DANCE LIBERATION:
MOVEMENTS OF FREEDOM IN THE WORKS OF
PEARL PRIMUS AND RENNIE HARRIS

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the choreography of Pearl Primus (1919-1994) and Rennie Harris (1964-) and how concert dance contributes to an atmosphere of social protest by furthering African American goals for equality and freedom. My performance and research provide an analysis of the artistic development of Primus and Harris in relationship to cultural movements for black liberation. The dances examined in this study express the social, political, and racial experiences of black people seeking freedom during various historical periods. I discuss notions of black identity, artistry, and political activism in the following social movements: the Harlem Renaissance, the anti-lynching movement, the Black Power and Black Arts movement, and the hip-hop movement. Primus and Harris are two examples of how individual dance artists contribute to collective activism.

To fully explore the dimensionality of black liberation in the works of Primus and Harris, I employ three distinct modes of research: (a) theories of dance history, cultural studies, and African American history, (b) historical research at the New York Public Library Dance Collection, and (c) my own rehearsal and performance experiences as a dancer. This interdisciplinary approach will serve as a model for future scholars in the field of dance.
Dedicated to the memory of
Katherine Dunham (22 June 1909 – 21 May 2006),
and to all those who continue to fight
for the liberation of oppressed people everywhere.
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PEARL PRIMUS AND RENNIE HARRIS

Pearl Primus (1919-1994) and Rennie Harris (1964-) are two North American choreographers whose work is characterized by the same themes of social protest that are inherent in political movements for black liberation. The Black Freedom Movement is a general term that refers to a multiplicity of political movements initiated by black people in order to gain freedom. From rebellions led by enslaved Africans in the 1700s to revolutionary movements of the 1970s, black people have been resisting oppression and fighting for freedom throughout American history.

Primus and Harris's roles in the Black Freedom Movement did not manifest itself through the conventional mediums of street demonstrations or civil disobedience. They worked for black freedom by creating dances that 1) illustrate the oppressive social realities of racism, 2) assert the humanity and beauty of black people and 3) establish a form that enables individual dancers to express and experience personal freedom.

An unlikely pair, Harris and Primus are connected by generations of choreographers. Primus is one of the earliest examples of what I call “dance
liberation,” a choreographic or performance practice that contributes to an atmosphere of social protest. Harris is one of the most contemporary.

In the context of oppression, the experience of freedom is predicated by social change. The concert stage can be a site to “rehearse” social transformation and envision social justice. My research identifies Primus and Harris as a part of the cultural arm of the Black Freedom Movement and thereby establishes concert dance as a legitimate contributor to an atmosphere of protest.

Scholar Erika Doss has researched the “protest aesthetic” of visual artists such as Emory Douglas whose images were published in the Black Panther, the Black Panther Party’s newspaper. Referring to visual art, Douglas asserts, “revolutionary art is a tool for liberation” (Doss 175). In addition, various scholars have researched the role of music and writing in the Black Freedom Movement. In Blues, Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday (1998), Angela Y. Davis provides readers with a close reading of blues lyrics, social history, and the performative qualities that influenced black feminism. Margo Perkins adds to a growing research interest in black liberation struggles of the 1960s and 1970s with her book Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties (2000). She takes a detailed look at three autobiographies written by women involved in the Black Panther Party and the written word’s impact on promoting activism and social awareness.

As evidenced by the diverse works of Paul Robeson, Public Enemy, Elizabeth Catlett, and Toni Morrison, artists and activists create cultural work that
is integral to African American political resistance. Art shapes the imagination of its audiences and can assist a collective movement in reforming or toppling unjust structures.

Author Ellen Graff draws from previous scholarship of 1930s dance history and thoroughly investigates leftist dance in relationship with socialist and communist movements in the United States. Stepping Left (1997) provides information about black dance artists, but only intermittently, and never in terms of their specific contributions to black freedom movements. Susan Manning’s Modern Dance Negro Dance: Race in Motion (2004) provides thorough readings of early modern dance with special attention to constructions of race, gender, and sexuality. Anthologies that tie the arts to social change such as editor Mark O’Brien’s Reimaging America: The Arts of Social Change (1990) only make brief mention of dance examples as compared to other arts. For the most part, art scholars and political historians have largely neglected concert dance as a specific means for black liberation.

There are a few exceptions. Of note is a slender collection of writings edited by Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Alison D. Goeller entitled Embodying Liberation: The Black Body in American Dance that provides a fine analysis of dances produced by black American choreographers such as Primus’s contemporary Katherine Dunham, Alvin Ailey and artist Zora Neale Hurston. Primus’s dances of protest are not addressed at all. Also Thomas DeFrantz’s article

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1 Notably that of Stacey Prickett.
“To Make Black Bodies Strange: Social Critique in Concert Dance of the Black Arts Movement” in *A Sourcebook on African American Performance: Plays, People, Movements* (1999) edited by Annemarie Bean provides some information and sources on concert dance in relationship to the Black Arts movement. Further research investigating the link between black concert dance makers and black political movements is needed.

Where are the streams of black liberation in concert dance? How does dance appear in black political movements? These are the questions that led my research, the questions I had to ask, all the while knowing that the dance makers and performers I have studied were making work within a simultaneity of traditions.

My research defines dance liberation through the work of two major dance artists. Primus and Harris are two exemplars in a continuum of black artists and activists who have used choreographic art to advance the political struggle for black freedom. My aim in locating Primus and Harris within the stream of black freedom struggles is to evidence the markings of concert dance on black liberation movements in the United States. Accordingly, a critical investigation of their work in this context will also highlight the powerful tradition of social change in the histories of concert dance. This study locates Primus and Harris in the context of political history (as opposed to apolitical history). Both artists used dance to contribute his or her individual voice to a larger social movement.
I have chosen to focus on two dances in particular: Primus’s “Strange Fruit” and Harris’s “Endangered Species.” I examine each dance in relationship to specific political movements—“Strange Fruit” as part of the anti-lynching movement and “Endangered Species” as part of the hip-hop movement. Furthermore, this study investigates significant influences that pre-date and/or coincide with the birth of each choreographer.

I am interested in the conditions, events, political movements, and people that shaped the time period into which each choreographer was born—factors that predate the birth of the dancer, and long predate the birth of the dance. In Pearl Primus’s case this approach means that I am as interested in the 1920s Harlem Renaissance and how this artistic/political movement shaped the landscape in which Primus could create a piece like “Strange Fruit” in 1943 as I am with the historical period of the 1940s and how dance as political protest was a part of a specific trend in modern dance at the time. I argue that the Harlem Renaissance affected Harlem, and as a result affected Primus as well.

Regarding the contemporary dance liberation exemplar Rennie Harris, this study pays close attention to hip hop as a social movement rooted in the radical black consciousness of the 1960s Black Power and Black Arts movements. Harris’s autobiographical hip-hop solo “Endangered Species” retains those influences while presenting a contemporary interpretation of black life in the 1990s. The Harlem Renaissance and the Black Power movement were significant contributors to the artistic and political worlds in which Primus and Harris made
their respective work. Providing a broad historical context for "Strange Fruit" and "Endangered Species" strengthens a detailed description of each work.

This approach to researching dance provides me, as a researcher and performer, with a contoured continuum to place my own scholarship and performance. Like the symbol of the Sankofa bird, I am able to exist in the present more fully and richly because I know my past.2 Throughout this study, I incorporate my experiences as a dancer in relationship to Primus and Harris. By including my own personal experiences performing their choreography, I aim to demonstrate how this research affects my own practice of dance liberation as a performer, and how researching dance in this way informs my interpretation of each dance. My internal insights and personal experiences as a performer coupled with my historical research offer me a unique perspective on the choreographic work of two participants in the Black Freedom Movement.

The following chapter of this study outlines the impact of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance on Pearl Primus. In particular, I focus on the contributions and connections of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston to Primus’s overall body of work. I detail the influence of each artist on Primus through a close reading of Hughes’s poems and excerpts from Hurston’s autobiography.

Also examined in this chapter are the dance and political histories of the 1930s and 1940s. First I discuss the New Dance Group and radical black artists of

2 Sankofa is an Adrinka symbol from Ghana that depicts a profile of a bird whose neck and head are turned to face backwards. The symbol reminds those who look at it of the importance of learning from the past.
the period. I then consider the breadth of the anti-lynching movement: the origins of lynching at the end of the Civil War, artistic anti-lynching production, and the early contributions of Ida B. Wells—all in relationship to Primus’s “Strange Fruit.” Dispersed lines from Lewis Allan’s poem “Strange Fruit” frame this section. I end the chapter with more personal writings on my experiences learning and performing “Strange Fruit” as well as my relationship to Primus as a type of artistic godmother.

The third chapter considers the work of Rennie Harris in relationship to hip-hop culture and the Black Power and Black Arts movements. Personal experiences with Harris are integrated into the first section of the chapter describing my one-on-one interactions with Harris in the creation of a new work made for me titled “White Lines.” This section shows how my personal experiences of dance liberation affect my constructions of meaning in Harris’s work. I discuss Harris’s background as a professional dancer as well as his choreographic process.

Next, I focus on “Endangered Species” as a site of resistance for the performer and the audience emphasizing the power of autobiography in dance. I examine the impact of the Black Power and Black Arts movement on hip-hop culture in general and “Endangered Species” in particular. The militancy, urgency, and aggressiveness of the Black Power movement affected hip-hop dance culture. I focus on how certain values of the Black Arts movement such as orality and performance, “perishable” black art, and “style” and “spirit” can be seen in Harris’s autobiographical solo.
The fourth chapter brings the examples of Primus and Harris together in order to emphasize the implications of dance liberation on audiences.
TIMELINE

1865  The Civil War ends. President Lincoln is assassinated. Reconstruction begins.

1866  The Ku Klux Klan is formed in Tennessee. Lynching as a form of terrorism rises.

1877  Reconstruction ends. President Hayes removes military troops from the south.

1892  Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Wil (Lee) Stewart are lynched.
      Wells publishes an editorial in *Free Speech* catalyzing the anti-lynching movement.

1909  The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is founded to promote social reform and legal justice.

1919  Primus is born in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad.

1921  Primus moves to New York.

1920s  The Harlem Renaissance.

1929  Depression.

1931  April, the “First Negro Dance Recital in America” (Edna Guy).

1932  The Workers Dance League (later to be named New Dance Group) is formed.
1934  Spring/summer Asadata Dafora’s *Kykunkor* becomes a Broadway hit.

April, the Modern Negro Dance Group appeared in a concert headed by the Workers Dance League.

1937  Edna Guy, Alison Burroughs, Clarence Yates, Katherine Dunham, and Asadata Dafora stage *A Negro Dance Evening* at the 92nd Street YMHA; Charles William’s Hampton Institute Creative Dance Group debuts in New York.

1943  February 14, Primus’s professional debut at the 92nd Street YMHA. Primus is hired at the Café Society Downtown. Primus performs “Jim Crow Train” and “Hard Time Blues” at the Negro Freedom Rally, Madison Square Garden.

1944  Primus travels south where she lives and works with sharecroppers and attends church services in rural black communities.

1948  Primus travels to Africa to study dance and culture.

1948  President Truman gives executive order to desegregate the armed forces.

1950  Paul Robeson’s passport is revoked.

1952  Primus’s passport revoked, she is placed on “Red Channels” list published by Red Channels and the American Legion.

1954  Southern freedom movements rise.

1954  Brown v. Board of Education, Supreme Court rules that segregation in schools violates the Fourteenth Amendment.
1955  Montgomery Bus Boycott.

1957-75 U.S. involvement in Vietnam War.

1962  Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) founded by Robert Williams.

1963  President John F. Kennedy is assassinated.

1964-68 Urban rebellions, rising black nationalism.

