Roots of Cultural Identity in African American Concert Dance In

Alvin Ailey’s *Revelations* and Chuck Davis’ *Memorial*

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Abstract

Cultural identity is an individual and collective process of rooting members in a shared sense of community based on commonalities of experience, history, tradition, and memory. African American choreographers, Alvin Ailey and Chuck Davis created concert dance traditions that significantly influenced African American cultural identity in concert performance. For Ailey, Davis, and other African Americans, the ring-shout and negative racial stereotypes were pivotal in reshaping cultural identity by impacting artistic choices and cultural representations in performance. At the point of the ring-shout and Africanized Christian practices, a class division developed that placed aesthetics deemed too African in folk and traditional performance. As a resistance against negative racial stereotypes in performance, African American concert dance artists sought to establish appreciation for their cultural heritage by blending their vernacular with Western styles and or presenting African aesthetics in performance. Dance works that visually reflected an American experience, a syncretism of ballet, jazz, and codified modern forms were received as modern dances and those that fulfilled social expectations of African dance aesthetics were classified as folk and traditional. However, classifications of traditional or modern dance should be determined by the characteristics of the creative process, by how the theme, function, and purpose align with the cultural identity, individual and collective memories of the creators and practitioners, and not how visual aesthetics or movement vocabularies are perceived to connect to certain cultural traditions. This study will use a historical analysis, including oral histories, audience and critic reception, ethnographic interpretation from extensive experience in traditional and modern dance, and a semiotic analysis of archival video footage of two concert dance works, Alvin Ailey’s *Revelations* and Chuck Davis’ *Memorial*. *Revelations*, is recognized as an American modern dance masterpiece and *Memorial* as an African dance tradition by dance historians, dance critics, and audiences largely based
on visual analysis of the aesthetic values and not on the creative characteristics. Although the two bear some semblance, I propose as an alternative interpretation that *Revelations* functions as a traditional dance and *Memorial*, as a modern dance in African American concert performance. The significance of this intervention is to highlight the characteristics of traditional African dance beyond socially expected movement vocabularies of aesthetics markers and detail their structure to root cultural identity through individual and collective memory. This is important to broaden the incorporation of African dance aesthetics in modern creative processes, and to broaden the inclusivity of innovation in traditional creative practices. Secondly, in focusing on the creative framework, theme, function, and purpose, over the visual aesthetic of African American concert dance, this intervention examines African cultural retentions in African American performance whereby syncretic movement vocabularies were translated into a traditional framework with a creative process and structure that preserved Pan African cultural identity in concert performance. Lastly, this intervention is to identity the impact of the ring shout and negative stereotypes towards African Americans in determining artistic choices that departed from African American traditions for American or African aesthetics to refocus cultural identity. This study proposes a comprehensive approach that combines traditional and modern methods.
The primary objective of this work is to offer an alternative interpretation to the classifications of the choreographic works of African American concert dance artists in consideration of differences between creative processes of modern and traditional artists in American concert performance. This intervention challenges and expands commonly held approaches to classifications that are based on visual aesthetics, that place choreographic works in certain categories largely based on how the work appears to use movement ideas. If a work looks African it is often categorized as a traditional African dance or an interpretation of one, however, if the movement vocabulary is a blend of forms such as, ballet, jazz, and codified modern dance techniques the work is often considered modern. However, traditional dances have a structure that root a community in cultural identity and that objective can be accomplished without a closed set of formalized movements. As such, consistency of the theme, function, and purpose and how those relate to cultural identity are more appropriate determining factors for African American concert dance.

The scope of the study spans a period from the ring shout to twenty-first century performances through the lens of two renown artists, Alvin Ailey and Chuck Davis. Alvin Ailey is considered a modern dance master and Chuck Davis, a trailblazer in bringing African traditional dance to American concert theater. I approach these two artists through their signature works, Ailey’s *Revelations* and Davis’ *Memorial*, as case studies to explore this interpretation. In looking more closely at these two artists and the significance of their work, as well as others who helped shaped their direction, I hope to broaden perspectives of Pan African retentions and translations in African American cultural identity through concert performance.
They do not particularly care whether they are like... anybody else... They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardization. And perhaps these common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself.

Langston Hughes
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Alvin Ailey’s Revelations, and Chuck Davis’ Memorial: Modern or Traditional Dance?

On January 31, 1960, Alvin Ailey premiered his legacy to African American concert dance and the signature of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Revelations.¹ Presented in the Kaufman Concert Hall at the 92nd Street Young Men’s-Young Women’s Hebrew Association (YM-YWHM) in New York, Revelations was set to traditional arrangements of spirituals and gospel songs.² Revelations followed the history of African Americans from enslavement to liberation through a spiritual journey that captured the African American church experience of the Deep South.³ Ailey described Revelations as a “blood memory,…intimately connected” with his childhood memories of the Baptist Church in Texas.⁴ What Ailey describes as “blood memories,” I refer to as a commingling of individual and collective memories that establish cultural identity and are deeply connected to one’s shared sense of community and belonging. In a 1970 interview featured on ABC News, Americans All, Ailey expressed his choreographic vision for Revelations, he stated, “I’m trying to show people where we came from as artists, as Americans, as dancers, as black people… to make an identification with the black past through dance and preserve those black roots.”⁵ Ailey’s vision was warmly received by global audiences; Revelations is the most widely seen modern dance work in the world.⁶


² Ibid.

³ Ibid.


⁶ “Revelations.” Alvin Ailey American Dance Foundation; Thomas DeFrantz, F. Dancing Revelations Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4-20. DeFrantz is Chair of African and African American Studies and Professor of Dance at Duke University. He earned degrees from Yale, City College University of New York and organized the dance history program at The Ailey School.
At first impression, *Revelations*, is a modern dance classic, a departure from the formalization of ballet, embracing individual interpretation, exoticism, and mysticism. In *Revelations*, Ailey incorporates ballet aesthetics of externally rotated high leg extensions and elongated articulated ankles and feet, but departs from ballet with his incorporation of an expressive, contracted use of the torso, characteristic of Graham technique and elongated lateral lines and angles of Horton technique. In the early development of modern dance, choreographers incorporated exoticism, developing inspiration and intrigue from perceived access to customs and traditions different from their own. Exoticism was often expressed through mysticism or subjective interpretations of spiritual or religious experiences to depict emotional or psychological themes. Many dance critics, historians, and scholars interpret Ailey’s reference to the Baptist Church, spirituals, and gospel songs, as exoticism expressed through mysticism and characteristic of modern dance. They also interpret Ailey’s incorporation of sequential, percussive articulations of the spine, shoulders, and hips as characteristics of an exotic movement vocabulary. I interpret Ailey’s use of his “blood memories” of the Baptist Church, a syncretic movement vocabulary that reflects an African and American identity, and the use of subtlety and flow as characteristics of Pan African traditional creative processes in *Revelations*.

Flow and subtlety are fundamental to African dance traditions and are prominent components in *Revelations*. Flow refers to a thread of energy connecting movement in time and space in a conversation.

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8 Exoticism is a trend in art and design of drawing inspiration or imitation of style, characteristic, tradition, or custom from a foreign country, culture, or community.

9 Mysticism is a subjective experience of ecstasy or altered state of consciousness layered with religious or spiritual meaning.
with the music, the audience or the community, and the purpose of the dance. Subtlety distinguishes the quality of movement execution that is often achieved by contradictory means. I offer these definitions of flow and subtlety to advance the understanding of how these two principles can be at work in a seemingly modern dance vocabulary inside of a traditional African dance framework in *Revelations*. That the movement vocabulary to which Ailey applies these fundamentals is a syncretism further supports my perspective because such a blending captures the complex cultural identity and collective memory of African American people who have inherited somatic narratives from both sides of the Atlantic.

*Revelations* is a masterpiece, a ballet that is a translation of traditional Pan African dance processes, although it is generally classified as a modern dance. I hold this perspective because American concert dance generally operates under European ballet standards, such that classification is based on how an aesthetic system visually connects to a geographical region. However, visual aesthetic is not sufficient to categorize dance as modern or traditional outside of European or European American artistic practice for two primary reasons. First, modern dance was created within a Western artistic system as a resistance to European classical ballet that was highly informed by a “creative colonization” of non-Western traditions. Thus when artists outside of this group engaged in modern dance the process and the aesthetic results are different. Secondly, movement vocabularies are inadequate to determine dance classifications because aesthetics evolve and movement vocabularies can incorporate degrees of syncretism without losing cultural association. I propose classifications of traditional or modern dances should be determined by the characteristics of the creative process, by how theme, function, and purpose align with the cultural identity, individual and collective memories of the creators and practitioners, and not how visual aesthetics or movement vocabularies are perceived to connect to certain cultural
traditions. Under this consideration, *Revelations*, is characteristically traditional; it is preserved
generationally and roots individual and collective memory in a shared sense of community reflective of
the corresponding cultural identity.

