City of Islands

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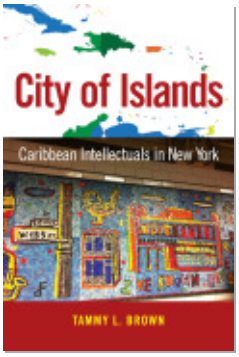

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CHAPTER 4

Pearl Primus and the Performance of African Diasporic Identities

> Dignity in my past; hope in my future; I fight among fighters for a new world; That will blossom in a bright new spring.[1]
>
> —PEARL PRIMUS

In contrast to the predominantly male Caribbean intelligentsia that dominated the opening decades of the twentieth century, choreographer and dancer Pearl Primus's entrance into New York's artistic and intellectual limelight during the 1930s reflects a changing tide in Caribbean intellectualism, which was increasingly creative and noticeably female. Primus, alongside fellow Trinidadian-American jazz virtuoso Hazel Scott, stood at the vanguard of early civil rights artistic activism, and these two laid the foundation for other women to come, including writers such as Caribbean American poet and essayist Audre Lorde, Trinidadian-born novelist and playwright Rosa Guy, and Barbadian-American novelist Paule Marshall. Given this lineage of Caribbean women artists committed to the cause of social justice, it is important to remember that religious and secular New Negro racial uplift organizations led by Caribbean male intellectuals such as Ethelred Brown and Richard B. Moore set the stage for Caribbean women intellectuals' creative approach to battling racism in America and beyond.

Throughout World War II and post-war America, Caribbean women artist-activists created provocative literary and performance art to confront America's race problem head on. They used the theatrical stage to educate white audiences about African diasporic cultures—with the hope of engendering a sense of respect for and appreciation of the broad spectrum of philosophical traditions and cultural practices of black people in the United States and around the world. These women were warriors for social justice. I use this militaristic metaphor to draw attention to the ways in which black women writers, musicians, dancers, and actors framed their own artistic activism as a

Tammy L. Brown, *Omowale-Daughter Returned Home: Pearl Primus*, Mixed Media, 2014.

sort of political and moral warfare against the perils of white supremacy in all of its soul-crushing forms, from Jim Crow in the United States to European colonial oppression in Africa and the Caribbean. This notion of wielding art as a weapon against racial injustice was particularly poignant in the historical moment. In an age when African American soldiers fought to prove their

manhood and patriotism on battlefields throughout Europe more than a half century before women of any race were allowed to engage in military combat, Caribbean women artist-activists waged their own local and national wars for democracy through theatrical performances at community centers, speakeasies, and concert halls.

From the 1940s through the 1950s, Pearl Primus was at the forefront of this artistic civil rights movement, which I term a campaign of "artistic democracy." While most scholars have used the term "modernism" to categorize this age of experimentation and marked movement away from realism and linear narrative form, especially in the realms of visual and literary art, I define this time as an era of artistic democracy because of the ground-breaking work produced by black writers, musicians, actors, and dancers who used their art to imagine a better world—a world free from racism and class oppression.[2] Democratic ideals also defined this time as black artists worked to dismantle racial segregation by joining multiracial performance art collectives and by protesting for the desegregation of venues where they performed. From Primus's choreographic renditions before integrated audiences at Café Society in Manhattan, to Baltimore-born actress Anne Brown's one-woman protest against segregated audiences at the National Theater in Washington, DC, Caribbean women joined American-born blacks in a creative and concerted effort to stamp out racism, both legally and in the practice of everyday life. Pearl Primus's life and work best illustrate this point. Although conservative political scientists might not recognize the political import of Primus's work because she did not shout her message from a stepladder on Harlem street corners or lobby for legislative changes like Richard B. Moore, I argue that Caribbean women artists turned the theatrical stage and the literary page into sites of political protest in their own right.

I contend that Pearl Primus's use of dance as a mode of political protest in Jim Crow America was particularly powerful because at a time when black bodies were criminalized, demonized, mocked and physically attacked, Primus used physical movement to reclaim the sanctity and dignity of the black body. Let us consider the terrifying context. According to the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper, between the years 1882 and 1918, 3,337 people were lynched in the United States, the majority of whom were black men.[3] Historical figures such as anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells and contemporary scholars such as Crystal Feimster also have written about the under-reported and under-analyzed issue of rape as an act of terror against black women.[4] Although scholars are still debating the actual number of incidents of racial violence against black men and women at the hands of white perpetrators, the overwhelming reality that the safety of black bodies was in jeopardy cannot be

overstated. Scholars of African diasporic studies, including Toni Morrison and Houston Baker, have written about the inadequacy of standard English to express the unspeakable horror of slavery and subsequent forms of racial and sexual violence. In a lecture titled "Unspeakable things Unspoken," Toni Morrison stated:

> My choices of language . . . my reliance for full comprehension on codes embedded in black culture, my effort to effect immediate co-conspiracy and intimacy . . . as well as my (failed) attempt to shape a silence while breaking it are attempts (many unsatisfactory) to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Afro-American culture into a language worthy of the culture.[5]

Thus, Toni Morrison understands the failures of the written, spoken and heard word in capturing the unspeakable trauma of racial oppression, and she attempts to address this issue by creating silences in the text. Scholar Houston Baker has described such efforts in Morrison's novel *Love* as a "discursive system replete with both dread silences, and 'broken word' narratives of resilience, spiritual retention, and miraculous survival."[6] I agree with Baker's assessment regarding Toni Morrison's mastery of ephemeral space and time in the way she uses literary devices such as non-linear narratives and magic realism as a multidimensional spiral that takes the reader closer and closer to the heart of a character's suffering. In contrast, Pearl Primus used the kinesthetic vocabulary of dance to bring her viewers closer and closer to understanding the physical, spiritual and psychological trauma of racism.

While Ida B. Wells used the written and spoken word as a weapon against racial violence and Billie Holiday belted blue notes in protest of lynching, Pearl Primus's use of dance as a "weapon for social change" added depth and power to civil rights activism during this era of artistic democracy. Through the visual and visceral vocabulary of bodily movement, she captured the psychological, spiritual and physical torment of the time and a longing for racial equality that was so intense, it could not be fully expressed in words. Primus understood the symbolic work of her movements as the dance connected her, as an individual, to a broader multiracial America struggling to find common ground. "I dance not to entertain but to help people understand each other," Primus stated, "Because through dance I have experienced the worldless joy of freedom, I seek it more fully now for my people and for <u>all</u> people everywhere."[7] In this context of rampant disregard and contempt toward the black body, Primus reclaimed and reframed the black body as a thing of beauty and intelligence. Given Primus's life-long promotion of mutual cultural respect as a democratic value, Primus's presentation of the black body

and African diasporic cultures in positive terms was an effort that not only benefited black Americans, but it benefited the nation as a whole. Primus's vision of a better America required strategic collaborations with white and black artist-activists.

In 1941, Primus made history as the first black dancer to join the New Dance Group—a radical performance art collective founded by white leftists a decade earlier. Wholeheartedly embracing the troupe's guiding mantra: "Dance is a weapon for social change," Primus approached the theatrical stage with a radical, political mission—to shine light on the hypocrisy of American democracy by speaking the truth about the nation's race problem at home while it waged its "war for democracy" abroad.[8] Her choreographic protest against racial violence, "Strange Fruit," best illustrates this point. At the same time, Primus revolutionized the world of modern dance as one of the first choreographers to bring West African and Caribbean dance forms to American audiences. The titles of her early work, including "Yanvaloo," the Haitian "snake dance"—a dance of supplication, and "Fanga," the Ghanaian dance of welcome, which most likely greeted Primus upon her first visit to the country that she considered her spiritual and ancestral motherland, reflect the diversity of African diasporic cultural influences that inspired Primus's choreography.[9] The way that Primus's cultural identity constituted a mode of artistic activism is best captured by a pride-filled declaration that she made during one of her early performances as a solo artist: "Dignity in my past; hope in my future; I fight among fighters for a new world; That will blossom in a bright new spring."[10] The "new world" that Primus struggled to achieve was undeniably optimistic and idealistic because she dreamed of a world that was not only free of racism, but a world that affirmed the intelligence and dignity of all black people. In this regard, Primus was both a lover and a fighter. Armed with knowledge of African, Caribbean, and black American cultures, gained through self-directed study and academic training, combined with her own family folklore, Primus used her love for black people and black culture as ammunition in her fight against racism.

Primus's distinctive style of presenting Caribbean and West African dance in their most "authentic" forms to American audiences was a radical political statement, in and of itself, forged by her personal biography and the historical moment. As a young immigrant immersed in the rich intellectual and cultural climate of Harlem's African diasporic artistic flourishing, the avant-garde experimentation of cross-cultural bohemia, and the resounding revival of American folk art sponsored by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of President Franklin Roosevelt's monumental New Deal, Primus inhabited an intellectually charged, and, I argue, an unprecedentedly egalitarian time in

the history of modern American performance art. Through her choreography, poetry, interviews, and academic writing, Primus worked to kill the seeds of white supremacy by challenging the fundamental idea of black inferiority, which had philosophical roots dating back to the age of European Enlightenment. Given Primus's understanding of performance art as a kind of creative warfare against racial injustice and class oppression, we should understand Primus's no-holds-barred criticism of the failures of American democracy as her strategy of attack; whereas her proactive celebration of the diversity of African diasporic people and cultures constituted her strategy of artistic defense against Jim and Jane Crow attacks on black human dignity.

I want to reintroduce Pearl Primus because little scholarship exists on Primus's work, especially how her personal biography shaped her theatrical, political protest. Dance critics John Martin and Doris Hering have discussed Primus's explosive entrance on the New York dance scene in the early 1940s, but they do not take a long-view of her life and legacy, placing them in historical context. Primus's longtime friend and colleague Peggy Schwartz recently published a book-length biography of Primus, but it is more descriptive than analytical. Most recently, African American studies scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin published a brilliant chapter on Primus in *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists and Progressive Politics During World War II,* in which she observes, "Modern dance had been ensconced in radical politics since its formation; traditional African dance sought to give expression to the community's history and aspirations. In creating a dialogue between these two forms, Primus helped to introduce a new context for the marriage of black aesthetics and politics."[11] Griffin's astute observation of the forward-looking synergy between Primus's kinesthetic vocabularies of modern dance and West African based polyrhythmic movement eloquently captures Primus's political and educational mission as an artist and activist. Because Griffin does such an exceptional job in covering the historical and political context that produced Primus's political protest, my treatment of Primus, in contrast, centers on how she leveraged her personality and immigrant cultural identity in the cause of civil rights. My discussion takes into account these studies of Primus in the realms of modern dance and African American studies, as I present both a personal and political portrait of the legendary choreographer, dancer, and scholar.