1964  Lorenzo (Rennie) Harris is born. The Civil ’Rights Act becomes law.

Malcolm X breaks from the Nation of Islam and founds the Organization of Afro-American Unity. Amiri Baraka’s (Leroi Jones) Dutchman debuts in New York.

1965  The Voting Rights Act is signed into law. Malcolm X is assassinated in New York, New York.

1966  The Black Panther Party (BPP) is founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Scale in Oakland, California.

1965-69 Deacons for Defense and Justice, the armed wing of the southern black liberation movement, is in existence.

1967  Huey P. Newton is arrested for murder, and the “Free Huey” campaign is initiated. BPP storms the California State Capitol in Sacramento with loaded guns and reads a statement by their Minister of Defense, Newton.

1968  Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

1971  September 9, Attica Rebellion.

1992  Rennie Harris Puremovement is founded.

1994  Pearl Primus dies.

2005  Spring/summer rehearsals with Rennie Harris for “White Lines.” Summer rehearsals with Kim Bears-Bailey at Philadanco learning “Strange Fruit.”

M.F.A. concert *beautiful roots* shared with work graduate colleague Kamilah Asha Levens: Sullivant Theater, Columbus, OH November 3, 4, 5th.
PEARL PRIMUS: THE ARTISTRY OF PROTEST

Pearl Primus and The Harlem Renaissance

Pearl Primus (1919-1994) was born in the years when many blacks were migrating north for freedom. Blacks left the South en masse, they left the injustice of lynchings, the inequality of segregation, and the poverty of sharecropping—all practices Primus would later protest through dance. Born in Trinidad in 1919, Primus moved to New York when she was two years old. New York would remain a central cityscape during her girlhood and young adulthood. New York was the home of one of America’s first black metropolitan meccas—Harlem.

The artistic influences of what is known as the Negro or Harlem Renaissance shaped Primus’s racial and political identity. Artistic production in the Harlem Renaissance was decidedly linked to cultural and political action. Harlem was the home of the “New Negro.” 3 Alain Locke, editor of the seminal anthology The New Negro (1925), states it simply: “The pulse of the Negro world has begun to beat in Harlem” (14). That pulse throbbed in the world that Primus

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3 The phrase “New Negro” became “the term of choice to describe the spirit of the 1920s among many black Americans” (Locke xi).
would encounter as a young dancer/choreographer. Richard C. Green, author of “(Up)Staging the Primitive: Pearl Primus and ‘the Negro Problem’ in American Dance” observes the inevitable cultural influence of the Harlem Renaissance on Pearl Primus’s future:

As a Negro youth living in New York of the 1930s, Primus’s artistic craft and vision were also undoubtedly shaped and influenced by the legacy of the Negro or Harlem Renaissance. (108)

The Harlem Renaissance affected ideological and practical aspects of what it means to be black in America. The black struggle for freedom has consistently and centrally been concerned with gaining and experiencing full humanity. Definitions of freedom and definitions of humanity are prescribed by individuals who constitute a particular political or artistic movement.

The Harlem Renaissance reached its zenith in the mid 1920s and ended with the Depression of the 1930s. Major artists of the period asserted the humanity of blacks by making people of African descent subjects of their art (as opposed to objects). Artists offered complex, three-dimensional portraits of black life. It was during this time that novelist Jean Toomer wrote the experimental Cane, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Georgia Douglas Johnson scripted witty, sublime, and somber poems about jazz, work, politics, and Harlem life, while writer Zora Neale Hurston delved into anthropology to study the folk life of black southerners. Beyond literary contributions, Aaron Douglas, Augusta Savage⁴, Sargent Johnson,

⁴ Savage patronized performances by Edna Guy in the early 1930s. Savage is just one concrete example of how Harlem Renaissance artists supported the development of black concert dancers (Manning 57).
and William H. Johnson created sculptures, murals, paintings, and drawings. The Harlem Renaissance was undoubtedly a watershed period of artistic creation.

During the 1920s, in New York and other urban centers, black intellectuals, activists, and artists were publicly considering what freedom meant to them and therefore what it meant to be fully human. There was a popular sentiment that a “New Negro” now walked the streets of Harlem. Locke explains the constructions of what he referred to as the “Old Negro”:

So for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being— a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be “kept down,” or “in his place,” or “helped up,” to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden.5 (3)

To transcend being regarded as a “something” rather than a human being, cultural architects of the Harlem Renaissance made art while simultaneously creating new and diverse ideas about what it meant to be black and free in America. In his introduction to Locke’s *The New Negro*, Arnold Rampersad refers to the Harlem Renaissance as a “second Emancipation”6 (xiv) Essentially, the Harlem Renaissance was a period of rebirth in which black Americans were radically changing the meaning of blackness for themselves and for all of America.

During Primus’ development as a concert dancer and choreographer, she befriended many of the influential artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Her kindred

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5 The notion that the Negro was a “something” is apparent in a commonly used phrase of the time to describe racial issues as “the Negro Problem” or “the Negro Question” as well as in later public forums and printed debates in dance journals like *Dance Observer* about the role of the Negro dancer.

6 The first Emancipation was the emancipation of enslaved people of African descent post Civil War (1865).
connection to poet Langston Hughes (1902-1967) is evidenced most obviously in
the overlap of thematic content in their work. For example, “The Negro Speaks of
Rivers” (1943) was performed to Hughes’s poem of the same title (1920). “The
Negro Speaks of Rivers” was Hughes’s first, serious poem to be published. He was
18 years old and traveling by train to Mexico City to visit his father. As he passed
the Mississippi river heading southward at sunset Hughes began to think of the
significance of the river. Hughes explains:

I saw this great, muddy river flowing down to the heart of the south. And I
began to think about what it had meant to the Negro people in the past, how
in slavery time to be sold down the Mississippi was, I’d heard, the worst
thing that could happen to a slave, because if they sent you down into the
rice fields into the delta, the hot regions around New Orleans, you might not
live very long. And then I remembered reading that Abraham Lincoln as a
young man had gone down to the Mississippi, he’d seen the slave market
and the buying and selling of human beings and he never forgot it. It was
Lincoln who many years later signed the Emancipation Proclamation that
freed the black slaves. And so these thoughts went into this poem of mine
that I wrote down on this train, shortly after we’d gone across this river in
the sunset. 7

The image of moving waters is prominent in descriptions of Primus’s dance
as well. Margaret Lloyd describes the dance by stating: “It is beautiful with
undulating rhythms over deep-flowing currents of movement that wind into
whirlpool spins” (273). Lloyd’s description of the work is laden with images
suggesting the dance’s resemblance to a river moving. Like the symbol of the
river, black identity was flowing and changing in the 1920s. Hughes’s poem and
Primus’s dance are primary examples of how dance and literature served to
promote radical definitions of the constantly changing black identity.

7 My transcription. Langston Hughes Reads (1980)
The poem depicts the legacy and memory of black people by connecting various ancient and historical places and times within the identity of one speaker. It reads:

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.
I’ve known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers. (Hughes 4)

There is a sense of timelessness about the speaker that exhibits self-knowledge and power. A level of greatness seems to exist within Hughes's “I” and “my.” The personal pronouns grow large and signify the timeless quality of black existence.

In her solos Primus represents a nuanced “I” as well. She danced solos that not only represented individuals, but also represented a multitude, a collective, a people. In “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (the poem and the dance), the Negro is simultaneously a singular person existing within a legacy and an ever-present figure of history transcending time and place.

This peculiar or nuanced “I” is an example of how “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” contributes to shifting notions of black identity. Author Richard C. Green connects the importance of this specific poem and dance in relationship to black identity formation.
The acts of speaking, writing, and dancing are strategies by which American Negroes have attempted to forge social, cultural, and political identities... Primus’s dance offers a counterhegemonic narrative of identity by placing the Negro on the grand stage of inherited historical tradition. (Green 125)

Primus talked with Hughes about the imagery and meaning of the poem while making the piece (124). He wrote prolifically in the form of operas, poems, plays, and fiction. Hughes’s poems were characteristic of the period in how they embraced African heritage and acknowledged a distinguished sense of history articulated by a singular speaker or narrator. “Negro” by Langston Hughes voices the speaker’s identification with Africa and his or her journey through history:

I am a Negro:
Black as the night is black.
Black like the depths of my Africa.
I’ve been a slave:
Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.
I brushed the boots of Washington
I’ve been a worker:
Under my hand the pyramids arose.
I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.
I’ve been a singer:
All the way from Africa to Georgia
I carried my sorrow songs.
I made ragtime.
I’ve been a victim:
The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo
They lynch me still in Mississippi.
I am a Negro:
Black as the night is black.
Black like the depths of my Africa. (Hughes 8)

Again, Hughes uses the nuanced “I” in this poem. The speaker exists in different time periods and geographical locations. Like Primus, Hughes merges the
individual “I” with the recollections of a more collective black history. This includes references to an African past.

“Negro” is also an example of how Hughes and Primus address similar themes in the content of their art. In line 16 Hughes mentions lynching. The line stands out because it departs from the verb tense structure of the rest of the poem. Hughes writes, “They lynch me still in Mississippi” (emphasis mine) (Hughes 8).

Lynching was a social and political problem that crossed multiple generations. As a result, the anti-lynching movement encompassed both Hughes and Primus. In response, Hughes wrote numerous plays and poems on the topic and Primus choreographed “Strange Fruit.”

Another writer whose work influenced Primus was Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960). Although Hurston’s personal relationship to Primus is not documented, Hurston’s work was just as influential to the artistic world Primus encountered. A kind of literary sister of Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston was a novelist and folklorist; her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is commonly required high school and college reading. Both Hughes and Hurston were included in Locke’s anthology *The New Negro* and collaborated on projects together.

Though better recognized for her literary contributions, Hurston was also a dancer and director. Hurston produced dances from the Caribbean and the South based on her anthropological research. In *Embodying Liberation*, Anthea Kraut

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8 Hughes and Hurston had a relationship that is well documented—often centering around the conflict of co-authorship attached to the play *Mule Bone*. 18
emphasizes Hurston’s place in the history of concert dance in her article entitled
“Re-scripting Origins: Zora Neale Huston’s Staging of Black Vernacular Dance.”

Kraut lists Hurston’s production and research in the following passage:

[I]n the 1930s Hurston assembled a group of sixteen Bahamian dancers and
rehearsed, directed, produced, and performed in a series of concerts
consisting of folksongs, dances, and pantomime. The material for these
performances arose directly from Hurston’s anthropological research in the
southern United States and the Bahamas as well as out of the desire to
communicate black cultural forms to a broad public (59).

Zora Neale Hurston can rightly be considered among the pioneering black women
of concert dance. By bringing cultural information from the African diaspora to the
stage, Hurston left a legacy of using anthropology in service to dance.

In Hurston’s autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road (1942) she explains why
she began to present her anthropological research on Bahaman songs and dance in
the early 1930s.

I had no intention of making concert my field. I wanted to show the wealth
and beauty of the material to those who were in the field . . . My group was
invited to perform at the New School of Social Research; in the folk-dance
carnival at the Vanderbilt Hotel in New York; at Nyack; at St. Louis;
Chicago; Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida; Lake Wales; Sanford;
Orlando; Constitution Hall, Washington, D.C.; and Daytona Beach Florida.
(194-95)

Hurston studied anthropology at Columbia with Dr. Franz Boas in the Department
of Anthropology (174). Additionally, she contributed literary images rooted in the
authentic experiences of beauty, love, work and spirituality within black cultures.
Eventually, like Hurston, Primus would also study anthropology at Columbia and
present her anthropological research on the concert stage. Hurston, Primus, and
Dunham all restaged traditional African or Caribbean dances. Hurston’s pioneering
efforts in the field of anthropology and performance provided a model for gathering and presenting dance material that honored African origins. Both Hurston and Hughes influenced the thematic content and veneration toward her sources that Primus later used.