In *Cultural Memory, Resistance, Faith, and Identity*, Jeanette Rodriguez, a theologian and Ted
Fortier, an anthropologist describe tradition as both a tool and a product of the rooting process, which is
fundamental to establishing identity, both individually and collectively. Rooting describes how a
community creates a narrative by orienting historical events within communal values to develop a
shared sense of community. Individual and collective memories are combined into shared narratives
that inform cultural identity. Cultural identity is not geographically locked, but resides in memory and
choice; what an individual and community choose to embrace and remember. Cultural identity is
preserved in tradition. Traditions can take on many forms, dance, music, cuisine, fashion; and preserve
cultural identity and heritage through reiteration. Through *Revelations*, Ailey rooted the narrative of
African American people in concert dance tradition. Modern dance developed as a resistance to
tradition. In *Revelations*, Ailey preserved tradition; thus I argue it is a traditional dance.

Across the East River in 1977, Chuck Davis created his signature legacy, *DanceAfrica* at
Lepercq Square at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in New York. *DanceAfrica* is the longest

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11 A “shared sense of community” is a perception that members have a belonging and commitment to each other based on
common experience, history, or perceived future.


2012/05/1977-origins-of-danceafrica.html. Margalit Fox. “Chuck Davis, Who Brought African Dance Traditions to America,
running series at BAM and the nation’s largest African dance festival. At the inaugural performance, Davis transformed Lepercq Square to a theatrical African village, and enveloped audiences and performers in a sense of dramatized shared community. Three constants grew to frame DanceAfrica: the “Jalie’s Corner,” the “Grand Finale,” and Memorial: Tribute to the Ancestors. From the “Jalie’s Corner,” Davis directed the flow of the experience, with breaks of dance, spoken word, chants, and his adopted Ago-Amae call and response. In the “Grand Finale,” Davis choreographed a curtain call with the entire cast, bringing companies from different parts of the Pan African community on the stage together, dancing in the same time and space. Lastly, Davis choreographed Memorial; a tribute to the ancestors. This was a constant, a tradition of the festival.

Davis’s purpose in Memorial, was to preserve the tradition of ancestral memory and expand a Pan African shared sense of community. Davis wanted to celebrate the “African village,” which he viewed as being wherever African people called home. Davis figuratively transported audiences to a constructed ritualistic scene drawing intrigue with the exoticism and mysticism of a recovered sacred custom outside time and space under the backdrop of a starry night sky. Memorial was received as a traditional African experience, but I interpret it as a modern experience, a reconstruction of tradition.

Davis created Memorial from traditions he researched from a milieu residing outside of his personal and collective memories, as a resistance against the historical portrayal of his heritage in American performance. Davis was inspired to travel to Africa to research African dance and culture...
after he watched a performance from the Sierra Leone National Dance Company at the New York World’s Fair in 1964. From this experience, Davis committed to a lifelong artistic practice of cultural exchange, using his modern interpretation and dramatization of African traditions to realize his vision of an inclusive Pan African village. However, because Davis utilized a visual aesthetic that fulfilled social expectations of traditional African dance that was consistent with dances that had been brought to America by African born artists, such as Asadata Dafora and the African national ballets, the creative approach he used has been accepted as traditional African dance.

Ailey and Davis both presented themes outside of ballet standards, however considering the history of African American concert dance performance and characteristics of modern and traditional creative processes, Ailey’s Revelations is more closely representative of a traditional dance and Davis’ Memorial a modern intervention. This study will examine this interpretation in several ways. First, this will be explored through a historical analysis of oral histories and archival video footage of Revelations and Memorial. Secondly, it will be examine through an ethnographic analysis spanning a process of observation, practice, and creation of both traditional African and modern dance in American concert dance performance. Third, supportive evidence will be examined through an analysis of critic and audience reception traced primarily through New York Times, New York Amsterdam News, and prominent dance historians. Lastly, this interpretation will be explored through semiotic analysis of

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19 The New York Times, regarded within the industry as a national newspaper with worldwide readership, has relatively equal percentage of male and female readers. The paper has been awarded 132 Pulitzer prizes and reports on major NY dance companies from diverse styles. It has archival coverage from the beginning of modern dance and the rise of African dance to the concert stage. (1835-present) https://www.nytimes.com/company/. New York Amsterdam News, established in 1909 is New York City’s oldest African American newspaper that covers local, national, and international news. https://amsterdamnews.com/.
African, modern, and ballet somatic and aesthetic practices incorporated in *Revelations* and *Memorial.*

This interdisciplinary intervention, informed by semiotic and ethnographic analysis as a creator and practitioner in both modern and traditional forms, provide a unique perspective characteristically unusual of most established dance critics and historians. The significance of this intervention is to highlight the characteristics of traditional African dance beyond socially expected movement vocabularies or aesthetics characteristics and to detail the structure of traditional African dance to root cultural identity through individual and collective memory. My interpretation seeks to broaden the incorporation of African dance aesthetics in modern creative processes, and to expand innovation in traditional creative practices. Secondly, by focusing on the creative framework, this intervention examines African cultural retentions in African American performance whereby syncretic movement vocabularies were used to translate a traditional framework that preserved Pan African cultural identity in concert performance. Lastly, this intervention is to identify the impact of the ring shout and negative stereotypes towards African Americans in determining artistic choices that departed from African American traditions. This study proposes a comprehensive approach that combines traditional and modern methods.

*Revelations and Memorial: Where Do They Fit Within Concert Dance?*

*Revelations,* is the signature ballet of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT), and AAADT considered among the most accomplished concert dance companies. In a 2020 publication of the top American Ballet Companies by the Dance Data Project, AAADT was listed fourth: New York

20 Semiotic analysis interprets symbolism in movement, shape, musicality, and color in cultural and dance performance.
City Ballet, San Francisco Ballet, American Ballet Theater, and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. This is an unusually high listing for a modern dance company, as ballet companies have a longer established concert history and larger operating budgets. Thus AAADT’s listing among the top four is significant of its prestige. In its 2021 publication of the 50 Largest Contemporary and Modern Dance Companies, Dance Data Project lists AAADT as the top American dance company, above Ailey’s contemporaries such as Paul Taylor, and postmodern choreographers, such as Bill T. Jones.

Ailey began international touring of Revelations in 1962, only two years after its debut. In 1966, AAADT performed at the Inaugural Arts Festival in Dakar, Senegal, in 1968 at the White House under President Johnson, in 1977 under President Carter, and in 2003 in honor of the President of Kenya Mwai Kibaki. In 2008, a US Congressional resolution described AAADT as a “vital American cultural ambassador to the world and the preservation and enrichment of the American modern dance heritage.” Over the company’s 64 year history, AAADT has performed in 48 states and 71 countries.

AAADT has become known for exceptional modern technical acuity and spirited tradition through Revelations. Jennifer Dunning, a dance critic writing for the New York Times in 1980, stated “This evocation of the world depicted in black American religious music is still, after 20 years being...

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24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.
greeted with whistles, rhythmic clapping and pleas for encores.”27 Audiences anticipate this experience, it has become a tradition. Zita Allen, a dance writer for New York Amsterdam News, and the first African American dance critic for Dance Magazine, described in 2016 how audiences, after 56 years, feel “blessed,” at the end of the performance and “leave the theater with a spring in their step and smiles on their faces.”28

In Revelations, Ailey balanced dramatic athleticism with his translation of his “blood memories” to deliver this experience. In a 2006 article published in the New York Times, entitled “Alvin Ailey Company Flexes New Muscle,” dance critic and journalist, John Rockwell captured the importance of this balance.

Its dancers are better than ever, with the marvelous athleticism…[and] sleek sensuality the company has long fostered. What made Ailey’s best dances so memorable was their translation into modern dance the passions and sensations of his own background, the rural Texas countryside in which he was raised.29

Ailey’s ability in Revelations to translate his memory and cultural identity with subtlety distinguishes it from other brilliantly executed modern dances that audiences enjoyed, but do not feel compelled to engage with; by standing and clapping at their seats or even dancing and singing along in the aisles. As Allen writing in the New York Amsterdam News, phrased it, “Revelations is a dance that…embodies the spirit of an era in our history…[with] many…memories…united by the understanding…of the personal


and universal.”\textsuperscript{30} Ailey’s unification of memories, both deeply personal to him and shared collectively within his community, reflects a traditional creative process despite a modern syncretic aesthetic.

