue, she often hosts post-show discussions, and, unlike most, these often include heated debates between people who have very strong opinions about hair. At one event a woman defiantly argued that she is not an assimilationist because she straightens her hair. Another passionately claimed to take strength and spirituality from her dreadlocks.

Regardless of one's personal feelings about hair, Zollar highlights that hair is dialogic. Black women are having a conversation through and about their hair. Hairstyle has become a gesture of freedom, a personal statement, and a creative act. As the funk music returns at the end of the performance, the dancers, confident in their ability and right to make decisions about their hair and by extension their lives, dance joyfully to the lyrics "one nation under a groove, getting down just for the funk of it."

As a coda to the performance, Zollar comes back onstage and relates the story of friends who were traveling in West Virginia and stopped at a diner. There, the waitress, amazed at their long locks, called to her husband to come out and take a look at "these women's hairstyles." Because they were in a good mood (and this is crucial, because the scenario could have gone a very different way), the women took up the task of explaining to this black woman and her husband the matting process of locking one's hair. Enthralled, the waitress explains that she thinks it's beautiful and is delighted that ordinary "kinky hair will do that" and that other people (presumably meaning herself) could achieve the same look. She wonders if everybody knows this. One is left with the sense that this woman might just reevaluate her relationship with her hair and soon add to her own hair story a personal awakening to her beauty.

**Batty Moves**

The rear end exists. I see no reason to be ashamed of it. It's true there are rear ends so stupid, so pretentious, so insignificant that they're only good for sitting on.

Josephine Baker, quoted in Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*

Since my own genitals are public, I have made other parts private.

In my silence I possess

mouth, larynx, brain, in a single gesture.

Elizabeth Alexander,

"The Venus Hottentot"

Perhaps the most well known Urban Bush Women piece that focuses on isolating and deconstructing one part of the black female body is *Batty Moves*. In this piece, Zollar calls attention to the personal and political relationships black women have with that part of the body. The title says much. Descriptively, the dance will be a series of moves one can do with one's buttocks. Declaratively, it is a statement that the nether regions can be isolated and can, indeed, move. It also serves as a metaphor in the dance world; it is a message to forms like classical ballet, reminding it of a long-forgotten body part. Not only does the batty move, but it can also communicate a message and fight for a cause—corpororeal rhetoric. Zollar has said, "Whenever you see African peoples you see movement in the hips. . . . I wanted to continue that tradition with this piece. . . . to celebrate what is just a glorious, wonderful, beautiful, and fun part of the body." Personal and social issues around ethnicity and the buttocks are quite complex and deeply connected to notions of personal identity and sources of political power. At the heart of the piece is a reexamination of this holy contested site and an empowered re-inscription of it. During the panel "Directions of Choreographers for the 21st Century: Perceptions of Dance in the Black Community" at the International Association of Black Dancers' Conference in 1995, Zollar laid out the stakes of the project: "Most young women I've talked to have been through some very strong, traumatic, sexual abuse. I think there
comes a way that you want to reclaim your sensual being through dance. In Nigeria, shaking the butt is raised to a powerful level of artistry. We have to work with that energy here, and raise it to a higher level so that we can begin a healing cultural momentum.²⁰ There are many reasons why interrogating the trope of the black female posterior is so highly charged. Throughout history, particularly from the nineteenth century forward, scientists, social theorists, and cultural critics have seen the backsides of black women as discursive sites from which judgments and conclusions about the place of black women in society may be made. Zollar herself met resistance to her desire to become a professional dancer because of her body type, particularly her hips. This led her to do drastic things to lose weight; at one point she weighed just ninety-five pounds. Eventually, she learned to embrace her body and even toyed with the idea of naming her company “Thunder Bums and Company.” She claims that being rooted in African dance helped her accept her body image, particularly that of her rear end.²¹ Here, I examine where that awakening about body image has taken Urban Bush Women and the work being done through the piece. I contextualize the piece with historical and cultural examples and base my analysis on the assumption that the choreography reaches beyond the stage to comment on and change contemporary attitudes about body image, sexuality, and authority.²² The piece works to undo the damage of sexual abuse and to challenge audience members to imagine new relationships with their bodies.

