HARLEM INTERSECTION – DANCING AROUND THE DOUBLE-BIND

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Thesis

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 1

II. JOSEPHINE BAKER – C’EST LA VIE ................................................................. 13

III. KATHERINE DUNHAM – CURATING CULTURE ON THE
    CONCERT STAGE ................................................................................................. 30

IV. PEARL PRIMUS – A PERSONAL CRUSADE .................................................. 53

V. CONCLUSION ......................................................................................................... 74

BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................................................................ 85
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

“Black is Beautiful” became a popular slogan of the 1960s to represent rejection of white values of style and appearance. However, in the earlier decades of the twentieth century black women were daily deflecting slings and arrows thrown at them from all sides. Arising out of this milieu of adversity were Josephine Baker, Katherine Dunham, and Pearl Primus, performing artists whose success depended upon a willingness to innovate, to adapt to changing times, and to recognize and seize opportunities when and where they arose. Baker introduced her performing skills to New York audiences in the 1920s, followed by Dunham in the 1930s, and Primus in the 1940s. Although these decades resulted in an outpouring of cultural and artistic experimentation, for performing artists daring to cross traditional boundaries of gender and race, the obstacles were significant.

This first chapter undertakes a transitory look at the complex interconnected cultural forces at work early in the twentieth century that may have benefited or hindered the aspirations of Baker, Dunham, and Primus, and endeavors to shed some light on the following questions: Did female proponents of emotional and sexual self-determination help young black women gain leverage to overcome the pervasive oppression of gender stereotyping? How did the lofty rhetoric of the intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance affect the ambition of hopeful young black performing artists? And finally, how did the
popularity of nightclubs impact prospects for young black dancers?

Chapter two considers the dynamic career of Josephine Baker with a view toward better understanding how she translated her improvisational talent, based on vernacular dancing skills, into international stardom. Chapter three explores the long career of Katherine Dunham whose analytical and cultural work as an anthropologist had a profound impact on the development of black concert dance. Chapter four focuses on Pearl Primus and her serious approach to African and African-American based dance and how her dances, less provocative than Baker's, and less flamboyant than Dunham's, may have facilitated a more empowered image of black dancing bodies on the stage.

Josephine Baker, Katherine Dunham, and Pearl Primus defied all odds and became what would seem to epitomize perfectly the sophisticated, cosmopolitan, black American so idealized by the leading literary commentators of the Harlem Renaissance. Nevertheless, this early vanguard of mostly male intellectuals, ever fearful of perpetuating stereotypes, tended to regard stagecraft, music, and dance as contentious art forms, and in all likelihood could not even allow themselves to imagine a time when black dance would move far away from its vernacular manifestations and become an important part of the cultural establishment. It was, however, through the medium of dance that many young blacks, including Baker, Dunham, and Primus, acquired the acclaim and visibility to shape their cultural heritage and affirm their place in the civilized world. To achieve this level of fame, these young artists had to be imbued with enough daring and talent to go up against a world dominated by whiteness and maleness, and have the fortitude to resist allowing racial prejudice and gender discrimination to obstruct their vision.
Prominent African-American women expressed strong views on gender-specific social dynamics particularly as they affected African-Americans during the first half of the twentieth century; views that presumably may have resonated with a large number of black women. The voices of these women had particular relevance for female dancers aspiring to choreograph their points of view and present them on the concert stage. According to Jacqueline Jones, by 1930 black women forty-four years of age and younger were literate to the same degree as northern white women and black men of the same age, giving them [black women] the authority to become part of the contemporary debates swirling around them at the time (192). For instance, black educator and journalist Elise Johnson McDougald leaves little room for ambiguity in her repudiation of the way in which black women were doubly denigrated by white America when she argues that they were excluded from the cultural ideals of beauty and considered acceptable targets for ridicule (Lewis 75). Early modern dancers, (including Dunham who constantly found the artistic intent of her work diluted by critics who saw it as sensual, and Primus whose physical characteristics prompted critics to review her through the lens of ethnicity often obscuring the serious intent of her choreography) moderated these negative connotations as they found in dance a space to subdue social expectations of women's physicality.

The first African-America woman admitted to the New York State Bar, Ruth Whitehead Whaley, maintained that “the New Negro woman” was denied a voice and was “considered as a mere chattel, cowed and subdued, taught that she, like children, must be seen and not heard.” Whaley contends that black women are held back as women, and further held back because they are black; in other words, they are the
ultimate victims of segregation and discrimination (Patton and Honey 19). These early female-authored texts, along with others, helped call into question barriers of race and gender and prepare the way for young black women, even those who took up dancing as a declaration of independence. Baker, Dunham, and Primus recognized and seized upon the potential of dance as a means of empowerment, and succeeded in confronting expectations based solely on race.

For almost all critics, however, the primary issue became how to attack stereotypes while accounting for the rapidly expanding African-American urban population. Edward Thorpe contends that large numbers of African-Americans migrated North after World War I and contributed to the unexpected population explosion in Harlem. This district in New York City grew “from 50,000 inhabitants in 1914 to 80,000 in 1920 [and] to 200,000 ten years later” (86). Harlem became a magnet attracting young talented artists in many diverse fields who came together and precipitated a dialogue on black cultural consciousness and identity. Scholarly voices like those of W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Langston Hughes wrote passionately on all matters pertinent to the struggle for black self-definition and often referenced the lives of women in making their case.

In his essay, “The Criteria of Negro Art” Du Bois includes short anecdotes that serve as a reminder that during this optimistic time of economic and social change, talented black women were still often thwarted by circumstances beyond their control. In one instance, a black woman is alone in a bare room making sculpture because no school of sculpture in New York City will welcome a student of her race. In another vignette, Du Bois makes known the dilemma of a woman in Chicago, a talented musician unable
to study at a prestigious school of music because the application form indicates that she must be a white American (Lewis 101). With these anecdotes Du Bois supports his view that even though race is a formidable obstacle African-Americans must persevere, or talented women will be unable to realize their potential as artists as a result of discriminatory practices.

To reinforce his notion of art as propaganda Du Bois is particularly impassioned with what he views as propaganda “confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent” (Lewis 103). To illustrate his point, Du Bois once again singles out women. Discussing two New York plays, Du Bois notes that in one there is a fallen black woman who continues her slide into degradation. In the other play the female protagonist is white, and although she begins a life of degradation, in the end she “is one of the angels of the Lord” (Lewis 103). The theme of these plays would certainly seem to challenge Du Bois's view that black drama be a vehicle of racial uplifting and cultural enlightenment. Du Bois explains: “We can go on the stage; we can be just as funny as white Americans wish us to be; we can play all the sordid parts that America likes to assign to Negroes; but for anything else there is still small place for us” (Lewis 101).

Alain Locke had a more positive view of the achievement of blacks in the theatre noting that even in the subsoil of the vaudeville stage black artists demonstrated their unmistakable talent. Locke argues that given the right setting and a dignified medium, black artists would be artistic revelations (qtd. in Long 89).

Evoking the theme of ancestral legacy, Locke raises some issues that would have significance for Josephine Baker, Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus. Maintaining that “music and poetry, and to an extent the dance, have been the predominant arts of the
American Negro” Locke goes on to note that except for a “remarkable carry-over of the rhythmic gift” there is little evidence to support a direct connection of the African-American with his ancestral arts. Josephine Baker came to feel strongly about the assumption that African-Americans have an inborn aptitude for dance (Papich 36). Locke does acknowledge, however, that despite the trauma of the middle passage “the American Negro brought over as an emotional inheritance a deep-seated aesthetic endowment” and that this endowment is retained as part of the African spirit blending itself into different cultural elements (Patton and Honey 121). Dunham and Primus would embrace this perspective in their works with remarkable results.

Both Du Bois and Locke emphasized the notion of art as a channel to express the implications of cultural identity and advance the race (DeFrantz 108). Insisting that there be no limits on artistic expression, Locke felt the best strategy for what he described as a “wider race consciousness” would be an acknowledgment of the cultural diversity of the population of Harlem (African, West Indian, and black American) evidenced in the vibrancy of the folk life of this growing, urban, black population (qtd. Lewis 49). Another outspoken literary artist, Langston Hughes, added his voice to the aesthetic debate of this period.

A prodigious Harlem Renaissance writer of poetry, short stories, plays, and articles, Langston Hughes had a remarkable career that spanned five decades affording him the opportunity to appreciate the development of black concert dance, and in some instances even inspire choreography. Hughes's often quoted 1926 essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” offers a clarion call for African-American artists: “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned
selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too” (rpt. in Lewis 95). Here, Hughes would seem to be in lock step with Alain Locke in espousing the vernacular traditions of America's black subculture as an affirmation of the unprecedented possibilities for African-American creativity. It could be argued that Josephine Baker came to realize these “unprecedented possibilities” in choosing to elevate the popularity of vernacular dance forms and perform them in her own unique way for enthusiastic white audiences.

According to Jayna Brown, Langston Hughes often made references to dance in his poetry. Although Hughes celebrated the dancer, other writers were less benevolent as “fear and blame were mapped onto the bodies of black women dancers: fear of what was being left behind as black people diffused into urban industrial environments, and blame for the perceived loss of community structures and stable cultural traditions” (Brown 194). Brown also notes that while these female dancers were an engaging subject for black fiction and poetry, the chorus girls, conceivably akin to Josephine Baker, were often independent vagabonds. Brown contends, “The women of the chorus stood for a kind of rootless female independence and affirmed the 1920s ideal of pleasure without consequence, of the freedom to cast off the past, of defiance of traditional familial forms and their responsibility to them” (233-34), a conclusion that could serve as an apt description of Josephine Baker's early life. Richard Wright poignantly observes, “But only a few of those who dance and sing with us suspect the rawness of life out of which our laughing-crying tunes and quick dance steps come; they do not know that our songs and dances are our banner of hope flung desperately up in the face of a world that has
pushed us to the wall” (130). Wright, with his insightful prose, eloquently taps into what may have motivated young black women, like Josephine Baker, to pursue dance as a livelihood.

It took the women of this country more than fifty years to attain woman's suffrage – an achievement that led to a significant influx of women into cities. When the fifteen-year-old Josephine Baker arrived in New York City in 1921 with dreams of being on the stage, the Nineteenth Amendment had only received its final ratification a year before and, as a group, African-American women continued to be limited to the lowest paid categories of employment. Mark Schneider points out that although African-American women had limited employment opportunities compared to both black men and white women, their one bright beacon of hope during this period was to find a job in the world of entertainment. Furthermore, African-Americans lucky and persistent enough to make it on the musical stage and in dance halls not only came to realize a renewed sense of self esteem, but also the security of a weekly salary (Schneider 30). However, since racism remained pervasive during the first half of the twentieth century, black performers seeking employment on the professional stage could not escape discrimination.

Unfortunately, in its earliest manifestations, dance almost exclusively presented a stereotypical image of blacks, and it was these portrayals that kept dance from being held in higher esteem with the leading intelligentsia. Joyce Aschenbrenner asserts: “The writers of the Harlem Renaissance had begun the struggle against racism in the field of literature. In Afro-American dance the struggle had begun earlier and was more difficult because of the thinking that had dominated the American stage since the black-faced
minstrel, and because of entrenched economic and cultural interests” (*Reflections*, 44). Black stage productions of the 1920s began to emerge from these negative images by becoming notable for their chorus line of black dancers performing with precision and high energy and inspiring innovative choreography for the musical stage. Edward Thorpe confirms this adding that in the 1924 musical *Chocolate Dandies*, featuring Josephine Baker as one of the leads, the tap dancing of the chorus girls, in unison to complex rhythms, became “the yardstick by which Black musicals were judged for a decade or more” (77).

For black female dancers employment as an entertainer had its own set of biases, including the requirement of a light-skinned complexion in the early days. Barbara S. Glass specified, “Once it was established that the girls were excellent dancers, they were chosen for their physical characteristics. They all had to be very light in color, at least 5’6” tall, and all under 21 years of age”(226). Thorpe adds that although performing on Broadway was prestigious for a black dancer, more money could be earned by performing on the vaudeville circuit with the added benefit of becoming well known, if not necessarily famous, throughout the country (82). Between 1928 and 1930, after being in a temporary state of decline due to the popularity of motion pictures with sound, Black musicals and revues rebounded and black dancers, singers, and musicians became celebrities (Thorpe 82). This optimistic period, offering increased opportunities for black performers, was further invigorated as nightclubs and ballrooms in Harlem began to flourish.

The Swing Era of the 1920s, with its improvisational music and dance styles, ushered in an authentic entertainment that would prove fundamental in the rise of the
Harlem nightclub. Thorpe notes that by the end of World War I Harlem was “a well-established and thriving Black quarter with clubs and theaters including the Apollo Theater, the Cotton Club, and the Savoy Ballroom,” and that these establishments not only employed dancers but billed them as the main attraction (87). Indeed, these prohibition-defying, gangster-run nightclubs proliferated in America's urban centers during the 1920s, and besides being a magnet for black musicians, these cabarets provided young dancers steady work and the chance to be seen and appreciated by large audiences.

James Weldon Johnson observed that, “The night-clubs have been the training ground for a good part of the talent that has been drawn upon by musical comedy and revues in the professional theater; and not only for strictly Negro productions, but also for productions in which there have been mixed casts, as, for example, in Show Boat and Golden Dawn” (180). This exuberant dancing, however, had its detractors, and there was particular concern for women. As Erenberg explains, “The cabaret posed a direct challenge to the cult of domesticity. Progressive and conservative critics who based their conceptions of civilization on the idea that women were essentially pure, religious, and moral were disturbed by women's cavorting in dance in informal, drinking environments with men” (80-81).

Despite the critics, the enthusiasm for social dance spread. White audiences fascinated with this lively form of entertainment began to come to Harlem in increasing numbers to patronize the bars and cabarets and be entertained by black dancers. The main ballroom of Harlem, according to Thorpe, was the Savoy where a succession of African-American dances originated including the Charleston, the Black Bottom, and the
Shimmy. Thorpe points out that although there were many other ballrooms in Harlem during this period, the Savoy, which opened in 1926, was considered the one where young dancers, hoping to become professionals, went to practice and be seen (87). A somewhat censorious observation was made by Long who claims that the motif of “primitive” was commercialized in several Harlem nightclubs including the popular Cotton Club, an establishment that incidentally barred African-American patrons. Long adds that these “jungle” revues featured chorus lines, tap dancers, and eccentric dancers, and were accompanied by an orchestra with a distinctive “jungle” sound (84), a theme that was to be exploited in Josephine Baker's music hall performances in Paris.