\textit{Revelations}, is a revolutionary ballet because it translated a traditional African dance framework into concert dance without losing alignment with theme, function, and purpose. The theme of a ballet is the unifying dominant idea expressed in subject, setting, events, and qualitative characteristics including artistic mechanisms and aesthetic presentation.\textsuperscript{31} Function refers to how a creative work operates or is accomplished within a community or society. Purpose is the expressed intention or objective of a creative work. For \textit{Revelations}, these three align with traditional African dance frameworks, which will be explored in greater detail in the subsequent sections of this study.

In \textit{Revelations}, Ailey combined movement from different dance traditions that were reflective of his individual and collective memories to create a traditional experience as a dance narrative.\textsuperscript{32} Through narratives communities frame events and ideas to shape a sense of reality.\textsuperscript{33} Ailey was able to translate his shared narrative as the theme of \textit{Revelations} without losing the function and purpose as a rooting tradition in concert performance, which is unusual for ballets. Ballets tend to codify, formalize, and separate from the traditional accessibility of the people the traditions they created. Ailey expressed a commitment against this consequence; he believed, “The dance came from the people…and it should be always delivered back to the people.”\textsuperscript{34} In this way, Ailey incorporated a modern characteristic of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{30} Zita Allen. "\textquote{Revelations'-Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of a Masterpiece.}" \textit{New York Amsterdam News}, Dec. 9, 2010.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Artistic mechanisms refer to choreographic structure components how the theme is expressed. Aesthetic presentation is the qualitative intended standard of the presentation format.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Modern dance resisted the formalization and codification of ballet, however, a number of the most prominent modern dance choreographers did codify a technique including Lester Horton, Martha Graham, and Katherine Dunham. Postmodern choreographers emerged as a resistance against what was becoming a formalization of modern dance with a perspective that all movement has the potential as dance vocabulary.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Rodriguez. \textit{Cultural Memory, Resistance}, 3-11.
\item \textsuperscript{34} \textit{An Evening with the Alvin Ailey American American Dance Theater.} (1986) \textit{Americans All.} (1970).
\end{itemize}
resistance against classical ballet standard by delivering dance back to the people, but a traditional
function of using dance as a way to root shared narratives among his community.

Ballet encompasses multiple meanings. It is the entirety of a substantial creative dance work and
a dance company. By this definition, ballet does not have a formalized kinetic vocabulary and any
community of people can have or present a ballet. However, in the popular application of the word,
ballet refers to a traditional European dance style characterized by formalized movements and gestures
originating in the Italian Renaissance of the early sixteenth century and developing formally in the
courts of France.\textsuperscript{35} Although ballet developed among the aristocracy, a substantial body of “terre à
terre” or earthy, folk, or vernacular dances were formalized and absorbed into ballet.\textsuperscript{36} As these dances
became popular at court, they were altered to a uniform upright posture for conformity to court etiquette
and codified in dance schools. With the rise of theatrical performances in opera houses and theaters
outside of court, ballet became established as a classical and academic form.\textsuperscript{37} As a production
framework, the ballet retained its court theme for presentation that established it as the model for elite
concert dance with the first and oldest being the Paris Opera Ballet in 1669.\textsuperscript{38} Ballet was performed in
elite American circles by European artist under special invitation by the late eighteenth century however,
the San Francisco ballet is the first and oldest American ballet company, formed in 1933.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{35} Anna Paskevska. \textit{Ballet Beyond Tradition.} (New York: Routledge, 2005), 12-20. Catherine de Medici of Italy established
early ballet in the court life of France when she married King Henry II.

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.} For example, the Bouree of seventeenth century Spain is the modified pas de bourrée, a set of chained or linking
sideways steps. The Gavotte, Mazurka, Polonaise, Polka, Minuet, and Viennese Walts are other traditional European folk
dances that were absorbed by the court.

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{38} Paskevska. \textit{Ballet Beyond Tradition}, 12-20.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Ibid.}
Although ballet is generally referred to as classical concert dance, each culture has the potential to have its own classical concert dance. Classical concert dance is dance for an audience that adheres to an established pattern different from an evolving vernacular. Before colonialism African classical concert dances existed within an ethnic identity. After gaining their independence from European colonial rule beginning in the mid-twentieth century, African national ballets were formed to encourage national pride. Artistic directors and company founders, such as Fodéba Keïta and John Akar wanted to accurately capture traditional African dance aesthetics to present a national identity distinct from their colonial past; however their methods were not traditional. It is my perspective that the directors of the national African ballets engaged in a non-traditional formalization process to create a “ballet vocabulary” to convey a national identity. In doing so, they transported traditional dances from among the diverse ethnic groups within the nation to studios and concert stages as thematic material for modern interpretations.

In an interview for the Jerome Robbins Archives at the New York Performing Arts Library in 2015, Djoniba Mouflet, Founder and Artistic Director of Djoniba Drum and Dance Center and Ballet D’Afrique Djoniba, described the rise of the national ballet of Guinea. Les Ballet Africans began in Paris, France in 1952 under the direction of the esteemed Guinean choreographer Fodéba Keïta with a cast of dancers from Martinque, Senegal, Guinea, and the Congo. The ballet toured internationally until Guinea gained its independence in 1958, and in that year Les Ballet Africans was invited to become

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41 Mouflet was born in Martinique, studied at Mudra Afrique, a government sponsored contemporary dance school founded in Dakar, Senegal in 1977, based on Pan African artistic theory where students were recruited from different African countries learned ballet, jazz, Agony technique, and exchanged traditional dances from their ethnic groups.


https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/bd7e87e0-4b66-0133-4e0a-60f81dd2b63c.

Guinea’s national ballet. The ballet recruited the best dancers from among the different ethnic groups in Guinea: the Susu, Malinke, Fulani, and Baga. They were brought together to train for the national ballet in Conakry, the capital of Guinea. Mouminatou Camara, was one of those dancers, she was a member of Les Ballet African de Guinea and Ballet D’Afrique Djoniba.

In an interview for the Jerome Robbins Archives in 2014, Camara described the artistic process of the national ballets and her childhood dance experiences. In her Islamic Fulani community, she was not born into a griot family and was not encouraged to dance. That she pursued dance, was a resistance against her ethnic tradition. Camara started dancing in school where her friends who were Susu taught her many of their dances. When the national ballet held auditions, she auditioned and was accepted.

In Les Ballet Africans, Camara learned dances of the Susu; Guinea Fade, Mane, Yankade, Macaru and dances of the Malinke, Lamban, Yamama, Doundounba, Sofa and Kassa. Camara explained each dance had a different theme, function, purpose, and instrumentation, but most of the traditional dances did not have many movements, often just one or two. For dramatization and to

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
fulfill the breath of a cohesive theme to reflect a national identity, directors and dancers made variations for the stage. These variations were products of a modern dance creative process.

In the modern dance choreographic process, the theme is the rudimentary movement idea. A variation is an intentional expansion or alteration to create a different expression that is related to the original theme. A manipulation develops complexity beyond the variation to render a form that is even farther removed from the original. When the traditional ethnic themes were transformed in the national ballets through variations or manipulations by individual dancers or ballet directors to fulfill a new purpose and function, though the intention was authentic inclusive representation of a national cultural identity, that was not the exclusive effect. As the dances were absorbed into the African national ballets, they underwent a formalization process that filtered traditional ethnic dances through artistic interpretations not necessarily from the originating ethnic community such that the dances were no longer “traditional African dances” at that point even if they were created and performed by African artists. As the national ballets toured globally and African dance became more popular on the concert stage, “ballet style,” spread as aesthetic characteristics of traditional African dance. The “ballet style,” of Les Ballet African was received as a representation of Guinean cultural identity and as traditional African dance, but traditionally dance reflected an ethnic identity.

Moreover, traditional African dances cannot be fully defined by a sequence of movements, I maintain they are living legacies formalized by ethnic identity within memory and codified in an oral tradition that binds the dances and music to one another. Sacred dances and those belonging to secret societies are often the most formalized; they are codified in an oral tradition among its members. However, dances that are not as exclusive are a part of community life and the dance vocabulary is

51 Ibid.
reflective of the people’s experiences. Traditional dances are not limited to a particular aesthetic, but
capture memory, subtlety, and flow through the theme, function, and purpose.

Cultural historian and choreographer, Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, describes the “Africanist
aesthetic as “… a standard that values process… the movement [as] the action.”
In this aesthetic, the
value is not in accomplishing virtuosic shapes or positions, but the quality and continuity of the
movement. However, as traditional African dance is also about memory, it is more than about the
process of movement as the action. It is about flow, a thread of energy connecting movements in time
and space in conversation with the music, the audience or the community and the kinetic process that is
the standard. It is about the totality of the experience. Functionally, flow is about recapturing and
redirecting energy creating a reciprocal process that balances effort with experience. An action is
initiated by creating a point in space and in the arc of that movement, there is a point of release and
dependence on natural physical properties to recover the action through momentum that propels to the
next level of execution. This is one of the reasons African dances tend to build intensity in repetition,
because the relationship with gravity and momentum connects shapes in time and space but also feeds
the traditional experience of dance as both for the practitioner and the audience.