The New Dance Group and Dance as Political Protest

Before Primus began her career as a dance artist, she attended Hunter High School and College in New York studying biology and pre-medical science (Green 110). Upon college graduation, Primus initially wanted to become a medical doctor, but in her search for laboratory jobs, she experienced racial discrimination as door after door was closed to her. Margaret Lloyd, a chronicler of early modern dance, wrote about Primus’s search for work in The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance (1949). Lloyd explains: “She tried and tried for jobs, any job, going constantly down the scale, till at last she landed one as a vegetable picker” (268). Because Primus was excluded from jobs within her field of study, her search for employment led her to Roosevelt’s National Youth Administration and to a job performing social dances. Audiences applauded her dancing ability despite the fact that she had little experience with the recently birthed modern dance form (Glover 8-10).9

In 1932, the New Dance League, originally named the Workers Dance League, was founded upon the principles of social, political, and economic justice for all. The New Dance Group, a training and performance collective, was a

9 Modern dance was a “new” form of dance developed in the twentieth century; Primus’s teachers at the New Dance Group school were considered “second generation” pioneers in modern dance.
component of the larger organization and its mission. Its slogan “The Dance is a Weapon in the Class Struggle” characterized the political intent and passionate purpose of the collective (14). Susan Manning, author of *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (2004), describes the subscription and popularity of the organization:

> By June 1934 the Workers Dance League boasted eight hundred dues-paying members, twelve amateur groups, fifty classes, and a number of ‘performing units’ in New York City . . . According to the league’s own estimates, its dancers performed before thirty-four thousand spectators in a single season. (62)

The New Dance Group offered work scholarships to students who wanted to study dance. In 1941 Pearl Primus auditioned and received a scholarship to take classes at the school; at that time she was the only black student in the school (Glover 11). The environment of the New Dance Group enhanced Primus’s socio-political awareness and heavily contributed to her philosophies about dance as an agent for social change (32). Dancer and historian Joe Nash is quoted as describing the New Dance Group as “the group of dancers with the raised fists” (14).

The image of clenched fists addressing the sky is an iconic symbol of the 1960s Black Power movement. In fact, the raised fist is a motif within the dance “Strange Fruit.” The soloist repeatedly charges forward on a diagonal towards the lynching tree with her arms extended and her fists clenched. Although, the 1960s and 1970s are known in contemporary American popular culture as the time of revolt, artists such as Pearl Primus, Langston Hughes, Lois Malou Jones, Paul Robeson, and Joshua White participated in their own radical struggle for freedom
during the 1930s and 1940s. Before the afro was en vogue, before the Black Panther Party chanted “Free Huey!” and before the United States media captured the hostility and brutality of southern segregation, black performers of the 1940s utilized their art for the realization of democracy.

Historians describe leftist political and artist activity of the mid 1930s through the late 1940s as the cultural front, the cultural Popular Front, or the Popular Front.¹⁰ For the purposes of this study, the Popular Front is a distinctive social formation describing an intersection of communities, including the dominant presence of the American Communist Party, as well as socialists, workers, labor organizers, black radicals, and artists of varying political ideologies. All believed that art making for mass popular culture could positively influence the struggle for a legitimate, fully realized American democracy.

Dancers, singers, writers, and visual artists addressed issues of poverty made visible by the Depression, raised their fists against fascism and the effects of World War II, and continually fought for the human rights of black people everywhere (Glover 101). These black artists shouted and wept through dance, page, and song. They exalted the beauty of their African origins, refused to perform before segregated audiences, denounced American racism abroad, and

despite state sanctioned repression and coordinated efforts to stifle black radical
activism, artists made an impact on the collective consciousness of America.

Over the decades of her career Primus created many “dances of protest.”
These explicitly political “message pieces” are clustered in the 1940s. In 1943
alone Pearl Primus made four “dances of social protest” (Barber 270-72). In a
strictly political sense, her dances were effective precisely because they were a part
of a larger social movement. Effective protest art exists in relationship to a larger
political movement. Like the blues songs of traveling blues women, dances of
protest pointed audiences to injustice and inspired social action.

Activist and scholar Angela Y. Davis explains the potential and place of the
musical genre of the blues in social protest:

In order for protest to acquire an explicitly political character, there must be
an organized political structure capable of functioning as a channel for
transforming individual complaint into effective collective protest: At the
same time, social protest can never be made the exclusive or limiting
function of art. Art may encourage a critical attitude and urge its audience
to challenge social conditions, but it cannot establish the terrain of protest
by itself. In the absence of a popular mass movement, it can only
encourage a critical attitude. When the blues ‘name’ the problems the
community wants to overcome, they help create the emotional conditions
for protest, but do not and could not, of themselves, constitute social
protest. (113)

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11 Under Barber’s categorization the four pieces are “Strange Fruit,” “Hard Time Blues,”
“Jim Crow Train,” and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” However, labeling Primus’s
repertory is somewhat slippery. It is arguable, for instance, that “Hard Time Blues” could
also be placed in Barber’s “Dances Based on American Negro, Folk, Spirituals, and
Revival Music” category, or that dances without explicit political content functioned
politically by countering dominant, negative stereotypes of Africa, black Americans, or the
Negro dancer.
Davis outlines how art can function in relationship to a popular social movement. There are several points in her argument that are relevant to my examination of the markings of concert dance in black liberation struggles. In order to unpack how dance performance exists as protest art, I will examine Primus’s participation in the Negro Freedom Rally of 1943 in relationship to the above quotation from Davis’s blues analysis.

First, Davis proposes that protest art must exist within a structure capable of amplifying the artist’s voice further than the walls of the theater, gallery, or studio. Explicitly political art must encounter an audience that will take its message into a social reality larger than the performance space. If art lives and dies without encountering and affecting an audience capable of social action, it cannot be considered protest art. In a 1943 review of Primus’s performance at the Negro Freedom Rally, Langston Hughes describes the interaction between Primus and her audience:

The young lady who leapt so high in the middle of Madison Square Garden a couple of weeks ago at the Negro Freedom Rally is named Miss Pearl Primus. She was in the very middle of the Garden on a star-shaped stage, and twenty thousand people were sitting around her. Every time she leapt, folks felt like shouting. Some did. Some hollered out loud. (On Leaping)

In the full review entitled “On Leaping and Shouting,” Hughes focuses on the dance “Jim Crow Train,” a 1943 protest piece about riding on segregated Jim Crow trains. The dance, performed to music by Waring Cuney, moved this particular audience to shout aloud. Audience members had emotional and kinesthetic reactions to the performance. By performing “Jim Crow Train” and “Hard Time
Blues” at the political rally Primus aroused the “emotional conditions” necessary for protest and collective action.

Evident in this example of Primus’s performance for a packed Madison Square Garden audience is another key point in Davis’s view of social protest art. Audience members who encounter protest art must have an organized political mechanism to transform their “shout” into change. In this instance, the structure was the Negro Freedom Rally—a manifestation of a larger political movement for black liberation that denounced Jim Crowism, racism, poverty, and lynching.

Dance is an effective and useful tool to raise the consciousness of its audience members. Dance has consistently been a part of a black freedom struggles. In Embodying Liberation scholar Ramsay Burt explains:

It is generally recognized that music and dancing have been among the most important means of black cultural expression in the United States, both as a site of dissidence and as a site through which to imagine and enact possibilities of liberatory alternatives to an unendurable present. (79)
Strange Fruit and the Anti-Lynching Movement

Primus used her “dance of protest” to both reveal injustice and re-imagine a just world. “Strange Fruit” did the former by showing a woman’s reaction to a lynching. For the purposes of this study, the term lynching, in relationship to Primus’s “Strange Fruit” and the anti-lynching movement it was a part of, refers specifically to the lynching of black people (mostly men) by white mobs. This form of lynching occurred mainly in southern states in the years following the United States Civil War in 1865.

Through the many decades that encompass the anti-lynching movement the horrors of lynching compelled many artists to take up arms in the form of pens, paintbrushes, and choreographic devices. In 1919 Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller (1877-1968), created a sculpture of Mary Turner who was lynched along with her husband and unborn child in 1918. The description of Turner’s lynching can be found in correspondence from 1922 quoted in Perkins’s *Strange Fruit* (1998).

Preceding Mary Turner’s lynching was the lynching of her husband Hayes Turner. He, like many others, was lynched not because he committed a crime, but because he was black. When Mary Turner protested his lynching she was met with the same fate.

She was in her eighth month of pregnancy, but the mob of several hundred took her to a small stream, tied her ankles together and hung her on a tree head downwards. Gasoline was thrown on her clothes and she was set on fire. One of the members of the mob took a knife and split her abdomen open so that the unborn child fell from her womb to the ground and the child’s head was crushed under the heel of another member of the mob; Mary Turner’s body was finally riddled with bullets. (15)
In response to this lynching, Fuller created *Mary Turner (A Silent Protest)* in 1919, Primus’s birth year. The bronze colored sculpture portrays Mary Turner holding her pregnant belly as a twisting cloud of faces and hands billow at her feet. Other artists made work based on this and many other lynchings—the details of which were often reported in newspapers or circulated in photographs, postcards, and letters.

Sculptors, musicians, playwrights, and choreographers created art that exposed the violence and repression many blacks faced in America’s apartheid.\(^{12}\) The lynching of blacks continued despite political conventions and campaigns that urged the federal government to support anti-lynching legislation.\(^{13}\) Although by the 1940s lynching had been a part of American culture for nearly a century, it had not been completely eradicated or legally vanquished. In fact, some of the poignant images or stories of lynchings, like that of young Emmett Till, occurred well into the mid 1900s.\(^{14}\) Because of its unarrested longevity in America, lynching became another sordid aspect of the American cultural memory. Visual and performance artists made work about lynching because they themselves had been affected in some way by the haunting nature of the crime.

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\(^{13}\) On June 13, 2005 the U.S. Senate approved a resolution apologizing for its failure to enact federal anti-lynching legislation. Still in 2005, 15 Senators opposed the resolution.

\(^{14}\) Emmett Till was a fourteen year-old from Chicago lynched in 1955 for allegedly whistling at a white woman in rural Mississippi. His mother decided to have an open casket so that thousands of people could see the horror of lynching on his disfigured body, imprinting Till’s murder on the collective historical memory of Americans.
Lynching shaped the racial identity of blacks and whites living in the United States—even those who had never traveled South or had only heard reports of such horrific crimes. When Primus premiered “Strange Fruit” at the 92nd Street Young Men’s Hebrew Association (YMHA) on February 14th 1943, she had never been to the South. Over a year later, she made her first trip to the South where she picked cotton alongside sharecroppers and documented dances in black southern churches. She explains:

In 1944 I made my first trip down South to see what it was all about. I had done dances about sharecroppers and lynching without ever having been close to such things. I went to live with sharecroppers in Georgia, Alabama and South Carolina. I came back with a vitamin deficiency—a big dinner in such homes would consist of one-quarter of an ear of corn, the worst part of a piece of chicken, and some peas. After travelling through the South I felt licked—I had absolute hollowness in me for months... I visited the South again. I danced at schools and churches, I discovered that people there were thinking about these problems—that a thinking person was a big person down there. I realized that there is hope, that these problems will be solved—and solved there. (Goodman 55)

Because or despite of her first hand experiences with the hostile racially inflicted poverty of the South and the negative experiences of racism in her youth, Primus was committed to using dance as a tool to understanding people and resolving social problems. Like Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham before her, Primus used her studies in anthropology to bring dances from the Caribbean and Africa to the concert stage. Katherine Dunham was doing similar work having received a Julius Rosenwald Fund fellowship to travel to Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, and Trinidad from 1935 to 1936. Dunham earned a bachelor of philosophy degree in social anthropology in 1936 from the University of Chicago
Primus and Dunham share several commonalities including careers on Broadway, transforming anthropological fieldwork to concert dance, and a commitment to social justice. It must also be stated here that in 1951 Dunham created a ballet about lynching entitled *Southland*; it premiered in Santiago, Chile, and was never performed in the United States.15

Primus’s developing interest in anthropology served as a structure through which she could participate in and observe black southern culture. Primus would later take many trips to Africa and the Caribbean receiving the last Rosenwald fellowship in 1948. But in 1944, it was her research in black southern communities that affected her performance of “Strange Fruit” and “Hard Time Blues.” Enhanced by her fieldwork in the South, “Strange Fruit” was able to contribute to a larger struggle to end the lynching of black people in the United States.