The opening sequence of Batty Moves suggests a powerful journey for an individual. There may be audience members unfamiliar with the term “batty,” and this opening sets their expectations. Although the dancer does not seem frightened at the beginning of the piece, her steps are tentative, the music is halting, and she needs to find her groove. It is an awakening, a testing out of a body. The music supports this process, drawing the dancer in to its rhythm. The dancer takes minimal steps in moving across the floor. Her hair and arm tosses punctuate the tone. But it is the hip swings and lower-torso rotations that truly draw our attention. Two moments in particular—the single beat/double beat percussive swings to the side with a funky attitude and the moment she stops, takes her time, and executes a slow, full hip rotation—emphasize the importance the piece attaches to the lower extremities. Her pleasant, hip, assured demeanor communicates the ultimate message of the piece—black women should accept their posteriors despite what history and society might try to dictate.

In many ways, this journey is an inscription of the message of the piece that exhorts us, especially black women, to celebrate all parts of our bodies, particularly those that have been taboo. It is an attitude that encourages playfulness, sensuality, self-assurance, sexuality, and power. In the next section, the rhythm shifts so that African and Southern beats are more pronounced, and singers come in. The dancer does small skips to the lively beat, making full commitment to an energy that radiates with poise and conviction. It is as if the dancer has blessed the space, claiming ownership over it and her body. Some yells are heard from offstage in celebration of her accomplishments and encouraging her. At one point she stops abruptly, stares swinging with a very cool aesthetic, and, isolating her buttocks, looks over her shoulders as if to see what they can do. The piece that began from a tentative impulse ends in affirmation, joy, and fun.

This attitude flies in the face of centuries of negative representations of black female bodies and the damaging effects of racist, sexist conclusions drawn about black women’s place in the world. I pause here to contextualize the black female bottom as a discursive site. It has a long and vexed history, and it is in light of many nuanced and loaded meanings that we must understand Zollar’s constructions. Not just any body part, the buttocks have served as a central image for African American female sexuality since the antebellum era. Large hips are a vital part of the stereotype of the slave woman, paradoxically both grotesque and sexually enticing. A site of desire in and of themselves, the buttocks also conceal an even more “mysterious” site—the labia. According to Gottschald, “Indeed, the buttocks stand as a secondary sexual substitute for the real thing.”²³

The most powerful and devastating example of the legacy from which Zollar draws is the story of Sarah (aka Saartje, Saartje) Bartmann (aka Baartman, Bartman), a black woman believed to be from South Africa who was brought to London in 1810 by William Dunlop, a British ship’s doctor, as both a scientific curiosity and a circus freak.²⁴ She was lured with promises of riches but upon arrival was forced to exhibit herself, scantily clad even in the cold months, as an exotic aberrant in circuses, museums, bars, and universities. Endowed with what were considered abnormally large buttocks and genitalia (a condition known as steatopygia), she was given the labels “The Venus Hottentot” and “Black Venus.” Steatopygia eroticized women and became the “scientific” explanation for prostitution and for Freud’s later diagnosis of nymphomania. She was one of a number of such exhibitions.²⁵

After her “success” in the English provinces, in 1814 she was taken to Paris, where an animal trainer exhibited her daily, from eleven in the morning until ten at night, for fifteen months in a shed in the Rue Neuve. She was then given to a wild animal showman. By November 1815, she was gravely ill and could no longer be exhibited.

Her double status as freak and symbol of love, femininity, beauty, and purity (Venus) epitomizes the contradictions of desire in her relationship to Western constructions of the exotic/erotic, though Western men of science remarkably failed to acknowledge the erotic tension. The Black Venus is a vexed label that may hold more value than originally admitted. The contradictions in the
colonial mind between the black and the Venus image may not be as stark as believed. Roland Barthes suggests that it would be absurd to conceive of her as the object of desire, but as the longevity of her legacy attests, there is something about her (especially her buttocks) that continues to intrigue and entice. Stereotypes and cartoons were created in order to reinforce this relationship. She has had a profound effect in many spaces, according to poet and scholar Anca Vlasopolos: "Venus has exerted immense erotic fascination for the Western world, reflected for two centuries in fashions, paintings, and literature." We see this in the voluminous addition of padding (the bustle) and adornments in the form of ribbons and bows to the backs of European women's dresses in the nineteenth century, blurring the boundaries between the normal and the deviant, the sacred and the profane, the divine and the bestial. Vlasopolos put it well: "La Vénus à deux nœuds embodies, after all, the unsuspected desire of white men, poets, painters, civil servants, and of women, 'slaves' of fashion models, muses, for a fetishized Other, dis-embodied in the Venus Hottentot."  