In this way, African dance is also characteristically subtle; not what it seems to be. It often
appears to be more forceful and energetically expensive than it is. Even when movement phrases look
extremely virtuosic, there is a technique that creates a balance of effort and release. Pearl Primus, an
acclaimed dancer, choreographer, educator, and dance anthropologist believed the mastery of subtlety
was a fundamental structural component of African dance. She arrived at this conclusion after she
studied throughout Africa in Nigeria, the Congo, Ghana, Angola, Cameroon, Liberia, South Africa,

52 Brenda Dixon-Gottschild. Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts.
Sierra Leone, and Senegal. As a dancer, Primus was renowned for her dynamism, dramatic flair, athleticism, and her unique and specific application of effort in initiations, or how a dancer starts an action. She could gesture and make her hands move like water or lock her limbs and embody power. She mastered translation specificity through subtlety and it made her ability to communicate rhythmically in gesture and movement distinct.

In her diaries from her studies abroad under a Rosenwald Fellowship in the late 1940s and 1950s, Primus recorded her observations and understanding of African dances.

The dancer is still very important in the lives of the people….The dancing… seems to hug the earth, leaving it fleeting only to plunge into its gut again-, the feet move faster than any other form I’ve seen. Often I must peer through narrowed eyes to see if the feet touch the ground at all. For the most part I would say the dance here shows mastery of subtle movement-Oh-the tiny movement of the back, the use of the hands, and the minute ripple of the neck.”

In her descriptions, Primus captured the complexity of the subtlety of the dances she observed, such that it was difficult to distinguish the actions that produced such effects.

Although her anthropological studies and commitment to education helped to develop the visual aesthetic of African dance in American concert performance, interpretations of her work may have

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54 Ibid, 1-14.

55 Ibid, 65-70. Rosenwald Fellowships were grants awarded to hundreds of African American writers, educators, artists, and scholars as well as European Americans investigating race relations.

56 Ibid, 76.

limited its expansiveness as well. Her students, among whom were Joan Akwasiba Derby and Merle Afida, accepted Primus’ interpretation of African dance aesthetics as the way African dance should be done. In Primus’ biography, Afida recalled “…we learned a lot of traditional dances and the African posture, which was always the body toward the earth in plié, something that we had acquired from dancing with Pearl.” Afida’s description of the body inclined toward the ground and Primus’ image of the “dancers hugging the earth,” are a part of some traditional dances, but do not effectively capture an inclusive definition of traditional African dance characteristics. Furthermore, these definitions can also be limiting. African dances do not require a forward posture, softened knees, and flexion at the hip to create between a forty-five to ninety degree angle relationship between shoulders or knees. They do not have to reach down to the earth, hug the earth, or incorporate fast footwork, but instead incorporate the actions of life patterns and the narrative of a people as the foundation of the dances’ vocabulary. The dance reflects the life of the community.

While I argue that there is not a singular posture or closed set of formalized movements that characterize traditional African dances, that is not to say African dances do not have technique or form. Traditional African dances have ideas that inform how the body moves in space, in time, and relate to gravity more than a formalized vocabulary of movements. Some of these concepts that characterize traditional African dance in addition to subtly and flow, include the use of gravity to access an advantageous relationship to momentum, sequential initiations, polyrhythm, and polycentrism. The use of gravity is often in a reciprocal exchange, a fall and the effect of a release. The release can manifest as

58 Ibid.
59 Ibid, 89.
60 Ibid.
61 This may not apply to sacred dances belonging to secret societies.
an extension of a limb, a change in weight or direction, and sequential initiations linked one to another. There are dynamic breaks to this effect, often initiated by polycentrism such that there are multiple and moving centers in the body. Polycentrism relates to polyrhythm in that the moving centers are connected to layered rhythmical patterns that inform the sequential timing of initiations that require polycentrism to maintain balance in the body. These are functional components of traditional African dances that enable practitioners to experience theme and purpose.

The themes and purposes of traditional African dances are diverse; Primus described their variety through her anthropological studies. They include “court dances,…nature imitations, ceremonials, fertility dances, dances of the aristocracy, children’s dances and dances of birth, puberty, death and motherhood…acrobatic, social, hunting…ballets narrating story and legend, humorous dances, and many others.” Primus studied the themes and purposes of African dances, filtered them through her interpretation, and taught them to her mentees and students. She described her experience as “a course in choreography.” Generally, her work after she returned from Africa was received as traditional African dance, but her artistic practice was reflective of a modern dance process.

Davis, in a similar practice as Primus, embraced traditional themes in his creative interpretations and like directors of the national ballets such as Keïta staged dances with torsos angled from the hips forward toward the earth, palms open, and arm extended toward the sky, virtuosic acrobatics, flowing vibrant costumes, and drumming. These attributes do not represent the totality of the diverse range of African dance aesthetics, but were reflective of the interpretations of individual artists and national ballets directors. With a purpose to foster cultural appreciation and reframe cultural identity, Davis and

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62 Schwartz, *The Dance Claimed Me*, 78.

national ballet directors left out much of the history of colonialism for an idealized precolonial representation. Davis, along with Primus and Katherine Dunham were among African American artists who participated in a reciprocal exchange with African artists, which catalyzed the development of African ballets and informed their artistic practices. This exchange gained momentum as African countries gained independence and African Americans engaged in civil rights struggles in America. Primus was highly influential in the development of the National Dance Company of Liberia, and Dunham the National Ballet of Senegal. However, when traditional African frameworks were applied outside of a visual aesthetic or dramatic theme consistent with those of the African national ballets, or dances billed as researched and originating in Africa, the framework of the creative processes were not connected to traditional African dance practices, but identified as modern dance, because “traditional African dance,” had developed a formalized “ballet style.”

As an example, in “The Ailey Blend-Ballet, Modern, and Broadway,” a 1978 article in the *New York Times*, Jennifer Dunning described Ailey’s work as a mix of “Broadway, ballet, …numerous modern dance styles…and high exoticism.” Outside of what inferences may be made about the meaning of “high exoticism,” a direct reference to African dance was not listed. At the time this article was written, outside of dance works that visually placed the theme in an African contexts, more subtle connections to African traditions were interpreted as creative exoticism.

By 2004 understandings had evolved in this respect. Thomas DeFrantz, dance historian and scholar in African diasporic aesthetics, described Ailey’s work as an expansive combination of dance techniques; jazz, ballet, modern styles (Graham, Horton, Humphrey) Brazilian, and West African

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isolations and musicality. DeFrantz identified isolations as a particular African kinetic signature and did not refer to this connection as an exoticism. He also pointed out that Ailey applied “Africanisms,” or characteristics of African culture that can be traced through practices in the African diaspora, into concert dance through the dance vocabulary, music selection, and some compositional strategies. He maintained Ailey was compelled to “honor ancestral legacies,” but he does not propose Revelations is an “Africanism.” He maintains that Revelations embodies African American culture as a modern dance.

DeFrantz is not alone in this perspective. Dixon-Gottschild, John Perpener, Susan Manning, Dunning, and Allen categorize Revelations, as a modern dance. Comparatively, Dixon-Gottschild describes specific traditional African characteristics of Revelations. She states

Revelations….has never been notated or copyrighted. Its survival and its aesthetic integrity are entirely a matter of oral tradition linking the generations of dancers who have performed it….Dudley Williams, an Ailey dancer since 1964 said, “its very personal to us”….Ves Harper, costume designer said of Revelations, I’m not sure if it can be taught. It has to be lived.

Dixon-Gottschild’s description aligns with traditional dances, that the dance is lived among the people to whom it belongs. Traditional dance is personal because it is connected to the collective memory and cultural identity of the community. It is preserved in oral tradition, through living and experiencing from one generation to the next. However, Dixon-Gottschild maintains, Ailey is African American by

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69 Ibid. 22-25.
70 Dixon-Gottschild. Digging the Africanist Presence, 18.
ethnicity but is not a choreographer of African dance but American concert tradition…influenced by both Africanist and European aesthetics. 71 Revelation is syncretic, but it is also an inclusive reflection of Ailey’s memories and shared sense of community that existed between those aesthetics.