Zora Neale Hurston, a novelist, folklorist and anthropologist and an acknowledged literary voice of the Harlem Renaissance, perceives black dance as “dynamic suggestion” and observes that, “every posture gives the impression that the dancer will do much more.” Hurston details isolation of body parts as a technique to engage the spectator to be “participating in the performance himself” as he responds to the performer. Comparing black dancers to white dancers, Hurston says:

The difference in the two arts is: the white dancer attempts to express fully; the Negro is restrained, but succeeds in gripping the beholder by forcing him to finish the action the performer suggests. Since no art ever can express all the variations conceivable, the Negro must be considered the greater artist, his dancing is realistic suggestion, and that is about all a great artist can do. (Patton & Honey 65)

This section of Hurston's 1935 essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression” provides a thought-provoking response to the conventional white perspective that constrained
African-American artists from making a legitimate contribution to black dance, and instead celebrates the beauty and complexity of the movement language of the black performer and its potential to fully engage an audience.

Glenda E. Gill reiterates the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance when she states, “Those performers who have been most fulfilled and respected were those who had a strong sense of identity as African Americans and who, at some point in their careers, either danced, sang, wrote about, or performed dramatic roles that showed this strong sense of identity” (1). Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, committed to this ideal, contributed to the effort to eliminate stereotypes associated with blacks by creating choreography that resulted from their anthropological fieldwork to discover the connectedness of the dances and rituals of peoples of the African diaspora. As a dancer Josephine Baker, relatively unschooled in European-derived dance technique, is a perfect example of Gill's requirement of a performer having a “strong sense of identity.” Too clever to allow herself to be limited by stereotyping, Baker became a star of the Paris music halls by capitalizing on her black body as she created a sensation with her risqué dancing in scandalous costumes – perhaps proving for the first time in the twentieth century, decades before it became the mantra of the 1960s, that black is beautiful.
CHAPTER II

JOSÉPHINE BAKER – C’EST LA VIE

Josephine Baker, always assertive and ambitious, went to Paris in 1925 and boldly navigated the social impediments of gender, race, and sexuality to find an artistic voice and style of her own. Arriving in Paris as a performer in *La Rèvue Negre*, a show conceived by impresario Caroline Dudley Regan featuring a troupe of black dancers and musicians from Harlem, Josephine Baker triumphed on the stage of the Théâtre des Champs-Elysees on October 2, 1925. Appearing semi-nude in the closing number, the provocative *Danse Sauvage*, Baker immediately captured the attention of the French audience. But Jazz-age Paris, with its experimental artistic climate, was in full swing even before Baker's sensuality and rhythm made her a star.

The Paris of the 1920s, captivated by Josephine Baker, had already been infatuated with jazz music and the latest American dance crazes including the Charleston and the Black Bottom. Music hall audiences were primed to project their misplaced fantasies of the exotic savage on the body of a scantily-clad black woman. But what was it about Josephine Baker's improvisational talent based on vernacular dancing skills that made her such an engaging performer? In an effort to answer this question, this chapter will examine Baker's early music hall performances, feature films, the opinions of dance
scholars, and published reviews by influential dance critics. Also, as a rising star of the French music halls, did Baker cleverly manipulate the racial element of her appeal through the use of a unique theatrical idiom, that included persistent modes of semi-nudity, and thereby encourage objectification of her body? To better understand this issue, one that very well may have been a quandary for Baker herself, an attempt will be made to determine to what extent she, as black female working in the predominately white-dominated world of entertainment, was able to exercise creative control of her image, especially as it related to her career. And finally, although the early years of Baker's career made her internationally famous, it was her support of the American Civil Rights movement during her later years that validated her legacy in this country. But first off, a fleeting look at Baker's early life discloses the somewhat deleterious circumstances from which this untutored black American began her incredible path to fame and fortune.

In the many biographical accounts of Baker some details of her early life differ, and Baker herself presents contradictory stories about her origin. However all agree that she was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on June 3, 1906, grew up in a family constantly struggling for survival, and was keenly aware of the uncertainty of daily life in a black ghetto in East St. Louis – having survived the 1917 riot in which many black Americans were either killed or left homeless. By fall of that same year, America entered World War I, and in 1918 a flu epidemic claimed countless victims. At thirteen years of age, Baker was married. During this period of her marriage, which lasted only a few months, Baker worked as a waitress in a club featuring live entertainment and became fascinated by show business. When an opportunity to perform with a street band presented itself, Baker was eager and willing to learn. Her participation with this group led to performing with a
traveling act on the Theatre Owners Booking Association touring African-American venues in the South. With this tour Baker soon became familiar with the challenges of discrimination south of the Mason-Dixon Line as conditions for black women on this vaudeville circuit were less than ideal.

Lynn Haney explains that humiliations on the Theatre Owners Booking Association circuit were unrelenting, and even the simple act of ordering coffee and a doughnut more often than not “drew a hostile blue-eyed stare.” Signs abounded warning “For Whites Only,” and they appeared even on latrines that proclaimed “White Ladies and Colored Women.” Haney notes that although the signs were merely “a foolish white man's game” it would be foolhardy for a black to ignore them in a town where the Ku Klux Klan might be scouting that very night in their flowing garments on saddles ornamented with skulls (29). Despite these daily challenges, it was on this first tour that Baker began to polish and develop her performing skills as a dancer and a gifted comedian, and this preparedness paid off when she was later hired for the touring cast of *Shuffle Along*.

Black music and social dancing, very much in vogue in the 1920s, may explain the popularity of the musical *Shuffle Along*. This show, primarily developed for black audiences, was produced on a shoestring and went on to become a smash hit. Written and directed by African-American artists Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake along with Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles, this landmark production provided a ticket to fame for several black performers, including Josephine Baker. A clever show, *Shuffle Along*, had long-standing ramifications for staged musicals – especially in the area of dance. Phyllis Rose points out that during this period white produced musical revues featured chorus girls
primarily for display as they were only required to stand, look lovely, and move enough
to display their bodies and costumes. With *Shuffle Along* white audiences were astounded
as the chorus line actually danced (55). The exhilarating dancing in *Shuffle Along*, a new
innovation for the stage, opened a whole new world of possibilities for musical theatre.
James Weldon Johnson confirms this writing, “*Shuffle Along* is a record-breaking, epoch-
making musical comedy . . . and its dances furnished new material for hundreds of
dancing performers” (186-87).

Baker was initially rejected for *Shuffle Along* as she was not yet sixteen. However she did manage to be hired as a dresser for the road company where she learned the songs and dances and finally got her big break when one of the chorus girls became ill. According to Rose, Baker was magic on the stage as she “clowned outrageously. . . . People buying tickets asked about the little chorus girl at the end of the line who crossed her eyes” (57-58). Baker reputedly had an uncanny ability to project a character with strong emotional appeal as being both funny and pathetic. Often singled out in reviews, Baker soon caught the attention of Sissle and Blake who offered her a job in the main company where she remained for the next two years until the show closed. Josephine Baker was fortunate indeed to make her musical comedy debut in this celebrated production and her own recollection of life on the road reflects an attitude of complete exhilaration:

Toledo, Grand Rapids, Detroit, Buffalo, Rochester, Philadelphia,
Atlantic City . . . Wherever we went we brought down the house,
playing to mixed audiences in neighborhoods where blacks had
never before performed. Sissle and Blake were tireless. Although
we were giving ten performances of *Shuffle Along* weekly, they had found the time to put together a new show, *In Bamville*. Not only was I in it; they had written a special part for me. (qtd. in Baker and Bouillon 33)

As noted by Baker, Sissle and Blake had indeed recognized Baker's talent and cast her in their next show, *Chocolate Dandies*, (originally called *In Bamville*) where she received rave reviews. In a photograph of Baker (Hammond and O'Connor 24) it becomes obvious why Baker first came to the attention of audiences with her comedic talent. This photo shows Baker with her face made up like a minstrel performer perched on some type of railing, and costumed in a childlike checkered short dress with oversized shoes. This image, apparently drawn from the minstrel tradition and racist vaudeville performance conventions, illustrates Baker as the doll about to begin to dance, either by falling backwards or jumping off the rail – antics and energy that characterized Baker's early performing persona.

Discussing Baker's tendency to improvise rather than perform sequences as they were given to her, Noble Sissle remembers, “She would come offstage with the audience screaming and applauding and with her face lighted up with joy . . . It wasn't that she wanted to be contrary. But youth, high spirits, and her excellent instincts for getting a laugh were controlling her body” (qtd. in Rose 58-59). Sissle's comment further confirms Baker's unique sense of rhythm and self-deprecating humor that allowed her to connect with the audience. This excess of her performances was to become an important part of Baker's dancing style, remembered more for its energy and frenetic movement than for its choreographic precision.
After Chocolate Dandies closed, Baker took a job and continued to perform her Broadway style of dance at the Plantation Club where she was discovered by impresario Caroline Dudley Regan who offered her the opportunity to go to Paris. Commenting on this opportunity Baker recalled that Mrs. Dudley, obviously not sharing New York's fascination with “white blond-haired Negro girls,” put together a troupe of twenty-five extremely “dark-skinned” dancers, singers, and musicians. (Baker and Bouillon 44).

Baker here exposes her sensitivity on the politics of skin color. By contrasting “dark-skinned” with the phrase “white blond-haired Negro girls,” Baker is making a very direct comment on the racial oppression that she obviously internalized. This comes as no surprise as Baker began her career during a period marked by segregation in everything from medical care to dance classes.

Arriving in Paris, Baker had many lucky breaks. During rehearsals, artist Paul Colin designed a poster of her that was placed in kiosks throughout the city which created tremendous interest in the black revue. Baker described the poster, noting, “I appeared all over Paris emerging from a cloud of green feathers, nude except for ropes of pearls reaching below my loins, bracelets twisting from wrist to shoulders, sparkling shoe buckles and dangling earrings. Chiquita (her pet leopard) seated on his haunches, . . . was offering me an enormous bunch of flowers” (qtd. in Baker and Bouillon 85). The inclusion of Baker's pet leopard may have been an effort to deliberately cater to European taste at the time for racialized displays. This, along with Baker's nakedness, would seem to suggest a certain rawness or animalism – an attitude that would become a hallmark of her music hall performances and films that featured jungle themes and animal associations. Baker, ignoring the demeaning aspects of this representation seemed unable
to resist the call of the wild and took the stage and performed in her own incomparable style – a style marked by kinesthetic energy and a spectacular display of movement embodying a sexualized fantasy of blackness.

Phyllis Rose maintains that Josephine Baker's dance technique, initially learned “on the streets and in the houses and yards of black St. Louis” included popular social dances (46-47). Rose speculates that Baker's own contention that she learned to dance by “watching the kangaroos in the St. Louis Zoo” may have been an explanation used by Baker to further her image as a child of nature, and in any case, according to Rose, black vernacular dances often included movement of animals (46-47). Regardless, this life-long infatuation with animals became part of her performing persona. Baker herself recalled that during her time at the Folies-Bergère she had a pet snake named Kiki that she often took on dates (Baker and Bouillon 57), and it was Henri Varna, director of The Casino de Paris who presented Baker with her pet leopard, Chiquita, explaining “you can take him everywhere with you. It'll be marvelous publicity” (Baker and Bouillon 84). Baker's pets then became accoutrements of her professional life to reinforce her contrived performances of the primitive savage.

Audiences and critics alike generally appreciated Baker's dancing as well as her impeccable comedic timing in the playful clowning accompanying some of her performances. This repertoire of stage skills served Baker well in her Paris debut especially in her energetic interpretation of the Charleston – a social dance to syncopated 4/4 rhythm characterized by outward heel kicks combined with up and down torso movements achieved by bending and straightening the knees. The origins of this dance are somewhat obscure however it has been traced back to blacks who lived on an island
off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina. African-Americans migrating north brought the Charleston to Harlem in the first decade of the twentieth century, where it was taken up by black performers like Baker who made it into a world-wide dance craze.

Remembering her first rehearsal for La Rêve Negre, Baker offers her own authoritative perspective on dancing the Charleston:

The Charleston should be danced with necklaces of shells wriggling on the skin and making a dry music . . . It is a way of dancing with your hips . . . to bring out the buttocks and shake your hands. We hide the buttocks too much. They exist. I don't see what reproach should be offered them.

(qtd. in Baker and Chase 107)

Baker's seductive Charleston provides evidence of her conscious strategy of image construction loosely based on an elaboration of exotic fantasies. By emphasizing full-body movement, especially movement of the hips, Baker seems complicit in her own objectification; exhibiting her body in movement related to the African tradition as if to reinforce her perceived representation as a savage femme fatale.

Discussing Danse Sauvage Baker identifies certain psychological aspects of her performance such as being “driven by dark forces I didn't recognize” and while improvising as being “crazed by the music” in an overheated theatre filled to capacity. She dramatically adds that her every leap seemed “to touch the sky” and on returning to earth “seemed to be [hers] alone” (qtd in Baker and Bouillon 51-52). Here Baker reveals a certain self-awareness, and this, along with her considerable talent, ambition, and energy, defines a young performer acting as engaged participant in the construction of her image as the dark skinned icon of the erotic, exotic primitive.
Years later, one of the first-night audience members, Janet Flanner, relates her reaction to seeing Baker from her first entrance in Danse Sauvage. Flanner remembers the entrance as astonishing with Baker being scantily clad and carried upside down on the shoulders of a large black man who paused midstage and suspended her in a “slow cartwheel to the stage floor” where “she stood like his magnificent discarded burden in an instant of complete silence” (qtd. in Hammond and O'Connor 19). It was perhaps with this sensational entrance that Baker unknowingly, if not fortuitously, created her unforgettable performing persona. Theatre reviewer André Levinson offers scintillating details:

With Miss Joséphine Baker everything seems to change. The rhythmic spurt comes from her, and her frenzied flutterings and reckless dislocated movements. She seems to dictate to the spellbound drummer, to the saxophonist who leans lovingly towards her with the pulsating language of the blues, in which the insistent ear-splitting hammering is punctuated by the most unexpected syncopation. In mid-air, syllable for syllable, the jazz players catch hold of the fantastic monologue of this crazed body. The music is created by the dance. And what a dance! . . . this brief pas de deux sauvage in the finale reaches the heights with farouche and superb bestiality. (qtd. in Hammond and O'Connor 20)

In pointing out the “pas de deux sauvage” Levinson suggests an appreciation of the racialized female sexuality undisguised in Danse Sauvage. Flanner's characterization however could be interpreted as an image of Baker being objectified as a dancer and a woman, in that she is carried in as dead weight on the back of her male partner and
“stood like his magnificent discarded burden.” Levinson, obviously impressed with the
to virtuosity of Baker's movement, also seems to fully appreciate the incredible animation of
Baker's performance and is particularly fascinated with Baker's ability to control the pace
and rhythm of the dance.