Bartmann was ultimately given to the anatomist and zoologist Georges Cuvier, who (despite the fact that she was dying) commissioned a painting of her in the nude at the Jardin du Roi for "scientific" purposes. After her death on December 29, 1815 (sources vary about whether she died of smallpox, exposure, syphilis, tuberculosis, or alcoholism), Cuvier made a plaster cast of her body and conducted experiments on her body in the name of science. She was approximately twenty-five years old. Because Cuvier writes of his surprise upon examining her labia post-mortem, we can deduce that Bartmann successfully resisted this invasion while she was alive. However, upon her death her entire body was at his disposal. He used Bartmann as a case study to "prove" hypotheses of racial inferiority as well as sexual proclivities. Eventually, Cuvier cut her body into pieces, jarred the parts in formaldehyde, and placed the jars on display at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris. She was reduced to a collection of sexual parts. Somehow divorced from moral responsibility (no doubt under the illusion of science), the museum allowed spectators to gaze upon her dissected body relatively guilt-free. In 1974, due to public pressure, the jars were removed from public viewing and put in storage. In February 2002, after about six years of concerted efforts by the government of newly liberated South Africa, France finally returned Bartmann to South Africa (two hundred years after she left). In a very direct way, Bartmann's story illustrates Foucault's first two modes of objectification of the subject through the exercise of power on the body. Bartmann was separated from her land with promises of riches and separated from herself as she came to comprehend how others viewed her. In the name of science, she was classified as abnormal and became a thing to be looked at and studied. To the world, she ceased being a person with interiority and became solely a body. The pseudoscientific fascination with the different served a pathological desire of the power structure to define normality by dissecting that which is considered abnormal in order to solidify its own place as normal (and, by extension, better, just, and good). P. T. Barnum made a career out of taking control over others' performances of identity. The exploitation of Sarah Bartmann lies at the nexus of performance, medicine, anthropology, zoology, Darwinian evolutionary biology, comparative taxonomy, colonialism, and tyranny. In Difference and Pathology, Sander L. Gilman gives an account of the historical and psychological creation of stereotypes based on race and gender. Chapter 3, "The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality," is devoted to an explanation of the role played by representations of blackness and female sexuality during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This sexuality was inextricably linked in popular conception to animality, particularly wild, apelike lasciviousness. Rumors spread that black women actually did copulate with apes. Foucault's process of classification plays an important role when one looks at the myths created by the Venus Hottentot situation. As Gilman points out, the labels of the primitive and hypersexual black would not have held were it not for the system of "science" that developed to "prove" the conclusions through evaluation and experimentation. Sarah Bartmann provided the definitive case study in this skewed scientific system of sociocultural Darwinism. Cuvier's description of Sarah Bartmann after her autopsy concluded that she was part of the lowest form of human species. According to Gilman, "If their sexual parts could be shown to be inherently different, this would be a sufficient sign that blacks were a separate (and needless to say, lower) race, as different from the European as the proverbial orangutan. Similar arguments were made about the nature of all blacks' (not just Hottentots') genitalia, but almost always concerning the female." So, black women have had to contend with the legacy of this stereotype of pathology that has stigmatized their very existence in western society. Indeed, the true pathology might be Europeans' and North Americans' simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from the black female body through a fictionalized construction of black female identity. This complex, distorted desire conflates everything in the lower regions (the buttocks, genitals, hips) as the locus of the mysterious, primitive, wild, animal, grotesque, risqué, dangerous, and base. This process of classifying and stereotyping was a way for whites to define their identities against blackness. By retaining control of agency in this relationship, they could assure themselves that nobody would challenge this system and that their senses of self were secure. Today, black women still have to contend with
these representations, stereotypes, and power dynamics. As black women gain power in this dialectic, artists, theorists, and scholars tend to agree on the desirable power of representation, even if they are still debating the pros and cons of specific images and the real political process toward improving the relationship black women have with their bodies. This is the project of *Batty Moves*.

In its second section, the lights come up on eight women calmly walking with a slight swagger onto the stage. They get into a line parallel to the audience facing upstage, and as each steps into place she punctuates her arrival by swinging her hips on her final two steps. These women move with a mixture of sensuality, power, and attitude. The woman stage left begins a chain in which each dancer swings her hips quickly (punctuated with arms and torsos), rotates her head to the woman on her left, and, giving attitude, yells to her, “Say what?!?” Each woman’s bottom, more than her mouth, seems to be doing the talking. “Say what?!” becomes question, commandment, and exclamation and responds with indignation to whatever was just said. Each woman responds with surprise and offense to the audacity of the statement or request that precipitated it. I imagine somebody has just asked them to wash their floor or stated that they were not permitted to do something or go somewhere. These women are having none of it. The last woman gets the message and replies, “Say what, honey-child?!” “Honey-child” then travels back in the other direction to the same charged gesticulations, as if the women are telling their girlfriends about the outrageous thing that happened to them and reassuring each other. This “conversation” through the buttocks emphasizes the attitude needed for resistance; it begins a build-up of empowering energy.