Like Dixon-Gottschild and DeFrantz, Perpener agrees Revelation, is a modern dance in which Ailey blended European, European American, African, and West Indian concepts in a revolutionary and distinctive form. Perpender maintains “Ailey crossed the boundaries of aesthetic hierarchies and cultural dichotomies to create work that was replete with ground-breaking significance.” Still, Perpender is drawing this conclusion based on aesthetics. This standard is not appropriate when analyzing cultural identity in performance, because it does not account for the fluid nature of vocabulary being related to lived experiences characteristic of African traditional dance practices.

Putting aesthetics aside, Manning who also agrees with Perpender and Dixon-Gottschild that Revelation is a modern dance, bases her conclusion on the use of abstraction. 73 Manning describes Revelation, as being performed in a way that accurately captured cultural identity in that it was “performed not as other groups have danced…nor might dance.” Manning does not acknowledge that this attribute aligns with the theme, function, and purpose of traditional African dance practices. She classifies Revelation as a modern dance because Ailey incorporated “mythical abstraction.” 75 Fundamentally there is some utilization of abstraction in all dance, whether traditional or modern.

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71 Ibid, 58.

72 Perpener, African-American Concert Dance, 201.

73 Susan Manning. Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion.(Minneapolis,University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 211. DeFrantz also supports the idea that Ailey utilizes abstraction Revelation to create an archetypal black personae. Ibid, 25.

74 Ibid, 211.

75 Ibid, 211-212.
*Revelations*, is not mythically abstract beyond the frames of traditional cultural practices because any use of abstraction was filtered through Ailey’s individual and collective memories.

Although Allen writing for *New York Amsterdam News*, also regards *Revelations* as a modern dance, her descriptions highlight traditional African characteristics that are similar to those she describes in Davis’ *Dance Africa*. Allen describes *Revelations* as incorporating “African dance styles” layered with memory, which “embodies the spirit of an era in our history,” and “memories…united by..understanding.” She does not connect these qualities to the traditional African dance experiences she describes as a part of *DanceAfrica*. Comparatively, in her coverage of *DanceAfrica* in 2015, Allen described the experience as more than just about dance performance but a cultural rooting tradition. She interviewed Davis who told her, “*DanceAfrica, is necessary. It builds a sense of self-esteem, pride, and empowerment while also teaching folks who we are and building cultural bridges.*” *Revelations* shares this theme, this function, and purpose.

Margalit Fox, writing for *New York Times*, in 2017 described Davis as “America’s foremost master of African dance [he]…choreographed, taught, and otherwise evangelized for dances of Africa and the African Diaspora for more than half a century.” Similarly, dance historian, Lynne Emery writes in *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today,* “Chuck Davis made African dance his speciality…to present works that portray the complete range of black heritage, from its origins in Africa.”

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79 Ibid.

80 Margalit Fox, “Chuck Davis Who Brought African Dance Dies at 80.”

Emery’s timeline of “Black Dance” history, Davis is listed among the African-Caribbean concert performers and Ailey within the modern dance tradition.\textsuperscript{82} Even so, this is not how Davis viewed his artistic process. In an interview with Alastair MacCauley writing for the \textit{New York Times}, in 2010, Davis stated, “We try to show African dances accurately, but they’re theatrical presentation. Authenticity happens in the space and on the soil.”\textsuperscript{83}

\textit{Revelations} did not fit comparable molds of theatrical presentations associated with traditional African dance. It is not performed in a dramatized village setting, drums do not dominate the music, and its theme is not geographically connected to an African location. Essentially, it does not include the socially expected choreographic elements African choreographers and the national ballets introduced as defining signatures. These signatures were largely created through non-traditional creative processes, even when the movement sequences were transported accurately, the artistic practice dually embraced modernism through resistance to ballet as classical concert performance and the communal tradition from which the dances originated. However, what led Ailey and Davis to choose the creative and aesthetic approaches they applied in their signature works is beyond artistic vision and choice; historical social events informed their directions as well. Although there were many concurrent societal factors, I propose the ring shout and minstrelsy were particularly significant in determining aesthetic and creative approaches for Ailey and Davis.

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\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Ibid}, 272-278, 324-332.  \\
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Initially, the ring shout brought Pan African solidarity among Africans transported to America but class divisions over its African form created a rift between African and American identity and aesthetics. Minstrelsy rising with the antebellum period further complicated this rift. Minstrelsy relocated with mockery and disdain, African American traditions into entertainment performance, essentially tarnishing them as inappropriate source material for elite concert dance performance. Thus concert dance artists such as Ailey and Davis, with an expressed intent to show the beauty of their heritage and reframe how their cultural identity was portrayed bypassed traditional African American forms such as Buzzard-Lope, Pigeon Wing, Possum Walk, Buck and Wing, Cake Walk, Virginia Essence and the Soft-Shoe Shuffle. Their artistic choices to depart from largely African American source material were related to the class divisions over African aesthetics at the point of the ring shout and to how such aesthetics were captured in minstrelsy and entertainment performance.

American novelist, scholar and literary critic, Ralph Ellison, described the ring shout as “America’s first choreography.” It was much more than choreography, the ring shout was a new tradition formed from the commonalities of diverse collective memories of an African past. Sterling Stuckey, an esteemed African American historian who chartered a significant study of African culture in American slavery, determined the ring shout was the key to understanding how African American cultural identity was formed.


87 Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 3-12.
In *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundation of Black America*, Stuckey argued the brutality of slavery created the impetus for enslaved Africans previously from different ethnic lineages to forge solidarity.\(^{88}\) They realized what connected their shared condition, their African origin and common status as enslaved persons, also created opportunity for a shared sense of community.\(^{89}\) To resist the commonality of oppression they overlooked ethnic distinctions to redefine themselves collectively and thus became the first expression of Pan Africanism through the ring-shout.\(^{90}\) With every round of the oscillating circle, unnecessary distinctions fell away and were replaced with shared fundamental values that became the building blocks for their new Pan African identity. These shared values included ancestral reverence, belief in the ability of the spiritual world to influence the material world, burial rites, the importance of dance and music in spiritual experiential practice, and particularly the use of a counterclockwise circle as spiritual tools to communicate with the unseen but interconnected spiritual realm.\(^{91}\)

In *Free to Dance: The African American Presence in Modern Dance*, producers Charles and Stephanie Reinhart begin their historiography of African American dance with archival footage of the ring-shout.\(^{92}\) As the production comes into focus dancers are shuffling their feet in a counterclockwise circle characteristic of the ring shout.\(^{93}\) The ring-shout has a slow incremental build often beginning from a harvest dance. It has one rhythm layered with many subtle variations of individuality inside

\(^{88}\) *Ibid*, 11, 12.

\(^{89}\) *Ibid*, 3-17.

\(^{90}\) *Ibid*, 11, 12.

\(^{91}\) Stuckey, Sterling. *Slave Culture*. ix-16.

\(^{92}\) Reinhart. *Free to Dance*.

\(^{93}\) *Ibid*.
driving unity. As the rhythm intensifies, often through repetition with a gradual increase in tempo, the dance ritual progresses from gestures from daily life, such as picking, flicking, digging; and shifting to sacred dance inviting the intercession of spirit. This transition point is often marked by a gradual development of relative unison. Unity created through music, dance, flow, and characteristically Pan African, became the solidarity point for bridging diversity and developing an African American identity.94

From Ailey’s descriptions of *Revelations*, this is an identity he wanted to capture. Ailey stated, “We would present a concert based on Black American material, songs from the Georgia Sea Islands…true spirituals…ring-shouts…water baptisms…blood memories from my childhood.”95 Ailey looked to the Georgia Sea Islands, because it was a region where African customs were less influenced by American culture for two main reasons.96 First, its location provided relative seclusion from mainstream society thus protecting cultural retentions. Secondly, it was a destination for illegal slave traders to continue to smuggle Africans as late as 1858, even though the trade was abolished January 1, 1808.97 As such there was an extended period of renewed influx of cultural ideas from Africa to this region for longer than in other locations.98

Many inhabitants of the Georgia coastal area, remembered familial narratives about their African past and their continued practice of African traditions in America.99 In the 1930s, the Georgia

94 Stuckey, *Slave Culture,Nationalist Theory*, ix-16.

95 Ailey, *Revelations*, 97-104.


97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.
Writer’s Project interviewed African Americans living in the Georgia Coastal areas of the Deep South about their memories of rituals and belief systems. Recalled from their memories, were descriptions of harvest dances and shouts. One interviewee, Rose, from Harris Neck, a small settlement in the South Savannah of Georgia, described them in this way. “Dat wiz allaz a big time…We pray an gib tanks fun duh crop an pray fun duh next year. We all eat an sing an dance….We still dance dat tuhday.”