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit*

*Blood on the leaves and blood at the root*

These are the first two lines of a poem that would turn song, turn dance, turn protest. Originally published under the title “Bitter Fruit” in a union publication, “Strange Fruit” was popularized by vocalist Billie Holiday in 1939. Holiday is often given credit for writing the song. In fact, Jewish schoolteacher

15 For more on Dunham and Southland see “Katherine Dunham’s *Southland*: Protest in the Face of Repression” by Constance Valis Hill.

16 The poem “Strange Fruit” is quoted in its entirety throughout this section; it appears in italic. Lines from the poem are used as a frame and quoted from Margolick’s *Strange Fruit* (2000).
Abel Meeropol wrote “Strange Fruit” under the pen name Lewis Allan. The song floated around communist and activist circles until it landed in the Café Society where Holiday would make it famous (Margolick 37).

The Café Society was one of New York’s first integrated nightclubs. It was a spot where intellectuals, artists, and regular folks gathered for drinks and entertainment. In terms of black entertainment, the Café Society did not promote negative depictions or stereotypical representations of black people; there was no “Uncle Tom comedy” at the Café Society (40). Integrated audiences experienced intelligent and soulful expressions of art as entertainment. Black and white people fraternized on stage and off. The environment at the Café Society critiqued race and class hierarchy in its social codes as well. Author David Margolick describes the Café Society atmosphere like this: “The doormen wore rags and ragged white gloves and stood by as the customers opened the doors themselves” (40). It was a different kind of place—the perfect place to debut a song that described in stinging and poetic language the atrocity of lynching.

*Black body swinging in the Southern breeze*

*Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees*

Southern spectacle lynching emerged in the 1880s (Dray 47). Its intensity is linked to the emancipation of enslaved African Americans in the United States. Southern whites used “mob violence” to assure the “perpetuation of the southern status quo, especially the continuation of an exploitative plantation economy”

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17 Sometimes spelled Lewis Allen.
During Reconstruction (1865-1877), free blacks began to assert their humanity, making strides for economic independence and demands for full citizenship. Lynching emerged as a means to impede the economic, educational, and social progress of free black men and women (Dray 32). Vincent Harding, author of There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America, poetically describes how this new freedom affected the movement, posture, actions and attitudes of newly freed blacks:

"[I]n many places black folk simply assumed new forms of dress, the women wearing brighter colors than ever before, donning white gloves, carrying parasols, writing their own speeches of freedom in each formerly forbidden item of apparel, in each proud movement of their bodies. For their part, the men kept dogs and guns, hunted whenever they chose, traveled around the countryside without passes. Both men and women often refused to yield the sidewalks to white folks when they met . . . They argued with white people, refusing any longer to say yes when they meant no. They met in public with any blacks they chose and with as many as they chose, at any hour and for as long as they chose. They changed their names. They made new demands on white people, based on their own sense of dignity and their new freedom to express it." (279-80)

Indeed, emancipation was a radical transformation for the enslaved person and affected the dynamic power relationship between blacks and whites. Black individuals experienced multiple and unique levels of freedom. At the same time, there were legislative and social forms of repression that made severe limitations on the social progress of newly freed blacks.

The system of slavery in the United States was predicated on specific notions of race—particularly, the inferiority or inhumanity of blacks. Tyranny and
terrorism in the form of beatings, mutilation, rape, and strict rules about intraracial socialization enabled systems of slavery to stay intact. The end of the United States Civil War and the emancipation of enslaved African Americans (legislated in the Thirteenth Amendment) shook the racist hegemony that had dictated interactions between blacks and whites for centuries. Consequently, lynching as a means of terrorization escalated. As scholars Tolnay and Beck evidence, lynching was used as “a tool for maintaining dominance in a society that was forced to accept a revolutionary change in the status of blacks—from slaves to freedmen” (257).

Pastoral scene of the gallant South

The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth

In essence, the practice of lynching—literally hanging, burning, and mutilating people—replaced the tyranny and brutality of slavery in the United States. In one way, the terrorism African Americans experienced after emancipation was heightened because they were no longer guarded by their legal status as property. In other words, pre-emancipated African American citizens were regarded as property to be bought and sold, and therefore the law served to protect one man’s “property” from being damaged or destroyed. As newly emancipated African Americans, blacks were denied even this kind of protection under the law and stripped once again of their constitutional rights (Dray 29-32).19

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19 For more on this analysis, see Tolnay and Beck’s *A Festival of Violence*, p. 246-47.
Enslaved or free, the African American man or woman was starved of the status of being considered five-fifths human.\textsuperscript{20}

Pearl Primus danced to assert the \textit{humanity} of black people. In 1943, months after her professional debut, Primus was the first dancer hired to work at the Café Society— the same place that Billie Holiday made "Strange Fruit" famous. Primus chose to perform "Strange Fruit" accompanied not to Holiday's recording, but to the spoken narration of the poem. In its later incarnations, the solo was often performed by Primus without any text at all. Writer Margaret Lloyd describes Primus’s performance:

> With no sound but the brush of her garment, the swish and thud of her bare feet and fists, the dancer hugs the earth, beating it, flinging herself upon it, groveling in it, twisting her sinuous body into fantastic shapes across it, now fleeing, now facing in timid fascination the invisible sacrificial tree which is the focus of the dance. (271)

The tree that Lloyd depicts is not physically represented on stage, but psychologically imagined by the dancer and transmitted to the audience. It is the tree where the lynching has occurred, and at the root of the tree is the blood of thousands.\textsuperscript{21} Upon seeing Georgia’s red clay hills for the first time, author James Baldwin wrote:

> I could not suppress the thought that this earth had acquired its color from the blood that had dripped down from these trees. My mind was filled with the image of a black man, younger than I, perhaps, or my own age, hanging from a tree, while white men watched him and cut his sex from him with a knife. (198)

\textsuperscript{20} Refers to the Three-Fifths Compromise of 1787 in which enslaved blacks were counted for representation to be only three-fifths of a whole free person.

\textsuperscript{21} Because of the nature of the crime and shoddy documentation, numbers of people actually lynched are arguable, but range from 5,000-10,000.
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh

and the sudden smell of burning flesh!

On March 9th 1892, the bodies of three men were found shot to pieces in a field a mile north of Memphis, Tennessee. The lynched men owned and operated the People’s Grocery Store that had been providing unwanted competition to a white owned grocery store across the street. The black owners were arrested and accused of wounding three white men while defending their store from vigilante attack. Thomas Moss, one of the People’s Grocery Store owners was a close friend of Ida B. Wells, a journalist and editor; she knew him to be a decent man. Her investigation into his murder ignited a century-long crusade to end lynching and Wells is recognized as the “nation’s first anti-lynching advocate” (Dray xi).

The Memphis lynching revealed to Wells that “lynching was not simply a spontaneous punishment for crimes” as it was purported to be. Instead, she realized that lynching was more often “an act of terror perpetrated against” black people “in order to maintain” white “power and control” (Royster 3). Wells then began to understand the complex social and racial dynamics involved in the lynching phenomenon. Rape of white women was often given as a reason for an angry white mob to ritualistically murder a black man. Wells investigated lynchings all over the country dispelling the myth that whites were justified in killing black men to uphold the purity of white women. She reported her findings in pamphlets, speeches, and in her paper the Free Speech. In her autobiography she writes:

22 Also known by her married name: Ida B. Wells-Barnett
Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Lee Stewart had been lynched in Memphis . . . and they had committed no crime against white women. This is what opened my eyes to what lynching really was. An excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized (4).

Ida B. Wells used her pen as a sword and brought lynching to the forefront of American politics. The media was often complicit in lynchings, providing publicity and announcements so that thousands could attend a lynching. Newspapers often misreported local events in order to justify the merciless and unlawful killing of blacks. Using the media, Ida B. Wells laid the theoretical groundwork for future organizations and leaders to combat America’s legacy of lynching. She wrote pamphlets and articles and gave speeches in the United States and abroad. Despite constant threats to her life, Wells continued to write and speak about lynchings until late into her journalistic career.

Several times in the twentieth century anti-lynching legislation came before the United States Congress and was successfully filibustered in the Senate. Despite efforts by organizations like the Woman’s Loyal Union, the National Association of Colored Women, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a federal anti-lynching law was never passed. In the 1930s author and activist W.E.B. Du Bois diligently unfurled a banner outside of his New York City office each time he heard of a lynching. The banner read: “Another Man Lynched Today.”

*Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,*

*For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,*

35
Like Ida B. Wells, Pearl Primus hoped to stop lynching by exposing its ills to society. Between their two lifetimes, lynching had become an American pastime and Primus danced to expel lynching from American life. Philip Dray, author of *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*, characterizes the unique and gruesome qualities of lynching:

There is much killing in American history, a great deal of it no doubt senseless and unnecessary, but lynching celebrates killing and makes of it a ritual, turning grisly and inhumane acts of cruelty into the theater with the explicit intent that they be viewed and remembered. It is this ritualization, and the knowledge that victims were chosen for their race and put to death in specific defiance of reasonable values of fairness or decency, that makes the story of lynchings so burdensome an American legacy to confront. (xii)

Primus made her audiences confront the horrible reality of lynchings through dance. Known for her big leaps, Primus hardly leaves the floor in this solo. “Strange Fruit” stands apart from Primus’s other choreography. As Primus describes it, “hurt and anger . . . hurled me to the ground in that solo” (Glover 63).

Dance provided Primus with a way to fight against oppression. The power of the physical body in dance relates to the lifeless body hanging from southern trees. Performance gave Primus a unique opportunity to physically demonstrate the vitality of dance while simultaneously reminding the viewer of the limp, swinging body with “bulging eyes” and “twisted mouth.” Primus performed “Strange Fruit” at demonstrations, rallies, concerts, and clubs in order to raise the consciousness of Americans.

In its many incarnations as poem, song, and dance “Strange Fruit” was a part of an anti-lynching movement that exposed the brutality of lynching for the
world to see. Primus’s performance of the work was a unique contribution to this struggle. Her movements, Holiday’s voice, and Abel Meeropol’s inspired writing were all essential components of the artistic wing of the anti-lynching movement. Though there were other larger factors involved in the decline of lynching such as the Great Migration north and the changing economic system of the South, Primus helped to sweep away lynching through choreography and performance (Beck 222).

*For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,*

*Here is a strange and bitter crop.*
“Finding” Primus and Performing Strange Fruit

Pearl Primus is my guardian spirit. When I first read about her work, I felt as if I were reading about my heart’s secret desires. Here was a woman who did what I wanted to do: she danced, educated, and fought for the liberation of black people and all people. In looking at photographs of Primus, I was struck by her strength, beauty, and power. I found affirmation for my physique and hair. Having experienced discrimination and racism as a young dancer, I felt uplifted when I read about a dancer who “looked like me” making revolutionary protest art and traveling to countries in Africa and the Caribbean. These initial perusals of Primus’s biographical information led me to search and research her contributions with increasing depth and fervor. I am still uncovering and piecing together information about her life.