Throughout this section the dancers mostly keep their backs to the audience. In unison, they sink into their hips, bounce down, and as they rebound they look over at their bottoms, alternating sides with each bounce. On a yell from one of the performers, the women crouch even lower, further punctuating the buttocks, in case there is any doubt about where the audience should focus. For two counts of eight the dancers hop backward (toward the audience) and push up their bums on each beat. They march back upstage, posing in different stances as one woman turns to the audience, calls out to it, and turns back around with a head roll and a snap up (one of the most powerful gestures of attitude in the black female movement arsenal). They move into a sequence of fast-paced, hard-hitting steps and shakes and begin the phrase again, looking over their shoulders as they bounce. Zollar is making a statement simply by having the women keep their backs to the audience for so long. Rather than a position of vulnerability, having their backs turned to the audience becomes one of strength. More dancers enter, and the movement shifts between pounding, weighty, muscular, confrontational movement to one that is casual and social, more like nightclub dancing. The juxtaposition of the in-your-face attitude and relaxed self-assuredness sets a strong tone for the performance, both mindful of the audience to the point of sassy defiance and indifferent to outside judgments. This is an important postmodern embrace of the both/and and a rearticulation of Du Bois’s concept of double-consciousness. They exist on the stage both as to-be-looked-at and as ends in themselves. They perform with both a self-conscious awareness of the implications of taboo and codification in their movements and a cool dismissal of them (as opposed to an anxiety-ridden suppression).

At the end of this section, the dancers spread out into a traditional circle (they stand in a semicircle, with the audience completing the circle) to allow soloists to come out and improvise. It is as if Zollar left this space in the piece open for the spirit to catch the dancers, allowing them to riff to the better theme. The dancers on the side clap and shout out support for each one in the center, and they take turns showing the audience their stuff. After the final solo, the group comes together again. As the lights come down, the sense is that they are all grooving to the rhythms, power, and joy of their own bodies with the support of other women around them.

The firsthand accounts of the Bartmann spectacle are mainly given through the eyes and writings of the white men who gazed on, dissected, and labeled her: she was literally divided and conquered. Now there is a desire to get at the woman behind the image, however impossible that project may be. What was she thinking? What was it like to be *that* objectified? It is almost as if contemporary artists are doing battle with the extant record to counter Cuvier’s assessment. The contemporary project becomes a metaphorical reassembling of her body. Though we may never be satisfied with these attempts, and they will perhaps always be surrounded by controversy, they serve a healing purpose for contemporary black women, and *Batty Moves* directly participates in this project. That Bartmann was and is distinctly without voice or personal story is catastrophic. It is for humanity’s sake that so many have tried to give her voice and dignity, re-imagine her as a whole self, and re-empower the body parts whose treatment was the source of her tragedy.

We may also wonder what lies behind the continued obsession with black women’s buttocks; they have always held power for women of color, be it as the control others took to define them or as the source from which they now gather strength. In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, women of color have found various ways to use their buttocks to claim agency and authority over their lives. As Vlasopolos points out, “[This] nexus of sex, climate,
race, class, anatomical stigmata, mental illness, ethical lapses, deviant sexuality and endangered/ing reproduction has been examined and unraveled again and again.

In this context, Betty Moves again asks its audience members to reevaluate their notions about the significance of the buttocks. Importantly, this is in the context not of increasing one’s desirability to men or of being young and current with popular trends. Rather, it is a celebration of the individual without validating dominant culture. As part of Urban Bush Women’s project toward healing, Betty Moves is a highly politicized reassessment of the body. We are asked to celebrate the body part for ourselves, not others. Ananya Chatterjea states that this type of representation “springs . . . from an ability to love and value our physicality and a calm assertion of our need to have control over our representation. . . . In such choreography, subversion and critique are braided with celebration and creativity.”

Similarly, Thomas F. DeFrantz articulates this: “[Zollar] means to heal the dancers and the dance by reminding us how our bodies are profound not just in the metaphors they inspire, but in the memories they contain.” The dancers take the term “reversing the gaze” in a new direction. Like staring back at the camera in film, turning their backs to the audience and emphasizing their rear ends is a politically charged move. They “stare” back at the audience with their back sides in a power play that renegotiates control of their bodies.