Pearl Primus was part of a broader movement of artist-activists who used the theatrical stage to fight for civil rights. By the 1940s, She and Trinidadian-born Jazz pianist Hazel Scott were forging new paths in the entertainment industry and public intellectualism, and Café Society in Harlem became one of the most notable sites of artistic activism. Both Primus and

Scott emphasized their Trinidadian cultural identity, in their personal lives, on stage, and in the public sphere, as a source of political power. While Scott drew upon her extensive Caribbean social networks to gain support for her husband Adam Clayton Powell's political campaigns, Primus developed her network of Trinidadian performance artists—including drummer Percival Borde, whom she would eventually marry—to better understand the history and cultural meanings of dance in the land of her birth. Such relationships enhanced the content of her choreography and subsequently bolstered her credibility as an anthropologist, artist, and educator. She also forged extensive artistic and academic networks throughout Western Africa to obtain source material for her choreography, and through the process of performance, she hoped to improve public perception of people of African descent. We've explored the example of Hazel Scott's career in the introductory chapter; so, now let us turn our attention to the life and work of Pearl Primus.

I argue that Primus's career as an artist-activist, from the 1940s through the 1950s, should be seen as a theoretical bridge between two of the most significant movements in the history of modern American art: the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. Through Africa-centered anthropological research and choreographic practice, Primus built upon the literary legacy of "Africa" in the imagination of Harlem Renaissance writers and extended the tradition of New Negro anthropologist-artists such as Zora Neale Hurston and choreographer and dancer Katherine Dunham. Like Dunham, Primus's positive vision of African diasporic peoples and cultures prefigured the "Black Pride" campaign of the 1960s Black Power movement by nearly two decades. How might we explain such political foresight? I contend that Primus's immigrant experience, bold personality, and participation in New York's avant-garde artistic communities endowed her with the cultural capital to advance such a pro-black message during this era of artistic activism. This is important because Primus's biography shows the power of family history and cultural identity in shaping the creative vision and political message of Caribbean women artist-activists during World War II and the postwar years.

Just as there are two sides to every coin, the flipside of Primus's boldly creative personality was a tendency towards irritability. Numerous diary entries testify to this truth. For instance, during one of her sojourns to western Africa, she wrote, "[I] feel better today—apologized for bad behavior the day before—work on itinerary—sleep—wash hair."[12] Her inclusion of "bad behavior" in a list of otherwise mundane tasks, such as sleeping and washing her hair, suggests that Primus desired to downplay her emotional idiosyncrasies, but she still felt compelled to include the detail, perhaps as a confession

of sorts, to ease her own conscience. In this regard, we must remember that the fundamental nature of autobiography is usually to present the author in her best light. So, is it safe to assume that Primus's "bad behavior" was much worse than she documented? Copious interviews with people who knew her well can only illumine this point; however, we also could read her inclusion of "bad behavior" on a list of routine tasks as a Freudian slip suggesting that such behavior was common for her. Regardless, while Primus neglected to mention the nature or details of her "bad behavior," the point remains that at least she possessed the humility and self-awareness to apologize for whatever emotional harm she might have inflicted. In Primus's defense, her journal entries reveal she was devotedly self-reflective regarding this matter. Thus, she was not an unrepentant narcissist, although her interpersonal interactions sometimes reinforced the stereotype of the black, woman artist as "diva."

In her personal life, Primus also was brilliant, complex, and moody. For instance, the same "Afrocentrist" who found the love in her heart to embrace an entire people—black folk around the globe— sometimes could not demonstrate the same acceptance on a personal level. Her stepdaughter, Cheryl Borde, who lived with Primus and her father Percival Borde after they married in 1961, would later complain that she felt isolated in their home, confined to her basement bedroom, not allowed to join the rest of the family upstairs.[13] According to Cheryl, Primus's interactions with her were just as chilly as Cheryl's literal surroundings while living in the dank basement of her father and stepmother's apartment—amid costumes and theatrical props.[14] Although the "wicked stepmother" is a common trope in fictitious narratives of blended families, that image has endured because at its core is a grain of truth. Given Primus's diary confessions of her fickle temperament, I am inclined to believe Cheryl's account. Such personal recollections provide us with a multilayered understanding of Primus's interior self. I contend that exploring the interior lives of performance artists is especially important to more fully understand the humanity of the person beyond the stage lights. Primus's ability to leap and hang in the air, as if time were suspended, and her mastery of certain elements of emotional intelligence and performance that made her so adroit at "moving a crowd," sometimes made her seem superhuman. But accounts of her mercurial personality, such as stories relayed by Cheryl Borde and self-disclosures in Primus's own diary, reveal that she was just as human as anyone else. In turn, Primus felt great emotional distress during the time she was married to her first husband, Yael Woll, while having an affair with Percival Borde (who was also married), especially worrying about her public perception when she became pregnant with their son Onwin.[15]

Primus also felt sensitive at times regarding her media reception, sometimes feeling utterly vexed by the fact that white critics did not fully understand the intellectual rigor behind her kinesthetic expertise. Like Hazel Scott, Primus willingly assumed the role of an international civil rights activist; although she undertook this role with much verve and élan, it did not make the burden of race any easier to carry. During the height of Primus's career, she also endured the stress brought on by constant surveillance by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which included her on a list of potential Communists or Communist sympathizers as her work for the New Dance Group, Workers Children's Camp (Wo-Chi-Ca), and other friendships with leftist artists and organizers spurred the FBI's suspicions. Primus still labored tirelessly to achieve her artistic and education visions of spreading knowledge and increasing appreciation of African peoples and cultures—a mission that her family nurtured even during her earliest years as a young girl in Trinidad.

From Port of Spain, Trinidad, to New York

Pearl Eileene Primus was born on July 1, 1919—though, for reasons of her own, she would incorrectly claim November as her birth month—in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Her father Edward was a merchant seaman, and her mother Emily Jackson worked as a domestic off and on. Although Pearl lived in Trinidad for only three years before moving to New York, three distinct memories of her birthplace remained etched in her memory. She recalled "bending down in the soft earth" as a young girl and playing with a "nest of coral snakes" that she had mistaken for beautiful coral beads. She remembered tightly hugging her father's neck as he dove deep into the Caribbean Sea, spying some kind of sea urchin that frightened her into letting go, sinking, then feeling her father's reach and rescue. Emily was so angry with Edward after this near-drowning incident that she did not speak to him for weeks. Primus concluded, "Maybe that's one of the things that influenced my fear of water."[16]

Primus also called to mind a "carnival creature" that leapt over the tall fence surrounding her yard, "terrifying [her] to pieces." Her mother reinforced this memory by telling and retelling this story throughout her youth.[17] The masked creature was a colorfully theatrical participant in Trinidad's annual carnival and inspired Primus's dissertation topic at New York University more than forty years later as she studied the educational use of masks among the Mano of Liberia. Primus's fascination with naturalistic imagery—earth, water, masks, and spirits—started with such rich childhood cultural experiences. Primus's fascination with nature is also evidenced in her diaries,

which include countless doodles of trees, birds, lakes and other bodies of water as well as poems about the natural flora and fauna of Caribbean islands and African countries that she visited. Primus's early memories of Trinidad intermingled with family folklore and an idyllic Africa in her mind's eye to shape a language of power and protest throughout her career.

Young Pearl moved with her family from Port of Spain to New York in 1921, during the first wave of Caribbean immigration to the United States, which coincided with the height of the Harlem Renaissance. She grew up in a tightly knit Caribbean community in New York City, ran track and field in high school, and became interested in modern dance as a teenager. In an interesting twist of fate, Richard B. Moore's daughter, Joyce, and Pearl Primus were classmates at Hunter College, but they only knew each other in passing. Joyce Moore Turner recalled that she was merely taking the dance class for fun and to fulfill a gym requirement, whereas Primus was so intensely focused on the dance as an art form that she did not bother much with her classmates.

When Pearl Primus first moved to New York she lived with her family at 69th Street and Broadway. Her father was the janitor for the building, much as Trinidadian-born activist Claudia Jones's father found work as a maintenance man. Between the years of 1930 or 1931 the family moved to Hell's Kitchen, then several years later they found a building at 536 Madison Avenue in the Williamsburg neighborhood in Manhattan. The Primus family still owns this property today. When young Pearl was six years old, she attended PS 94 at 68th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. She and her childhood friend Sophie Johnson would wait for the bus after school on Wednesdays to take them to church on 65th Street and Central Park West for Bible study.[18]

Like Barbadian-American novelist Paule Marshall, Primus's sense of space and time was fundamentally nonlinear. History was always present as she sculpted her personal family folklore, travel experiences, and anthropological studies of West and Central Africa and Caribbean dance styles into performance pieces and lectures to present to American audiences. Her definition of "progress" was also nonlinear as it resembled the *adinkra* West African symbol *sankofa*—a bird craning her neck backward until her body becomes a full circle. Likewise, Primus proposed a historical and metaphysical return to one's African roots in order to move forward into a brighter and more confident future. Going backward meant revising narratives of American history that omitted the accomplishments of peoples of African descent. This process of return and revision would transport black and white Americans into a better, more inclusive, democratic future.

Pearl Primus's interest in dance and anthropology alike grew out of her own African diasporic cultural heritage. In the introduction to her dissertation, Primus called herself "a product of multi-cultures" and emphasized that she was reared by a "proud African mother in a strictly West Indian home within an American community."[19] Her views of cultural identity and difference echoed that of prominent cultural studies scholars, for she defined herself in contrast to a proximate other. Scholar Ann Pellegrini has observed, "Racial difference, like sexual difference, provides one of the instituting conditions of subjectivity. It helps to set limits between self and other, precariously identifying where the 'I' ends and unknowable other begins . . . the 'I' knows itself by what it is not. . . . But it is a self-identity that must always look anxiously outside for its confirmation, disavowing any relation between inside and outside, self and mirroring image."[20] Although most scholarly discussions of othering pertain to socially constructed categories of race, Primus mainly defined otherness in cultural terms. Like Jamaican-born Unitarian minister Ethelred Brown, she recognized intraracial diversity. Pellegrini's discussion of racial difference is instructive when thinking about Primus's understanding of ethnic differences. She viewed her household as distinctly Africa-centered and Trinidadian in contrast to her non-Caribbean New York neighbors.