Although Ailey expressed in his autobiography that he wanted to capture and preserve this heritage from the Georgia Sea Islands as it related to his “blood memories,” in Revelations he did not use the signature African American choreography of the ring-shout to embody his memories. While the ring-shout was the platform where Africans initially forged a new Pan African identity in America, incrementally and ironically it became a point of division within the African American community. This division was largely informed by classism and religious identity by the antebellum period.

In Exchanging Our Country Marks, historian Michael Gomez traces this division. Before the three periods of the Great Awakening beginning in the eighteenth century, most enslaved Africans continued to practice forms of African spirituality and did not convert to Christianity until it was Africanized in America. Christianity was Africanized during the revivals of the Great Awakening, a movement of increased Christian enthusiasm marked by the expansion of Baptist, Methodist, and

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100 Ibid, 123.

101 Ibid.

102 Ailey, Revelations, 97-104.


104 Gomez, Exchanging Our Country Marks, 15-16, 245.

105 Gomez, Exchanging Our Country Marks, 246, 251-262. The three periods of the Great Awakening that increased black conversion were 1760-1790, 1790-1830, and 1830-1860.
Presbyterian denominations. These revivals were open to “white and black coreligionists.” African Americans were drawn to the revivals, because they offered religious equity. European Americans were drawn to the emotional experiential worship and largely adopted ecstatic worship practices from African Americans. The revivals of the Great Awakening became tied to abolitionist efforts, and religious equality led to the rise of black clergy as members of a black elite. The black elite was composed of black clergy, but also free African Americans. Some of the free population were emancipated, some escaped, and others purchased their freedom through earned income.

However, before the decline of the slave trade, class divisions were rooted in labor differentiations and slaver stereotypes of African ethnic groups. Slave owners in North America held preferences for particular African ethnicities because of customary expertise or mixed African and Arabic heritage. Senegambians, Mandingos, Fulani, Bambaras, and Malinkes were preferred as domestic servants; butlers, maids, cooks, and nannies. They were considered to be more intelligent because they were believed to be mixed with Arabic heritage, and because of Arabic literacy. Literacy was associated with higher intelligence and often placed such persons in supervisory positions as overseers. The Fon, Fante, Yoruba, and Asante were preferred as artisan, blacksmith, carpenters,

106 Ibid.
107 Ibid, 252.
108 Ibid, 251-262.
110 Ibid, 31-33.
111 Ibid, 31-33.
112 Ibid; Gomez, Michael. A. *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa.* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2018), 61-70. As Islam spread through this region under the old empires of Ghana and Mali between 1000-1230, Arabic literacy was more common among Muslims from this region.
washers, and bricklayers.\textsuperscript{114} Mande from the Grain Coast were relegated to agriculture because of their familiarity with rice, indigo, and tobacco.\textsuperscript{115} The Igbo and Bantu speaking people of Congo-Angola were largely field laborers because they were considered more likely to revolt. They were also believed to be stronger and did most of the work that made slavery profitable.\textsuperscript{116}

However, with the decline of the slave trade, labor distinctions shifted from being connected to ethnic distinctions, to complexion and trades.\textsuperscript{117} Some slave owners, freed their children from enslaved mothers creating a class division marked by complexion. With the importation of Africans with experience in particular trades declining, skilled artisans gained economic and social leverage. With liberation in sight, complexion, trade, and Christian conversion came to determine classism within the African American community.\textsuperscript{118}

By 1830, classism and aspirations of inclusion, fueled a divisive trajectory of African and American aesthetics at the point of the ring-shout.\textsuperscript{119} The African American elite and many members of the black clergy predominantly rejected the ring-shout and related Africanized practices, because they labeled them heathenish for their African form.\textsuperscript{120} The establishment of the American Colonization Society in 1817, strengthened this divide. Many wanted to avoid African affiliation so as not to inadvertently express support for the organization’s mission to emigrate free African Americans and

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\item[\textsuperscript{114}] Holloway, \textit{Africanisms in American Culture}, 31-33.
\item[\textsuperscript{115}] \textit{Ibid}.
\item[\textsuperscript{116}] \textit{Ibid}, 31-33.
\item[\textsuperscript{117}] Gomez, \textit{Exchanging Our Country Marks}, 15-16.
\item[\textsuperscript{118}] \textit{Ibid}, 245.
\item[\textsuperscript{119}] \textit{Ibid}, 15-16.
\item[\textsuperscript{120}] \textit{Ibid}.
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emancipated slaves to Africa.\textsuperscript{121} However, outside of the black elite and churches where the ring-shout and other Africanized practices were not allowed, they continued among African American folk traditions. African American folk traditions were thematic sources for the foundations of American concert performance.

American concert performance had a multi-dimensional development, that was characterized by diverse cultural influences and an overlap between common or folk traditions and elite functions. Concert dance performance came to America during the eighteenth century as wealthy patrons invited European ballet dancers to perform for elite functions at their homes or affiliate institutions. This display of prominence was costly. As the frequency of such social events expanded, prominent land owners, regional leaders, and businessmen hired performers from among free populations or compel enslaved Africans to perform music and dance for their functions to cut costs and to offer a unique experience to their guests. They were encouraged to do this as they observed how enslaved African Americans celebrated at holidays or other festivals and competitions that were allowed and encouraged at particular times to quite unrest. Increasingly, European Americans of different classes became intrigued by dances such as the Cake Walk and the Virginia Essence, and by the 1830s variations and manipulations of African American culture became the theme of the first uniquely American performance format, minstrelsy.\textsuperscript{122} Minstrelsy was the first and primarily the only door through which African Americans made their way onto the concert stage before the turn of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{123} When African

\textsuperscript{121} Stuckey, \textit{Slave Culture, Nationalist Theory}, 200-202.


\textsuperscript{123} Thorpe. \textit{Black Dance}. 40-52
Americans were given greater opportunity after the Civil War, they had to obliged this performance format.\textsuperscript{124}

Although the structure of minstrelsy is not often compared to modern dance composition by leading dance historians, the similarities are striking. Seeds of what would become characteristically modern dance choreographic approaches lived first in minstrelsy; the appropriation of thematic source material from another cultural tradition, individual interpretation through variation and manipulation, exploring psychological themes of identity and emotion, and a resistance to the existing concert formality.\textsuperscript{125} When Thomas Rice, the “father or minstrelsy” modeled his character Jim Crow after the dance and mannerisms of an unidentified slave he observed in the street, he drew his manipulations from outside of his experience in an allure of exoticism.\textsuperscript{126} His interpretation was as a mockery, but through it he chartered a uniquely American form that became a performance traditional by the end of the century.

As African American performers gained access to the stage, they worked incrementally from within the limitations presented to them to expand their representations. I propose that African Americans engaged in modern dance processes during minstrelsy but were limited by accessible performance opportunities and negative stereotypes. Dance historian Edward Thorpe provided evidence to support this interpretation in his account of Bert Williams and George Walker in \textit{A Senegambian Carnival} and \textit{In Dahomey} between 1900 and 1902.\textsuperscript{127} Bert Williams and George Walker, began their career as a singing, dancing, and comedy duo in medicine shows in California.\textsuperscript{128} After viewing a

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{124} Toll, “Behind the Black Face,” 3-15.
  \item \textsuperscript{125} Emery, \textit{Black Dance}, 248-251; Perpender, \textit{African-American Concert Dance}, 101.
  \item \textsuperscript{126} Toll. “Behind the Black Face,” 3-15.
  \item \textsuperscript{127} Thorpe. \textit{Black Dance}, 55-57.
  \item \textsuperscript{128} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}
performance by a Dahomean dance group, at the San Francisco Winter Fair, they were inspired to create *A Senegambian Carnival and In Dahomey*. As they were performing in the shadow of minstrelsy, they distorted some of the source material and aesthetics incorporated from the Dahomean ensemble. However, their creative practice was characteristically modern, it was an individual interpretation of tradition as a resistance to the accepted standard. Their limited access to performance opportunities and negative stereotypes obscured their artistic practice as natural to African Americans and not as an artistic interpretation. Although they were not limited to entertainment stages, a similar obscurity of artistic practice surrounds the work of Keïta and Davis in their use of modern dance constructs and artistic interpretation to bring traditional aesthetics of African dance to concert performance. Manning explains, because “Negro Dance” was largely connected to entertainment performance, it is only recently being linked to the concert traditions it supported. “Negro dance,” gave way to black concert dance around 1970, however, “black concert,” dance has been developing from before the birth of American concert performance.