“Finding” Primus was akin to Alice Walker’s moving resurrection of Zora Neale Hurston’s work. 23 In the late 1970s, Walker, in need of specific material about voodoo practices among rural Southern blacks, came across Hurston’s anthropological work (In Search 83). Walker describes reading this material for the first time:

On any page in Zora’s work I was likely to see something or someone I recognized; reading her tales of adventure and risk became an act of self-recognition and affirmation I’d experienced but rarely before. Reading her, I saw for the first time my own specific culture. (Anything We Love 46)

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23 Walker recognizes her own work as well as Robert Hemway’s biography of Hurston, the work of Mary Helen Washington, Charlotte Hunt, Sherley Anne Williams, as contributing to Zora Neale Hurston’s resurrection as a major novelist, folklorist, and personality in American literature (Anything We Love 48).
It was a necessary step in my artistic maturation to locate a tradition that I was a part of, and to see myself reflected in the dance world. I did not realize how much I needed a dance foremother until I found one.

After reading about Primus in different dated dance history books, I searched for information about her online and discovered that she had passed away. Primus died before I could meet her in person, but I already felt a connection to her, and later I would meet her through dance. In retrospect, it was only after I found Primus that I was able to muster the courage to pursue my dreams of becoming a professional dancer, activist, and scholar. Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham gave me inspiration. Their examples of achievement in the academy compelled me to pursue graduate studies in dance.

As a novice dance researcher not yet in graduate school, I looked for Primus in the pages of books, and wrote letters to living artists associated with her work. Eventually, I discovered the oasis of the New York Public Library Dance Collection. For the first time, I heard Primus’s voice and saw black and white reel footage of her dancing as well as video of her discussing her work. My research was fulfilling, but I still had not ever seen her choreography in live performance.

In August of 2003, the Urban Bush Women (UBW) in association with the Long Island University Dance Department presented a “Walking With Pearl Intensive.” Due to timing, travel, and finances I was unable to participate in the week-long intensive, but mid-week I observed Kim Bears-Bailey teach Primus’s “Hard Time Blues” (1943) to workshop participants. Kim Y. Bears was a young
dancer with Philadanco when she was hand-picked by Primus in an audition to
learn and perform two solos for a 1988 American Dance Festival (ADF) program
entitled *The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance.* The two solos Bears
learned were “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “Strange Fruit.” “Hard Time
Blues,” a piece protesting the poverty of sharecropping, was performed by Warren
P. Miller. Bears and Miller were the first dancers other than Primus herself to
perform these three solos. Although Bears did not learn “Hard Time Blues” from
Primus, she was able to couple her first-hand experiences with Primus with
documentation of the piece in order to restage the work for UBW’s intensive.

The repertory class, held at Mark Morris’s Brooklyn dance studios, was
preceded by a historical lecture by John O. Perpener III. We all sat on the floor
outside of the studio; Perpener happened to sit next to me. I was giddy while I
listened to nuggets of information about Primus that I had never heard before.
After the lecture Perpener pointed me to dissertations on Primus—sources I had
not considered.

On the day that I was able to observe, the workshop participants were
already in the process of learning “Hard Time Blues.” Bears-Bailey continued to
teach and review the movements and musicality of the piece with the dancers. The
participants split into smaller groups and practiced the material executing the dance
to Bears-Bailey’s vocalized instruction. I remember seeing the effort that this

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24 I chose to refer to Bears-Bailey by her maiden name and middle initial Kim Y. Bears
when referring to her 1988 involvement with Primus because that is how she is cited in the
critical writings of the time.
dance demanded and how tired the dancers were. Their sweaty bodies leaped up and they arched their backs as their legs hiked and bent in the air.

One moment that stood out was to me was when the character of the piece begs. Kim demonstrated. She began with her head bowed and slowly raised her head and eye focus as one hand rested on her bent standing leg and the other extended towards the audience. The extended, cupped hand conveyed the complexity of the character’s feelings. I saw humility, pride, and shame all at once. Another movement of the piece that Bears-Bailey deliberated was “the silent scream.” In “Hard Time Blues” the dancer shuffles on the balls of her feet traveling across the stage with her knees bent and her thighs close together. As she moves, her right arm reaches up with a splayed hand and the dancer widens her gaping mouth. The scream is silent—and all the more piercing.

I witnessed Primus’s choreography in live performance for the first time, and it moved me to tears. I cried watching the piece because the dance suggested the weariness and rage of poverty with such detail that it provoked feelings of grief and fatigue. Years later, I learned Primus’s “Strange Fruit,” and I experienced similar feelings of sadness and desperation. When I arrived at The Ohio State University to begin my graduate degree in dance, hardly any of my classmates had heard of Pearl Primus. I spoke about her to explain the type of work that I wanted to do. And when my words seemed insufficient, her statement about dance was my mantra:

I dance not to entertain but to help people better understand each other... Because through dance I have experienced the wordless joy of freedom, I
seek it more fully now for my people and for all people everywhere. (Estrada 60)

In this statement Primus links personal transformation to social transformation, joy to freedom, and the oppression/liberation of black people to the oppression/liberation of all people.

During my second year of graduate school I contacted Bears-Bailey to ask her if she would be willing to teach me Primus repertory for my graduate M.F.A. concert. After obtaining permission from Mrs. Joan Myers Brown, director of Philadanco, Kim and I planned to meet in Philadelphia the summer of 2005. As I prepared to travel to Philadelphia to rehearse with Kim, I felt as if I were going to meet my ancestor. And I was. I knew in my spirit that learning “Strange Fruit” was the closest I would get to “meeting” Pearl Primus. Upon arrival at the Philadanco studies at Nine North Preston Street, I was greeted by Kim’s smiling face and warm persona. I recalled her generosity from the UBW workshop in New York, and I felt instantly welcomed.

We watched the 1988 ADF performance introduced by Pearl Primus. In the video, Primus steps into a warm light. She is dressed, as she often was, in a head wrap and a loose dress embroidered with African prints. She introduces “Strange Fruit” by saying:

There was a party— an exciting party, a shouting party . . . a lynching party. A man has just been lynched. The revelers are leaving the scene, and as the last person is leaving, she turns and looks and is caught by the horrors of reality. A man has just been lynched. Strange Fruit.25

25 My transcription.
As Primus leaves the stage her warm light fades and the next image is of Bears poised with her arms bent behind her, her elbows jutting back and her fists at her hips. Bears turns to look at the imagined lynched body, her arms fling above her head as she spins to the floor. Kim told me that when I perform the piece I should wait to feel the light on my skin, and at that moment I should move so that the first image the audience sees is the sharp turn towards the lynching tree.

We did not refer back to the video during the rehearsal process. The video was not the instructor for the piece. During the first rehearsal of “Strange Fruit,” Bears-Bailey showed me the video in order for me to see Primus, to hear her words, and to view a version of the dance that I was going to learn. Kim taught me phrases from “Strange Fruit” before she taught me the order of the dance. In so doing, I was able to practice specific steps or movements and get a sense of how I was to execute them. It was during these drills that Bears-Bailey taught me the mechanics of the movement.

I remember going across the floor repeating the movement performed to the line “Black body swinging in the Southern breeze.” Much like the shuffling steps in “Hard Time Blues” silent scream, the movement that accompanied this line of the poem used the same bent kneed stance. While I moved across the floor on the balls of my feet, my torso made a circle leading with my ribs. My arms formed an oblique triangle above my head with my two hands clasped together. As my ribs and back moved in a circle, my arms did too. Each circular movement of the torso and arms ended with a percussive contraction of the back and abdominals.
Initially, while practicing this step I did not have the image of the swinging lynched body. Bears-Bailey emphasized the contraction and the maintenance of a bent kneed stance while I crossed the studio floor.

Later, Kim pieced together these steps into the form of the dance. I began by standing in the upstage right corner of the stage. My right foot was in front of my left foot as if I were in the middle of a stride. In that opening position I felt rooted into the ground, stuck almost, unable to leave with the leisurely and rowdy steps of those ahead of me. I knew there was something that I needed to face behind me. I always had a strong image for that first position. Standing there I imagined the lynching party retreating: a mass of people at a distance with their backs facing me dressed in white and pastel clothing—summer picnic attire.

Images were an important part of my process. I gathered images from a number of sources. During the rehearsal process Bears-Bailey talked about her rehearsals with “Ma.” I received valuable information and imagery from Kim’s recollections. Michelle Simmons, the only other dancer to learn “Strange Fruit” from Primus, wrote an essay in a commemorative issue of Talking Drums about her experience learning the solo. Her words were helpful to me after I had learned the piece and had to practice on my own.

While I was in Philadelphia, I went to the public library and checked out books on lynching and Ida B. Wells. Years earlier, when I was teaching dance history at the University of Memphis, I came across the book Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America, a collection of postcards and photographs of
lynchings complied by James Allen. I also read analyses of the racial and economic motives behind the crime. Again and again I looked at the ghastly photographs of men hanging from trees, staring at bodies burned and charred. As advised by one NAACP anti-lynching advocate, I also looked at the faces of the perpetrators and bystanders—the sweet faced white children and the enthusiastic men with souvenirs in hand. My historical research and rehearsals with Bears-Bailey supported the exact metaphors of Allan’s gripping poem.

The most memorable rehearsal with Bears-Bailey came at the end of our time together. We were in the largest studio space on the second floor of the Philadanco studios. As per usual, I danced the piece once and Kim gave me corrections. I practiced the big sweeping run that ended the piece and Kim insisted that I run with more urgency as if there were angry dogs chasing me. I ran in a circle over and over again exhausting myself. We neared the end of our rehearsal time, and Kim asked me to run through the piece again. After I finished, Bears-Bailey said, “Again, do it again.” I was tired my knees were sore and tender. I walked back to the upstage right corner and took my place to begin the piece again. I saw the image of the lynching party receding and turned to look at the lynching tree. I took in the sight of the lynched man. Upon seeing his marred body I fell.

In previous rehearsals Kim had insisted that the falls needed to be “real”—not technique class falls, but a true release of the weight so that my arms went up as my body pulled down. So I fell, and each time I got back up and reached toward that tree. I rolled away from the tree in fury. I reached my hand up in the air

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begging for mercy and pleading for justice. I ran in a wide circle my arms open wide. In time the circle shrunk until I was again on the floor. I danced the piece for the second time, tired and emotional. Towards the end of the piece I felt as if I was going to lose control and burst into tears. But I held it together. When I completed the last gesture Bears-Bailey said, “Again, don’t even think about, just go, do it again.” I went back to that corner to begin the piece again.

Again I saw the lynching party receding. Something inside me made me turn and look at the disfigured body. His clothes were tattered and dirty from being pushed, shoved, dragged, and prodded. Just looking at him made me exhausted and sick. I had to turn away. And I had to look. Throughout the piece Primus constructed a conflict of compulsion and revulsion. I ran towards the tree with my fists clenched and chest open only to retreat backwards with my chest caved in and my shoulders rounded. I reached towards the man hanging from the tree and I reached towards God. I crawled towards and away, towards and away. I forced my body to push through its exhaustion and continue to see, retreat, dance.

At last I was staring at the imagined victim, at the tree bearing fruit, and I walked defiantly: closer to the tree, closer to the body. My right arm swung high and then low in the final defiant gesture of the dance, and I began to cry. Short of breath, sweaty, and teary I could not wrap my mind around the fact that fellow human beings were treated with such cruelty. For most of my adult life I have had to come to terms with white supremacist practices perpetrated on black people and the historical mistreatment of blacks in America. While repeating “Strange Fruit”
in this rehearsal I was forced to deal with the physical realities of lynching both in my psyche and in my body. I propped my head on my forearm against the piano and wept. Kim did not say anything for a few minutes. She was ready to give me the dance, to pass it on as it had been passed on to her. During the rehearsal process, she stressed that she would not do this unless it felt right and just to do so. So it was in these moments I have described that Kim saw that I was ready to carry the dance.