Family folklore and ideas of cultural retention infused Primus's language of self-identity. She frequently discussed her maternal African ancestry. Her father and uncles were expert storytellers who recounted the sights, sounds, and textures of family travel experiences throughout the Caribbean and West Africa. As a young girl, Pearl especially enjoyed hearing stories about her maternal grandfather, nicknamed Lassio, who was a renowned herbalist and healer in West Africa.[21] Lassio rooted his medicinal practice in the worship of ancestor spirits called Orishas. In the popular black periodical, *Ebony* magazine, one journalist observed the strong influence of family folklore on Primus's performance, art, and intellectual pursuits: "One of her grandfathers was a voodoo doctor, an impressive gentleman whose feats are still recounted in the Primus household in Brooklyn."[22] Like novelist Paule Marshall's family friends, whom she affectionately nicknamed "the Poets in the Kitchen," for their preservation of Barbadian idioms and wit, Primus also found artistic inspiration through her own family's West African and Trinidadian oral traditions.

For Primus, this family lore provided an alternative, non-European vision of "civilization" and "progress." This worldview sharply contrasted with white supremacist images of Africa and its descendants depicted through vaudeville minstrel shows and World Fairs. While Irish and Jewish immigrants

performed in blackface to mock African Americans and demonstrate racial solidarity with American-born whites and World Fairs presented Pygmies as spectacularly underdeveloped, both mentally and physically, Primus arrested these negative stereotypes and turned them on their head.[23]

Although her mother was born in Trinidad, Primus's Africa-centered cosmologies informed her description of her mother as "African." Primus's parents deliberately made African and Afro-Trinidadian cultural retention a priority via storytelling, dance, and food. In many ways, they recreated Trinidadian island life to the best of their abilities in New York, which led Primus to conclude: "Cultural differences were very obvious between life outside and inside the home."[24] Like novelist Paule Marshall, Primus emphasized the importance of growing up in a tightly knit Caribbean community in New York that shielded her from racism and bolstered her self-esteem. In an April 1946 interview, Primus recalled her parents' negotiation of the racial politics of their new home: "When my parents came to this country, they made the adjustment by isolating themselves. I was raised in a narrow circle that embraced church, school, and home."[25]

In 1946, Primus similarly recalled, "I guess I was fortunate in that race prejudice struck me late, about the time I graduated from high school. By then I knew enough and was grown up enough to adjust myself to it without becoming bitter."[26] This strategy allowed the Primus children to enjoy the material and social benefits of both worlds; their parents earned more money in New York and the family maintained many Trinidadian cultural values that were reinforced by social participation in New York's burgeoning Caribbean communities.

In a 1946 article, Primus further outlined the differences between racial discrimination in the United States and class-based divisions in the Caribbean. She said, "I was born in the West Indies and did not run into race discrimination until late in life. In the Indies there is no color system, but a class system. A black person with money and prestige is in the top brackets. A white peddler remains a white peddler."[27] Although Trinidad's class-based social hierarchy teemed with its own unique set of injustices, the Primuses still preferred Trinidad's allegedly "race-blind" classism to the race-based prejudice that they encountered in the United States. So, Primus's parents tried to recreate this notion of the lesser of two evils by keeping Pearl and her siblings close to home. Unlike Paule Marshall, Primus neglected to acknowledge that although Caribbean populations were mainly black, members of the upper social and economic classes were quite light-skinned. Thus, although a blatant binary system of white versus black racism did not exist in the Caribbean, the political economy still revealed intense suffering due to the legacy of racialized

slavery and colonialism that produced a broad spectrum of skin color gradations overlapping with class and upheld by light skinned Caribbean elites.

But Primus also was sure to note that although her family abhorred white supremacy, they still remained open-minded. "My parents taught me not to indict the whole white group if one white person discriminated against me. It was a valuable lesson,"[28] Primus recalled. Her first visit to the southern United States to study the movements of sharecroppers left her feeling "licked." "Everything looked ugly to me there—the Negroes because of their hunger and feeling of inferiority, the whites because of their fear and hunger." Although her encounters with racism and intense poverty left her feeling "an absolute hollowness . . . for months" after her return to New York, Primus would later recall several kind deeds proffered by white southerners, which stirred her memory of her parents' advice to resist the temptation to group all whites in the same category.[29]

Primus mingled with well-known American-born and foreign-born black entertainers and political activists, including Paul Robeson, Hazel Scott, and Billie Holiday. A mature Primus would later humorously recall the humiliatingly dramatic start to her performance career as a solo artist. She was barely nineteen when she approached one of the programmers at Café Society in Greenwich Village to audition, and he was not at all impressed by her appearance. Her simple skirt and bobby socks conjured an image of drab naïveté rather than the fabulously dynamic personality and talent needed to impress Café Society goers. But Primus insisted that she be given a chance, and she danced with such skill and enthusiasm at her audition that she earned a coveted slot as a Café Society entertainer. Primus reminisced: "My first night at Café Society Downtown, my music failed. I was brand new, so I used records. Eddie Heywood put one on, and I counted to three and jumped on. Silence. The third time I tried, I dissolved in tears, and this huge man emerged from the audience. "Aren't you the person who broke up my home?' he asked. It was Paul Robeson. I'd taught his son to do the Lindy Hop at camp and the child had gone home and smashed up all the furniture dancing. But Robeson made me get up and keep dancing that night."[30] Jazz luminary Billie Holiday also was present that night. She shouted encouragement from the back of the jam-packed room, and Primus danced and danced. She performed three shows each night for ten months. When music lovers came to hear famed guitarist and songwriter Josh White and Trinidadian-born pianist Hazel Scott, they also would have the pleasure of witnessing one of Primus's dance concerts. Primus inherited the energy and synergy of Harlem Renaissance greats such as Paul Robeson and Billie Holiday, took up the mantle of artistic activism, and carried it throughout the remainder of her career.

The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond

In many ways, Pearl Primus is a daughter of the Harlem Renaissance. When she moved to New York City as a toddler, New Negro declarations of black intelligence, sophistication, and cosmopolitanism as expressed through poetry, music, and the visual arts was in full swing. As a up-and-coming performance artist and intellectual in her own right, Primus "cut her teeth" on the poetry of Langston Hughes, the Jazz renderings of Billie Holiday, and the theatrical work and radical example of legendary scholar-athlete, actor, and activist Paul Robeson. Her creative vision, kinesthetic vocabulary, and choreographic ability expanded under the tutelage of American-born blacks, African immigrants (*e.g.,* Asadata Dafora), Caribbean and white American instructors. As a young adult, Primus took dance lessons with famed Trinidadian-born choreographer Beryl McBurnie, and performed alongside compatriot Jazz pianist Hazel Scott at Café Society. Primus also took dance lessons with groundbreaking white choreographers of modern dance such as Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman. She gleaned inspiration from New York's vibrant artistic communities, her own family folklore, and Trinidadian cultural roots to create work that pushed the boundaries of modern dance and the social strictures of race and class in pre-Civil Rights era America. Examples? Primus used her artistic vision and her African diasporic cultural identity as ammunition in the battle for civil rights.

Pearl Primus's African-inspired performance art was not spontaneously generated in a vacuum. She came of age during the wake of the Harlem Renaissance, and her incorporation of imagined African dance elements into her choreography was a practice that many at the time termed "primitivism." Primus frequently mythologized Africa in ways comparable to poet Countee Cullen, whose poem "Heritage" begins:

> What is Africa to me
> Copper sun or scarlet sea
> Jungle star or jungle track
> Strong bronzed men, or regal black.[31]

Cullen used colors like "copper," "scarlet," and "bronzed" to paint a sultry and idyllic portrait of the African landscape and to sensually describe its inhabitants, more specifically, African men. The words "jungle," "strong," and "regal" depict Africa as a land where naturally rugged royalty thrived. Primus similarly extolled a monolithic "Africa" in her professional debut, "African Ceremonial" (1943). Her costume and stylized movements suggested an exoticized

gaze. Primus could have performed "African Ceremonial" in everyday West African women's attire like an oversized top, sarong skirt, and head-wrap or varied her costume, but she wore a sleeveless black leotard, midriff exposed, and layered with a short raffia skirt. This costume was a variation on the same theme of scantily clad "primitivists" like Tarzan in Edgar Rice Burroughs's 1912 novel. Primus also used props like spears and beaded gourds to conjure the sights and sounds of "Africa." Although she claimed to represent African dance in its most authentic form, she exaggerated jumps and turns for dramatic purposes. Harlem was a transformative locale in shaping Primus's civil rights activism, which paradoxically included this mythologized view of African people and cultures.

Primus's proximity to Harlem Renaissance artistic production wasn't the sole impetus behind "primitivist" choreography like "African Ceremonial;" the broader modern dance scene in New York also shaped her work. Leading choreographers and dancers like Martha Graham, Jane Dudley, and Asadata Dafora began performing "primitivist" choreography in the 1930s. Although the latter part of Primus's career focused on West and Central African and Caribbean dance forms almost exclusively, Primus still squarely placed herself in the midst of the early modern dance movement in New York City. She reminded her audience: "My dances aren't all African and Caribbean inspired," she said. "Aside from the Ruth Benedicts and the Franz Boases, I've studied with Graham, Humphrey, Weidman and Holm. When they had four people in their class I was there."[32] Indeed Primus's expression of her civil rights activism through the power of dance was rooted in anthropological vocabularies learned under the tutelage of scholar Franz Boas during her studies at Columbia University as well as in a kinesthetic vocabulary learned during intensive study with leading modern dance instructors.

The New York worlds of performance and literary art were synergistic as artists in both realms took on African-inspired themes, but Primus's view of her African heritage was more affirmative than most of her contemporaries. Although poet Countee Cullen romanticized the African topography, culture, and people, he also implied that Africa was a spiritually backward continent. At this juncture, Primus strongly dissented, for she never condemned any African religion, social structure, or political system. By stressing the sanctity of non-Westernized African cultures, she contested white supremacist notions of the uncivilized "other" and constructed new black identities based on Africa-centered consciousness, mutual cultural respect, and humanism.

Insular and vibrant artistic communities in Manhattan and Harlem also shaped Primus's civil rights activism. While holding on to her Trinidadian heritage, she embraced the world of multi-racial, leftist intellectualism at Café

Society in Greenwich Village as well as Café Society Uptown in Harlem. She grew as an artist-activist-intellectual in the company of like-minded souls at Hunter College, the 92nd Street YMCA, and even a leftist summer camp called Worker's Children Camp, better known as Wo-Chi-Ca.

Primus's work as a principal dancer with the integrated New Dance Group and as a counselor and dance instructor at Wo-Chi-Ca Camp, founded in New Jersey during the Great Depression, placed her at the center of leftist artistic projects at a very young age. Wo-Chi-Ca Camp photos of black and white children playing, dancing, talking and learning from a multiracial staff echo the same spirit of racial equality and mutual respect seen in photographs of Primus with white classmates at Hunter College and fellow performers of the New Dance Group. These experiences laid the foundation for Primus's role as "cultural ambassador" to the New York Public Schools where she would later, from the 1970s through the mid-1990s, assume responsibilities as instructor and demonstrator.