Modern dance began as a primarily American concert dance form in the beginning of the twentieth century, with Isadora Duncan, often called the “mother of modern dance.” She sought freedom from ballet, by removing the corset, slippers, and ballet academic form for a natural expressive movement style. She was inspired by ancient Greek aesthetics, and movement that interpreted the music often in outdoor garden performances. Her modern dance was a return to tradition, to an identity


133 Modern dance also developed in Europe, particularly in Germany, with Mary Wigman and Rudolf von Laban.
separated by time. Her approach to modern dance is comparable to the approaches of Davis and the
directors of the African national ballets that used modern creative approaches to capture a traditional
aesthetic different from their formative experiences.

After Duncan, Ruth St. Denis and her husband and partner Ted Shawn expanded imaginative
freedom by embracing exoticism in a more classical theater performance, and opened the Denishawn
School of Dancing and Related Arts in 1915. St. Denis created and performed dances with Egyptian,
Indian, and Asian themes from her individual interpretation. She incorporated abstract music
visualization and cast herself in character roles outside her formative milieu in signature dances such as
*Incense Ritual* and *Egypta*. Although St. Denis did not use an interpretive filter of mockery, her
approach was similar to minstrelsy, in which psychological themes of identity were explored through
masking as characters, and European American performers tried on different cultural identities as an
artistic interpretation. St. Denis and Shawn may not have consciously embraced this overlap with
minstrelsy because American concert performance developed with an interconnection between
entertainment and elite influences. St. Denis began as entertainment performer, and in her search for an
alternative to entertainment and classical ballet, her artistic interpretations blended both frameworks
along with exoticism and individual interpretation.

Comparatively, early African American modern dance artists were limited by negative
stereotypes of them as being less capable of complex intellectual capacity and artistic interpretation.
Both minstrelsy and modern dance began as reserved for European American performers and allowed
them the creative interpretive authority to appropriate, vary, and manipulate source material from

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134 Reinhart, *Free to Dance*.
135 *Ibid*.
outside their community. As an example, Edna Guy who studied at Denishawn, and Hemsley Winfield who preceded Dunham, Primus, and Asadata Dafora, presented their interpretations of African themes in *Ritual African Themes* and *Jungle Wedding* in 1931. Dance critics labeled their work as lacking authenticity. Yet, the question of authenticity did not permeate the performances of St. Denis. This standard of “authenticity” was applied to African American artists, who later met it through anthropological research, but was granted to European American dancers as artistic interpretive license and to African born artists as birth right in African themes.

The next wave of modern dance leaders, Martha Graham and Lester Horton, sprang from Denishawn. They also looked to traditional non-Western dance styles, African, Indian, Asian, and Native American dance traditions for inspiration but created individual approaches distinct from St. Denis. Graham and Horton also departed from St. Denis’ approach by racially integrating their companies. However, they practiced “creative colonization,” in which they appropriated source material for their own use that they endeavored to develop into “high art.” Martha Graham stated in 1930, “We have two primitive sources, dangerous and hard to handle in the arts, but of intense psychic significance—the Indian and the Negro—That these influence us is certain.” Louis Horst, Graham’s companion wrote in his book *Modern Dance Forms*, “primitive art is evident as a strong quality in every

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139 Perpener, *African American Concert Dance*, 5-9. Martha Graham studied at Denishawn in 1916 and Lester Horton with Forrest Thornburg a Denishawn trained teacher. Other modern dance leaders who studied at Denishaw include Doris Humphrey, Charles, Weidman, and Edna Guy.


contemporary style…[but] the primitive did not create works of art but magic weapons.”

Early European American modern dance choreographers did not look at their practice as a cultural appropriation, or “creative colonialism” because they saw such traditions as unrefined source material that was at their discretion to vary and manipulate.

African American modern dance choreographers had an investment beyond individuality, innovation, and resisting the formalization and aristocracy of ballet. They were also interested in resisting negative stereotypes and building legacy and opportunity. African American artists frequently had to navigate both entertainment and elite concert performance to create legacy and opportunity for the next generation of artists. Although, there is a distinction between the elite concert performance and the entertainment realm of vernacular and folk performances, for African American artists this was a curtain on which they frequently had to perform on both sides.

One complex and controversial artist in this legacy was Josephine Baker. Baker began her career in the 1920s, as minstrelsy was in decline and overlapped with vaudeville. Her rise to stardom was concurrent with the rise of the Harlem Renaissance, a revolutionary movement where African American artists redefined their cultural representation and began to gain greater access to elite concert performance. Baker joined La Revue Nègre in 1925, an American production that opened in Paris featuring le jazz hot. Baker’s legendary performance of “The Dance Savage,” in which she danced within an African aesthetic, wearing a skirt of bananas, was a complicated unparalleled success.

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142 Ibid, 48.
145 Ibid. Jazz beginning in Mississippi region and New Orleans, spreading North during the Great Migration, and to Paris by 1920s.
the audience’s appeal were layers of exoticism and lingering stereotypes of Jezebel’s heighten
sexuality. However, in “The Dance Savage,” Baker embodied a dual identity, reinforcing certain
stereotypes to gain visibility for later generations to gradually change them. Baker is often recognized
as a successful entertainment artist, but her resistance against existing concert constructs is also a
modern dance practice and reflects the gradual building of opportunity. Concert audiences and
producers wanted and expected to see African aesthetics presented this way; before changing their
representation, often African American artists first had to capture the audience attention by fulfilling it.

Katherine Dunham, was able to capture her audiences with a flair of glamour and intrigue
reminiscent of Baker. When her company performed in Paris, Dunham was hailed “the most
extravagantly successful American dancer since Josephine Baker.” Dunham was a remarkable
success with her company and individually on Broadway in productions such as Cabin in the Sky and
Tropical Revue, as well as in films such as Stormy Weather, Carnival of Rhythm, and Pardon my
Sarong. In 1945, Dunham opened the Katherine Dunham School of Cultural Arts where she taught
her original technique, a blend of ballet, modern, African American vernacular and African-Caribbean
dances, to “dissipate misunderstandings…and prejudices,” and to give African American artists training
opportunities to develop the technical capacity to “show that there was a sound black dance tradition,
deserving the same respect as the white European tradition then dominating” the concert stage.
Dunham expanded performance opportunity, training, and inspiration to African American artists.

146 The Jezebel stereotype portrays African American women as hyper-sexual predatory. This stereotype developed to
rationalize sex between white men and black women and to absolve white men of the responsibility of sexual violence
against enslaved black women. Donald Bogle. Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of


149 Ibid, 52, 132, 121-126.
Dunham stated, “I work with the purpose of reducing the pressure on the Negro performer.” “I have provided careers and opportunities to many hundreds of young people, broaden the horizon of the American Negro, showing …the unwilling people in America and outside of America, the constructive potentialities of the Negro…and to give him back his own cultural roots.”\footnote{Ibid, 212.} Ailey continued this tradition.

When Ailey first saw Dunham’s company perform he was a teenager. In his autobiography he described how he was intrigued and inspired by the beauty of the performance. “I couldn’t believe there were black people on a legitimate stage in downtown Los Angeles, before largely white audiences, being applauded for their artistry.”\footnote{Ailey, \textit{Revelations}, 40-41. Horton operated the first fully integrated modern dance company in California in 1932.} Ailey was formally introduced to dance by his friend Carmen de Lavallade, who encouraged him to work with Lester Horton, but Dunham became an influential mentor to Ailey. Ailey joined Horton’s company in 1949, and De Lavallade and Ailey danced with Horton up until his death in 1953.\footnote{DeFrantz. \textit{Dancing Revelations}, xiv. Manning. \textit{Modern Dance, Negro Dance}, 210.} After Horton’s death, Ailey took over his company, until he moved to New York and performed in the Broadway productions \textit{House of Flowers} in 1954 and \textit{Jamaica} in 1957.\footnote{Manning \textit{Modern Dance, Negro Dance}, 210.} After these productions, Ailey decided to focus on choreography because he sensed “the New York City concert dance scene was basically closed to black dancers.”\footnote{Ailey, \textit{Revelations}, 78, 89.}

In 1958, Ailey formed AAADT with an expressed purpose to employ excellent black dancers in New York, give artistic voice to African American experiences in concert dance, and to form a highly
skilled racially integrated company. Amid an atmosphere of racism and segregation, Ailey was aware of the political implications of his integrated company. Ailey stated, “If you live in the elite world of dance, you find yourself in a world rife with racism…I am trying to show the world we are all human beings… if you’re a Black anything in this country people want to put you in a bag…I want it to be easier than it was for me.” Ailey accomplished these goals, he left behind a legacy of opportunity, provided a home for African American and other dancers of diverse backgrounds to study, perform, choreograph, and for global audiences to engage with the legacy of his “blood memories.”