Black entertainers from New York City like Josephine Baker had been long
indoctrinated to fully appreciate and manipulate the strong connection between exuberant
dancing and the music. Brenda Dixon Gottschild notes that “sometimes it was the dancers
who taught musicians, particularly percussionists, how and what to play to accompany
their ingenious improvisations” (Waltzing, 10). Gottschild further observed that unique
to Baker was the way she “improvised torso and limb movements emblematic of the
Africanist dancing body. . . . In fact, Baker danced so comfortably in her own brown skin,
so freely in her sexuality, that the effect was a stripping away of convention, a denuding
of the cabaret status quo” (Black, 159).

Phyllis Rose would seem to agree with Gottschild suggesting that the French may
have been right to see Baker as West African especially in that certain aspects of her
dancing come from the African tradition such as “moving of various parts of the body
according to different rhythms in the music” (25). Personally addressing the motivation
for her black dancing body, Baker acknowledges her natural talent, notes her lack of
formal training, and at the same time disavows the idea that African-Americans have an
inborn rhythm and a natural aptitude for dance, explaining: “You know, they say colored
people have a natural rhythm, and have natural movement. You know that is crazy. I've
seen some colored people who couldn't dance or sing their way out of a paper bag if they
tried for a hundred years, but for some reason, it did come naturally to me, and the more I
did it, the better I liked it, and that was it” (qtd. in Papich 36). With a dance career impacted by a culture of producers and audiences who regarded the dark skinned body as Other, Baker's rejection of the stereotypical attitude about blacks further indicates that she consciously made the decision to conform to these racial stereotypes to create the image of a savage femme fatale. Perhaps nothing confirms this more than Baker performing her famous banana girdle dance at the Folies Bergère.

Papich recounts the controversy surrounding Baker during rehearsals. The choreographer at the Folies Bergère, displeased that Baker did not follow directions, complained to Henri Varna, director of the Folies that she “acts like a little monkey.” Varna replied that this was not all bad as “monkeys can sometimes be very amusing” (54). Assuming that Baker was complicit in provoking white imagination and encouraging objectification of her body, she would have certainly understood the implications of being scantily dressed in the banana skirt – a costume suggesting an exotic Other from the jungle. After all Baker was not just any black female performer, but one who became famous staging primitivist performances. Nevertheless, the famous banana skirt provoked controversy as to its origin. Papich explains:

Josephine's and Varna's recollections differ on the famous banana costume, which became the rage of the continent overnight. She maintained that it was her idea, saying that if she could not be clothed in something as dramatic as the designers had sketched, then he should put her in nothing. Varna maintained that he had seen her eating a banana and thought of a “stack of bananas” costume. (55)
No matter who had the original idea for the infamous banana skirt, Baker's insistence that she be costumed in “something as dramatic as the designers had sketched” is further affirmation that Baker was not a captive spectacle but rather an artist whose notion of self-invention empowered her to participate in the creation and consumption of her image. For Baker the banana skirt was just one more facade that had the potential to manipulate her audience in an unexpected way. This animated American black woman, largely due to the sexuality of her performances, engaged the imagination of those eager to include her in their versions of the exotic primitive – a theme further exploited in her films.

Baker's first film, the 1927 *La Sirène des Tropiques* (*Siren of the Tropics*), directed by Mario Nalpas and Henri Etiévant, presents Baker's youthful exuberance. Not unlike other silent film actresses, she seems to be in almost constant motion throughout the entire film. However, there is one outstanding dance sequence in this movie – Baker performing the Charleston. In this frenetic version of the already energetic Charleston, Baker explores every expressive possibility of the dance through the principles of stretching, bending, twisting, turning, and undulating, while maintaining a fluidity and connectedness of the movement patterns.

*Princess Tam Tam*, produced in 1935 by Baker's then-manager and lover, Pepito Abatino, and created as a vehicle for Baker, was filmed on location in Tunisia. The rather predictable plot, not unlike Baker's other films, would seem to parallel Baker's own theatrical life – the protagonist is an exotic young woman who rises to notoriety. However, there are two exceptional dance sequences, both interesting for the display of dancing, but also in that they situate Baker almost exclusively under the gaze of a white
audience. One sequence is at a working-class bistro where Baker performs an impromptu dance that begins as a solo, until a white sailor joins Baker and the dance becomes a sort of soft-shoe duet. This scene, a device to advance the plot, also serves to highlight Baker as an exotic Other especially in that she performs with the white sailor in a bar patronized by mostly white working class customers. Curiously this scene does include a white woman in blackface sitting alone.

At the end of the film, at a fancy supper club featuring an elaborate floor show, Baker is plied with champagne and responds to the call of drums. Leaving her elegant table and making her way to the stage, Baker, presumably a Princess from Tunisia, rushes onto the performing space, kicks off her shoes, modifies her evening gown, and in an obvious display of primitive self-exposure, begins to dance her very lively version of the conga. This scene of Baker, supposedly African, dancing to a South American beat, is pure Hollywood, and overflows with racial implications in its attempt to reveal the nature of racialized blackness. In hindsight Baker observes that of particular enjoyment in filming *Princess Tam Tam* was the opportunity it gave her to introduce the conga, which as she points out, had absolutely nothing to do with Tunisia, but “would be the rage of Paris that winter” (qtd in Baker and Bouillon 100-101).

Discussing Baker's appearance in films, Rose saw her as a “glamorous star” and maintains that part of her appeal is her certainty of knowing “exactly how charming she is.” Further, Rose contends that while portraying this glamorous image Baker generates excitement, whereas when “dressed in a cotton frock freeing birds or rescuing puppies” she evokes “disbelief if not worse” (163). Rose obviously finds Baker more convincing as the glamorous star, but Baker herself indicates a certain preference for portraying less
glamorous roles recalling that in her film *Zou Zou* she was cast as a “simple, credible Creole laundress longing for her island home,” a role that “perfectly fit [her] idea of the cinema” being a representation of real life (qtd. in Baker and Bouillon 93-94).

Outstanding qualities that Baker projects on the screen are an incontrovertible radiance and childlike joy, qualities that present an interesting contrast to her elegant statuesque beauty. Unfortunately footage of her dancing is too often interrupted by cutaway shots that pan the crowd or the environment of the scene. These cutaway shots are disappointing as they interrupt what could be exceptional archival footage of a great vernacular dancer performing her art. What the films do succeed in communicating however, is Josephine Baker portraying an unpretentious black girl who transforms into a beautiful woman of the world – in other words, Baker playing herself.

Archival photographs of Baker (see Hammond and O'Connor 104-40), provide images of a woman who appears charming and at the same time individualistic. Many of these posed photos (see Hammond and O'Connor 105) bring to mind the glamour images of white Hollywood stars of the same era. Considering the social and professional environment in which Baker made her success, it is unlikely that she had complete control of her image, but many photographs (see Hammond and O'Connor 119) confirm that she quickly understood how to negotiate the complexities of prevailing colonial fantasies.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild explains that employing the primitive trope is to characterize complex cultures as “either lowly and inferior or idealized” and based on earlier forms of European interpretation as “either hated or loved but in either case objectived as Other.” Gottschild continues noting that this image, although presented as
free in one sense, is at the same time recognized as being sexually promiscuous and considered the lowest on the evolutionary ladder while Europeans are considered highest (Digging, 35). Arguably Baker's skin color and scantily-clad body would have contributed to her image as the “objectified Other” that Gottschild details here. Still, rather than being a barrier to Josephine Baker's success, this image of the dark woman as the Other became a key factor in her rise to fame.

At her debut performance, as an object of the audience's gaze, Baker was perceived as the embodiment of an exotic product from a French colonial territory, a perception articulated in a review by André Daven who wrote glowingly of Baker's stage presence “bringing a glimpse of another world,” and her dancing that filled “the entire room [with] the raw force of her passion.” Daven continues in this tone of adoration by proclaiming Baker as “eroticism personified” and further declares that “the simplicity of her emotions, her savage grace, were deeply moving” (qtd. in Baker and Bouillon 50). Daven's notion of Baker having the power to summon a “glimpse of another world” suggests Baker had an uncanny ability to manipulate her unorthodox movement style in such a way that audiences and critics appreciated her choreographic diction as authentically primitive – even African. It is almost ironic that Baker's myth of the primitive savage made her into a modern commodity capable of impressive financial rewards.

According to Ean Wood, by 1926 Baker was a full-blown celebrity. Considered at the time to be the most photographed woman in the world, photographs of her, as well as dolls dressed in her banana skirt, were on sale throughout Paris. Bathing suits, hairdressing products, and even cocktails were named after her (137). On this subject
Baker and Chase point out that a pomade to slick down hair, aptly named Le Bakerfix, would overtime bring Baker even more revenue than her stage appearances (171). William Wiser adds that Baker was provided gowns designed by Chanel, Schiaparelli, Patou, and Fath, the leading French couturiers, and that she helped bring “extravagant costuming back into fashion,” and further, that the image of Baker on picture postcards outsold “depictions of the Eiffel Tower” (285). As a flamboyant personality, Baker was apparently not only enjoying her freedom in Paris, but making the most of her prominence as a rising star of stage and screen.

But fame is fleeting, and despite being admired and celebrated in many countries of the world it was not until the latter part of her life that Baker received acclamation in the country of her birth. An extended tour in 1951 included a return to Harlem where Baker's performing career was upstaged by her liberal civil rights agenda. Thousands gathered for Josephine Baker Day in recognition of Baker's efforts for racial equality highlighted by her refusal to perform in segregated venues (Baker and Chase 297-98).

Some twelve years later, in 1963, Baker participated in the great rally for civil rights held in Washington, D.C., with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In her remarks on that auspicious day, she said:

I am not a young woman now, friends. My life is behind me. There is not too much fire burning inside me. And before it goes out, I want you to use what is left to light that fire in you. So that you can carry on, and so that you can do those things that I have done. Then, when my fires have burned out, and I go where we all go someday, I can be happy. (Papich 212)
According to Papich, Josephine Baker was not scheduled to speak at the rally, and her speech was entirely extemporaneous. Despite the fact that, as she expressed it, “there is not too much fire burning inside me,” Baker continued performing twelve more years until her death on April 12, 1975. Her last revue at the Bobino Theatre in Paris, celebrating fifty years on the Paris stage, was appropriately called *Joséphine*.

In the final analysis, Josephine Baker, after arriving in Paris, immersed her performing persona in primitive nakedness, encouraged animal imagery, and used her stage appearances to communicate directly to the politics of the time. This comes as no surprise, as from her first moments on the stage, Baker enjoyed her unrehearsed antics in the spotlight. As a very young performer, directors acknowledged her penchant for performing improvised versions of their choreography much to the delight of critics and audiences. Supposedly never uncomfortable performing semi-nude, Baker's racialized female body was perhaps both more and less than it seemed to those who saw her as Other. Furthermore, it was Baker herself who created this unique approach to her remarkable artistry – an approach that served Baker well in Paris where she seductively manipulated white imagination, flaunted white fantasies of animal magnetism, and encouraged objectification of her black dancing body.

It is interesting to contemplate what Josephine Baker's life might have been had she decided to stay in New York City, home of Harlem, the fabled cultural capital of black America. John Perpener argues that even though performers like Baker did not represent the elitist aspirations of the acknowledged arbiters of Black culture, she and other dancers became positive influences for future generations (17). Indeed, the phenomenal Josephine Baker freed herself from the burden of racial legibility and in
doing so found a certain personhood and agency that allowed her to explore new
identities on and off the stage, and become an international legend.

CHAPTER III
KATHERINE DUNHAM – CURATING CULTURE ON THE CONCERT STAGE

Perhaps more than any other black female artist examined in this study, Katherine
Dunham used the art of dance as a medium of intercultural communication by creating
innovative choreography based on the notion of the connectedness of cultural heritage.
Through a blending of the traditions and rhythms of indigenous social and spiritual
dances with elements of classical ballet and modern movement, Dunham initiated a
cross-cultural environment on the stage that enriched the world of dance and led to a
codified dance technique. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Dunham and her company
performed her stimulating repertoire in venues across the United States and throughout
the world, presenting black heritage before diverse audiences while at the same time
changing attitudes about black dancing bodies on the concert stage.

This chapter will briefly examine how Dunham combined her scholarly pursuits
and choreographic talent to create a theatrical experience without precedent. The primary
focus of this chapter, is however, on Dunham's professional career, addressing how a
black female artist created and maintained a large, unsubsidized company of dancers and
musicians for almost three decades and created a impressive body of choreography that
brought a new movement style to modern dance. Tracing a career that spans the years of
Jim Crow to the race riots of the 1960s, this chapter also discusses how Dunham steadfastly confronted discrimination throughout her long life.

When the curtain came down for the last time on her privileged career in the late 1960s, Katherine Dunham moved to an impoverished neighborhood in East St. Louis, secured funding, and opened a Performing Arts Training Center to help alleviate the social ills of poverty and urban unrest. This project was designed to employ a multidisciplinary approach, with performing and cultural arts as its principal method. Ruth Beckford refers to Dunham's work in East St. Louis as the “third chronological period” of her life, and notes that through her work as director of the Performing Arts Training Center (PATC) at Southern Illinois University, “she daily experiences the challenges, conflicts, and successes that face contemporary black youths.” Beckford adds that with PATC “her [Dunham's] hope is that, through changing their environment, she can change their attitude toward learning” (Beckford 91). In its initial conception, the sincerity of Dunham's undertaking was perhaps disproportionate to its potential for success.

Joyce Aschenbrenner explains that PATC did not have any of the “glamour associated with the artistic celebrities in New York City, but that it had its own romance lent by the legend of Katherine Dunham herself” (186). As director of the center, Dunham administered the programs that communicated her philosophy of art, life, and education. These active programs included a dance company, a children's auxiliary company, and the educational center (Aschenbrenner, Dancing 193). At this point in her life, it is possible that Dunham had begun to reflect on the extraordinary influences and opportunities she had experienced as a young black woman in the 1930s, and she saw in
these underprivileged youth the undeveloped talent and enthusiasm that she herself possessed in those early days in Chicago.

While a student at the University of Chicago, Dunham found herself in an environment that challenged her both intellectually and artistically. Here, Dunham had the opportunity to perform in an experimental theatre that led to her becoming acquainted with several literary artists, including Harlem Renaissance luminaries Langston Hughes, Alaine Locke, and Arne Bontemps. It was also during this period that Dunham began a serious study of dance under the tutelage of Ludmilla Speranzeva, a dancer from the Chauve Souris Dance School, and Mark Turbyfill and Ruth Page, both dancers and choreographers with the Chicago Opera. It was with the encouragement of these nurturing mentors and passionate instructors that Dunham began to teach, choreograph, and perform. Ruth Page featured Dunham as the lead dancer in her ballet, *La Guiablesse*, based on a Martinique folk tale, and with the support of Turbyfill, she organized Ballet Nègre, a short-lived performing group of her students. Although the group had a successful debut at the Chicago Beaux Arts Ball, financial concerns forced them to disband (Aschenbrenner, *Dancing* 23-38).