Primus grew up in a household filled with music, and in numerous interviews throughout her performance career she thanked her mother for instilling in her the love of dance. Famed Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes was one of Primus's mentors, and her later solo work throughout the 1940s reflected her rich personal experience—coming of age as a performer and woman in the midst of such vibrantly diverse intellectual expression and cultural production. To say Hughes was a fan of Primus would be an understatement. He understood Primus's importance as a singular, kinesthetic complement to the written and spoken intellectualism of the Harlem Renaissance when he observed, "Every time she leaped, folks felt like shouting. Some did. Some hollered out loud."[33] Hughes's witness to the visceral affect that Primus had on her audiences is both poignant and insightful. While political speeches, poetry, and jazz music dominates popular and academic discussions regarding the political import of the New Negro and the civil rights movement, I, like Hughes, cannot emphasize enough the power of Primus's singular presence as a dancer. In other words, in addition to Marcus Garvey's legendary marches throughout 1920s Harlem that displayed black consciousness, power, and solidarity, Primus's choreography powerfully presented these same themes on the theatrical stage from the late 1940s onward.

Primus's Solo Career

By the mid 1940s, Primus stood poised—ready to pursue her career as a solo choreographer and dancer. She enthusiastically donned the mantle of

a radical, artist activist among a vanguard of Caribbean women literary and performance artists centered in the battle for civil rights. On Wednesday October 4, 1944, Primus made her debut at the Belasco Theatre in midtown Manhattan. She had already earned critical acclaim as a principal dancer in the New Dance Group, but this Broadway showcase signaled her arrival as solo artist and principal choreographer. For the greater part of the soiree, Primus took full command of the stage—expressing a unique vision of her own African diasporic identity in motion. Alternately accompanied by a quintet of male dancers and a five-piece jazz band, Primus explored the rites and rituals of the Belgian Congo in "African Ceremonial" and riffed off of her own Caribbean roots in a Vodun-inspired piece titled "Yanvaloo," a ritualistic dance of the snake or spirit Damballah that literally means "I beg of You." Perhaps this dance of supplication was a direct plea to the white audience of well-to-do theatergoers to acknowledge the intelligence, beauty, and diversity of black cultural experiences in America and throughout the world. Primus's presence on that stage not only marked her personal achievement as a gifted dancer and budding intellectual, but it also reflected the changing times in a nation close to winning a "war for democracy" abroad, while racial injustices persisted at home. The United States was a nation in love with things considered "primitive." The undulating motions of West African-based dances such as the "Yanvaloo" conjured faraway lands of exotic peoples who still fit the hierarchy of American empire and alleged African inferiority, but Primus's individual training with the racially integrated New Dance Group, whose motto was "Dance is a weapon for social change," her solo dance protests of racial violence in America, and her work documenting the triumphs and trials of black Americans in the south, demonstrate her commitment to tell the truth about America's race problem. Her mission to revision blackness in positive terms, such as in the Belasco Theater performance, suggests a degree of openness, especially among white liberals, to hear Primus's message of reform.

Although Primus was only twenty-five years old when she made her Broadway debut, the confidence she drew from her own cultural identity gave her wisdom beyond her years. On the Belasco stage, Primus did not hold back; her repertoire was expansive and ambitious as it followed the contours of her literal and imagined travels throughout Africa, the Caribbean, and the southern states of America. Primus danced to the soul-wrenching sounds of South Carolina–born guitarist and folksinger Josh White, whom Primus met after he moved to New York in 1931, and she danced to music composed by master pianist Mary Lou Williams in a piece titled "Study in Nothing." All of these artistic collaborations demonstrate Primus's keen ability to incorporate the culture of her Trinidadian heritage, her family's West African folklore,

and her own independent studies of African, Caribbean, and black American cultures. In typical Primus style, she incorporated the spoken word into her dance performance as she declared, "Dignity in my past; hope in my future; I fight among fighters for a new world; That will blossom in a bright new spring."[34] The "new world" that Primus envisioned was one free of *de facto* and *de jure* racism, a social environment that affirmed the dignity of black people in the United States and abroad.

Dance critic John Martin wrote in the *New York Times* the following day that Primus's Broadway debut was "all fine and authentic in spirit, well composed and danced with great technical skill as well as dramatic power."[35] He was put off, however, by Primus's use of a narrative voice, performed by New York-born, black actor Gordon Heath, between choreographic sets in order to "tie the various numbers together into a kind of over-all picture of the Negro." I, however, contend that Primus's incorporation of a narrative voice was appropriate and speaks volumes regarding her ambitious historical scope and educational mission.

Building upon the vocabularies of West African art, Trinidadian carnival, and the movements of American-born black agricultural workers, Pearl Primus used the language of dance to combat racism and revise negative stereotypes of blackness. She articulated her "civil rights activism" through dance and scholarly writing based on her anthropological research. Primus embraced West African spiritual practices of the worship of multiple deities called Orishas, and believed that her ancestors spoke to her in her dreams. While most scholarly studies of the New Negro have focused on the literature of the Harlem Renaissance and predominantly male, radical public intellectuals, black women intellectuals, artists, and activists re-envisioned blackness in affirmative terms in the midst of continued white supremacist attacks on black folk's humanity.[36]

"Strange Fruit"

More than a year before her performance at the Belasco, Primus had arrested the attention of the arts world with her radical interpretation of the song "Strange Fruit." On February 14, 1943, Pearl Primus commanded the stage at the 92nd Street YMCA in Manhattan—performing solely to the words of the famous protest song for the first time. Written by Abel Meeropol (a.k.a. Lewis Allen) and popularized by Billie Holiday, "Strange Fruit" is arguably the best-known example of anti-lynching artistic activism in the history of the United States.[37] Primus deliberately chose a lyrical soundtrack for her choreography

that already carried moral weight in the context of political protest of racism in America. She choreographed a thoroughly modern dance solo and performed it to the poem's words alone—without the accompaniment of instrumental music. Its awed and radicalizing reception was comparable to when Billie Holliday first sang the haunting lyrics before an integrated audience at Café Society in Greenwich Village, NY, in 1939.[38]

I contend that Primus's choreographic rendering of "Strange Fruit" in contrast to Billie Holiday's vocal performance, struck a chord with viewers on a visceral level. In place of music, Primus used the pounding, percussive sounds of her body, as she literally through herself onto the floor, to punctuate the spoken words. This dance differed from her prior repertoire in both form and content. In contrast to the uplifting tenor of "Yanvaloo," "Fanga," and "African Ceremonial," in which Primus celebrated the Africa of her imagination, "Strange Fruit" was stark, contorted, and traumatic. Scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin described Primus's choreography to "Strange Fruit" as follows:

> Gone were the leaps. In their place, there is a body on the floor, a writhing, distraught human figure, reaching to the tree one moment, fallen down in twists and turns the next. And running but getting nowhere: running in a circle.[39]

Contrary to popular belief, the perspective of the dancer is of a white man or woman who participated in the lynching of a black person (most likely a man). The dance is set after the lynch mob has dispersed, and a sole viewer or executioner reflects on the horror of what just occurred. Primus's contorted and violent movements reflected the psychological and emotional torment of the white viewer or executioner.[40] This was an interesting perspective to portray because most civil rights activism focused on the violence Jim Crow inflicted on black Americans, but Primus also stressed how white supremacy and racial violence damaged its perpetrators.[41] In a 1944 article, Primus explained, "In mobs, you have the mass mind to treat . . . my dance shows a member of the mob as he leaves the scene of the crime. He looks back at the black body hanging by its neck and reviles himself for what he has done. It is not a beautiful dance."[42] Primus's radical interpretation of "Strange Fruit" encouraged passionate and renewed critiques of racial violence in the United States.

Primus's adaptation of "Strange Fruit" was one among many interesting and intimate collaborations with New York Jews. Although most of us are only aware of Primus's marriage to Trinidadian-born drummer and actor Percival Borde, Primus had been married before. In 1950, she married her first husband, Yael Woll, the son of Russian Jews who had immigrated to New

York. Woll's father was principal of the Downtown Talmud Torah School, where he also taught Hebrew, and "his mother was the daughter of a rabbi." Pearl and Yael met during the early 1940s in New York because they ran in overlapping artistic, leftist circles. When the couple announced their marriage plans, Yael's family was opposed, but the Primuses were more accepting. Yael would later recall, "They did the best they could with a white face in the house and in time they got more and more used to it." During the early years of their partnership and marriage, Yael Woll assisted Pearl Primus in lighting design and stage management. He handled logistical details, including transportation for Primus and her small band of dancers."[43]

According to Pearl Primus, she also had a genealogical connection to Jewish culture because her paternal grandfather was Jewish. Her son, Onwin Borde, later claimed that his grandfather "Herr Primus was a rabbi, a very upper-class, Ashkenazi Jew. I know all about Yom Kippur. I had a Jewish grandfather."[44] Whether this bit of family folklore was myth or reality, the point remained that Primus had close personal and professional relationships with New York Jews within the vibrant, cross-cultural artistic and intellectual life of the city at the time.

Primus's performance of "Strange Fruit" catapulted her into the pantheon of black women artist-activists. Primus's radical performance also attracted the attention of the House of Un-American Activity Committee, which listed her as a potential Communist although she was never a member of the party. Unlike fellow Trinidadian pianist and actress Hazel Scott, HUAC never required Primus to formally appear in a court trial before the committee. Despite FBI surveillance, Primus continued to work within a radical political paradigm. Her civil rights activism was nurtured through interactions with members of New York's intelligentsia because their progressive politics provided the vocabulary and intellectual space for Primus to fully express her own multi-cultural identity.

"Hard Time Blues"

Although it took years for Pearl Primus to acquire enough funding to travel abroad to conduct anthropological research, as World War II neared its close, Primus traveled extensively throughout the southern United States and found inspiration in the mundane. In the summer of 1944, she conducted intense ethnographic research in rural black communities in Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina. As an anthropologist and "participant observer," she assumed the role of an anonymous migrant worker. When asked why it was necessary

to travel to the South instead of observing black Christian devotional practices in New York churches such as Abyssinian Baptist, Primus responded that she could go to the Clayton Powell's church because he "follow[ed] the revival pattern," but she was leery of this cosmopolitan context because she believed Powell's intellectualism might hinder the authenticity of the church service. Primus continued, "I could go to other churches where there is even less intellectual development, but [the service] may be diluted."[45] Primus's self-taught and formally learned anthropological underpinnings led her to embrace this interpretation of rural cultures as more authentic, dignified, and static compared to the cultures of fast-paced urban areas. So, like anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston and prominent black gay professional dancer Bill T. Jones who came after her,[46] Primus traveled throughout the South and immersed herself in the religious and work cultures of rural folk to inform her choreography. During the week, she worked alongside black laborers toiling in cotton fields and studied their everyday movements, and on Sundays she participated in black Christian worship services to document elements of West African cultural retention in rural black devotional practices. Such "participant observation" provided primary source material from which Primus choreographed and danced numerous pieces exploring themes of racial and class oppression. She based her choreography to the song "Hard Time Blues" on this anthropological research.