Each night that I performed “Strange Fruit,” I turned off the lights in the small studio beside the theater stage. I closed my eyes. In the darkness beneath my eyelids I saw Primus’s face approaching me. She appeared to me as she looked in her older years; she had a brown, warm glow in her skin and colorful blue and red fabrics wrapping her head. In essence, seeing her image was a prayer—my way of conjuring up her intentions and her spirit. Each night I felt Primus with me. When I performed “Strange Fruit” I was totally immersed in the piece.

Audience members told me how much they were touched by the dance. For three nights in November 2005, a dance from 1943 met a contemporary audience. Many audience members told me that they were moved to tears. Some of them were speechless. I was surprised by how much the dance touched younger dancers in the dance department and people of all ages and generations. After one performance I heard Primus telling me with pride in her voice, “See, this piece stands the test of time.”
CHAPTER 3

RENNIE HARRIS: THE REVOLUTIONARY ART OF HIP-HOP

Meeting Rennie and Making “White Lines”

*His lungs hung like enormous elephant ears in the street carnival of his ribcage.*

*As his lungs filled with air, the powdered sugar puffed and shimmied, rising before falling before rising again. If he had decided to let the pain of this world devour him the sugar would not have risen above its greasy surface, and we would not have the gift of his art. He walked in the door breath, bone, flesh, and Rennie.*

Rennie Harris (1964- ) is tall and dreadlocked, he has dimples and huge hands. To watch him move is to “get it.” Usually, the “it” is the pain of being in human form. He embodies pain like no other dancer I’ve seen. As a choreographer (a title that to Harris simply means that he is getting paid for what he does), he is prolific. While working with him in the studio on “White Lines,” the solo he created for my graduate M.F.A. concert, movement continuously flowed out of him.

When interviewers ask him how long he has been dancing, he usually replies that he has always been dancing. Playing both the interviewer and the narrator of his own responses Harris tells an audience of hip-hop heads how he
“began.” Harris explains, “I always like to say, ‘There is really no beginning or ending with hip-hop because it’s an extension of traditional cultures here in the Americas.’ So, um, (pause) so they don’t really get that part of it.” In the voice of an interviewer he continues, “Well you had to actually start at a certain time.” Harris answers, “No not really.” He explains, “In our culture we have dance as a part of our culture, everybody has dance, you know what I mean, every ethnic makeup has dance within their culture. We are learned and conditioned to separate it from our life at one point.”

Harris’s attitude about the inevitability of dance was apparent in his choreographic process for “White Lines.”

Harris choreographed “White Lines” for me in a total of four weeks (working 2-3 hours, five days a week) beginning in April 2005 and ending in September 2005. During those rehearsals he seemed to have an inexhaustible amount of movement to offer me. “White Lines” is a kinetic montage of complicated rhythms, b-boy/girl movements, West African inspired phrases, and Philadelphia’s old-school stepping styling. Harris made me repeat movements until I performed them to his liking or until I exhausted his patience. He sometimes spoke about how working with women and “classically trained” dancers (of which I am both) was an adjustment for him after working with all male company members fluent in the forms of hip-hop dance.

26 Unless otherwise cited, all quotes from Harris in this chapter are from his lecture-demonstration given at the Ford Foundation’s “Future Aesthetics: The Impact of Hip-hop on Contemporary Performance” Conference New York, 2005.
Facing Mekka (2003) was the first time that Harris significantly incorporated women into his dance work. Before Facing Mekka, Rennie Harris Puremovement (RHPM) was all male. Even in Harris’s other evening-length work Rome and Jewels, Jewels was conspicuously absent. But in Facing Mekka, not only do women perform in the piece, but female dancers are in the foreground. Women take up the most space and time, and are the focus of this work.

In the context of the male dominated hip-hop culture, Harris’s inclusion of women as the primary focus of the piece is radical. Praising the piece in a New Yorker review, critic Joan Acocella states, “Harris’s most important innovation is that half the cast is female. With their light feet and waving hips, the women supply a note of lyricism—a remembered calm and sweetness” (Acocella 89). I saw Facing Mekka at the Bates Dance Festival the summer of 2004. After seeing the performance I felt just as I had after first witnessing Primus’s choreography performed live—more than being aesthetically pleasing or hyper-political, Facing Mekka moved me on a spiritual level and evidenced the contemporary possibility of meaningful, politically relevant, spirit-conscious dance. I wanted to dance that kind of dance.

I began working with Harris on “White Lines” during his residency at The Ohio State University’s Department of Dance in April 2004. During that week, I took Harris’s class in the morning and we rehearsed in the afternoon. At our first rehearsal we listened to a few songs that Harris said “sounded like me.” His once over of me in class was right on; the music he picked was “like me” because of its
smoothness, drive, and femininity. We began working with Nina Simone’s “See-Line Woman” (Verve Remix). Harris said that whenever he heard the music he saw faces of black women coming towards him. That image was the seed of the video I would create for the dance. The video was an edited collection of my own family pictures and photographs of prominent black women artists and activists. Their faces were projected onto the cyc behind me. Some faces were solemn, others serious, still others celebratory.

To me the solo is about being a black woman: being tired, but continuing to work towards freedom. “White Lines” is about all women who create art in the everyday (my grandma’s spaghetti and apple pie uniquely made by her own hands). It is about women who resist oppression (Sonia Sanchez’s love poems, Pearl Primus’s protest dances, my mother’s courage in the face of racism). And the piece is about women who nurture the struggle for black freedom as ordinary women—as mothers of children, as mothers of revolution, as mothers of democracy. All of these women and all of these meanings have influenced my own path towards freedom and have impacted my artistic goals as a dancer.

During my performance of the piece the photos of women like Sarah Vaughn, Nikki Giovanni, Pearl Primus, my mother, and maternal grandmothers all gave me inspiration to keep dancing. The sense of persistence, “to keep on keepin’ on,” was a theme in the movement of the piece. The seven and a half minute piece began as it ended with me jumping and twisting in a pool of light. At first, I faced stage left and jumped loosely and plainly my head bobbing forward and back.
Then I added my arms, and my right arm bent allowing my right hand to touch my right shoulder and my left arm to touch my left shoulder. My arms extended in half and full circles in front of me as my legs reached out with them. In its final accumulation, I began twisting and jumping. As my right hand brushed my left shoulder, my left arm swung low behind me. I twisted my lower body to the right and my head and upper body to the left. Quickly, my feet landed and I jumped again; with each jump I twisted in opposite directions. I started moving before the lights went up and stopped after they had gone down in the same pool of light—indeed I was physically working and tired, but I kept on.

Several times in “White Lines” I performed floor work, supporting my body weight with my arms. I stretched out like a long bench into a push-up position, lowering myself down to the floor, and extending my left arm out like a snake that slithering along the downstage left diagonal. Then I pushed myself back up to the bench position using my arm strength. This sequence of floor work was followed by a crawl back towards my feet and a slow roll up through my spine into a standing position. After one such moment, while still slowly rolling up through my back, I began to move my feet quickly in a kind of sequestered hopscotch. My legs bent, swung, and hopped underneath each other to the quickest pulse of the music. Juxtaposing the slower movement of coming from the floor to standing with quick feet and loose swinging arms and legs, Harris had created a visual representation of persistence.
Even in the rehearsal process I was pushed to keep on going. As was true of my rehearsals with Kim Bears-Bailey learning “Strange Fruit,” the practice of learning and rehearsing “White Lines” was physically and emotionally demanding because the focus was always on me, the soloist. We rehearsed during a scorching Philadelphia summer in a studio with no air conditioning—just fans and gaping windows gulping bits of breeze. I sweated through all the layers of my dance clothes. I did not ask for breaks. I just kept going until Harris said to stop. Despite fatigue, it felt good to work so closely with one person—and to work so hard.

I remember a phone conversation I had with my friend Liz the summer I first met Rennie. Liz and I live in different cities and travel often; consequently, we only talk on the phone a few times a year. At the time, she was a political organizer and medical student in Chicago and I was in Maine after a grueling first year of graduate school. She must have sensed that I needed particular wisdom and encouragement that day because she said, “Ama, you know that you are dancing for all of us who are doing work. You are dancing for those of us who can’t. Your dancing keeps us from falling. We need you to dance.” “Yes,” I thought to myself, “my dancing does positively affect the world. I am dancing for those who don’t have the legs to do it.” Dancing is my part in the struggle for liberation for all people. I chose to work with Rennie because I knew from my experience viewing Facing Mekka that his choreography would provide me with the a structure within which I could experience freedom.
Harris makes dances that are consciously a part of a tradition. Harris is clear that his movement is coming from a tradition of black dance that began during a time in history when Africans were stolen from their homeland against their will and forced to work without pay in the bondage of slavery. During the Middle Passage, enslaved Africans were forced to dance to stay fit. Many chronicles of "black dance" history include this practice of "dancing the slaves" as the beginning of their narratives. In a lecture-demonstration Harris notes:

The very first time in the middle passage that slaves were made to dance with shackles, and they had to dance in shackles to rhythms of tea kettles was the very birth of contemporary, black contemporary art, so to speak. This is when they applied traditional means— tradition— to their current means. It transferred at that moment. From there on... it's history. From the plantation, the cakewalk, your ring-shout into camel walk, moon walk—and you keep on going and you can visually see the connection right up into modern day time.

Harris himself is able to embody these connections because he has been dancing socially for so long. Using his six feet and two-inches frame Harris has danced through many social dance trends. Harris's background as a dancer is rooted in the Philadelphia step tradition (which he locates as an extension of the tap era in Philadelphia). Like tap, steppin' utilizes body percussion or the ability to make sound with the instrument of the body. For example, the sound of a stomp on the floor, the sliding of two feet to meet one another, or the sound of slapping one


hand against another and then that hand to another foot. Philadelphia steppin’ was also known as “GQing” or “Ike-ing,” and Harris participated in the last wave of stepping from 1976-1979. He differentiates the Philadelphia stepping legacy he was a part of from the kind of stepping that is commonly performed by black fraternities and sororities today: the style, execution, and purpose was different.

During one rehearsal for “White Lines,” Rennie and I did not have access to a sound system, so we rehearsed without music. Instead of being thwarted by the circumstances, we were inspired. The rehearsal was a watershed moment for us because Rennie found that teaching me the rhythms with just the floor and my dancing body was enough for me to execute them. He would call with his feet and I’d respond with mine.

Sections of “White Lines” come from Harris’s experience as a stepper. Harris first encountered hip-hop culture during his youth while immersed in the Philadelphia steppin’ scene. At the same time that Harris was steppin’, hip-hop dance culture was being developed in the South Bronx. In fact, the same music that Harris was steppin’ to in Philadelphia dancers in the Bronx were rockin’ to. For example, songs by the inspiring and legendary James Brown, and breaks from bands like The Incredible Bongo Band.

In a chapter dedicated to innovations of hip-hop originator, DJ Kool Herc (Clive Campbell), Chang describes the break: “The moment when the dancers really got wild was in a song’s short instrumental break, when the band would drop out and the rhythm section would get elemental. Forget melody, chorus, songs— it
was all about the groove, building it, keeping it going.” DJ Kool Herc mastered a technique that he called “the Merry-Go-Round” by looping breaks back to back extending the time that dancers could rock the floor. Quoting Herc, Chang continues: “His sets drove the dancers from climax to climax on waves of churning drums. ‘And once they heard that, that was it, wasn’t no turning back,’ Herc says. ‘They always wanted to hear breaks after breaks after breaks after breaks’” (Chang 79).