With her academic focus on anthropology along with her increasing involvement in dance, Dunham received a Rosenwald grant in 1935 for fieldwork in the Caribbean where she observed, assimilated materials, and participated in the rituals and dance ceremonies of Martinique, Trinidad, Jamaica, and Haiti that would become the basis of her future choreography (Aschenbrenner, *Dancing* 45). Richard Long enumerates three specific processes that informed Dunham's research: the incorporation of African religious dance into new ritual behaviors; the secularization of African religious dance;
and, the interaction of African secular dance with European secular dance (63).

Dunham's work in the Caribbean culminated in the creation of a pedagogic vocabulary drawing on principles of African dance movement that would have a substantial influence on modern dance.

After eighteen months of travel and research, Dunham returned to Chicago, reorganized her group of dancers, and continued to choreograph and perform. Halifu Osumare explains that Chicago was a perfect environment for Dunham in its being “the crucible of anthropology's evolution” while at the same time offering her “an all-important gestation period for creative development away from the jaded gaze of the New York dance scene” (qtd. in Clark and Johnson 613). Be that as it may, Dunham was pleased to receive an invitation to bring her dancers to New York City as part of the Negro Dance Evening to be presented at the Young Men's Hebrew Association auditorium on March 7, 1937.

Dunham and her dancers made their New York debut in this concert, and Terry Harnan asserts that despite the YMHA auditorium not being an important theatre, it was in New York City, the center of dance in the United States, and provided Dunham's company an opportunity to be seen by a New York audience (97-98). This concert was organized by African-American choreographers determined to produce a serious artistic enterprise, and finding the right venue was an important consideration. African-American dancers at the time were concerned with seeking patronage outside of the leftist dance network, and to this end, the choreographers participating in the Negro Dance Evening choose to associate with the Young Men's Hebrew Association (YMHA). This decision was made as part of an effort to obtain support from the Jewish community for their
vision (Manning 59). Nonetheless, this New York debut concert was an important collaborative project for Dunham as it allowed her to associate with and see the work of other black artists such as Asadata Dafora, Edna Guy, Allison Burroughs, and Clarence Yates.

Returning to Chicago after this performance, Dunham's career as a writer and a dancer would get a boost from an unlikely source – President Roosevelt's New Deal, which initiated programs to ameliorate conditions resulting from the Great Depression. Dunham, along with many young writers was nurtured by the Illinois project, a federal government subsidy program under the umbrella of the Works Progress Administration. Certain others who worked on the Chicago writers' project, later to become famous in their own right, included Margaret Walker, Frank Yerby, Nelson Algren, Willard Motley, Studs Terkel, and Saul Bellow (Aschenbrenner, Dancing 111). On Dunham's work with the Federal Writers' Project, Jerre Mangione found that Dunham used her University of Chicago focus on anthropology to initiate several black studies; one investigating Chicago's Negro cults, and another dealing with storefront churches which were flourishing in the city's black districts at the time (127). In 1938, after completion of this assignment, Dunham and her dancers, now part of the Federal Theatre Project, performed in a program of dance at the Great Northern Theatre. At this performance, Dunham premiered her Martinique research-inspired choreography, L'Ag'Ya.

With this premier performance Dunham displayed what would be a hallmark of her directorial style as she exercised considerable creative control over her stagings and insisted on high production standards that included all the elements of theatre. Dunham wrote the narrative for L'Ag'Ya' based on a fighting dance and set in a fishing village
where she had lived in Martinique. This ballet had a large cast, including many non-
dancers, and the overall theatricality included colorful costumes and sets conceived and
designed by John Pratt. Incidentally, Pratt, an established designer of costumes and stage
décor, eventually became Dunham's husband and continued to design for her company
throughout her long career. Reviews for *L'Ag'Ya* were very positive with the *Chicago
Tribune* noting that “her [Dunham's] large troupe of colored dancers moved with
admirable ease and lack of affectation;” the *Chicago Daily News* claiming “the show was
clearly stolen, by *L'Ag'Ya*, a fiery folk ballet from Martinique;” and the *Chicago
Defender* writing that “few of us will ever see enough of this great artist and somewhere
in the recesses of collective consciousness . . . lurks always the fear . . . we are enjoying
in borrowed time a contribution intended for world acclaim” (qtd. in Aschenbrenner,
*Dancing* 117). Indeed audiences were seeing perhaps for the first time, choreography
that combined different styles and cultural influences, opening up the possibility for them
to imagine a multicultural world that would uphold and even embrace difference.

Following her performances with the Federal Theatre Project, Dunham returned
to New York to choreograph the 1939 Broadway production, *Pins and Needles*, a musical
revue sponsored by the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union. Harnan relates that
it was while working on *Pins and Needles* that Dunham began to look for a way to
present a show of her own and points out the difficulty there was to find an available
performing space in the middle of New York's busy theatrical season (104). She notes
that with the help of Louis Schaeffer, production manager of *Pins and Needles*, Dunham
and her company leased the Windsor Theatre on West 48th Street just off Broadway
available on Sundays, and with the premiere of their first revue, *Tropics and Le Jazz Hot,*
on the second Sunday in February in 1940, they enjoyed immediate success (Harnan 104). Perpener characterizes Dunham's career at this point as “extremely busy.” She continued to teach, rehearse, perform in Pins and Needles, present concerts at the YM-YWHA, and produce Tropics on weekends at the Windsor Theatre (144).

Manning notes the historic significance of Tropics and Le Jazz Hot claiming that with this production, “black self-representation became widely accepted among audiences and critics” (142). The program, opened with a Cuban song and dance, followed by two rumbas, two dance-drama vignettes (including a Haitian carnival meringue), Martinique folk dance, and finally Dunham as the “Woman with the Cigar” in Tropics – Shore Excursion. Le Jazz Hot, performed after a second intermission, included a boogie-woogie, Barrelhouse and Honky-Tonk. The program ended with another narrative piece, Bre'r Rabbit an' de Tah Baby” (Morris 117-19).

Dance critic John Martin was enthusiastic in his review of the Dunham troupe's Windsor Theatre debut: “Her rumbas from Santiago de Cuba and Mexico, her Island Songs from Haiti and Martinique, her delicious little scene called Tropics – Shore Excursion, are all as finely racial as her truly wonderful little genre piece called Florida Swamp Shimmy” (qtd. in Clark and Johnson 212-213). Obviously Martin was impressed with Dunham's approach even though his characterization of her pieces as “finely racial” might be construed as a stereotypical reaction to seeing black dancing bodies. According to Perpener, Martin consistently endorsed and confirmed Dunham's talent and performing skills, but often had an “ambivalent viewpoint that usually surfaced when he wrote about black dance artists” and at this point in her career he and other critics particularly objected to her inclusion of elements of ballet (143).
Aschenbrenner further confirms Martin's ambivalence claiming “in his generally positive critique of the Dunham Company, he [Martin] continued to object when he believed the balletic element was too intrusive, especially when the company returned to New York after tours in Europe” (Dancing, 122). In an interview with Constance Valis Hill, Dunham remembers coming under criticism for her use of ballet, but defends the choice by responding “I think there are times when it just simply fit, if you know it well. I hate to see it when it's just thrown in there because somebody has seen a ballet or something. But I think it was well used by me. I don't think anyone else used classical ballet [as I did] in L'Ag'Ya (Collaborating 244). Critics however continued to respond negatively whenever Dunham incorporated ballet into her choreography, and this attitude with its undertones of racism, would seem to be saying that ballet is a “white” form of dance that a young black choreographer should not be using, or in other words, that black dancing bodies are not suited to European-American dance techniques. Martin was one of the “established pundits” disparaged by Brenda Dixon Gottschild as she articulates her strong objection to this obsolete attitude:

Surely no dancing body – black, brown, or white – is inherently unfit for any kind of dance. Instead, cultural preferences by the established pundits of taste set and shape the exclusive criteria that distinguish one culture's values from another, one dance form from another. (Dancing, 103)

Gottschild's contemporary perspective is especially relevant when considering the often presumptuous comments made by Martin and other dance critics reviewing the choreography of early black concert dancers.

Irrespective of her inclusion of elements of ballet, Dunham also found herself
defending the incorporation of Americana dances in the *Tropics and Le Jazz Hot* concert:

I think that my sense of injustice with my sense of correctness made me realize that even though I might be archaeologically or historically correct in bringing these exotic things into our performances, and as a part of our technique, I shouldn't forget that we were black. We were not African, but black Americans, and black Americans have never been clearly defined. It's why 'Afro-American' is such a letdown. It's not quite true. (qtd. in Clark and Johnson 241)

Dunham, obviously aware of the artistic and social climate, very directly asserts her sense of black pride remembering first and foremost that she is a black American.

According to Gay Morris, Dunham felt a responsibility to use her art to “show white audiences the contributions blacks had made to American culture and, at the same time, the cross-influences between black and white forms” (119). Manning underscores this by noting that even the black journalists recognized the importance of Dunham's performance at the Windsor Theatre as they “recorded how Dunham's productions made them see black bodies in motion differently from before” (150). Still, as part of the regimen for these “black dancing bodies,” Dunham recognized value in ballet training. Vanoye Aikens, a Dunham dancer remembers:

We did nothing but tour. But wherever we would settle for a week or ten days, she would go and find a ballet teacher. So our training – we were not allowed to train outside of the company. If we were in Chicago, as we were for weeks and weeks and weeks, she would find the teacher and the studio. And your day would begin with
ballet. And then if it were not so, then she would teach a ballet class, which I hated. It was too difficult. . . . We had to work between shows, I mean we had to have a class between shows. And we had flamenco. You name it. But that was our life. (qtd. in Clark and Johnson 280)

It is apparent from Aikens's account that Dunham had high expectations of her dancers and their training was an important part of the process, as it emphasized the importance of continually striving to attain greater skill and refinement. She recalls, “While touring, I felt pressed for time and perfection and knew we simply could not waste energy on bad, apathetic, or sloppy performances. We simply had to reach a certain perfection. . . . During intermissions I would criticize and point out the things that were not satisfactory to me in the performance, and I would do so in no uncertain terms, and sometimes under great pressure and tension” (Beckford 118-19). Dunham's rigorous discipline may have been in some measure a response to the widely held assumption that African-Americans did not need training because they were natural performers. Manning claims that “it was Dunham's productions that undid the critical conundrum of natural talent versus derivative artistry that white critics had scripted for African-American choreographers” (143).

Discussing Dunham's company of dancers, Agnes de Mille, points out that “Katherine had to do all the training herself, and she produced results that were astonishing. . . . She simply set them dancing, and they seemed just to be having a good time” (42). De Mille offers her opinion of Dunham's dance technique:

When Katherine Dunham started her career in the early thirties, there were
only a half dozen black dancers in New York. . . . There were no black students of dance, for the good reason that there were absolutely no opportunities for them to perform. . . . She [Dunham] had a very simple technique: a rudiment of ballet, I suppose some small aspects of modern – Duncan perhaps – but not tap, none of the big virtuoso black forms. She never attempted what she could not do, and whatever she did was accomplished with great finish and deftness. The treasure she gave was her personality, and that was nothing short of magic, for she had the unusual combination of seductiveness – very real, compelling, and strong – and humor. (38-43)

De Mille's recollection, while offering a rather pointed commentary on Dunham's “very simple technique,” at the same time, acknowledges that during this period there were limited opportunities for serious dance training open to black dancers. De Mille appreciated Dunham's not resorting to “big virtuoso black forms” and suggests that her movement vocabulary was eclipsed by her magnetic stage presence.

However, Aschenbrenner insists that it was the formation of the company that represents Dunham's greatest success: “Katherine Dunham's primary creative achievement was the founding and artistic direction of a dance company, composed mainly of African-American dancers and performing, for the most part, dances based on themes from Africa and the black diaspora” (Dancing, 105). The 1948 London Observer recognized Dunham's potential for making a difference: “While being strictly non-racialist, believing that art has not frontiers, she has unconsciously sought to show the deracinated coloured people of North America their cultural background; to link them to
their less sophisticated and less corrupted cousins in the Antilles; and to build on their real talents for dance and music a valid, cultural style of their own” (qtd. in Clark and Johnson 308). However, Dunham did not entirely limit her artistic process to identifying with the ancestral interconnection that she explored and observed in the Caribbean. Morris explains that Dunham actually never intended to reproduce authentic Afro-Caribbean dances but to fuse these movement forms with elements of ballet and modern dance, the two major techniques she had studied before her fieldwork (119).

Following their success at the Windsor Theatre in New York, Dunham and her company returned to Chicago where, during a performance, they caught the attention of George Balanchine and Vernon Duke, choreographer and musical director respectively of the all-black musical Cabin in the Sky. Dunham and her dancers were contracted for this production, which opened on Broadway in 1940. Cast in the leading role of Petunia Jackson was acclaimed performer Ethel Waters, and Katherine Dunham was cast as the temptress, Georgia Brown (Aschenbrenner, Dancing 123-24). Harnan points out that this production was Dunham's first opportunity to sing, act, and dance and that the salary for Cabin in the Sky, up to three thousand dollars a week, was considerably more than the Dunham company had earned previously (106).

On her choreographic collaboration with George Balanchine for Cabin in the Sky, Dunham remembers, “With Balanchine, we had an understanding. I was a little bit outdone when I wasn't the sole person. But he did have a thing to say now and then about staging” (qtd. in Clark and Johnson 245). After its Broadway run, Dunham and her dancers toured with this musical until it closed in Los Angeles, where they remained for a period of time while appearing in several films. These commercial film productions
included the short film, *Carnival of Rhythm*, featuring Dunham and her company performing Brazilian music and dance; the film *Stormy Weather* starring Lena Horne and Bill Robinson with Dunham and her company executing a dramatic piece of choreography; and a 1942 film revue, *Star-Spangled Rhythm* (Aschenbrenner 128). Roy Thomas notes that Dunham's performance and choreography for commercial films prepared the way for “increasing use of black dance, dancers, and choreographers in Hollywood films made in the Fifties through to the present day” (535).