Hand Singing Song

Dance is the fist with which I fight the sickening ignorance of prejudice.

Pearl Primus,
Dance Magazine interview, 1968

I am black and I have seen black hands
Raised in fists of revolt, side by side with the white fists of white workers,
And some day—and it is only this which sustains me—
Some day there shall be millions and millions of them,
On some red day in a burst of fists on a new horizon!

Richard Wright,
“I Have Seen Black Hands”

I believe in the magic of the hands.

Assata Shakur,
“I Believe in Living”

Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ain’t I a woman?

Sojourner Truth,
“Ain’t I a Woman?”

Isabella Baumfree (later Sojourner Truth), an escaped slave, spiritual leader, and activist, addressed a women’s rights convention in 1851. She pulled up her sleeve, made a fist, and displayed the muscles shaped by years of slave labor in the field. She stood over six feet tall and to one master was “better . . . than a man” because of her ability to do both “women’s work” and “men’s work.”

Though her hard work for her masters led to ridicule from her fellow slaves, she proved that she was no complacent mammy by escaping the terror at the first opportunity when things became unbearable, despite the fact that the New York State emancipation laws would take effect just one year later. In 1826 the strong hands that had gotten her through life became badly diseased. Her master used this as an excuse to renege on his promise to set her free. Fed up, Truth escaped with her baby in one arm and a few provisions in her other.

Throughout U.S. history, the image of muscular black woman has pervaded popular culture. At its worst, it is a misleading stereotype. At its best, it is a source of inspiration for women the world over. As in the 1940s poster of Pearl Primus dancing in The Negro Speaks of Rivers, dance and power often go hand in hand. Caught in an attitude leap so high the floor is not visible, Primus raises her head proud, eyes open wide, chest broad, and, most germane to this discussion, fists clenched and muscles flexed.

With her concert dance piece Hand Singing Song, Zollar claims a place as Primus’s heir. The piece serves as a monument to the resolve and strength of black women using the image of black female hands as a metaphor. These hands comfort, pray, and punch. Hand Singing Song, a reach back to history and a call to future triumphs, is a forty-minute performance divided into six sections. The first section, “Give Your Hands to Struggle,” begins with calls out to the ancestors. Voices in the dark proclaim the names of historical figures who were or are leaders in the struggle for freedom and equality: Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, Sitting Bull, Medgar Evers, César Chávez, and Leonard Peltier. As the audience listens to the names, a circular spotlight comes up on a soloist, front and center. Her movements are slow and sinuous, weighty and requiring a great deal of strength to execute. Her arms circle the space, her chest expands, and her head reaches back. Upstage right of her, another spotlight reveals a small group of people dressed in red
robes, calling out the names, standing as symbols of her ancestry, giving her the strength she needs to go on and build on the works of those who've gone before. She does not acknowledge them physically or verbally. They are like the voices in her head, the stories in her memory that empower her. The group supports her by swaying and moaning a spiritual, bringing her a certain surety and peace; several times she is able to simply walk forward, hands raised to her chest as if she is taking a precious piece of 'herself' and offering it to the audience. From this base of support and through this gesture, she allows the spirit of the movement to possess her, and her movements become freer. She steps out of this to slowly assume the familiar Black Power liberation posture—feet in a wide, secure stance, muscles taut, head down, right arm raised up and out, and hand in a tightly clenched fist. This gesture echoes throughout the entire performance as a reminder not to give up the struggle for liberation. This first moment is in the context of African American heritage as the source of power. From her ancestors and the spirit, she acquires the strength to struggle and survive. With them, she is a force to be reckoned with. The music builds, and the spirit takes increasing possession of her body, until she at last fully abandons herself. Her head commits to the actions so that she need not look anywhere she is going, checking in with the ground. Rather, she trusts that the ground will be there to support her. She raises her hand up in glory, and as the spirit washes over her, the audience sees the wave course through her body. As the possession ends, she moves more calmly, walking in circles, arms raised up, head back as if aking in the sun. The lights come down as she brings her hands to her heart.

By beginning the piece with this look to history, Zollar connects it to the ong line of figures in the struggle for freedom and equality. She claims this connection through the hands. In addition to washing, ironing, and cooking, slave women's hands were put to use hoeing fields and picking crops, sometimes while nursing, thereby creating both productive and reproductive labor for the plantation.