According to Harris, there was a lot of interplay between b-boys in the Bronx and steppers in the Badlands area of Philadelphia. Harris comically describes his first memory of seeing a b-boy spin on his head in North Philadelphia. He did not know whether to scoff or applaud. He explains:

This cat came out and got on the floor—no, on the cement—he spun around on his head and we all stopped and went (he looks at the audience quizzically with furrowed brow, and they respond with laughter). At first we were like, “Oh man that’s wack.” We were like, “Is that dope or is that... spinning on their head, who ever heard of that?” Who knew, right? (Harris chuckles).

After that introduction to hip-hop, Harris became a lover of poppin’, a style created by Boogaloo Sam in Fresno, California. Poppin’ is the contraction of muscles back and forth, it is in this style that Harris uses to express pain so brilliantly. The first solo Harris created for himself is entitled “Endangered Species” (1992). In his own words, Harris states, “Endangered Species” was “the first time that I felt that hip-hop, the style of poppin’, meets theater through me.”
"Endangered Species": Autobiography as Activism

The autobiographical solo is a form in dance ripe with vulnerability and confrontation. Unlike the written autobiography, dance is an art form presented by a live, moving, body interfacing with a live audience. In *Choreographing Difference* (1997), Ann Cooper Albright imports the relative power of experiencing an autobiographical dance versus a written autobiography. She concludes:

In performance the audience is forced to deal directly with the history of that body in conjunction with the history of their own bodies. This face-to-face interaction is an infinitely more intense and uncomfortable experience which demands that the audience engage with their own cultural autobiographies, including their own histories of racism, sexism, and ablism. (121)

"Endangered Species" provides many moments that are full of confrontation, particularly, in the instances when Harris looks directly at the audience. He does this during his disclosure of his childhood experience of molestation. The revealing of this part of his boyhood is perhaps the most painful of Harris’s secrets to bear. It is at this point in the dance that the breathing sounds my ears have become accustomed to drop out completely. For the first time since Harris started the piece, there is an audible silence. Harris kicks and pushes contracting his muscles back and forth so that his resistance and pain is enhanced by his movement technique. His recorded voice booms: “I just started getting flashbacks, and all I remember is the pain. I remember the pain. ‘Ma it hurts, Ma.

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29 I first read of the phrase “autobiography as activism” in Margo Perkins’s book of the same title (2000). Perkins examines the autobiographies of Elaine Brown, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur and the legacy of autobiography and activism in black communities.
Ma, help me, help me, help me, ma’ (he cries).” Harris transforms himself into his six year-old self, his shoulders slouch over his kneeling lower body.

Tomorrow’s my birthday. I’ll be six. And I guess that’s when I realized (breathing pulse stops) that molestation was as American as apple pie, (pause) would you like a piece? (Harris offers his hands out like he is giving a gift and looks directly at the audience). I’ve already had mine. (breathing pulse comes back) Yeah I thought so.

Harris’s performance of “Endangered Species” is an act of resistance. His autobiographical solo resists victimization and oppression by inserting his personal “voice” (and body) into the public sphere. Harris challenges a meta-narrative (what he describes in “Endangered Species” as “his/story”) by publicly telling his version of the story. He injects his own life experiences within a history that usually privileges the elite and discounts dissident or marginalized voices. Importantly, Harris critiques white supremacist constructions of history and racism. Despite racism, molestation, and physical violence Harris’s autobiographical solo assures its audience that he has in fact survived— he is dancing after all. Harris’s survival is his most fundamental form of resistance; his testimony to the audience has the potential to motivate others to resist as well.

As an audience member I had to sit with my discomfort and acknowledge Harris’s experiences as his truth. Ultimately, Harris’s performance of autobiography is a site of resistance for himself, but it is also a space in which, I, as audience member, confront issues of violence, anti-black racism, and sexual abuse.
The original piece was about thirty minutes in length. Later, Harris created an eleven-minute version. It begins with a sound score of audible breathing while the lights reveal Harris running in slow motion. His right and left legs alternate in a sliding backwards glide against the floor. He grimaces as if breathing is an arduous task; his arms lift and fall crossing the mid section of his body. The pre-recorded text of Harris’s voice is layered over the breathing, which provides a pulse and meter for the dance: Harris tells the story of his family, his streets, and his secrets. His voice and breathing envelope me as he begins:

I have one mother, five brothers, and one sister. Two of my brothers are hustlers, a.k.a. gangsters; one of my brothers has cerebral palsy and is mentally retarded; the other has an Audi and a Pathfinder. My younger brother is just becoming a teenager. And then there’s my sister. I haven’t figured her out yet, or maybe she hasn’t figured herself out yet. I still remember the day she decided to tell everyone she was a lesbian. One of my brothers started chasing her around the house, he tried to beat her up, I guess he thought he could beat it out of her. Maybe he felt guilty, and maybe we all felt guilty— I mean I did punch her in the face once, and my other brother threw her down the steps. She had to get six stitches. And once my cousin beat us all up, he said it would make us men. I guess we’re all men now, huh?

The gravity of Harris’s autobiography does not lessen throughout the whole piece. In Harris’s voice I hear the pain of recollection. I hear every thud his sister’s body took as she fell down each stair. I hear the sound of knuckles against jaw and the silent swelling of America’s self-proclaimed manhood. I hear remorse, contemplation, and acceptance. Images of violence are not only aural but visual as

30 All descriptions of “Endangered Species” is based on the shorter version of the piece performed at the Ford Foundation’s “Future Aesthetics: The Impact of Hip-hop on Contemporary Performance” symposium in New York, 2005.
well. Four times in the solo Harris picks up an imagined gun. He pulls the trigger many times, sometimes the barrel is pointed at his temples, other times it is aimed in the direction of the audience at a character from his past. Harris’s hands writhe around pressing wrists as he kneels down without their assistance. His hands seem to be fighting one another. The light tan of his palms circle the brown of his hands in a duel. Limbs hang off of his tall body, contorting and controlling as he continues his story:

> I remember being in a room full of white people and I didn’t even realize it until one of them pointed it out. My identity was lost—it was taken from me. As a kid I wished I was white. I guess it was because of that European concept, you know American history. No one told me it was his/story about America... Racism.

Harris’s fingers define themselves around the imagined gun. He holds it up to his right temple and shoots himself falling down to his left side in pain. His mouth is gaping open and his locks hang over to one side. The killing of the black male body has been witnessed by countless many: assassinations of political leaders, lynchings, gang violence, and the merciless Tuskegee experiments. Harris witnessed his first shooting when he was eight years old. The piece ends with the sound of three bullets racing and rippling as Harris contracts and convulses on the floor.

In addition to violence, “Endangered Species” also explores the subject of rage. In a recorded interview named The Negro Writer in America, author James

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31 The United States government, in the form of the U.S. Public Health Service, conducted experiments on 399 black men in the late stages of syphilis. From 1932-1972, the men were not told they were infected by the disease and were purposefully denied treatment.
Baldwin pointedly states that “to be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a state of rage almost all of the time.” Like Baldwin, Harris relates his own rage to racism, “Racism. Racism. That’s a funny word, racism. But yet that’s what America was built on. Maybe that’s why I have this rage inside of me.” The first two times he pulls out the imagined gun occur when he says the word “racism.” Racism, rage, and violence are inextricably linked in this autobiographical solo.

Personal autobiography in written and theatrical forms can serve to connect the individual’s story with that of the collective. The relationship between the person who pens/dances autobiography and the people who read/view it can be quite intimate. Revelation and truth-speaking are considered inherent characteristics of the genre and provide a space where the individual can publicly transmit his or her private story. Within this transmission there is the possibility that one person’s story could affect the collective. “Endangered Species” is characteristic of this unique connection between individual performer and the collective audience.

Furthermore, I argue that “Endangered Species” is a site of resistance for both the performer and the audience in four important ways: 1) Harris’s performance acts as an embodied testimony of his survival in the face of oppression; 2) Harris constructs a counter-hegemonic narrative by utilizing his artistic voice to tell his own version of his story through pre-recorded text and live dance performance; 3) Harris “names” his oppressors—consequently, his audience
is able to locate injustice within his autobiography; 4) After locating injustice, audience members can link Harris’s experiences to their own (alike and different), and make their own internal critiques of violence, molestation, and racism, potentially acting to stop oppression through their own activism.

Harris’s ability to relate highly sensitive and personal issues through both text and movement is stunning. He captivates audiences with his testimony, virtuosity, and vulnerability. Harris’s autobiography is much more than psychological purging. It is activism.

“Endangered Species” is an example of how dance interfaces with social responsibility and action. In its authentic vernacular variations, public forums, and relocation to the concert stage hip-hop dance provides cultural participants with a potentially transformative experience. The captivating and life-altering power of dance is difficult to measure, but is consistently present in the political struggles for black liberation. From South Africa’s toyi-toyi to Pearl Primus’s “Strange Fruit,” community experiences of dance have moved people to demand justice and to celebrate humanity. Hip-hop dance is an extension of this tradition. Harris brings vernacular hip-hop movement to the concert stage where dance interacts with audiences who are capable of activism.

In 2005, the Ford Foundation and La Pena Cultural Center organized two gatherings entitled “Future Aesthetics: The Impact of Hip Hop Culture on

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32 During the apartheid reign in South Africa, people danced and chanted at political protests and gatherings. This dance is known as the toyi-toyi.
Contemporary Performance.” Harris presented a lengthy lecture-demonstration. He closed his presentation with a performance of “Endangered Species.” On a panel about hip-hop activism, Taj James, a political organizer and executive director of Movement Strategy Center, spoke about the importance of art in movements for social change. His comments encapsulate the power of a work like “Endangered Species” to transform consciousness and critique injustice. I will quote James at length. Referring to time he spent in South Africa, James passionately observed:

I kind of had a revelation as an organizer . . . I think that what artists do is in some ways the only thing that matters, and I think it’s the only thing that makes a difference. And I might think that as a political activist I can make speeches and write pamphlets and do all these things that really communicate to people. My experience is that those things really don’t matter that much. And the reason why it’s important that we’re here together and that we are around the table together is because what art does is it allows people to really speak the truth and communicate and transform people’s understanding of the world in a way that nothing else can do. And my sense of being in South Africa is that if we can’t sing (pause), then we have no future, that if we can’t dance then we have no future, if we can’t create and visualize and express then we really have no future. And what this movement represents is the people who’ve been doing that, and what the stories we’ve been hearing are the stories of what the impact is and the difference that it makes when we do that.

The movement James refers to is the hip-hop movement. James situates the importance and vitality of contemporary art making as a part of hip-hop activism. Hip-hop encompasses different forms of music, dance, visual art, and activism. As a social movement, hip-hop grew out of the youth culture in the Bronx, New
York. It is as complex as the people who make it. Light-hearted, innocent, rebellious, and political—hip-hop is constantly defined and re-defined by new generations of young people. It is, as Harris says, the latest incarnation of African cultures in contemporary societies.

33 See Chang’s *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* (2005) for a fresh history of the movement.
Harris’s Hip-Hop: Rooted in Aesthetics and Activism of 1960s

It is neither myth nor exaggeration to state that hip-hop culture developed from the radical black consciousness of the Black Power and Black Arts movements. The Black Arts movement was a national and local proliferation of diverse political and artistic endeavors regarding the self-determination and liberation of black people that swelled from about 1965-1975. Despite the theoretical and practical differences of artists involved in the Black Power movement, there was a general consensus about the importance of art in any kind of cultural revolution or determined political course. Author James Edward Smethurst describes the relationship between the Black Power and Black Arts movements in the following way:

It is a relative commonplace to briefly define Black Arts as the cultural wing of the Black Power movement. However, once could just as easily say that Black Power was the political wing of the Black Arts movement . . . the Black Power movement distinguished itself by the sheer number of its leaders (and members) who identified themselves primarily as artists and/or cultural organizers. (14)

One of the most recognizable and influential black leaders of the 1960s is Malcolm X. In 1964 Malcolm X split from the Nation of Islam and formed his own organization: the Organization of Afro-American Unity. His speeches from 1964 and his assassination in 1965 mark the beginning of the Black Power and Black Arts movements. Malcolm X’s oratory genius, intelligent humor, and sharp tongue moved audiences to transformation. Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam in March of 1964; he was assassinated eleven months later on February 21, 1965. His public speeches and his brutal assassination proved a catalyst for many artists and
activists to adopt black nationalism and self-defense as necessary strategies for black liberation.