A brief examination of the lighthearted film *Star Spangled Rhythm* provides an opportunity to see film footage of Dunham as dancer and actress, before she had begun to tour nationally and internationally. This typical wartime all-star musical mélange, directed by George Marshall, has a somewhat flimsy plot and was obviously scripted to showcase Hollywood's most popular, white, box-office stars of the period. Beckford maintains that Dunham expressed her dismay to the production company of having only one spoken line and some dancing in this film, and further objected to the grammar of her one line and insisted on a revision. The script called for her to say “You ain't only classy, you is Haile Selassie” and the line was changed to “You're Haile Selassie” (Beckford 47). Dunham's objection to using ethnic dialect with its potential for furthering negative stereotypes points to her sense of pride as an educated black woman who values her verbal skills. Although the film projects stereotypical images, Dunham and her dancers are featured in an elaborate production number.

This dance sequence, with its black mise-en-scène based on racial sentiments of the time, presents a cinematic version of Jazz-age Harlem. Dunham's dance duet with Eddie “Rochester” Anderson, who is decked out as a black male stereotype complete
with zoot suit, fancy shoes, and hat, can be characterized as a sort of jitterbug. However, there are interesting close-ups of Dunham that offer a sample of her Caribbean-inspired technique. Dancing primarily with bent knees, Dunham articulates her whole body with emphasis on isolations of the shoulders, chest, pelvis, and arms. The camera work is effective in providing a view of the dancing from various angles and effectively captures the performer Katherine Dunham even highlighting her compelling stage presence and charismatic screen persona.

After a period of time in California choreographing and performing with her dancers in films and clubs, Dunham signed with impresario Sol Hurok, who rearranged her repertoire into a theatrical revue that would work on the road and in concert halls. Hurok's arrangement became a model for future Dunham Company productions. These shows typically opened with a Caribbean dance, followed by a dramatic piece, and ended with American popular or social dances. However, before the tour with Hurok, Dunham added *Rites de Passage* to her repertoire – a controversial piece that included a male puberty ritual which, according to John Perpener, “was attempting to show that bodily movement could be imbued with intense metaphysical meaning” (152). Perpener claims that officials in Boston, whose complaints led to a visit by a censor, did not understand that Dunham “was attempting to change perceptions about race, culture, art, and sexuality” (153).

Hurok, after two seasons of managing Dunham's large entourage, including musicians and the stage settings and costumes of John Pratt, began to scale down the production. Strongly objecting and insisting that the company needed to maintain the “integrity of performances,” Dunham negotiated with Hurok and bought out her contract
for $25,000” (Aschenbrenner, *Dancing* 130-31). As Beckford explains, “She felt that patrons, in returning to theaters where they had once experienced lavishly staged shows, would not accept a black velvet curtain for scenery and maybe two pianos in place of an orchestra” (54). In these accounts of her dealings with Hurok, Dunham comes across as a very bold and assertive young black woman with the courage to challenge a white male, an attitude of self-determination that would serve her well as she took over the complete management of her company of dancers.

Aschenbrenner notes that “Katherine Dunham had compared her relationship with the company while on tour to, “that of a lioness protecting her young” (*Dancing* 163). Eartha Kitt remembers that although the company respected Dunham’s choreography as well as her critiques of their work, they sometimes resented the power she had over them and often had a love-hate relationship with each other and their lives as dancers (Aschenbrenner, *Dancing* 168-69). Harnan emphasizes that finances were always a worry since Dunham had to support the company between performances. Additionally, “there were special taxes and fees to pay and problems in that they were only permitted to take a limited amount of cash out of a country. This was sometimes not enough to support them in the next place” (137). Not only did the expenses of touring weigh heavily on Dunham, but providing consistent training for the company was also a primary concern. To achieve the professionalism she desired, Dunham opened the Katherine Dunham School of Arts and Research.

The school, first established in New York in 1944, welcomed a host of aspirant dancers, some actors, and some more or less leisured folk who sought to expand body and mind” (Long 100). Unfortunately the rigorous touring schedule of Dunham and her
dancers, performing on stages throughout the world during the 1940s and 1950s, made it difficult for Dunham to maintain control of this endeavor. John Martin describes the various courses of instruction:

It has two-, three-, and five-year courses leading to professional, teaching, and research certificates; its faculty numbers thirty, its curriculum contains everything from dance notation through ballet, modern, and primitive techniques to psychology and philosophy, with acting, music, visual design, history, and languages . . . its student body, unaffectedly interracial, numbers approximately four hundred; and – its deficits are enormous. (qtd. in Clark and Johnson 296)

As Martin points out, this ambitious undertaking conceived by Dunham to expand the range of expressive potential for her dancers and other aspiring young performing artists was burdened by financial and administrative issues.

Harnan claims that after a promising beginning, in mid-1947, the school was put under a Board of Directors, and in 1952 given a charter from the State of New York as the Katherine Dunham School of Cultural Arts. Harnan then speculates as to whether it was these state requirements or the absence of Dunham's “magical presence” that led to a drop in enrollment, adding, “Katherine had to forward money earned from their performances to keep the school going – the first of many times this was to happen” (133). Dunham remembers, “The program proved too extended for private enterprise, and my personal earnings could no longer underwrite its costs on such a scale; particularly since much of my work was in countries where payment was in non-transferable foreign currency.” (qtd. in Clark and Johnson 479). Ten years after it first opened, the Dunham
School offered its final class (Harnan 161), and “not until Alvin Ailey incorporated his school in 1967 did New York again boast a studio where Negro dance and modern dance converged” (Manning 188).

Dunham, unceasingly beset by financial concerns and never far removed from the strains of running her company, still managed to present unique dance productions in the most professional means possible. Postwar England responded enthusiastically to Dunham and the dancers. In a 1948 critique, Dunham was recognized for her efforts and described in glowing terms: “The extraordinary fact about this diverse and brilliant show is that it is entirely the production of one person . . . who can write, produce, and direct the work of a whole company, and do so with originality” (qtd. in Clark and Johnson 307). Clive Barnes was equally impressed:

Right off, I realized I was watching something of importance. Quite what that importance was took me a couple of decades to comprehend, but dance, particularly unfamiliar dance dressed in a fairly familiar guise, can be like that. A lot of the performance, notably in that final “Blues” section, had something of Dunham's hard-acquired Hollywood sheen to it. The new element was the way she assimilated the various kinds of dance she found in her native America, including classical ballet, with the anthropological findings of her Caribbean search for African roots … and made that assimilation into a unique modern dance style, with a vision as strong as that of Martha Graham. (2)

This comparison to Graham was high praise. Barnes apparently appreciated Dunham's choreographic efforts to connect her dancing to a wider social context. Gloria Thornburg,
a Dunham dancer, expresses what can only be characterized as unconditional admiration noting that “Katherine Dunham was the creative genius, the materials and responsibility for the company were hers, and that for audiences she was the primary attraction, the performer with the greatest charisma, if not the most accomplished dancer” (Aschenbrenner. Dancing 168).

Even though Dunham may have personally achieved a measure of freedom, independence, and power only dreamed of by most black women of her day, throughout the United States members of her company often found it difficult to find suitable accommodations or even restaurants that would accept blacks. Beckford writes that at one point Dunham was able to secure a reservation in Las Vegas but that her company had to stay in a separate area reserved for blacks; she explains, “Although blacks could entertain in hotels, they weren't allowed to sleep in them” (57). Manning observes that during their tours in the early 1940s, Dunham and her dancers usually traveled north of the Mason-Dixon Line to avoid discrimination (125). Dunham would, if necessary, contact the local NAACP to report theatres with segregated seating (Manning 125), and on one occasion, felt she had to speak out. Following the company's performance in Louisville, Kentucky on October 19, 1944, she expressed her passionate disapproval:

It makes me very happy to know that you have liked us, that you have felt some of the beauty and happiness that we feel when we perform. But tonight our hearts are very sad because this is a farewell to Louisville. There comes a time when every human being must protest in order to retain human dignity. I must protest because I have discovered that your management will not allow people like you to sit next to people like us. I
hope that time and the unhappiness of this war for tolerance and
democracy, which I am sure we will win, will change some of these
things. Perhaps then we can return. (qtd. in Clark and Johnson 255)

Dunham's remarks reveal that she was unwilling to accept discriminatory conditions as
the status quo, and one of her later works, Southland, was a direct challenge to the
widespread climate of hate, prejudice, bigotry, and ignorance.

VéVé A. Clark describes Dunham's 1951 ballet Southland "a daring dance drama
indeed" (336). The U.S. State Department reacted negatively to this ballet which
depicted a protest against lynching. Clark theorizes that the timing of this production,
immediately preceding the McCarthy hearings and the early civil rights movement, may
have added to the controversy (337). Southland premiered at the Teatro Municipal,
Santiago de Chile in January, 1951. Dunham's program notes are remarkably forthright:

And though I have not smelled the smell of burning flesh, and have never
seen a black body swaying from a Southern tree, I have felt these things in
spirit, and finally through the creative artist comes the need of the person
to show this thing to the world, hoping that by so exposing the ill the
conscience of the many will protest and save further destruction and
humiliation. This is not all of America, it is not all of the South, but it is a
living, present part. (qtd. in Clark and Johnson 341-42)

Although it would seem that Dunham felt completely justified in using her creative talent
to help remove barriers and create respect for all human beings, Hill maintains that covert
diplomatic maneuvers on the part of the State Department insured that Southland was
immediately suppressed in Santiago and was not repeated during the remaining
engagements of the company's South American tour (*Southland* 352-53). Nevertheless, Dunham, with her characteristic panache, went on to present this provocative ballet as part of the company's 1953 Paris season.

*Southland* received mixed reviews in Paris: “When the ballet was finally danced, nobody was pleased. French leftist journalists thought the lynching theme should have been presented more harshly. Journalists on the right criticized her for putting on the ballet at all” (Harnan 158). Hill explains that Dunham was “deeply grieved by the criticism;” further, “She was burned out, not only from battling critics but from fighting her own company who, she discovered, never wanted to perform *Southland*, a ballet they viewed as bringing up feelings of racial difference – something they had gladly left behind in America” (*Southland* 354).

Aschenbrenner contends that it was in Paris, however, that the Dunham company had “perhaps the greatest success of their first European tour” (*Dancing* 143). Although Josephine Baker with her “uninhibited theatricality” had been the hot, new, sensation of Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, according to Aschenbrenner the Parisians also “responded to the cultural and intellectual content as well as to the aesthetic appeal of the Dunham Company presentations” (*Dancing* 143-44). Harnan observes, “Katherine was hailed as 'the most extravagantly successful American dancer since Josephine Baker’”(134). In a conversation with Beckford, Dunham remembers that Josephine Baker at that time, appearing less often on stage and seeing her popularity as somewhat diminished, may have felt threatened by the success of the Dunham company. However, in the same conversation, Dunham also highly praises Baker as “one of the most loved people in European theater . . . who held an undisputed position as a star in some of the same fields
in which I operated” (*Dancing* 106).

There was, arguably, an underlying attitude of professional jealously between these two black female performers. Dunham insists that it was negligible and that, “as we got to know each other, we became friends” (*Dancing* 106). Aschenbrenner adds, “Baker offered to introduce Katherine Dunham to Paris” (*Dancing* 143), and although Dunham declined this offer, Baker, along with other celebrities, came backstage after a performance to personally congratulate the company, many of whom later decided to remain in Paris to launch their own careers, including Eartha Kitt (Perpener 158). Kitt, discussing this Paris debut, offers interesting details of the lobby décor that would seem to suggest a lingering attitude of colonial fantasies – an attitude that contributed to making Baker an overnight phenomenon in the 1920s:

> Opening night in Paris was fantastic. More silks, satins, sables, and lace than I had ever seen before. A stage was set up in the lobby. The decoration in the lobby was intended to create the atmosphere of a jungle. There was even a tiger peeking through the greenery. Animal skins and drums of all sizes and shapes, along with primitive artwork were displayed along the path to the theater. (qtd. in Clark and Johnson 312)

This lobby décor apparently focusing on the exotic elements of a program of African-derived dances seemed to be in stark contrast to Dunham's anthropological approach aimed at elevating the Western world's cultural appreciation of the beauty and power of African-American dance forms. In what can only be an ironic footnote, Gwen Mazer points out that in the company's first performance in Paris there were no blacks in the audience, an occurrence that when brought to the attention of Dunham was quickly
remedied as she “immediately made sure tickets were set aside and that the African students at the Sorbonne were made welcome” (421).

A combination of financial and physical problems caused Dunham and her company to disband and regroup more than once. However, they reunited for a final Broadway production, *Bamboche*, which sent Dunham to Africa to collect materials and dancers for a Moroccan opening section (Aschenbrenner, *Dancing* 158-60). Aschenbrenner explains that *bamboche* were “country parties [in Haiti] involving courtship dances, with emphasis on skill in executing dances and agreeable appearance to attract the opposite sex” (*Dancing* 84). This dance revue in three acts, opened on October 22, 1962, and closed after eight performances (Clark and Johnson 385). As Beckford notes, “The timing was not good, because the show's opening coincided with the Bay of Pigs debacle in 1962” (77). After this short-lived production, Dunham directed *Aida* for the Metropolitan Opera Theater in 1964 and 1966.

Dunham, returned to Illinois as artist-in-residence at Southern Illinois University. Following her choreographic work on *Faust* for the University's 1965 production of this opera, Dunham reassembled her company for what would be their last appearance – a performance in Harlem at the Apollo Theater. Beckford contends “Dunham sensed that to gather the dancers, rehearse, inspire, protect, baby, and discipline them was too hard. She knew it was no longer her career and that she was no longer receiving the personal satisfaction that made the hardships of being star, producer, and touring with a company worthwhile” (61). For the next few years, however, Dunham remained active in the international dance world, choreographing for a film and stage production in Rome, a show in Paris, and a reunion of her company to perform in the American Ballet Theatre's
twenty-fifth anniversary gala. Aschenbrenner states that during this period “Dunham was invited to train the National Ballet of Senegal [for the First World Festival of Negro Arts] . . . and the State Department gave Dunham official status: she was named U.S. Representative to the festival in Dakar” (Dancing 175). After a long distinguished career, that allowed her to impact continents, countries, and cultures, Katherine Dunham was at long last ready to exit the stage.