Slaves were literally considered "hands." This synecdoche defined the "worth" of many field slaves. In a Foucaudian exercise of power, masters classified hands according to individual strength and endurance. Contrary to contemporaneous beliefs about the delicate female constitution, reserved for white women, black women were not exempt from this classification. According to Jacqueline Jones:

Judged on the basis of a standard set by a healthy adult man, most women probably ranked as three-quarter hands; yet there were enough women like Susan Mabry of Virginia, who could pick 400 or 500 pounds of cotton a day (150 to 200 pounds was considered respectable for an average worker) to remove from a master's mind all doubts about the ability of a

strong, healthy woman field worker. As a result, he conveniently discarded his time-honored Anglo-Saxon notions about the types of work best suited for women.

Black men were three-fifths a man, and black women were three-quarters of that. Pregnant and nursing women were typically considered half hands if they picked less than the average 150 pounds of cotton per day. By doing what they were forced to do, Jones explains, slave women gained a reputation for being abnormally suited for manual labor, unlike their white counterparts: "White men and women from the North and South marveled at the skill and strength of female plow hands." The image of the strong black woman developed into an overpowering national myth and stereotype; we are still wrestling with the ramifications of this. The myth, according to scholar Michele Wallace, is that she is "too domineering, too strong, too aggressive, too outspoken, too castrating, too masculine.""37 Somewhere between superhero and victim lies the truth of African American female subjectivity. Black women's victimization serves an argument for their strength. But without strength, how could Harriet Tubman have escaped slavery and keep returning to the South to rescue others, victim though she was? Slave women were, above all, victims of an oppressive regime. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the strength it took to survive. Slave women were more likely than slave men to stand up to their masters in verbal confrontation and by striking them, although fewer of them ran away, probably because of their family obligations.38 They often worked as hard as men, they nursed the other slaves, they pilfered food to feed runaway slaves, and they bore children under impossible circumstances. For all these reasons and many more, many people, including those in the concert dance tradition, have taken pride in the physical, emotional, and spiritual strength of these women. Rejecting the idealization of the frail, airy nympha of classical European ballet, African American female choreographers like Pearl Primus, Blondell Cummings, and Zollar prefer grounded, weighty, and strong physical vocabularies.

Hand appear as important images throughout African American cultural history. Hand jive is a language unto itself, and the high five (along with other black "handshakes") is a powerful greeting, loaded with implications about status and coolness. These are such strong gestures that they have permeated mainstream U.S. society. Some African Americans shake their hands instead of or in addition to their heads to indicate a negative response. The hands of black boxers like Jack Johnson and Mohammed Ali became symbols of the potential of the race. In black and Latino gay culture the snap is a powerful retort, an exclamation point that punctuates and closes a discussion.39 Fists and violence are
also an important part of African American history, and the image of black fists breaking chains abounds. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass talks about striking his master as being the moment he moved from slave to man. Malcolm X rejects a guidance counselor’s suggestion that he make his living working with his hands. Black grandmothers’ hands dexterously knit, sew, quilt, testify, pray, and comfort. Booker T. Washington extolled the virtues of manual labor. In Lorraine Hansberry’s Raisin in the Sun, Mama Younger talks about the pride her late husband had in turning the earth with his hands. Writing became a means to freedom for many slaves, and slave autobiographies that were “handwritten” by the slaves are prized.

Zollar uses the title of the second piece to name the entire performance. In “Hand Singing Song,” Zollar lets the hands do the talking. The focus is on the hand gestures and movements that resonate particularly for African Americans.

The piece opens with five women standing casually in a line. There is no music. Each dancer moves through a series of pantomimed gestures that isolate the hands, abstractions of everyday movements—showering, cooking, shaking a finger at a naughty child. After a time, the dancers freeze. Then, in unison, they walk toward the audience, each bringing a hand forward, palm up as if offering something to them. The other hand swings around from the back and slaps the palm. The dancers walk backward upstage, hands raised as if they are being arrested or want to show that they are unarm’d. This opening sequence raises the seemingly banal to the symbolic. The level of isolation and abstraction, together with the silence, focuses our attention on the ways the body (particularly the hands) carves through space. The gestures, the varied rhythms, the play with unison, and the contrasts create “music” enough.