1964 is a crucial year in understanding the contributions Malcolm X made to the growing Black Power movement. During the last year of Malcolm X’s life his political philosophies developed and changed. It was also an election year, and the year that Rennie Harris was born. In a speech titled “The Black Revolution” Malcolm X counters a pacifist/pro-integrationist perspective with his call for self-defense. He says that blacks would no longer suffer passively in the face of anti-black racism. A new generation was emerging, and they were not going to be pushed around without pushing back. He explains to a majority white audience:

1964 will be America’s hottest year; her hottest year yet; a year of much racial violence and much racial bloodshed. But it won’t be blood that’s going to flow only on one side. The new generation of black people that have grown up in this country during recent years are already forming the opinion, and it’s a just opinion, that if there is to be bleeding, it should be reciprocal—bleeding on both sides. (X 48)

1964 was a “hot” year in American history. Days after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act there were riots in Harlem that spread to other northeast cities including Philadelphia, Harris’s home city.

Countering the non-violent strategy of the southern civil rights struggle, Malcolm X defined revolution and the objectives of liberation through his speeches. In the following passage he describes the attitude of a black nationalist in regards to his or her progress towards freedom:

He doesn’t thank you for what you give him, because you are only giving him what he should have had a hundred years ago . . . if the Civil War had freed him, he wouldn’t need civil-rights legislation today. If the
Emancipation Proclamation, issued by that great shining liberal called Lincoln, had freed him, he wouldn't be singing “We Shall Overcome” today. If the amendments to the Constitution had solved his problem, his problem wouldn't still be here today. (53)

Malcolm X described a new consciousness that was developing among black people. He detailed a person who would no longer compromise or wait— who would not be appeased by empty legislative promises and election year antics. Providing his audiences with a historical framework, Malcolm X and other political leaders of the 1960s criticized their more acquiescent civil rights siblings. And much like the New Negro of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, black nationalists prepared to get their freedom in a radically new way.

Many young African Americans were politicized by Malcolm X’s street corner speeches and plain talk. His style and rhetoric influenced the Black Power movement. Black radical cohorts exhorting black nationalist viewpoints began to form. In addition to new organizations, some non-violent strategists began to embrace separatist, nationalist, or revolutionary tactics, especially after the violent assassinations of Malcolm X (1965) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968). Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture), former chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) popularized the slogan “Black Power.”

One of the largest and most significant national and international organizations formed during this period was the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) founded in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. Building on Malcolm X’s unapologetic and defiant stance, the BPP promoted pro-armed
revolutionary resistance and developed a ten-point plan beginning with the demand “We want freedom”34 (Cleaver 285).

The actuality of black men and women arming themselves to protect each other combined with the real life metaphors of black communities as war zones (under siege, policed, raided, and occupied). The result was an image of proud and defiant black men and women defending themselves. This “photograph” of 1960s black liberation had an influence on the next generation of youth. Finally, the United State’s two decade-long involvement in the Vietnam War shaped the political atmosphere of the 1960s and affected the demeanor of a nascent hip-hop movement.

Harris states, “the belief is that from ’65 to ’69 the hip-hop consciousness was born via the wars and the Black Panthers and all the other stuff that was happening; a new consciousness was coming about.” Harris believes that at the root of hip-hop culture is the consciousness that was articulated, achieved, and developed during the Black Power and Black Arts movements. Chuck D, of Public Enemy, agrees. In Fight the Power, his 1997 book named after a song of the same title written for Spike Lee’s movie Do the Right Thing, he writes, “the Vietnam War and the turbulent 1960s is a period that . . . I actually lived through . . . and was personally affected and shaped by the pervasive antiwar, civil rights, and Black-Power sentiments as a child” (25).

34 This consideration of BPP ideology refers to its initial aims. For more on the ideological developments of the BPP, the 1971 split, the activity of the party in relationship to the FBI, clandestine formations such as the Black Liberation Army, and the influences of Franz Fanon and Mao Tse-tung on its internationalist perspective, see Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party (2001) and The Black Panther Party Reconsidered (1998).
The Black Power movement’s influence on hip-hop dance movement can be found in descriptions of the dancing. Chang quotes Harris as describing the qualities of hip-hop dance movement in this way:

If you really look at hip-hop dance, it’s really a rites-of-passage thing. You never see the arms release down. They’re always up in fighting position. It’s going to war... What do we say? We say you’re going to battle. You go out there to fight. (Chang 115)

Others describe early hip-hop dance using words like aggressive, straightforward, and militaristic (115). There are several characteristics, qualities, and attitudes prevalent in the Black Power’s sister Black Arts movement that have informed hip-hop culture in general and that inform Harris’s solo “Endangered Species.”

The first and most obvious, is Harris’s chosen media: text and dance, or in the terms of the Black Arts movement: orality and performance. Although the Black Arts movement coalesced as a nation-wide movement through the production and dissemination of journals such as Liberator, and though research of the period often focuses on the largely literary nature of the movement, there was, in the words of Smethurst, a “high premium on orality and performance” (91).

Like artists of the Harlem Renaissance, many artists and activists of the Black Arts movement were in search of a black aesthetic or a stylized black voice in art that expressed radical notions of what it meant to be black in America. Writers, poets, and leaders such as Tom Dent, Mike Sell, and Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee) valued the oral performance and brevity of poetry and plays over the density of the novel (91). Poems and plays along with dance and even mural making provided an opportunity for performance (89). In addition to printed media
such as newspapers and journals, artists used live performance to express, commune, and convert audiences to emerging ideas about being black and achieving political, economic, and cultural freedom. Orality and performance have the ability to express and disperse ideas. Moreover, many black artists of the Black Arts movement privileged oral culture over written culture and the communal aspects of performance over the solitary literary pursuit (90).

The oral character of hip-hop culture is embodied in the MC. The MC, began as a “master of ceremonies” that accompanied the DJ at parties, clubs, and events. The metaphorical sons of the Last Poets and Gill Scott Heron, MCs would make exclamations to keep the crowd excited. In the 1970s, phrases like, “Throw your hands in the air and wave them like you just don’t care!” and “Clap your hands to the beat!” shifted into longer rhymes and riffs. The commercial commanders of hip-hop chose the marketability and portability of the MC over the DJ, graffiti writers, and dancers of hip-hop (George 20). The DJ, the heartbeat of hip-hop, was eclipsed by the MC.

For many people who were introduced to hip-hop via the radio or records, rap became synonymous with hip-hop. But for Harris, who as a stepper met hip-hop in its embodied beginnings, the culture remains multi-elemental. As a young dancer, Harris remembers a time when b-boys and dance crews headlined concerts
and the MC was not the only star. With this perspective and experience, Harris is able to bring together dance movement and orality in much of his choreography.\textsuperscript{35}

Harris’s autobiographical solo “Endangered Species” boasts the oral and performative qualities that are a mainstay of hip-hop’s ever-evolving culture. The combination of Harris’s recorded voice with his live dance performance offer an integrated and dynamic type of autobiography—different than that of a written memoir. Harris’s voice, though recorded, is performative. He does not chose to simply tell his story as if he were talking to a friend in conversational language and tones. Instead, Harris performs his autobiography with his voice. He uses dramatic pauses, inflection, exaggerated breathing, crying, and changes in pitch and volume. In turn, his body dances with his voice integrating movement with text.

Another bias of the Black Arts movement that appears in hip-hop culture and in Harris’s work is the importance of “perishable” art. Poet Haki Madhubuti explains:

Black art, like African art is \textit{perishable}. This too is why it is functional. For example, a black poem is written not to be read and put aside, but to actually become a part of the dance, or simply make one act. Whereas the work itself is perishable, the \textit{style} and \textit{spirit} of the creation is maintained and is used and reused to produce new works (Madhubuti 37-38).

Embedded in dance is its ephemeral essence. Dance cannot be captured or reproduced in ways that other genres of art can be. Madhubuti’s explanation of perishable black art points to a relationship that can be established between art and its audience. Even though the dance fades away, it leaves some intangible offering.

\textsuperscript{35} Harris masterfully weaves together elements of hip-hop culture in \textit{Facing Mekka} (2003) by presenting a holistic work that incorporates a visual element of video, live musicians, vocal performance, and dance.
for the audience members that may cause them to think, react, or act. Audiences may carry away the style or spirit of an artistic work, but it is still available for the artist to use again and again.

A dancer’s style remains with onlookers in the cyphers and battles of hip-hop movement. As Chang observes in his descriptions of b-boy culture, “the spotlight was on each dancer’s style” (115). On the concert stage, distinct from the competitive circles of hip-hop, style still prevails. As a soloist Harris is known for his expertise as a popper. He leaves audiences with his style of poppin’ expressed in eulogies of pain. Recall for instance the image of Harris lying with his back on the floor pushing away an invisible perpetrator—his arms pulsing and contracting as he extends and retracts them, flexing his hands and treading his legs. Harris has distinguished himself as a hip-hop dancer through his style.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Throughout this study I have outlined the characteristics and qualities of particular social, political, and artistic movements in relationship to specific choreographic works. I discussed Pearl Primus’s “Strange Fruit” in the context of the multi-decade long anti-lynching struggle and Rennie Harris’s “Endangered Species” in relationship to hip-hop as a social movement. In so doing, I have attempted to illuminate the dynamics between the artist’s individual voice and the collective. Black Arts poet Haki Madhubuti’s wrote: “Most blackart is social: art for the people’s sake. That is, the people will help shape the art, and although the work may not be here forever, through the active participation of the people, its full meaning will be realized.” Art is a social endeavor. People complete art. It is through the actions of people that protest art is made complete.

Forty years earlier Zora Neale Hurston surmised:

Negro dancing is dynamic suggestion. No matter how violent it may appear to the beholder, every posture gives the impression that the dancer will do much more. For example, the performer flexes one knee sharply, assumes a ferocious face mask, thrusts the upper part of the body forward with clenched fists, elbows taut as in hard running or grasping a thrusting blade. That is all. But the spectator himself adds the picture of ferocious assault, hears the drums and finds himself keeping time with the music and tensing himself for the struggle. It is compelling insinuation. That is the very reason the spectator is held so rapt. He is participating in the performance himself— carrying out the suggestions of the performer. (177)
People participate in performance. Over the last sixty years, thousands of people have participated in dances choreographed by Primus and Harris. They, as Hurston put it, carry out the suggestions of the dance by making meaning out of movement and adding their own knowledge to abstract expression. In matching broad, diverse political movements with discrete dance pieces, I have evidenced two solos that contribute to an atmosphere of social protest by presenting a moving picture of racial injustice. In the call for justice and in the fight of freedom, performances of “Strange Fruit” and “Endangered Species” assert the humanity and beauty of black people. Primus and Harris made dances that provided me with a blessed space to experience my full humanity through dance.

This study implicitly considers the capacity and importance of audience members who participate in dance liberation. In recognizing Primus and Harris, I hope to acknowledge the countless people who leave halls, theaters, and clubs affected by the dances they see, and who take action against injustice. We complete art by carrying it beyond the stage and into the world.
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