"Hard Time Blues" is Primus's working-class manifesto based on a song about southern sharecroppers by folksinger Josh White. Primus and Josh White's creative partnership was a natural one. Both were regular performers at Café Society, where they intermingled with a wide array of radical black and white artists, activists, and appreciators of art as participants in the progressive, interracial gatherings at the forefront of New York bohemia. When White released "Hard Times Blues" in 1941, Primus was still dancing with the New Dance Group, and Josh White's class consciousness resonated with her. White and Primus shared an interest in the plight of black sharecroppers, which is exemplified by the third stanza of the song "Hard Time Blues":

> Now the sun a-shinin' fourteen days and no rain.
> Hoein' and plantin' was all in vain.
> They had hard, hard times, Lord, all around,
> Meal barrel's empty, crops burned to the ground.[47]

When Primus performed "Hard Time Blues" throughout the mid-1940s, postwar prosperity was on the horizon but Depression era hardships lingered, especially for black Americans. This modern dance piece captured the spirits

of hard-pressed black American sharecroppers in its staccato and frenzied movements.[48]

Thankfully, the documentary film *Free to Dance* includes rare footage of Primus performing "Hard Time Blues."[49] She began the dance at center stage with one hand out and her head bowed. Although Primus performed "Hard Time Blues" as a solo, she conveyed the presence of uncompromising elites who rebuffed sharecroppers' requests for aid. As the music and lyrics rose toward a crescendo, she spun in circles. With one arm behind her back and her right hand extended in supplication, her fierce twirling conjuring the frustrations of sharecroppers struggling through "hard times," and denied help by those more fortunate. While the guitar chords and vocals increased in speed and intensity, Primus executed high jumps and hanging leaps, and her pounding fist connotes the physical brawn and political power of the working class. Although Primus's political activism centered on racial justice and she did not explicitly discuss women's rights, her strong arm and pounding fist evoke contemporaneous images of "Rosie the Riveter," a symbol of working-class women's rights. In contrast to the polyrhythmic movement that dominated "African Ceremonial," "Hard Time Blues" is stripped down. Although Primus's jumps electrified audiences, she maintained gravity in tone, fitting the subject matter. Even the staging underscores the political importance of Primus's work. American flags surrounded her as she danced. This visual image illustrates the power of Primus's political voice, which especially appealed to advocates for the rights of working class people.[50]

I describe the choreographic elements of Primus's work in detail, because I contend that her use of dance as a mode of political protest is especially powerful in the context of class oppression as experienced through the body in hard labor. By using her own body to articulate the frustrations and hopes of over-worked, physically and emotionally tired working-class Americans, she gave such marginalized peoples a political voice and platform. This kinesthetic and rhetorical strategy was rooted in Primus's conception that dance is a language—capable of conveying not only emotion but also intellectual ideas, when words fail. "Hard Time Blues" illustrates this point.

Although Primus was leery about facing the "ugliness" of Jim Crow head on, she believed her anthropological research in the South was necessary to the development of her own voice as an artist-activist. In a 1944 interview, when asked how she would deal with racism during her travels throughout the south, Primus compared Jim Crow to Hitler's Nazi regime. She also declared that she would not allow racism to thwart her work. Primus said, "I'm militant and I don't tolerate racial abuse, but there is food for me in the South and I'm not going to let my personal scruples stand in the way this

time. I'm going to comply with their Nazi-like rules because I'd hate to let people know who I am."[51] [The last sentence refers to the fact that Primus was traveling as an anonymous migrant worker.] Once again, Primus used her first-hand experience in the South as a kind of moral ammunition to challenge Jim Crow racism. In doing so, she inserted herself into the black intellectual discourse of the time regarding the fight for justice on two fronts: fascism abroad and racism at home.

Africa on Primus's Mind

Because Primus used education and cultural exposure as ammunition to challenge societal notions of black inferiority, she deliberately carved out a space for herself, in the public sphere, as a powerful artist-educator. Primus described the impetus behind her first visit to western Africa as a mission to "find material not only to enrich our theatre but to add to our knowledge of people little understood."[52] It might be a cliché, but for Primus's purposes, it still rang true: Knowledge is power. The bold and dramatic way in which Primus declared her appreciation of African diasporic cultures from an insider perspective as a "participant observant" and trained anthropologist allowed her to move beyond the romanticized depictions of blackness of her artistic predecessors. As an inheritor of celebratory yet exoticized images of the African diaspora rendered by Harlem Renaissance artists, from poet Claude Mckay's "Bananas ripe and green, and ginger root" in his nostalgic recollection of his homeland Jamaica in "The Tropics of New York"[53] to the iconic images of Egyptian pyramids and pharaohs in Aaron Douglas's complex, multilayered, and even ethereal renderings of black civilizations past, Primus embraced these positive depictions of blackness and moved beyond them. By basing her choreography on thorough, detailed anthropological research of specific African diaporic dances and cultures, Primus added a greater degree of nuance to academic and popular understandings of blackness.

In Primus's world, the souls of black folk were beautiful, brilliant, and diverse. Her's was a radical portrait of blackness to present to mainstream America at a time when the country was still reeling from the ravages of white supremacy and racial violence. I contend that Primus's style of artistic activism, especially her celebration of West African cultures, was shaped by her family history and immigrant cultural identity. Pearl Primus's fundamental mission to redefine blackness in positive terms, genealogically and philosophically, began with her own African roots. Africa dominated Primus's artistic imagination, so much so, that in 1943, she titled her professional debut,

"African Ceremonial," which opened on Broadway to critical acclaim. "African Ceremonial" featured West African and Central African dances performed as part of wedding celebratory rituals. Although Primus had not yet traveled to the continent, she based the choreography on oral history, secondary literature, and African visual art. For Primus, "African Ceremonial" became a sort of figurative "roots pilgrimage" to uncover hitherto unknown history, as most black Americans could not trace their lineage beyond three generations given the chaos and destruction of familial bonds wrought by slavery. Primus's 1943 debut was a variation of prevalent primitivist artistic themes, but it was also a bold—albeit romantic—declaration of pride in African cultures. Primus's work rebutted claims of black American cultural paucity or erasure at a time when historians were suggesting that black Americans had been stripped of their cultural history, that they were tabula rasa, irrevocably devastated by the psychic rupture of racialized slavery.

Primus argued that Africa did not need uplifting but was just fine *as is*. At the beginning of her career, her notion of racial uplift clashed with prevailing "race leaders'" strategies. One dance critic would later observe: "When she began doing African dances in the 1940s, she encountered resistance from black audiences who, she said, 'had been taught,' to be ashamed of their heritage as 'primitive.'"[54] Primus's approach was completely Africa-centered while most black leaders believed blacks would be uplifted through the adoption of Victorian mores. African American social, political, and religious leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries argued that African Americans needed to travel to Africa to share Western civilization with their African brothers and sisters. Even influential black consciousness leaders such as Marcus Garvey and Ethelred Brown, still adhered to Western notions of civilization and progress. Although Garvey espoused a metaphysical and political return to Africa, he preached that Africa would be redeemed through modernization and industrialization.

"Omowale": Daughter Returned Home

In 1949, Primus visited Monrovia, Liberia, for the first time, sponsored by the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship. Her goal was to study dance throughout Africa. On the very first day of her diary entries documenting her travels to western Africa, Primus wrote:

> Things I must do
> keep notes daily—

keep up with technique
Jot down notes on new movements
write up dances & musical instruments
French Visa
Visa for Accra.
Letters to contacts—
Press articles—Nigeria—itinerary to paper[55]

Always observant, studious, and forward-thinking, Primus juggled the double-burden of logistical administration—her passport, visas, letters of introduction, and so on, along with carving out time for the creative practice required to make her sojourn successful. She remained committed to honing her crafts as choreographer and dancer while taking in all of the sights and sounds of western Africa as fresh primary sources for future work. She was comfortable in the role of artist-anthropologist, and she thoroughly enjoyed studying this new cultural context as well as crafting a position of power for herself in this new space.

Following in the footsteps of contemporaneous anthropologist and choreographer Katherine Dunham, Primus was among the last cohort of artists to receive a Rosenwald grant. At a dance performance earlier that year at Fisk University, Primus had impressed one of the members of the prize's selection committee so much that when he learned that she had never visited Africa, he insisted that the Rosenwald Foundation sponsor her sojourn. Primus made a second trip to Liberia in 1952, and from 1959 until 1961 she spent a third stay in Liberia to help establish a Performing Arts Center there. From 1962 through 1963, Primus studied in Liberia for the fourth time; the Rebekah Harkness Foundation funded that trip.

Primus's diary entries reflect an almost giddy excitement about her travels throughout the continent that she deemed her "motherland." In her characteristic style of listing mundane daily activities such as doing laundry, washing hair, and so on, intertwined with monumental events, Primus wrote:

Rose early—wash—hang wash on trees—and bars of wood—found in bathroom—Rest house large but cold in appearance—Visit Oni to meet wives—not available—He tells me true history of Orangun—I now have both myth and reality—Oni gives me new name—Omawale—child returns home—pictures of Oni and self—will stop in to record message to America.[56]

Primus's diary entries are both poetic and impressionistic. One might think she'd list the most important, existential development first—the honor of

Nigerian elders bestowing her with a new Igbo name, Omowale—meaning daughter returned home, but she saved that detail for last. Primus's diary entries hint at an obsessive-compulsive desire to document every minute detail of her time in Africa. This reflected her excitement about her travels, but it also provides useful insights regarding her personality. Compulsive tendencies are common among artists who perform at a high level because attention to details is part of a spirit of perfectionism that made performance artists like Primus shine. Although her diary entries sometimes preface monumental accomplishments with mundane details, Primus undoubtedly considered the honor of receiving the Nigerian name "Omowale" an important event because she repeatedly recounted this story in interviews with journalists in the United States and abroad after her initial life-changing visit to West Africa.[57] Primus said it best when she declared in her diary, "I now have both myth and reality." Although it's possible to argue that a degree of romanticism might cloud the vision of any African diasporic person who makes a "roots pilgrimage" to the most likely home of her ancestors for the first time, 1949 was a turning point in Primus's understanding of her own African diasporic cultural identity. She now possessed first-hand knowledge to complement and challenge her prior, distant studies of African cultures and people.