Dunham arrived in New York some years after the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance, a time of prodigious literary and artistic creativity by African-Americans, but if she had made her appearance earlier, she might well have been recognized as an acknowledged heroine of the New Negro Movement in that she was a black woman able to live her dreams and leave a legacy in her art. Her anthropological, artistic approach to inventing dances based on the original cultural context from which they emanated would at the very least have qualified her as a curator of culture on the concert stage. Although her productions were considered theatrical, Dunham was persistent in her efforts to eliminate cultural barriers as she included in these productions ballets that confirmed the African roots of black dance thereby expanding the possibilities of multiculturalism in the dance world. Dunham offered this comment that serves well as an appropriate summation of her worldview: “If people could only understand they belong to a much vaster society than they live in, this would give them courage to live life with less fear of death. A bit of the whole is in everybody. You take your participation in the total” (Mazer 426). Katherine Dunham was indeed one of the most extraordinary individualists of American modern dance.
CHAPTER IV
PEARL PRIMUS – A PERSONAL CRUSADE

As a young black woman growing up in New York City in the 1930s, Pearl Primus may have been more directly influenced by the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance than Josephine Baker or Katherine Dunham. Indeed, this legacy may have encouraged Primus as she endeavored to bring unique content and form to American concert dance that helped to shape future perceptions of black identity. Consistently committed to the challenging issues of black Americans, Primus brought to the stage choreography that explored racial conflict in its rawest forms. Her artistic talent and her keen intellectual curiosity allowed Primus not only to confront color barriers, but also to enrich the potential of dance in her exploration of culture and rituals derived from the African aesthetic. However, at the time Primus entered the dance world, audiences were already beginning to appreciate a new movement vocabulary for the concert stage that began at the turn of the century as a repudiation of the principles of classical ballet.

The genre of modern dance in the 1930s and 1940s was rich with innovative choreography directed toward creating a uniquely American dance style. During these decades there was a redefinition of concert dance. The provocative work of notable pioneers Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey prepared the way for individual young
artists such as Pearl Primus to add their voices to the emerging field of contemporary
choreography by creating dances for the stage that expressed multi-layered
preoccupations, both sociocultural (her African derived works) and political (protest
dances with racial themes). But what were the early influences that led this young black
woman, coming of age during the Great Depression, to choose concert dance as a career,
and to what degree did race and gender determine her fate? Furthermore, during the early
years of her dancing career, was Primus helped or marginalized by the racialized
implications included in reviews of her work? Finally, a brief look at the work of
contemporary choreographers will help to reveal how Primus's anthropological approach
and artistic style resonate with twentieth-first century dance professionals.

Born in Trinidad in 1919, Pearl Primus was two years old when she immigrated
with her parents to the United States. Although born into a family culturally connected to
the Caribbean, Primus grew up in New York City. John Perpener points out that Primus
was reared in a nurturing environment of church, school, library, and home and
considered herself fortunate that racial issues, the subject of many of her later dances, did
not adversely affect her early childhood (162). However, according to Julia Foulkes,
after graduating from Hunter College, where she excelled as a student in preparation for
medical school, Primus had difficulty finding suitable jobs to finance her further
education due to racist hiring practices at the time (164). Margaret Lloyd adds that
Primus was shocked at the racial prejudice that forced her to take menial jobs, the only
work available to blacks (268). Richard Green notes that after briefly attending New
York University, Primus transferred to Columbia University for graduate work in
anthropology. A job in the wardrobe department for the National Youth Administration
situated Primus within the New York modern dance scene, where she had the good fortune to be trained and nurtured in a vibrant dance community during a period of optimism and rapid growth and began to seriously consider a career in dance (Green 110-111). Primus, having heard about auditions for a scholarship, moved on to the New Dance Group where she was the only black student at the time (Perpener 163).

Founded in 1932, the New Dance Group was established as a revolutionary association to educate dancers to become part of the class struggle by specializing in socially conscious choreography, and Green maintains that this political approach greatly influenced Primus (108). Edward Thorpe further explains that this association was “a kind of dancers' collective, pooling resources and working as a number of individuals and groups sharing a single program or series of performances, and holding informal discussions and forums on the direction of modern dance at a time when the art was in considerable ferment” (119). Margaret Lloyd adds that the New Dance Group was successful in getting “modern dance before more people, many people who had never heard of it before” (175). After the war, this association continued to offer a variety of dance classes at nominal fees taught by dancers Sophie Maslow, Jane Dudley, Eve Gentry, and Mary McBurnie/La Belle Rosette. The association also had a performing group. According to John Perpener, after Primus began to take classes and perform with the New Dance Group, her instructors, increasingly impressed with her natural talent, encouraged her to take classes with Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman (163). Lloyd claims that studying choreography with Doris Humphrey expanded Primus's range of movement potential as Humphrey taught her to “explore a phrase and extract every possible variant of it before letting it go” (276).
In her first professional appearance Primus debuted her own choreography, including *African Ceremonial*, *Strange Fruit*, and *Hard Time Blues*. Her first work, *African Ceremonial*, based upon a fertility rite of the Belgian Congo, was the result of months of research that included consulting books, photographs, museums, African students, and percussionists who accompanied classes at the New Dance Group (Perpener 163-64). Schwartz adds that it was her months of research on this dance that awakened for Primus her “pride in the beauty and dignity of ancient African cultures, their rituals, village life, and social and artistic constructs” (37). Both *Strange Fruit* and *Hard Time Blues* were dances of social protest concerning lynching and sharecropping, respectively (Thorpe 120-121). These solos, danced in the 1940s, became the pattern for Primus's early concerts and immediately provoked a variety of responses from reviewers.

Gervase Butler, reviewing Primus, suggested that it was her “training and vocabulary that made the difference rather than her subject matter,” while John Martin praised her for her subject matter, especially in terms of authenticity, pointing out “the originality of Primus's choreography and its strength of composition” (Morris 131). At the same time however Martin, along with other critics, used language that defined Primus as a Negro dancer, and as Peggy and Murray Schwartz explain even though reviews were filled with “superlatives,” reviewers seemed challenged at times to find the right words to describe Primus's dancing and used phrases such as “dusky little dancer,” that framed her performance in terms of race (51). Morris further notes that although leftist and black critics were also enthusiastic, they tended to place more importance on the debut of a black dancer “breaking the color barrier” (131-132). Peter Suskind of the *Norfolk Journal* pointed out that Primus, appearing with four other dancers who were
white, was the only one receiving curtain calls (Morris 132).

In his discussion of critical response to Primus's performances, Green maintains “high praise from major New York dance critics of the day” contributed to “her almost immediate success” (113). Green adds that Primus was sometimes an acknowledged modern dancer, but other times seen as a Negro dancer and reviews tended to focus both on the racial themes of her choreography and directly on race in terms of dance style and ability (128). In support of this contention, Green singles out George W. Beiswanger of the Dance Observer who, in his review of the “African Dance Festival” held at Carnegie Hall on December 13, 1943, compared Primus's work to that of African dancer Asadata Dafora. Beiswanger saw Primus's choreography as “giving the audience numbers that are more Negro than those presented by an African,” and he found it deplorable that Primus, a “genuine modern dancer,” seemed to feel compelled, because of her race, to present this type of work (Green 113-14). Jack Anderson discussed Beiswanger's opinion emphasizing that he [Beiswanger] went so far as to consider it presumptuous to insist that black choreographers limit their works to dances based on the joys and sorrows of their past; in fact, Beiswanger thought this limiting of subject matter was nothing less than blatant discrimination (Anderson 174). Still, reviewers from Charleston, West Virginia, to Boston saw Primus as a “bold dancer” who “does not try to go beyond bounds” and a “25-year old primitivist . . . of whom the Negro race can be justly proud” (Schwartz 51). This cultural lens through which Primus's dances were viewed may have begun as early as the 1931 “First Negro Dance Recital in America” where John Martin implied that black dancers were only suited to a certain technique (Perpener 44).

Lois Balcom, in two articles in Dance Observer, is unequivocal in pointing out
that, “In her [Balcom's] view, blacks were by nature undisciplined and emotionally profligate, and Primus's dances, in which she flung herself about and made spectacular leaps, were examples of it” (Morris 134). Perpener observes that Balcom interpreted Primus's work as a deliberate use of her racial heritage, asserting “Primus was playing to the expectations of a particular type of audience by giving them African jazz, and black protest dances they expected” (167). Morris argues that Balcom “showed concern for nurturing a black modern dancer” but feared that “she [Primus] would fall into the arms of easy entertainment where she would never become modern,” an attitude with racial implications that “resonates with criticism of Dunham as sexually extravagant, and in both cases this excess was tied to exhibitionism and commerce” (135). Josephine Baker, who exploited the European notion of authenticity of performance and created a movement style that was above all else, entertaining, could also be thrown into this racialized point of view. Unlike Baker, Primus and Dunham were both trained dancers and according to her biographers, Primus revered her training with the early modern dancers and considered herself as one of them, not bound by ethnic or racial considerations (Schwartz 42). Still, Julia L. Foulkes notes that they both [Primus and Dunham] continued to be criticized for not strictly separating entertainment and art, especially in their inclusion of popular social dances alongside more serious choreography. Ironically, these same critics were among those who insisted that modern dance, validated by white dancers and critics, would be the more useful art form to challenge racial discrimination (75).

Edward Thorpe relates that throughout the summer of 1944 Primus traveled to the South where she accumulated a great deal of material to further enhance her
choreographic concepts (121). Perpener says that while visiting southern states and traveling on trains and buses, Primus became keenly aware of the injustice of the Jim Crow laws supporting segregation (166). Another important benefit of this trip, as noted by Green is that it “was an eye-opening experience for Primus,” who discovered “African cultural retentions in the music and movement she found in churches and fields” (115). Lloyd adds that while visiting some “sixty-seven churches” (275), Primus saw the preacher as a sort of “witch doctor” articulating his message with a “drum-beat” intonation. When moved by “the spirit of the Lord,” the parishioners, in their unrestrained responses, would jump wildly into the air throwing out their arms and giving over to all “barbaric impulses” in this jump expressing not joy, but despair over their sins (Lloyd 274). Two of Primus's works, *Hard Time Blues* and *Strange Fruit* were inspired by this journey. According to Foulkes, Primus acknowledged that anger in her choreography could be expressed in two ways. In *Strange Fruit*, Primus's anger is expressed by hurling herself to the ground, while in *Hard Time Blues* the same emotion took her into the air (167). The previously discussed reviews of Lois Balcom, that faulted Primus for flinging herself about with “spectacular leaps,” influenced other reviewers such as Eleanor Anne Goff who used descriptive phrases with racial connotations such as “beautiful savagery” in arguing that Primus's “repetition of uninspired torso and hip flexions” were similar also, but not as “successful” as Katherine Dunham's works (Morris 135).

Photographs of Primus dancing (see Manning 161-62) are often those in which she is suspended in mid-air in what appears to be nothing less than a spectacular leap. While some critics were skeptical about the choreographic intentions of Primus's jump,
Morris contends that for Primus, the jump, (similar to Graham's signature contractions) was a means of artistic expression employed to express the themes of her dances (136). As noted earlier, it was the emotion of *Hard Time Blues* (a dance that conveys a sharecropper's rebellion) that took Primus into the air. Primus herself explains that for this piece the dancer “spins and leaps in frustration” (Schwartz 36). Lloyd offers details of this choreography:

Pearl takes a running jump, lands in an upper corner and sits there, unconcernedly paddling the air with her legs. She does it repeatedly, from one side of the stage, then the other, apparently unaware of the involuntary gasps from the audience. The feat looks something like the broad jump of the athlete, but the take-off is different . . . and the legs are kicked out less horizontally (271).

Morris comments that Lloyd was among those who remained skeptical about the intentions of Primus's jump seeing it “as out of keeping with the themes of her dance” (136). However, it is little wonder in this era of Jim Crow laws that regardless of whether or not her famous jump was considered as too much exhibitionism, Primus realized that it found powerful resonance in her dances of protest. Perpener appreciates the aesthetic elements of Primus's distinctive performing style, noting that at times “she wrenched movement from the air and then brought it down to its earthly conclusion. At other times, she imbued stillness with the elegant primal austerity of an African woodcarving” (162). In a 1968 *Dance Magazine* article, Primus, observed teaching a class, was overheard saying, “No, no, no. Leap again. Make it real. Dance in Africa is not a separate thing, but a part of the complex of living. You must use your body as an
instrument through which every emotion is projected. Dance for love, hatred, fear, joy, sorrow, disgust, amazement. You must reveal these emotions through your rhythmic movement” (Estrada 56). Schwartz notes that even after her return from Africa, Primus continued to perform her early solos and “held them close to her” feeling that another dancer could not fully understand them or appreciate their power, especially since they were now “imbued with the deeper rhythmic embodiments she absorbed in Africa” (94).

After only three and a half years of formal training at the New Dance Group, Primus and a small group of dancers debuted at the Belasco Theatre restaging and repeating several of her earlier dances (Strange Fruit, Hard Time Blues, and African Ceremonial) and premiering a new work, The Negro Speaks of Rivers, based on the poem by Langston Hughes (Manning 121). This poem evokes images of rivers as symbolic of the pain, suffering, pride and hope of the black experience. Green points out that Primus and Hughes worked closely in the evolution of this piece, and in an interview, Primus recalled talking to Hughes about his vision when writing this poem, a discussion that ultimately informed her choreography (124-25).

In terms of Primus's choreographic approach to The Negro Speaks of Rivers, Naomi M. Jackson observes that she used movement metaphorically, such as the dancer rolling to imitate the river's flow and simulating flight to represent escape (165). Primus acknowledged that the movement was shaped by modern dance techniques and African sculpture, and with the use of Hughes's poem she created a bridge between the black artistic movement of the 1920s with modern dance of the 1940s (Green 124-15). Lloyd, obviously impressed, details the movement patterns:

It is beautiful with undulating rhythms over deep-flowing currents of
movement that wind into whirlpool spins. She pivots on one knee or circles the stationary bent leg with the free leg, leaning her body in a long slant away from the traveling foot. The pale soles flash, the brown toes clutch and grasp, the dark fingers spread wide . . . her chaste intensity and passionate imagination carry to a sweeping finish. (273)

With this rhapsodic description it would seem that Lloyd appreciated Primus's ability to interpret social protest with her rich and varied movement vocabulary. It is also noteworthy but not surprising that Lloyd, whose book was published in 1949, articulates Primus's physicality with racial connotations. Lloyd uses the phrases “pale soles flash” and “dark fingers spread wide,” and she describes Primus as “intensely Negro” with “big brown eyes, with their expanse of whites” that seem to “look out from jungle distances” (266). Green, from his later perspective in an essay published in 2002, appreciated the laudatory tone of Lloyd's comments, but felt that they confirmed a stereotypical view of blacks that was not uncommon at the time, especially pointing to her choice of words suggesting Primus's body as a symbol for something primitive or Other (122). Lloyd, however, argues that it is foolhardy to separate Primus from her race because “as an artist ambassador of her race, she has something that no white dancer can give, something it is immensely important for her to give” (266).

Foulkes points out that black dancers were constantly finding themselves up against racial prejudices and that critics found it all too easy to minimize the artistic intent of their work. She maintains that Primus, only five feet two inches tall, had dark pigmentation, large expressive eyes, muscular thighs and buttocks, and was readily accepted on the stage as a stereotypical black woman, whereas her predecessor, Katherine
Dunham, lighter in color, taller, and leaner, may have kindled another kind of criticism by reminding audiences of miscegenation (73-74). Despite these widespread attitudes, Foulkes notes that Primus and Dunham “mediated sexuality within their artistry” and that their efforts prompted white critics to reconsider “assumptions about the capabilities of African American dancers and the difficulties they faced” (74).