The overhead floodlights darken so that the dancers are isolated center stage, illuminated only by sidelong light. They lean toward the audience, touch their fingers to their mouths, and whisper, “Shhh.” They repeat the various gesture sequences in silence with a serious, committed tone. The mood abruptly lightens as the dancers begin doing the Hokey Pokey, a release of tension and an embrace of the playfulness of everyday gestures. Yet this sense of security turns out to be a false one as the children’s game suddenly turns violent. The first dancer in line turns, looks up sharply, and asks, “What?” Her eyes widen, registering some frightening force. The dancers hide their faces and cower in fear. Operating under that oppression, the first dancer in line grabs the right arm of the next dancer, pushes it forward while commanding her to put her right hand in and out, in a violent round of Hokey Pokey. The first dancer does not appear to want to be inflicting this pain on the next but is compelled to do so by the force. The invisible hand of oppression is forcing one dancer to torment the next. Each dancer takes a turn being her neighbor’s torturer, always with an awareness of the governing force. When all the women scream “That’s what it’s all about!” the last woman is forced to repeat the scenario with a significant change. The final dancer reverses the in/out action so that when she says “I put my right hand in,” she plunges an imaginary knife into her heart. She pulls it out on “I take my right hand out,” and then with both hands around it, she plunges the “knife” into her stomach on the second “I put my right hand in.” The harmless children’s game has transmogrified into a vitiﬁe of torture, self-inflicted wounds, and suicidal gestures. A barrage of insults begins traversing the line to the accompaniment of slaps. The damage of affronts like “You so black and ugly!” “Nappy-head!” and “Big-lipped!” are played out on each dancer emotionally and physically as she alternates between being oppressor and oppressed. The hands are the means by which violence is inflicted. Each dancer then twists her open palm into a mock gun
that she points at the audience and fires. The guns are transformed back into open palms and the gesture of offering repeats.

The piece “On the Black Hand Side” is an homage to race pride and creativity as expressed with hands and the elaborate handshakes and gestures developed by African Americans throughout history. Zollar explains that rather than adopt European methods of physical contact during greetings and leavings, African Americans developed new forms in order to claim separate space, assert self-determined identity, and show solidarity. Developed by musicians, the handshakes indicate liberation from oppression through style. For the simple gestures to be improved on, they must be complex and labyrinthine. Each position must be hit precisely, as the dancers demonstrate by yelling “Bam!” each time they strike a pose in the process of shaking hands. Each “Bam!” becomes one more blow to the power structure. The handshakes are firm, and precision and confidence are hallmarks; there is no room for shakiness or sloppiness in the struggle.

All of this happens under the aesthetic of the cool, of course. Jazz music begins to play and the traditions of black greetings from slapping skin to high-fiving are connected. The revolutionary spirit of the late 1960s and early 1970s is connected to the spirit of the 1920s and 1930s. By participating in this intricate ceremony, the individual dancers become a part of a larger project. The hands move through ritualistic twistings, and handshakes lead to hugs—bodies touching heart to heart. Finally, these gestures lead again to the Black Power sign. They are part of a community in which members support and nurture one another. From this foundation, the next several pieces explore guiding hands as he means toward self-discovery.

In “Hands Singing Hallelujah,” a woman remembers her grandmother eaching out her hands to her, saying, “Come, give grandmother a hug.” The hugs were warm and cuddly, and the woman always felt secure in her grandmother’s arms. She stroked her chest as she remembers times when she was sick and her grandmother would smooth vapor rub into her chest, promising that he would feel better in the morning. Her grandmother’s love and care manifested through her hands has made a deep, lasting impression on the woman, aspiring her to sing:

I think I saw my grandma’s hands.
They were praying hands.
Hands that held me, oh, so close.
Hands that guided me on my way.
Praying hands.
Praying hands.

This physical, emotional, and spiritual healing, passed down through the generations, has given the woman the strength to go through life. Three dancers take turns giving and taking each other’s weight. They lift and carry each other. They protect each other, stay grounded so others can fly, and are there to catch whichever may fall. These three women, perhaps grandmother, mother, and child, stay connected throughout the piece, each always aware of what the others are doing. As the woman downstream sings “Hallelujah!” over and over again, the three women rest in a silhouetted tableau, hands interlocked, facing the singer as she walks slowly offstage.

The performance ends with “Hand to Fist,” a heavy, driving piece about the Black Panthers and the revolutionary movement toward self-liberation for African Americans. The piece is an investigation of dap—the complex series of hand greeting that black soldiers brought back from Vietnam. Dap becomes an integral part of the movement—the greeting symbolized strength, power, solidarity, even in the face of the many challenges the party faced, particularly those the FBI created.