Before Primus won the Rosenwald grant, her performance art took shape along points of a diverse cultural and spiritual constellation. To create African-based choreographies, she drew upon her imagination, her cultural participation in Caribbean New York communities, and her family-informed Africa-centered cosmologies. In her early career, Primus's notions of African cultural authenticity were skewed toward a romanticized vision of Africa, but dance critics still found her performances powerful and convincing. Her intellectual curiosity, creativity, and theatrical skill brought rave reviews, but such praise often sprang from the white reviewers' own distorted understandings of African art and culture.

A number of prominent dance critics based their assessments of Primus's early work as "authentically" African on her Caribbean and West African familial heritage. One reviewer reflected on the role of imagination and family folklore in Primus's development as a dancer by declaring, "When Pearl Primus says she was taught the dances of Africa in her dreams by *her grandfather, a mighty spiritual leader*, no one can dispute her. Performing them as a young girl at Fisk, they were so *authentically* African that an astounded foundation director gave her a grant to go study her cultural heritage at the source."[58] On one hand, the open-mindedness of this critic is noteworthy; she respected Primus's beliefs in ancestor guidance and worship, but on the other hand, the reviewer writing in the late 1960s might have discussed Primus's real-life

anthropological research in the Caribbean and in Central and West Africa. Sally Hammond's critique illuminates the delicate cultural and political scales that Primus attempted to balance and that dance critics essayed to understand. Primus did not see any conflict in being an intellectual and a spiritualist, embracing West African cosmologies while pursuing academic studies of Caribbean and African dance and culture. Hammond failed to grasp fully the sophistication of Primus's craft. Hammond employed familiar, facile notions of African-based dance as intuitive and spiritual, while Western dance forms like ballet and even American modern dance, were intellectual. For Primus, this was a false dichotomy. Primus's intellectual and spiritual selves enjoyed a symbiotic relationship; she felt no tension between her scholarly and theatrical endeavors to educate readers and audiences about Caribbean and African cultures, but she did feel intense frustration when critics failed to understand the complexity of her craft and intentions.

Dance critics often expressed negative stereotypes of African artistic production—depicting it as unsophisticated and backwards, which Primus countered by insisting that Africa-based performance art was universal and forward-looking, not merely parochial and entertainingly backward. Again, reviewers' critiques of Primus's work were double-edged. Critics frequently used the word "authentic" or grammatical variations of that word, along with supposed synonyms such as "unadulterated," "true," "sincere," "pure," "genuine," "rooted," and "innate" to describe Primus's "primitivist" dances. These reviews were usually laudatory in tone, but they still confined Primus in a socially constructed box marked "other" and "inferior." One critic posed the dichotomy of city versus country in terms of contamination and purity to describe Primus's research in West Africa: "The farther away from cities she journeyed, the *purer* were the dances. For on the coast and in the more urban areas, the native dance has lost its *dignity* through *contamination* by jitter-bugging and certain unfortunate commercial influences."[59] Although this critic voiced a somewhat positive view of African dance as "dignified," the reader is left with the image of a noble savage, whose "dignity" was separate and unequal from the European. Although Primus would take umbrage at the insinuation that African diasporic dances were not equally respectable.

Many critics framed Primus's first sojourn to West Africa as a cultural "roots pilgrimage"—a long-awaited way to repair cultural and psychic ruptures caused by forced migration during the Slave Trade. Doris Hering interviewed Primus after her first trip to West Africa and described her participation in Orisha-based dance rituals: "As the ceremonies went far into the night, the little American girl could *feel her identity with her African people* growing deeper and stronger, and she knew that when she returned to America, she

would dance as never before."[60] In December 1951, one critic wrote, "Pearl Primus, after many spurts, all of which have been interesting but inconclusive, has *finally found her roots*. She has become an eloquent and *inspired vessel of transmission*, bringing to us the *dignity* and *universality* of the dance of Africa in a subtly theatrical setting."[61] This critic echoed the sentiments of many colleagues by maintaining that Primus floundered in modern "nonprimitive" dance but excelled in performances of African-based dances—especially after her sojourn to the continent that she deemed her "motherland."

From the late 1940s through the early 1960s, in Primus's four trips to Liberia she was embraced by top-ranking officials as well everyday people as a member of the community. She chose the role of masks as an educational tool in Mano culture as a dissertation topic because it provided an apt subject to combine her expertise in dance and interest in African culture. She decided upon the "hinterlands of Liberia" as a field site because in a self-ruled nation "she was free to seek understanding of the cultures of the indigenous people without having to avoid the suspicion of colonial officials." She limited the chronology of her dissertation from 1948 through 1963 to study a time "when," as she noted, "the Mano people still followed their traditional way of life."[62] She focused on seven "spirit masks" in her dissertation: Gbini Ge, Long Ge, Gbetu, Bundu, Klua Ge, Zi, and Pia Se. Primus acknowledged cultural conflicts between African American settlers and indigenous Liberians, but the story she tells has a happy ending. She wrote, "Gradually the new settlers and the indigenous people recognized their future depended on working together and eventually becoming a united nation,"[63] and she credited the declaration of the Republic of Liberia as a free nation on July 26, 1847 to this spirit of cooperation.

Eventually Primus lived and studied in Nigeria, Ghana, the Cameroons, Togo, Angola, Zaire, Rhodesia, Tanzania, Central African Republic, Rwanda, Burundi, Fernando Po, and Republic of Benin. She also visited the Ivory Coast, Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Gambia prior to embarking upon her in-depth study of the Mano. In later visits to Trinidad, Primus would suggest that the sojourn confirmed that she was already on the right track regarding her pursuit of authenticity in Afro-Caribbean dance, just as her Rosenwald-sponsored travels throughout West Africa and Central Africa had confirmed. "My only assignment was to go to the parts of Africa where I could find material not only to enrich our theatre but to add to our knowledge of people little understood," Primus recalled.[64] After her travels, Primus spoke with a renewed authority regarding the authenticity of her work. In a 1951 interview, Primus declared, "Everything I do is consistent with what I saw

in Africa—except for wearing a bra. I have to make that concession to our modern standards."[65]

In numerous interviews, Primus emphasized the intense training and technical precision required to successfully execute African diasporic dance forms. Comparable to any formal European dance technique like ballet, Primus depicted the African dancer's apprenticeship as a grueling process that required dedication on the parts of both student and mentor: "Not only is strict emphasis placed upon the technique, sequence, timing and execution of the dance, but the student is drilled in perfection for years before the actual test of strength. When he has passed through the period of Initiation, the perfect dance he has learned in the bush schools 'becomes a vehicle in which his soul can soar to the heavens.'"[66] Primus also forcefully made the distinction between dancers and non-dancers among African people and black Americans, disproving popular racial stereotypes that suggested that rhythm and musical ability was genetically innate, instead of a culturally constructed and acquired skill.

Primus's Personality

Sources indicate that Pearl Primus's personal style and temperament might easily earn her the moniker of "diva," or, more euphemistically, "force of nature." Her diary entries during her travels throughout western Africa provide vibrant glimpses into her personality, and above all else, her humanity. Even Primus's unconventional style of diary recordings—her succinct listing of tasks, people, places, events, and perceptions strung together by a series of hyphens, reflected her own sense of creativity and the busyness of her mind. The reader is left with the impression that she was too consumed with immersing herself in the indigenous cultures and her grand educational mission to take the precious time to abide by the standard format of diary entries—writing in complete sentences. So, how do we understand this style of writing? One scholar observed, "The diary is best read not as a book with a beginning and end, but as a process. We should ask not what can be learned from the text of the diary, but what can be learned from the individual diarist's work of recounting his/her life, in private, on a continuous basis within a calendar grid."[67] I understand Primus's process of diary writing as serving multiple functions; the diary worked as a planner that allowed Primus to keep track of personal and professional priorities, it served as a research document that Primus could later reference, and it provided a psychological and creative

outlet to help Primus manage her chaotic schedule and inevitable interpersonal conflicts that arise when traveling to so many different locales in a foreign land. Should we read Primus's diary as a reliable reflection of historical events? Regarding the believability of diaries as a source of "truth," historian Jochen Hellbeck has observed that the diary's "'uncertain' nature between literary and historical writing, between fictional and documentary, spontaneous and reflected narrative, has frustrated many a literary specialist in search for canonical clarity."[68] This is true. In turn, we should understand Primus's diary as a reflection of her personal "truth"—a documentation of her unique "life witness." From her accounts of standard carsickness and nausea[69] to the emotional drama of interpersonal conflicts,[70] the details that Primus decided to include and her omissions provide insights into her unique personality.

If we put ourselves in her shoes, we also could conclude that living a life as hectic as her own—especially considering the physical of strain of travel during her visits to western Africa from the late 1940s through the 1950s, would make even the most even-keeled person feel irritable. And, of course, Primus was no exception. In one diary entry, she wrote, "Farewells to Yaba . . . tired—irritable."[71] Months later, in another diary entry, Primus wrote, "1½ [hrs of] sleep then chauffeur arrives—helps me pack—I am too exhausted to think."[72] I appreciate Primus's admission of her own physical and emotional fatigue, because in contrast to some dance critics' renderings of her undeniable athleticism in terms that made her seem more like a superhero than a human being, Primus's diary attests to the fact that she was indeed human. Primus's diary provides an intimate account of her psychological, emotional, and spiritual state—beyond the stage lights on Broadway and the flashing cameras of the international media.

As a self-aware, creative, and sensitive soul, Primus developed strong attachments to people she met during her travels; so, when the time came to travel to the next city or to finally return to the United States, saying goodbye to new friends was not easy. After one departure, Primus wrote in her diary, "more farewells . . . tears blistering eyes—hardest part of travel—leaving the friends one meets and learns to love."[73] In this passage, Primus progressed from a sentimental recollection of the emotional strain of saying goodbye to an account of the physical discomforts of transportation in subpar automobiles along unpaved roads in Western Africa. She wrote, "Car too small. . . . We're off—bumping—decide I'll be able to produce no children at end of trip."[74] Primus's use of hyperbole is amusing and revelatory. On one hand it revealed the hardships of travel, on the other hand it revealed Primus's wry sense of humor and grit. Primus's mentor Langston Hughes would have appreciated this diary entry. Primus's comical description of her "road weariness" calls to

mind Hughes's brilliantly humorous autobiographical account of his around-the-world trip during the height of the Great Depression, *I Wonder as I Wander*, in which he relays tales of cramped car trips, blisteringly cold train rides, and turbulent excursions by ship.[75] In this regard, Primus's bumpy car ride was par for the course for any adventurous soul traveling on a limited budget at the time.