Primus's choreography drew upon the black experience in an emphatic way. Manning provides an account of Primus's revival of one of her debut solos, *Strange Fruit*, from her 1994 notes, in which she details and frames the role in a very specific way:

Upstage right was where the dance was to begin with the woman who was a member of a picnic party leaving the area. Upstage right about quarter stage was a tree of reality where the woman's strength, pain and anguish would be grounded. Upstage left never approached. While downstage right was safe, center stage was a vortex one could and would pass through and ultimately encircle as the piece unfolded. The remainder of the space downstage left . . . was the area of repulsion, the area where the lynching had occurred. This space was vile, inapproachable. If one did approach it, one would be instantly repelled, thrown back with great force by the horror of this place. (165)

Schwartz, who provides a lengthy discussion of this collaborative project, explains that this teaching of *Strange Fruit* (to Michele Simmons, a former Ailey dancer), became Primus's final important restaging and “provides a valuable record of this seminal work in the canon of American modern dance” (231). Kim Bears, a dancer with Philadanco, met Primus in 1986 and later, with encouragement during the rehearsal process from Primus
herself, performed *Strange Fruit*. Bears also taught *Strange Fruit* to Dawn Marie Watson for the filmed version included in the 2007 *Dancing in the Light* DVD.

This filmed version offers further appreciation of the scope and complexity of Primus's emotional work, *Strange Fruit*. Immediately, the movement patterns are starkly dramatic as Watson so perfectly enacts the emotional state that Primus clearly conveys in her 1994 revival notes. The power of *Strange Fruit* is further enhanced as the choreography works in sync with the narrator's vocal interpretation of Lewis Allan's poem of the same name. Creatively constructing this dance in a narrative form without jazz and vernacular movement more often associated with the black experience is perhaps one bit of evidence that Primus was indoctrinated into the kind of expressive movement that epitomized modern dance during that period. Susan Manning explains “no photographs of the dance were published during the war years, perhaps because the camera could not capture the power of Primus's weighted movement against the weighty text” (163). However, this video version, while not entirely projecting the weighted movement, does seem to effectively capture Primus's intent as it clearly depicts the primacy of a moving human body in an intensely personal moment.

Lloyd points out that *Strange Fruit*, while obviously a woman's reaction to a lynching, does not entirely define the relationship of the woman to the victim. She additionally claims that Primus insisted to her that the woman is not one who may have loved the victim but rather one of the lynch mob who stays behind and realizes with “grief and terror” what happened (Lloyd 271). Lloyd says the dance “comes through to different people in different ways – the right way for modern dance” and further applauds Primus for her ability to identify with a “white person,” as well as being able to
understand, “even in a lynch mob, the possibility of remorse” (271). Foulkes agrees: “By portraying a white woman in *Strange Fruit*, Primus extended the horror and incomprehensibility of racism to white people” (167). Instead of the established pattern of white women representing black women on the stage (as in Helen Tamiris's earlier piece, *How Long Brethern?*), Primus reversed this concept in *Strange Fruit* (Foulkes 167). Manning contends that Primus “choreographed a reverse version of metaphorical minstrelsy” as, instead of white bodies, she “made reference to white subjects through her African-American body” (164). The fluctuating political environment that existed in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, culminating in the civil rights movement, most certainly would have influenced Primus to at least imagine the day when her work would be performed by a dancer regardless of race and ethnicity.

Very early on, Primus came under the surveillance of the FBI. In the early days of her career, following her debut performance, Primus spent ten months performing in a Greenwich Village jazz club, Café Society Downtown, and it was this nightclub work, according to Foulkes, that introduced Primus to a politically active group of performers including, among others, Lena Horne, Billie Holiday, and Paul Robeson. This association led to her participation in Negro Freedom Rallies during the war years (168), and this, along with her politically motivated protest dances made her a person of interest. Schwartz found that the first entry in Primus's FBI file was dated September 9, 1944, and among other issues, raises questions about her immigration status and notes her participation in a twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the Communist Party. A final entry, dated May 16, 1945, declares that Primus is “neither a prominent nor influential Communist” (64-68). Primus's 1943 performances at the Café Society, despite the
politics, had a very positive consequence for Primus's career, and brought her to the attention of Walter Sorell:

A rather short, strongly built dancer impressed me with her technique, expressiveness, and power of projection. He who has ever seen her leaps will never be able to forget Pearl Primus. . . . I had not the slightest idea that I would later often see her work and review it. From the very beginning I felt that she would never betray the roots from which the flame of her strength issued. She danced herself in The Negro Speaks of Rivers, she danced her race in African Ceremonial . . . She masterly evolved one Negro theme after the other, creating a vast panorama of the black world. (Sorell 171-172)

Although Sorell begins by suggesting that Primus's body was not exactly a typical dancer's body, he nevertheless was very impressed with her creative talent. Apparently Sorell was not the only one impressed with Primus's Café Society performances. Joe Nash remembered that when she danced the whole room became quiet and even those standing turned around to look at her, “she awed the audience, reached people emotionally, spiritually and intellectually” (Schwartz 45).

Primus's intellectual curiosity and quest for authenticity were finally rewarded. After seeing Primus dance in a concert at Fisk University, Dr. Edwin Embree, President of the Rosenwald Foundation, arranged for Primus to be granted a Rosenwald Fellowship which allowed her to travel to Africa where she participated in native dances and performed her own work. Visiting the Gold Coast (now Ghana), Angola, the Cameroons, Liberia, Senegal and the Belgium Congo (now Democratic Republic of Congo), Primus
was enthusiastically welcomed by the Africans (Thorpe 121-22). Morris claims that after her return from Africa Primus was “once again wholeheartedly welcomed into the high-art fold, this time as an anthropologist and expert in African dance as much, if not more, than as a choreographers of modern dance (137). Thorpe agrees, noting, “This African journey was a tremendous emotional and aesthetic experience for Primus, and her work gained a new strength and authority from it” (122).

Perpener argues that “the questions detractors such as Balcom posed concerning authenticity of her dance” were put to rest as Primus learned that there existed “major dance distinctions among ethnic groups” (171). Primus discovered in her journey to Africa that “there was no all-inclusive African dance style or technique that could be used as an easy reference” and therefore to “include or exclude a dance by questioning whether or not it was authentic was 'simply inaccurate'” (Perpener 171). Primus offers this explanation:

African dance is basic, vital! For the investigator it is the source, the well from which she draws inspiration for her creative work. African dance is complete. It ranges from the subtlest and most lyric of movements to the most dynamic, from the most sophisticated choreographed presentations to the simplest. It can defy space in fantastic leaps into the air or burrow into the earth. It does not limit itself to any one part of the body but employs the use of even the most minute muscle. It varies from the slowest and the stateliest of court dances to those which move so rapidly the eye cannot hope to register all that is happening. In all, there is the concept of beauty! (Asante 4-5)
This definition by Primus almost dances off the page. She clearly articulates here that African dance idioms are unlimited in style, size, and scope of movement and therefore dismisses any remaining questions of authenticity. Perpener adds that Primus also came to understand and appreciate the difference between ritual dancing learned from childhood and the dancing of trained African performers who studied from an early age with master dancers to learn traditional dances with precision (171).

Green discusses Primus’s return from Africa in some detail, acknowledging that Primus came to realize the validity of her “belief that African-Americans had retained some part of their African heritage, in spite of the traumatic cultural shock of bodies moving along the middle passage into slavery in the Americas” (120). After this trip, Primus focused on ethnographic staging of African dances. Perpener explains that Primus began to incorporate her observation of African dancing into new works such as Fanga, a dance of welcome from Liberia, Egbo Esakpade, based on court dances of Benin, The Initiation, featuring tribal masks, and a spiritual dance, Impinyuza, that she learned from the king of Watusi and reserved as a solo for herself. Perpener notes that Primus's African-inspired works became a combination of individual dances that “made stronger statements as theater pieces than the shorter, unrelated dances she had formerly presented” (172). As a recipient of many awards, several of which she shared with Katherine Dunham, Primus urged that instead of awards, “a greater honor would be to build on what we've done, take it to another level” (Schwartz 216).

As to her legacy, Primus need not have been concerned. Two black dancers, Donald McKayle and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, still working today, are building upon Primus's extraordinary heritage. Perpener maintains that Donald McKayle, as a teenager,
first saw Pearl Primus perform at the Central High School of Needle Trades and was so impressed with her performance that he became immediately attracted to the idea of becoming a professional dancer (189). McKayle recalls, “I was fortunate enough to follow Pearl Primus to the New Dance Group. . . . Later I asked her to teach me some of what I had seen on that stage. It was what you call a complete and immediate love affair with dance” (qtd. in Osumare 16-17). As a scholarship student at the New Dance Group, McKayle studied with Primus, as well as Sophie Maslow, Jean Erdman, and others. He made his professional debut in 1948. The environment for young black dancers was decidedly more favorable during this period. Perpener points out that despite certain challenges, such as the necessity to form picket lines to demand that unions allow blacks to audition for productions, the late 1940s and 1950s were optimum years for young black artists entering the New York Dance scene (189-90). Thomas DeFrantz adds that modern dance was especially receptive to black males and points out that Donald McKayle and others, “buoyed by the liberal optimism of the New York Dance community of the post-war era,” used their choreographic talent to “explore ways to self-consciously align power and the black male body onstage” (112), much like Primus did for the black female body onstage when, in her debut performance of *Strange Fruit*, she, as a black dancing body, expressed the horror of a lynching from the perspective of a white woman.

McKayle and Primus both used their choreographic skills to stimulate social awareness. McKayle's 1959 protest dance, *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder*, not unlike Primus's 1945 emotionally charged *Strange Fruit*, remains relevant in its power to evoke commiseration from audiences for people everywhere coping with grief, hope, and
despair. Although critics were quick to interject the subject of race into Primus's works, McKayle's piece premiered during a time of increasing racial agitation and elicited little if any comment on its racial implications (Morris 157-158).

For Primus, in both *Strange Fruit* and *A Negro Speaks of Rivers*, it was spoken poetry, but for McKayle, in *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder*, it is song lyrics that suggest the subject and provide a metaphor for the movement. The same predilection for social protest without sentimentality exhibited in Primus's early works is immediately manifested in the opening section of McKayle's choreography. Dancers cross the stage in unison with weighted movement and sharp physical impulse, expressive of the misery of being part of a chain gang. In the sections that follow, elements of African-inspired use of the torso and arms recall Primus's style. Even though McKayle's piece thematically suggests an affiliation with Primus's works, his choreographic approach in *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder* differs from Primus as it merges elements of ballet with jazz and vernacular movement. Despite there being no obvious direct links between Primus's solo dances of social protest and McKayle's ensemble work, there are specific sequences in the choreography of these artists that seem to suggest a shared motivation and approach to making dances. It was not until the first decade of this century that McKayle made a direct link to Pearl Primus with a West Coast premiere of *I've Known Rivers*, his four-minute work described as “a muscular solo set to a Langston Hughes poem” and one that pays “homage to dance icon Pearl Primus” (Looseleaf 113).

Almost as if to recycle Primus's dynamic contribution to the development of black concert dance, contemporary choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, founding Artistic Director of Urban Bush Women, created *Walking With Pearl . . . African Diaries* in 2004,
followed in 2005 by *Walking With Pearl . . . Southern Diaries*. These two separate works were based on Primus's diaries from her African fieldwork and a 1940s trip to the South. Knowing that Primus performed to spoken poetry, Zollar's company performs these two works accompanied by an oral reading of excerpts from the journals. Janice Steinberg argues that of the two works, *Walking With Pearl . . . Southern Diaries* allows Primus a stronger presence, especially with its inclusion of a reconstruction of one of Primus's works from her debut concert (*Hard Time Blues*) (UCSD ArtPower 1).

It seems rather fitting that Zollar, whose first teacher was Joseph Stevenson, (a former student of Katherine Dunham), would use her considerable talent to create compelling choreography from the diaries of Pearl Primus that touchingly honor and sustain her extraordinary legacy. Ananya Chatterjea maintains that “Zollar's work is inspired by the anthropological approaches and artistic styles of Primus and Dunham, the technique formalized by Dunham, [and] the choreographic practice of melding African American experience with Africanist dance material familiarized by Primus” (145).

Perpener offers a succinct summary of Primus's work, pointing out that her exceptional artistic approach both created dances that resonated with contemporary concerns of black Americans and dances affirming her passionate attachment to the people and culture of Africa (175). Weighing in among the legions of professional dancers with whom Primus's artistry resonated is the acclaimed Judith Jamison, Artistic Director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Jamison recalls first seeing Primus in Philadelphia, noting that she had great strength. She brought the Black woman's power and knowledge to the stage. . . . She had gone to the homeland, which impressed me as a ten-year-old, and I was blown away by her performance” (qtd. in Bolden 217).
Primus might well be proud of being remembered as a performer bringing “the Black woman's power and knowledge to the stage.” Although, as noted earlier, issues of race did not seem a significant factor in her childhood, as a young promising artist Primus became increasingly aware of barriers faced by black Americans and it can be assumed that this awareness was at least a part of the impetus that nourished her desire to become a dancer.