Zollar enters and recites a poem in which she recounts a time African Americans were attempting to redefine and reaffirm their place in the world. With a revolutionary posture and an African style, they resisted the forces that attempted to annihilate them. The drummer comes out dressed in black, with a black beret, and as he drums, the dancers enter the stage, checking each other out. Zollar talks about how they needed to make sure a person was an ally. The handshakes became a code, a signal to let members know they were among friends. Later in the Black Power movement, as there were more and more conspiracies and the fear of infiltration and retaliation by spies increased, members of the party were put on guard, and handshakes became a means of determining who was loyal to the cause. The fist in the Black Power gesture is meant to knock down the wall of oppression, prejudice, and hate. It is a symbol of might, meant to be inspirational and hopeful and inspire fear in those who would oppose the tenets of the movement. Though the Panther party was controversial, many found power in the clenched fist. One crowning, epic moment of the Black Power movement was the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, during
which American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, gold and bronze medalists, respectively, accepted their medals wearing black stockings with no hose and a black glove on one hand. Smith also wore a black scarf around his neck. When “The Star Spangled Banner” began, each of them raised a gloved fist and bowed his head. The crowd booed them. When they left the stadium, the crowd booed them again, and they, again, raised their fists. Though they became pariahs to the official Olympic organizations and were vilified in many newspapers, to many their gestures symbolized the potency of the increasingly politicized black national identity. They took a moment of allegiance to nation and proclaimed the primacy of their black nationality. The act meant fear for one and dignity for others. It is this complexity that Urban Bush Women taps into in “Hands to Fist.”

In the dance piece, the dancers grasp hands and in unison jerk their torsos to the beat until freezing in a Black Power tableau, hands in fists raised high in the air and punching forward forcefully. They begin a rhythm section, stomping and slapping their hands against their bodies. The action echoes Zollar’s se of children’s games, but with black costumes (complete with black berets) and determined attitudes the dancers convey that this is anything but child’s play. The driving rhythm played out on their bodies calls others to the stage the way drums called to rebelling slaves in the antebellum South. The group repeats the greetings from “On the Black Hand Side” with slaps, snaps, jumps, graps, and so forth, and takes them to a new level. The drumming icks in again and the dancers move in unison, hands in fists, angrily kicking, stomping, and punching. They violently spar with one another in a capoeira display that breaks occasionally for the dancers to give the Black Power sign. They then chaotically move through the space—yelling at the audience until one dancer freezes the motion and brings the dancers back together, moving in step to the same beat, thereby channeling the anger back into productive energy. Warrior-like, soldier-like, the dancers move in a circle. But this is only a temporary assembly of ranks. As Zollar talks about the decline of the Black Power Party, the rhythm slows down and a few dancers get out of step. She speaks of people leaving the movement because they were tired and burnt out, one left because they got a little piece of the pie, others did because they thought the movement was built on shaky ground—internal conflicts, abuse of power, abuse of women, homophobia, and sexism. Perhaps the strategy of stinging violence by those on whom so much violence was used came to be too much for some. All of this, possibly spurred on by FBI conspiracies, weakened the force of the message and pitted party members against one another. Drug use increased and suspicions flared.

One by one the dancers leave, until only two remain, circling each other like vultures, viciously pushing and hitting each other. Soon, only one remains, and she takes off her beret in disgust. But Zollar hopes that perhaps even though people left the movement, they didn’t leave the struggle for justice, and they are out in the world working to improve it, in small but powerful ways. We might take this statement (and indeed, the whole performance) as a metaphor for Zollar’s work to bring about liberation and healing through dance on the concert stage and in communities.

The remaining dancer, illuminated by a single spot, continues to dance and struggle until she brings others back, one by one. Zollar reminds us to keep working and working toward liberation of all people. Individuals can inspire groups. As she and the drummer riff on the theme of “work it out,” the dancers resume their circle, again moving in concert, building on each other’s energy. The final moment has the dancers paused at different points in the circle, facing outward. They reach out their hands palms up, make fists, and bring the fists back to their hearts. The stage goes black on Zollar’s last line: “We gotta work this out!”

Hands, like hair and butts, are vital tools Urban Bush Women uses to work audiences into working out deep-seated social issues. They are potent parts of the black female body, capable of being loaded and reloaded with symbolism. Each piece fearlessly traverses dangerous territory to do battle with disempowering stereotypes. Together, they form an arsenal in the movement to reclaim the black female body and heal the old wounds. All of the pieces analyzed in this chapter open up places for dialogue about what the state of affairs for black women’s bodies looks like to all of us. Solutions are not simple, though the message is clearly that the struggle must continue.