Primus sometimes deployed her ironic sense of humor as a weapon to disarm potential racists. She detested white supremacy to the core of her being and was occasionally incensed to the point of irreverence in face-to-face confrontation with treatment she perceived to be racist. In her personal diary on May 5, 1949, she recalled snubbing several Belgian women whom she met during one of her sojourns to the Congo: "We arrived at Boma today—some Belgian women stared me up and down—I looked them in the eye and laughed—silly fools."[76] Primus's flippant behavior suggests that although she loved to bask in the limelight, she only desired attention on her own terms.

Primus was used to receiving a lot of attention; her bigger-than-life personality, intellect, and talent often drew stares. She also was keenly aware of white people's fascination with her physical appearance—her thick, natural hair, often coifed in a manner that emphasized its volume, long before the afro was *en vogue*, as well as her ample bosom and muscular legs. Sometimes she leveraged this fascination from white male and female admirers to her advantage to attract monetary donations to her dance mission. But this kind of attention from the Belgian women in West Africa, who conjured memories of Jim Crow racism and colonial enterprise, was unwanted. Challenging the Belgian colonial notion of white supremacy and black servility, Primus's laughter, and her boldness in looking the Belgium women in the eye, was an assertion of power.

It is impossible to retrace the exact facial expressions and intentions behind the countenances of the women. Indeed, it is possible that Primus's sensitive and capricious personality projected unwarranted conclusions; nonetheless, this interaction is telling because it reveals Primus's own sense of self, racial pride, and place as a black American and "Afrocentrist" near the midcentury mark. Primus's tone is reminiscent of the speaker in Langston Hughes's poem "I, Too," who revises the racial hierarchy within the household in which he is employed as a domestic by eating well and enjoying himself, despite his forced segregation to the kitchen and his white employer's attempt to make him feel less than human.[77] Both Primus and the speaker in Hughes's poem point to the fundamental, existential absurdity of white supremacy. Primus's laughter suggests that she was in on the secret; the hollowness of white supremacy had been revealed. As if the encounter with the Belgian women

were a mere cobweb brushing across her cheek, Primus turns her attention to loftier landscapes and ideals as the next line in her diary reads: "My thoughts go home tonite—for I have seen many skies like these above our Central Park or Brooklyn."[78] Always the Pan-Africanist looking for connections between black people on the continent of Africa and peoples of African descent living in America and the Caribbean, Primus poetically finds a sense of shared meaning in the sky above that reminds her of skies that she has seen in her beloved New York.[79]

"They Just Don't Understand"

Although Primus's travels throughout the Caribbean and the continent of Africa reinforced her fundamental respect for African diasporic peoples and cultures, many American critics did not share her sentiments. They surveyed Primus's stage performances through the tint of white supremacist politics, and their reviews conspired to constrain her in a double bind. In one instance, an exasperated Primus lamented after newspaper journalists took photos of her group in London, "They just don't understand what we're trying to do. We're trying to show the heritage and dignity of the Negro through his dancing and music—not pander to the lower kind of public taste."[80] When some reviewers described Primus's performance art in terms of raw athleticism and passion, Primus complained, "They don't understand." Primus intended her work to serve grand humanitarian goals of interracial dialogue and mutual cultural respect. She did not perform for the sake of voyeuristic titillation. Sometimes her idealism carried the day, but in many instances, constructionist interpretations of her work prevailed.

On one hand, critics suggested that modern dance required intellectual acumen as well as physical dexterity, while "primitivism" called for raw athleticism and enthusiasm—the former genre being more difficult, sophisticated, and respectable than the latter. This derogatory view seeped through newspaper and journal reviews of Primus's work. Critics frequently alleged that "it is unfortunate that [Primus] has not progressed ideologically or artistically since her initial and brilliant success,"[81] (Ezra Goodman 1948). On the other hand, when Primus choreographed and performed modern dance pieces that better fit critics' definitions of intellectually based "high art," they still insisted that she came up short and urged Primus to stick to what she knew best—"primitivism." In July 1948, well-known dance critic Doris Hering wrote that Primus's "best work is without a doubt among the primitives, where vigor and a feeling of dedication rightfully outweigh choreographic variety and

sustained phrasing."[82] Hering attributed Primus's success in African-based dance to her undeniable athletic ability and sheer charisma. This compliment is double-edged: Herring's focus on "vigor" and "dedication" obscured Primus's intellectualism and relegated both African dance as a genre and Primus as a black woman performer as "inferior."

Comparisons always require an explicit or implicit benchmark. The tacitly understood standard in this critic's review is modern, "nonprimitive" theatrical art—mainly performed by white dancers. By labeling the dance and dancer passionate but subpar, Hering did a disservice not only to Primus but also to dance audiences because she overlooked the intellectual underpinnings of Primus's performance pursuits as well as the fundamental complexity of African-based dance styles. Hering never mentioned the library and museum research that Primus had conducted to inform her choreography nor the difficulty in executing polyrhythmic movement of the upper versus the lower body.

Tensions between the cerebral and the emotional self, mind and body, and city and countryside recurred throughout Primus's performance and academic work. For Primus, the mind and body—academic research and the discipline of dance—worked together in a symbiotic relationship. Each fueled the other. She challenged critic's suggestions that intellectualism and kinesthetic expertise were mutually exclusive. In a 1943 review, Robert Lawrence wrote, "This Negro girl, who is said to be working at present on her master's degree in psychology at Hunter College, does not dance intellectually. The only trace of the cerebral to be found in her performance lies in the beautiful control of movement, the tastefulness of her African, Haitian, and jazz dances which are arousing without ever getting out of hand." He also noted, "everything in the Primus act goes first-classly."[83]

Pearl Primus challenged dance critics' racially essentialist interpretations of her work. She tried to convince white and black audiences alike that African civilizations were as sophisticated and intelligent as any Western nation. John Martin was perhaps Primus's most sympathetic critic. Yet sympathy is an understatement when considering Martin's reviews that depicted Primus more as a superhero than a terrestrial being. In 1944, Martin described her choreography and execution as follows: "She can jump over the Brooklyn Bridge, and when in her impassioned dance to the poem 'Strange Fruit' she throws herself down and rolls across the floor at forty miles an hour it makes your hair curl with excitement."[84] Without question, Martin had a penchant for hyperbole, but one fact remains: Primus was athletically gifted, and many memorable moments in her performance career sprung from this natural and practiced physical ability.

Primus credited her teen-aged track and field extracurricular pursuits with providing the training for her signature jumps and hanging leaps in modern dance. Just as she churned her legs to gain height and distance as a high school long jumper, she consciously "climbed in the air" during her choreography for "African Ceremonial" and "Hard Time Blues."

Most white dance critics viewed Primus's athleticism through a lens of racial essentialism. One *Boston Globe* reporter also depicted Primus in mythological terms in a 1947 article by calling her "lightning-limbed."[85] This alliterative compliment was juxtaposed with her thwarted wishes to become a medical doctor: "The dancing doctor from Trinidad, lightning-limbed Pearl Primus, made her Boston debut at Jordan Hall last night and a sold-out house was well-rewarded."[86] Another 1947 article expressed similar amazement regarding Primus's ability to combine her intellectual and artistic pursuits: "Bouncing like a rubber ball, Pearl Primus, one of the world's foremost dancers, is whirling her way to a doctor's degree." This critic described Primus as so athletic and energetic that she could rebound like a rubber ball. The writer continued, "Pearl Primus can bounce in the air like a rubber ball, an achievement found rarely in young girls on their way to their master's degree at Hunter College . . . odd combination of intellectualized choreography and free emotional drive."[87]

Popular perceptions of black art as "lowbrow" clashed with Primus's campaigns to promote awareness of its beauty and sophistication. And when critics praised her mastery of "primitivist" dance styles by calling her gifts "racially rooted"[88] and labeled her "a dancer and choreographer of whom the Negro race can be justly proud,"[89] she exploded these rigid categories of race in her insistence that her work was human—universal. Primus experienced the coincident blessing and curse of being a black artist in America that scholar Paul Gilroy has observed: "Perhaps black artists experience community through a special paradox. It affords them certain protections and compensations yet it is also a source of constraint. It provides them with an imaginative entitlement to elaborate the consciousness of racial adversity while limiting them as artists to the exploration of that adversity."[90] African diasporic cultures struggling against white supremacy provided a broad canvas upon which Primus created new masterpieces, but she also found popular understandings of this canvas too narrow. She constantly reminded audiences that "Negro" artistic production was American and human.

Dance critics often cast Primus as the exoticized "other" as is illustrated by Doris Hering's description of Primus dancing as if she were a "creature possessed."[91] Primus would not object to the metaphysical connotations because she embraced long-standing West African cosmologies, especially belief in

ancestor worship, rebirth, and spirit possession; however, she would take umbrage at the use of the word "creature," because it implied an animalistic nature. Dance critics also frequently remarked upon Primus's physical stature, using words like "stocky," "sturdy," and "squat." They found it difficult to reconcile Primus's muscular physique and intellect with her subject matter. In July 1948, one dance critic wrote, "If you look at Pearl Primus with a Broadway eye, you see a short, pudgy young woman bursting with *animal energy* and bounce."[92] Such derogatory descriptions of Primus's body, coupled with critics' insistence that she thrived in "primitivist" dance forms while her attempts at modern choreography were "at best naïve," revealed the cultural biases of white dance critics. Still, Primus worked tirelessly, from the start of her career as a dancer in the late 1920s until her death in 1994, to revise negative stereotypes of blackness. She leveraged her unique cultural identity as a black woman born in the Caribbean and living in America while traveling to Africa to spread her message of Africa-centered humanism.