Perhaps the most important early influence on the direction of Primus's career was her association with the New Dance Group where many of its early members had studied with the recognized pioneers of modern dance. It was here that Primus began to understand the aesthetics of these pioneers and learn the basic elements of choreography. Also, the political environment of this organization with its emphasis on social change undoubtedly provoked the subject matter of Primus's early choreography – particularly her solos that made strong statements against racial injustice and inequality. As to the critics, dance scholars offer a great deal of evidence indicating that they were not unanimous in reviews of her concerts. Although her rapid success, by all accounts, is attributed to the high praise she received from leading dance critics, there were also, as noted earlier, reviewers with somewhat contentious responses to her work that raised questions about appropriate subject matter for black concert dancers. These reviewers also pointed out the need for black dancers to resist allowing their art to become “simply” entertainment. However, these responses, along with criticism of her famous leaps, helped, rather than marginalized Primus who forthrightly asserts “dance has been my freedom and my world. It has enabled me to go around, scale, bore through, batter down or ignore visible and invisible social and economic walls” (Schwartz n.pag.).
Perhaps the most important contribution of Primus was her confirmation, once and for all, that black dancers could not only succeed on the concert stage but also take pride in their ancestral roots. Like Dunham before her, Primus did anthropological fieldwork to recover and interpret details of African rituals and dances, strongly suggesting that, despite the trans-Atlantic slave trade, blacks should retain at least a fragment of African culture in their movement. This notion reinforced Dunham's earlier work, and further awakened a new appreciation for African-American cultural heritage. Indeed, the trajectory of Pearl Primus's career took her on what would become an intensely personal and richly rewarding crusade to establish an authentic dance form, a crusade that continues to sustain and nurture the many dance artists who follow in her footsteps.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

Josephine Baker, Katherine Dunham, and Pearl Primus were all part of a generation of African-American performing artists who refused to allow racism and discrimination to stand in their way as they boldly made their New York City debuts. However, even in this vibrant metropolis celebrated for its emphasis on renewed cultural awareness, these young black women found their artistic quests would require great tenacity as they metaphorically danced around the double bind of race and gender. Undeterred, Baker, Dunham, and Primus stepped into the arena where they performed for predominately white audiences and were judged by predominately white critics. In spite of being in this singular sorority, these dancers each had unique approaches to their art. No matter whether their performances were seen as risqué or spartan, all three of these artists, to varying degrees, were subject to racialized interpretations of their bodies on the stage. This chapter attempts to bring into sharper focus the choreographic forms employed by Baker, Dunham, and Primus, as well as the demeaning language choices of critics and audiences that on some levels devalued and objectified these gifted performers who used their artistry to enrich the cultural landscape.

To describe Josephine Baker's movement vocabulary is to miss the point because the building blocks are not remarkable in themselves. Baker comes across as an artist of particular intelligence and individuality who projected both confidence and delight. Her
intelligence is revealed in the manner in which she repeatedly executed attention-getting steps and combinations that dazzled her audience. There is a sense of a mind at work because, instinctive musicality aside, Baker moved as if propelled by a nervous, edgy energy. To complement this energetic, larger-than-life style, Baker was able to find the subtleties inherent in the choreographic dynamics that made her early music hall performances such a sensation.

As indicated in the previous chapter, Josephine Baker working as a dancer had already attained a certain amount of economic independence before deciding to go to Paris in 1925. However, it was Paris, the capital city of a colonialist country, which became Baker's springboard. In Paris this young dancer ignited audiences and critics, who seemed to relish their various interpretations of her blackness and womanhood while at the same time being energized by her provocative style of movement that was a blending African-American vernacular dance traditions with rhythmic interpretations of popular social dances. Baker, perceiving the potential of the audience's fascination with her black dancing body, ingeniously manipulated all aspects of her newly-found fame to increase her celebrity, which in turn facilitated her rebirth as an independent and unique modern woman. Regardless, her initial reception as a magnetic performer did not come without a price, as she was often characterized in disparaging phrases that suggested her exotic appearance as a black woman was both sensual and sinister.

Perhaps the first to appreciate the potential allure of Baker's other-worldliness was André Daven, Director of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, who conveyed the image of Baker as a presence that evoked a glimpse of other-worldliness and whose dancing was filled with rhythm and raw passion. Daven further notes that the combination of savage
grace and simplicity of emotions made her performance deeply moving (Baker and Bouillon 51). Daven's phrases “raw force of her passion” and “her savage grace” set the tone for the rhetoric that became customary when writing about Baker's early music hall performances.

Constance Valis Hill observed that, before 1914, the French considered all blacks dangerous and immoral, however, after coming into contact with Africans and Americans who participated in the war effort, and with the arrival of Josephine Baker, they began to view blacks as noble savages “blessed with unfettered primitive spontaneity” (Jazz 237). Even after a tour to South America and the opening of a new revue at the Casino de Paris, critics continued to describe Baker in such language as “beautiful savage” and “négresse droll and primitive” (qtd in Baker and Chase 171), appellations which Baker, as noted earlier, resisted through her adaptation of a performing persona that seemed to play to these very racist and sexist characterizations.

According to Baker and Chase, Baker's 1935 New York debut with the Ziegfeld Follies was met with harsh criticism. An unnamed reviewer for Time magazine was particularly brutal, describing Baker as “just a slightly buck-toothed young Negro woman whose figure might be matched in any nightclub show, [and] whose dancing and singing could be topped practically anywhere outside France” (qtd. in Baker and Chase 204). Reviews like this confirm that Baker, who had achieved great success abroad, was still considered by some to be fair game as a target for terminology brimming with racial prejudice and scurrilous insult.

Although making her New York debut more than ten years after Baker left for Paris, Katherine Dunham also had to mitigate the exoticism of black bodies on the
concert stage. Dunham's early concerts were seen as exotic, and reviews of her productions often emphasized her personal style and appearance. Julia Foulkes maintains that Dunham's approach to choreography was complicated by her efforts to find a balance between “the seductive banter of Baker” and the “sexlessness that white women modern dancers successfully deployed” (72), a dilemma further challenged by racial prejudice and by gender bias. Foulkes observes that Dunham's choreographic approach, combined with her education as an anthropologist, made her even more vulnerable to critics who focused their reviews on the sensual, sexually explicit moments of her choreography, even insinuating that her academic accomplishments were possibly an excuse to present primitive movement on the stage (72).

Regardless, Katherine Dunham exhibited impressive versatility and stamina throughout a long, strenuous career that included years of presenting her dance company on stages in the United States and abroad. The commendable achievements of Dunham as a performer and a choreographer cannot be separated from her success in founding, nurturing, and sustaining a dance company. Dunham, reportedly with great dignity and generosity of spirit, was able to develop a repertoire that both challenged the abilities of her dancers and showed them off to their best advantage.

Dunham's springboard was Chicago, and this city full of vitality was a perfect environment to stimulate her creative energy with its many opportunities, both social and professional, to interact with other artists, dancers, writers, and academics. By the 1930s, Dunham had developed into a serious dance artist whose skills were undoubtedly strengthened and accelerated by the many occasions she had to dance and present her original choreography on the stage. Dunham's light-skinned complexion undoubtedly
expedited her acceptance into professional circles where possibly her darker-skinned sisters may not have been welcomed.

Critics often referred to Dunham as “hot” and “performing in a sexually taunting, splashy, and theatrical style” (Foulkes 73). Walter Sorell found Dunham physically attractive but saw this attribute as a double-edged sword, noting that her attractiveness “is of great help in life and on stage – but combined with her theater sense this often brought her dangerously close to mere show business” (172). Gay Morris points out that, to an unfair degree, black dancers in the 1940s were often accused of employing virtuosity and sexuality simply for display, an attitude that served to impede any effort toward the inclusion of Africanist elements in black movement vocabularies. Both Primus's jump and Dunham's undulating hips presented a certain energy and forthrightness that subliminally suggested an element of danger to critics. Morris surmises that indeed Dunham's use of the shoulders and pelvis may have been seen as a challenge to “American Puritanism,” and Primus's physical virtuosity seemed on some levels a threat to barriers “constructed to control blacks and separate them from whites” (146).

Joe Nash, who began his formal training with Katherine Dunham and met Pearl Primus at the National Youth Administration in the 1940s (DeFrantz vii), explains that in 1938 when Dunham was beginning her innovative stage productions and developing her unique technique, critics did not fully appreciate the significance of her work (Black Choreographers Moving: A National Dialogue 76). In an early positive review John Martin suggests that Dunham's work be appreciated exclusively for its “authoritative approach,” even as he urges that “if the Negro is to develop an art of his own he can begin only with the seeds of that art that lie within him” (Kaiso 211). In other words,
Martin, as touched upon in an earlier chapter, more than once admonished black dancers not to venture too far beyond his [Martin's] prescribed movement form.

Just as critics began to appreciate the growing popularity of modern dance, black artists arrived on the scene, and many critics were unsure how black concert dancers should be viewed. Nash maintains that Martin, in his critiques of early black concert dance, was employing standards “at variance with standards for white dancers” and that “race was now the focus, not art. It was Negro dance, not modern dance” *(Black Choreographers Moving: A National Dialogue)* 76. Susan Manning contends there was a “token integration of modern dance and Negro dance” in the post-war years that managed to coexist within “racialized boundaries,” with modern dance being defined by its “mythic abstraction” and Negro dance continuing to stage variations on its “newly established convention of black self-representation” (183).

Unlike Josephine Baker, both Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus had the advantage of maintaining complete control over their art as they choreographed independently to create images that communicated a new black consciousness. However, even as these accomplished pioneers ushered in a new level of technical skill and expressiveness they had to embrace their blackness as a part of their identity, as Baker had before them. To this end, the movement language Dunham and Primus employed was an important part of their personal heritage. The work of many dance scholars confirms that Dunham and Primus were all too often up against unfair expectations as to what direction their work should take. Some reviewers even insisted that they limit the range of their choreographic efforts by exclusively using jazz and vernacular movement or that they confine their choreography to creating works highlighting the harsh realities
Gay Morris notes that in the 1950s, with increasing numbers of African-American dancers and choreographers, these artists came to be regarded as “modern rather than Negro, and their dances were universalized in keeping with modernist imperatives” (146). Be that as it may, during the 1950s the State Department found ways to intimidate performing artists. When the United States became concerned over international criticism of American racism, *Southland*, a stark, dramatic ballet with a tragic theme, so provoked the State Department that Dunham and her company were overlooked for touring grants awarded as part of the country's cultural diplomacy. Josephine Baker, in the 1950s, also drew the attention of the State Department when she criticized American racial discrimination while on tour in Latin America. Subsequently, she found it difficult to obtain further engagements in Latin America and “at one point was barred from landing in the United States on her way from France to Mexico City” (Morris 148-49).

As for Pearl Primus, very early in her career she interjected politics into her choreography by performing solos highlighting the unrelenting discrimination faced by African-Americans. However, by the 1960s she advocated a less aggressive approach:

> As for the white and black struggle, I have nothing to say. Enough words have been exchanged. I'm learning to deliberately reach beyond the color of the skin and go into people's souls and hearts and search out that part of them, black or white, which is common to all. Never mind political militancy. Artists are the only true militant people. (Estrada 56)

Pearl Primus was without question one of the “true militants.” She dedicated her adult life to confronting and eliminating stereotypes and instilling in African-Americans a
sense of pride in their cultural heritage.

Pearl Primus was a dancer's dancer, with a movement vocabulary that was sharp, lyrical, and graceful yet at the same time exuberant and refined. Considering that she had a relatively brief period of formal training, the variety of Primus's repertoire and her virtuosity is remarkable. Her choreographic skills infused social, political, and psychological themes into timeless pieces, and her research as an anthropologist allowed her to create works that honored her ancestors and introduced many American dancers to African dance traditions. However, as a black woman working in a medium where she challenged the dominate aesthetic of Western standards of beauty and body proportions, Primus was both celebrated and berated as a concert dancer. Primus's rapid success can be attributed to the high praise she received from leading dance critics, but along with these laudatory reviews there were a few critics with somewhat contentious responses to her work. These reviewers often raised questions as to appropriate subject matter for black concert dancers and stressed the need for black dancers to resist allowing their art to become simply entertainment. This tone of criticism, along with criticism of her famous leap, in no way discouraged Primus as she persevered in establishing what became an illustrious career.

Edward Thorpe points out that Primus's contribution to African-American dance was “immense” and that her work was devoid of “meretricious glamour,” instead placing emphasis on the “strength, dignity, pride and virtuosity inherent in the various forms of Black dance” (123). Thorpe was obviously juxtaposing Primus's work against the more elaborate productions of Katherine Dunham. Thorpe contends that although Dunham and Primus made dances that were culturally authentic, the major difference between their
choreography is that Primus “allowed her dances to make their own statement” whereas Dunham employed “all the forces of modern theatre as emphasis: dramatic lighting, brilliant costumes, lavish settings” (124). An accessible visual reference to appreciate how Primus's dances made their own statement is a video reconstruction of her timeless piece, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*. This reconstruction, examined in some detail earlier, highlights Primus's talent as a choreographer in that a solo dancer virtually rooted in one spot is able to fill the stage with large-scale uncluttered movement.

Primus and Dunham, both choreographers and anthropologists, were often compared as artists. Like Dunham before her, Primus sought to create a new positive African-influenced black choreography for her audience and to create work that went beyond the defamatory, stereotypical characterizations of black performers in the early decades of the twentieth century. What defined Primus more than Dunham, however, was the way in which she absolutely embraced modern dance as her medium. According to Susan Manning, when John Martin saw Primus dancing he “perceived the forms of Negro dance and modern dance coming together in a way that they did not in his viewing of Katherine Dunham” (167). Further, Martin maintains that while Dunham may have realized the potential of black dance, Primus found a connection of this form to modern dance, blending themes that were “racially authentic” with themes that were “individually expressive” (167). The work of both Primus and Dunham, perhaps for the first time, validated the artistic viability of black dancers on the concert stage.

Beyond stylistic differences, Manning points to similarities in the approach of Dunham and Primus to Broadway productions. While both choreographers opened their Broadway shows with primitive dances and ended with twentieth-century jazz pieces,
Primus, unlike Dunham, placed dances of social protest between these two forms. All the same, juxtaposing these contrasting dance forms did not necessarily serve Primus well. Manning argues that even though Primus “staged a more fragmented vision of African-American life,” Dunham “staged a coherent narrative of diaspora” (172). Additionally, Manning found this “straddling” of these dance forms was met with “marked ambivalence” by critics, an attitude characterized by Manning as indicative of “the divide between Negro dance and modern dance” and that was perhaps more of a conundrum than it appeared in Primus's earlier concerts (172).

Dance critic John Martin had definite ideas about how to view theatrical dance. Martin saw theatrical dance in two ways: spectacular, with emphasis on what the dance looks like, or as expressional, with emphasis on what the dance communicates. Martin placed ballet and other dance forms in the spectacular category but only modern dance met his criteria as an expressional form (Anderson 143). In Martin's view, then, the dances of Baker and Dunham, with their elaborate sets and costumes, would be considered spectacular, while Primus's body of work would be considered expressional.

To succeed as black women Baker, Dunham, and Primus had to be exceptional. These three artists recognized early in their careers that dance improvisation and choreography would be for them a means of empowerment. Baker's eclectic music hall performances, Dunham's theatrical revues, and Primus's austere protest choreography—all of these distinct approaches left models for future generations as to how dance functions within the lives of performers and audiences. Indeed, black female choreographers today are celebrated for their dynamic contributions. Contemporary artists continue to cross boundaries of gender and race to create compelling works that
project a new consciousness of the possibilities of concert dance. At the same time, these contemporary artists are extending and revising the significant performance styles and forms of movement pioneered in the first half of the twentieth century by the unforgettable Josephine Baker, the preeminent Katherine Dunham, and the phenomenal Pearl Primus.


*Dancing In The Light*. Dir. Madison Davis Lacy. Kultur, 2007. DVD.