To her critics, a black woman choreographer and dancer who held a PhD in anthropology from a premier American institution seemed to be a walking oxymoron. Twenty-first-century dance critics are knowledgeable enough or at least adequately politically correct to accept African diasporic art forms as "high art," as developed and sophisticated as any European dance style, but this idea was quite new when Primus started dancing seriously in the early 1940s. Thus, Primus inspired a new generation of black American artists. Her work and very presence inspired black female dancers and creative writers, who upended dance critics' views of Primus by embracing her message and physical blackness as affirmations of themselves. In 1975, Audre Lorde reminisced about Primus's visit to her classroom as a student at Hunter High School. "Primus—beautiful, fat, Black, gorgeous! She talked about Blackness, and she talked to us about beauty. . . . I sat there and ate it up! I couldn't believe what this womin [sic] was saying to me!"[93] For Lorde, Primus's presence was right on time. More than a decade before the release of James Brown's Black Power anthem "Say it Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud," Primus personified this very ideal. Thus it is not surprising that Audre Lorde, the daughter of immigrants from Grenada who would soon become one of the most outspoken black lesbian intellectuals that America has seen, was inspired by Primus. Similarly, contemporary dancer and choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar has echoed this sentiment. She states, "I have been in awe of Ms. Primus's legacy ever since I heard her speak years ago. . . . She talked of the great legacy of African dance and how as African Americans we should continue to study it, but not at the expense of dance traditions we have evolved on American soil."[94] As founder and director of the professional dance group Urban Bush

Women, Zollar was so inspired by Primus that she choreographed an entire performance art suite in her honor titled *Walking with Pearl . . Africa Diaries* and *Walking with Pearl . . . Southern Diaries*. When I asked Zollar about Pearl Primus's impact on her work, she said, "Urban Bush Women owes a lot to Dr. Primus. She brought power, athleticism and politics to the middle of the aesthetics of the newly developing field of modern dance. She envisioned the Black dancing body in ways that are still reflected in UBW's work and beyond."[95] Similar to Haitian novelist Edwidge Danticat's profound appreciation for the black immigrant women characters in Paule Marshall's fiction, Lorde and Zollar also cherished Primus's work, life, and legacy as they saw themselves reflected in her work and gleaned validation.

In addition to Primus's significance in the worlds of modern dance and mid-twentieth-century civil rights activism, her story is of great cultural import because her personal identity broadens our understanding of the hopes and struggles of a first-generation Caribbean American. Pearl was only three years old when she arrived in New York, but her family's folklore combined with anthropological research and travel experiences forged her strong sense of translocal identity. At the start of her professional career in the early 1940s, Primus was one of few dancers who pursued African diasporic rhythmic expression on the stage. She danced with a purpose as she criticized racism in the United States, introduced American audiences to "authentic" African and Caribbean dance, and promoted mutual cultural respect as an effective educational tool in kindergarten through twelfth-grade classrooms.

Like Trinidadian-born Jazz pianist Hazel Scott, Pearl Primus took Café Society by storm and mingled with both black and white power brokers throughout the city. Both Scott and Primus leveraged their Caribbean cultural identities and their artistic talent to win over the hearts and minds of black and white Americans, and their deep-rooted confidence and talent attracted an international following. Like Barbadian-American novelist Paule Marshall, Primus was also a self-proclaimed daughter of the diaspora. She seized every opportunity to speak, write, and dance out her African, Caribbean, black and American cultural identities. American-born black intellectual Harold Cruse might have taken issue with Primus's emphasis on her Caribbean heritage—deeming her guilty of promoting cultural superiority as he did with Marshall, but Primus would have retorted that her embrace of her African and Caribbean roots was intended to bring people together instead of pushing them apart. Primus, like Barbadian politician Richard B. Moore, always looked for commonalities. Her message was one of unity and celebration—celebration of African diasporic cultures and unity among African diasporic peoples. Her close personal and professional relationships

with other white dancers and intellectuals demonstrates the intense, cross-cultural synergy of bohemian, artistic New York, which overlapped nicely with Primus's broader message of mutual cultural respect. She espoused her own unique brand of cross-cultural humanism throughout her career as a dancer and as an educator at the Five Colleges dance consortium in Massachusetts and as a guest lecturer in K-12 public schools in New York City. Primus believed in the power of art and imagination, and dance was a vehicle to challenge bigotry and even transcend race.

"Afrocentricity," Mutual Cultural Respect, and K-12 Education

During the latter part of her career, Primus turned to the classroom, as dancers often do after their prime athletic years, and wide-eyed, elementary school children at New York public schools as well as college-aged co-eds became her principal audience. Primus presented the idea of dance as a cross-cultural educational tool in a 1966 article in *American Education*, in which she stressed the pedagogical value of dance as a means to promote empathy and mutual cultural respect among students in primary and secondary schools. She wrote, "The basic concepts, principles, and symbolism of dance apply to all people. The child will be able to identify with children in other areas of the world through an understanding of and creative participation in their dance."[96] According to Primus, the sheer experience of performing the quotidian movements of someone from a distant culture could metaphysically transport the "mover" across the expanse of land and ocean into the body and environment of formerly unknown people and cultures. Thus, the desired outcome of incorporating African dance into the school curriculum was to foster a greater degree of open-mindedness, respect, and acceptance, which is quite different from the popular term "tolerance," for people from diverse cultures, near and far.

Primus based her pedagogical approach upon the values of mutual cultural respect and inclusion—suggesting that all cultures possessed a distinctive voice that deserved to be heard. In the expression and reception of this voice, both the speaker and hearer were uplifted; the former was validated by tacit or active presence of the witness and the latter through an expanded worldview. In the introduction to her dissertation, Primus wrote, "The dances, sculpture, music and dramatic folklore of Africa must *speak* for [Africa] in all other lands. They must speak for her in the classroom [*sic*] of the world without losing their power or their authenticity. They must help explain the heritage of the people of Africa and those of African ancestry. They are her

cultural ambassadors."[97] Primus believed dance was a particularly effective way to educate Western students about African cultures because early African art forms were usually more functional than western art. West African dance incorporated real-life movements like planting crops or performing wedding celebratory rituals. In this regard, artistic form followed function.

Primus endorsed the educational value of not only African dance, but other art forms as well—including sculpture. She found intrinsic worth in elements of material culture, and her reverence for such items was bound up in her in her own ideas of "authenticity." Primus's appreciation of western African masks, drums, and fabric inspired her writing while she pursued her PhD in anthropology at New York University. In the introduction to her dissertation, Primus wrote, as Jennifer Dunning summarizes, that she "became involved in the study of ancestral masks through identification with African sculpture in order to better understand herself and the heritage of peoples of African ancestry.[98]" Or as Primus herself put it, "[I] present *authentic* pieces of dances created to exhibit the masks or the staff or the drum or the fabric."[99]

Conclusion

If Primus's life were a novel, the motif would be magical realism. In her world, terrestrial beings, ancestor spirits, family folklore, and literal and metaphoric travel experiences as well as intuition intermingled in a dynamic display onstage—a veritable "moveable feast" of identity in motion. While dance critics tried to pin her down by categorizing her work as "primitive" or "Negro," Primus knocked such categories off-kilter. Dance critics tried to ground Primus's work, but the beauty and brilliance of her oeuvre sprang from its multidimensionality and its restless quality—akin to the polyrhythmic nature of the dance itself. In many ways, her personal biography and choreographic style capture the unique sense of temporality and synchronicity that characterizes African diasporic identities. Primus's life epitomized Black Atlantic "flows, exchanges, and in-between elements that call the very desire to be centered into question."[100]

In this regard, Primus was both maven and maverick. She taught and inspired a long line of black dancers from New Dance Group member and solo artist Donald McKayle and Judith Jamison of the famed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, founder and director of Urban Bush Women.[101] More than a half century after attending a Pearl Primus performance that motivated him to become a dancer, McKayle remembered the visceral effect that Primus's presence had on him:

> I was in high school when I first saw her dance. She was like a vision, a beautiful sculpture. When she began to move her shoulders, her legs and her bracelets began to jangle, my reaction was like a chemical explosion. After that I just knew I had to dance and choreograph. If I hadn't gone to her concert that night I might have had an entirely different career.[102]

In an interview in Harlem during the twilight years of her life, Pearl Primus reflected on her fifty-year career as choreographer and dancer. Her mouth could barely keep pace with her mind.[103] She was adorned in West African garb—a brightly colored batik dress with embroidered collar, layers of cowry shells, coral beads, silver strung about her neck, gold rings on *every* finger, and crowned in an elaborately tied *gele* (head wrap) in contrasting colors. For Primus, the personal was political, and she conveyed her faith in "Afrocentrism" and mutual cultural respect through her attire. Explaining her development as a dancer and scholar, she quickly moved among the realms of the historical, political, and metaphysical. She gleaned inspiration from texts on African and African American history, black visual art, and her own anthropological research in the southern United States, West and Central Africa, and the Caribbean. Echoing Paul Gilroy's observations regarding the carnivalesque nature of African diasporic temporality, Primus also found the "nighttime is the right time" for artistic imagination because she stated that familiar and unknown ancestors taught her dance rituals in her dreams. Pearl Primus drew upon her biography as a source of power rooted in Trinidadian upbringing, Africa-centered family folklore, the vernacular culture of American-born blacks, and the avant-garde swagger of New York bohemia.

One might consider Primus an evangelist for the arts. She encouraged all students, black and white alike, to embrace the transcendent power of their own imaginations. In the latter years of her life, Pearl Primus delivered a commencement speech at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, in which she recalled the house that she lived in on 117th Street in East Harlem as a child. She said although she lived among dirt and squalor, her imagination took her to marvelous places. Primus triumphantly declared, "I faced prejudice, hatred, anger, defeat of all kinds, yet I made it to the top. This is my message to you."[104] Thus, imagination was the path to redemption and freedom. All of these political and philosophical worldviews—humanism, Africa-centered consciousness, mutual cultural respect, and high self-esteem—were undergirded by Primus's unwavering faith in West African cosmologies such as ancestor and Orisha worship. "The dead are still with us," Primus would remind her audience during performances and in interviews as she believed that the ancestors who came before her remained in direct communication

with all those who were willing to listen—leading and guiding us into a more just society.

While the public face of Caribbean intellectualism during the early twentieth century was noticeably ecumenical in nature and overwhelmingly male, Primus was a forerunner in a second wave of Caribbean intellectualism that was remarkably artistic in nature and noticeably female. Primus's style of activism was embodied and multidimensional. Instead of shouting political speeches atop a stepladder on a Harlem street corner like communist activist Richard B. Moore, or lobbying for legislative change in the case of Shirley Chisholm, I argue that the theatrical and literary production by Caribbean women artists played an equally important role in the battle for racial equality. While Ethelred Brown focused on religious racial uplift, and Richard B. Moore on working-class solidarity and Caribbean Federation, the performing arts allowed Caribbean women artist-activists to use their intellects, talents, and cultural identities in the cause of civil rights. Primus was a forerunner of the artistic expression of an Africa-centered consciousness in America and her work set the stage for the literary expression of African diasporic cultural identity by creative writers such as Barbadian-American novelist Paule Marshall. Primus's celebration of her unique cultural heritage also may be seen as a precursor to the multicultural identity politics of the Black Power and post-civil rights era in which Brooklyn-born, Barbadian-American politician Shirley Chisholm made a name for herself and built a culturally inclusive, feminist legacy.