Ailey’s inaugural choreography on AAADT, *Blues Suite*, was a ballet about the men and women he watched frequent the jukebox joints of the Dew Drop Inn drinking, dancing, and flirting to the blues. The piece ends with the early morning sounds of a train and a church bell. The program note for *Blues Suite*, read “The musical heritage of the southern Negro remains a profound influence on the music of the world…during the dark days the blues sprang full born from the docks and the fields, saloons and bawdy houses…from the very souls of their creators.” In his autobiography, Ailey explains how he cast dancers as people into roles he developed in his ballets from those he witnessed in his childhood. He wanted to bring real representations to the stage in contrast to stereotypes to root

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157 *An Evening with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.* (1986).


160 Ibid.

cultural identity in concert performance and to bring more African Americans into the theater.\textsuperscript{162} Ailey stated, “I wanted to show Black people that they could come down to these concert halls. That it was part of their culture…to a man who wonders who he is…the agony of coming from where I came from…[and] the contrast of all of that.”\textsuperscript{163} Ailey wanted to change the social constructs of segregation, to include African American themes in concert performance, and also to foster audience and thus financial support for this expansion.

Ailey intended to present an evening of African American culture that reflected the complex identity of African Americans, from the juke joints of \textit{Blues Suite} to the Black Church, ring-shouts and water baptisms of \textit{Revelations}.\textsuperscript{164} In \textit{Revelations}, Ailey effectively bridged a class divide that began at the ring-shout, bringing the Africanized traditions the black elite rejected into concert performance and inviting the everyday folk into concert experience. \textit{Revelations} has been performed in internationally esteemed concert venues such as Lincoln Center and for urban school children through community outreach programming.\textsuperscript{165} However, \textit{Blues Suite}, with its jazz and vernacular foundation, more closely associated with folk “Africanisms” never reached the level of popularity as \textit{Revelations}, and pairing them consistently in an evening was not a profitable marketing option.

 Nonetheless, critics such as Jill Johnson writing for the Village Voice in 1961, used lingering minstrel stereotypes in their reviews and marketing attempts to draw audiences into their articles. Johnson described \textit{Revelations} as “the drunken compulsion of a fertility rite…a swinging dance that could drive you easily out of your mind…[with] ecstatic extensions which throw the body into bursting

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\textsuperscript{162} Ailey, \textit{Revelations}, 97-104.  \\
\textsuperscript{163} “Alvin Ailey Quotes on Life, Dance, and the Black Experience.” \textit{PBS Thirteen}.  \\
\textsuperscript{164} Ailey, \textit{Revelations}, 95-105.  \\
\textsuperscript{165} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{flushleft}
arcs of mad abandon [to] that DRUM! The drum will never let you go.”  

Her description seems to imply that by a psychological break or uncontrollable desire the dancers are able to fulfill the intensity of the choreography, not through skill or training. Her descriptions exaggerate African aesthetics and proliferate stereotypes that African Americans are less capable of artistic interpretation and are naturally inclined to music and dance. Drums do not predominate the musical arrangement of this ballet, nor is there a dominant ecstatic swinging quality or a sense of mad abandon. Ailey does not capture the theme of a fertility rite, that is closer to *Blues Suite*; the rites Ailey captured were water baptism and the ring-shout. Lingering stereotypes encouraged a hyper-sexual interpretation of movement that rippled through the spine or swayed the pelvis to be related to sexuality and attributed technical acuity to an intoxicated state. To challenge such stereotypes and to create cross cultural understanding, choreographers such as Dunham and Ailey used syncretic American aesthetics. Primus and Davis also used syncretic approaches, however as they operated in a more socially expected African aesthetic they are linked to traditional or folk arts and social radicalism more than Dunham and Ailey. I propose this can be connected to the rift in African American identity at the point of African forms between the elite and folk traditions at the point of the shout.

Pearl Primus was a radical artist who paved a trajectory that significantly influenced Ailey and Davis and expanded the scope of African American concert dance particularly through protest dances and blending education and performance.  

In 1968, Primus expressed the interconnected nature of dance and African heritage in her life. She stated “My career has been a quest…a search for roots. The journey has taken me deep into the culture of many..Dance has been my vehicle..my freedom…and my


world.” Primus shared a similar path with Ailey and Davis, in which “the dance claimed” them.

Ailey was intrigued by childhood memories, but did not receive early training. Davis had been a military medic in the navy. He enjoyed the dance scene of the Washington D.C. nightlight while he was pursuing studies in nursing at Howard University, but he too did not have early plans to pursue a dance career. Their initial plans were interrupted, and claimed by a fundamental purpose to preserve, reconstruct, and root cultural identity in African continuums deeply connected to their sense of community and a desire to expand cultural understanding through dance.

Primus began with the New Dance Group, as its first African American student, where she gained fundamental dance training and interest in protest dances in 1942. The New Dance Group was a modern dance ensemble with the expressed mission to channel their political interests for social change through expressionist dance. In 1943, Primus made her professional debut at the 92 YMWHA, in which she performed her repertoire of social protest works; Strange Fruit, a protest against racial violence based on a woman’s reaction to a lynching, Hard-Time Blues, protesting the exploitation of southern sharecroppers, and African Ceremonial, based on a Congolese fertility rite. Primus described her protest works as the “scream which eases for a while the terrible frustration common to all human beings, who because of race, creed, or color are invisible.”

168 Schwartz, The Dance Claimed Me, viii.


171 The New Dance Group was founded in 1932, by a group of New York Students of Hanya Holmes. The group “aimed to make dance a viable weapon against the evils of capitalism…” Schwartz, The Dance Claimed Me, 1-14.

172 Perpener, African-American Concert Dance, 163. Strange Fruit was performed to Abel Meeropol’s poem (who published under the name Lewis Allen) of the same name, Billie Holiday made this poem famous in her vocal performance.

173 Schwartz, The Dance Claimed Me, viii.
After her debut, Primus landed a residency at the jazz club, Café Society Downtown, where she performed nightly and continued choreographing protest dances such as *Jim Crow Train*. Primus performed *Jim Crow Train* to Langston Hughes’ poem, *Freedom Train*, which protested segregation. Concurrent with her residency at Café Society Primus performed with Asadata Dafora. Dafora, credited as the first to establish traditional African aesthetics in American concert dance, was born in Sierra Leone. Dafora expressed he wanted to expose audiences to African culture through concert performance.

In 1943, Primus performed her dance *African Ceremonials* as a guest in Dafora’s “Kykunar” or “Witch Woman” at his African Dance Festival at Carnegie Hall. Kykunar was one of Dafora’s prominent works and was inspired by a ritual exorcism from the Mende people of Sierra Leone. “Kykunar” was received as an authentic representation by a native African. When *African Ceremonials*, was reviewed outside of Dafora’s “Kykunar,” Primus’ work was critiqued as lacking authenticity. In Primus’ Broadway debut in 1944, critic Lois Balcom writing for the *Dance Observer* dismissed her dances as, “stereotypical approximates…derivatives.” However, what Dafora presented in “Kykunar,” was a dramatization, his creative interpretation, that included her choreography.

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Dafora was not born into the Mende ethnic group he portrayed, he was a Sierra Leone Creole. He was born into a prominent mixed heritage family in Freetown, British Sierra Leone as Austin Dafora in 1890. His grandfather repatriated from the Caribbean and his cultural identity was complicated by the history of Freetown. After Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807, the Royal Navy’s West African Squadron intercepted illegal slaver vessels and released the captured Africans from these vessels to Freetown. Freetown became home to a Creole population, descendants of freed African Americans, African Caribbeans, and London’s “Black Poor.” Dafora grew up in the mix of this and in a household that was different from the pre-colonial Mende community that he staged. “Kykunar,” was inspired by traditions from a different ethnic group than his own, that he observed, studied, and filtered through his European training in theater and opera. Dafora engaged in a similar artistic process as Primus, Dunham, and Davis; he combined research, observation, and creative interpretation

Primus’ experience with Dafora, critics’ reviews, and her own quest for authentic roots led her to study throughout Africa, where she was given the name, Omowale, or child returns among the Yoruba in Nigeria. Among the Watusi of Rwanda, she was legally declared a man and adopted as chief dancer by the king, who personally taught her Impinyuza. Primus performed Impinyuza as a solo but later adapted it as a men’s variation for Ailey’s company in 1990; it remains a part of the company’s

182 Ibid.
183 Ibid.
184 Ibid, 105-108.
185 Ibid, 104-108.
186 Schwartz, The Dance Claimed Me, 1-14, 69-80; Perpener, African American Concert Dance, 172. Impinyuza is a warrior dance in honor or the chief ruler and the deity he represents in the community.
repertoire. Of the African countries in which Primus studied, she was particularly invested in Liberia. Liberia was founded in 1821 as a colony to resettle freed African Americans. Descendants of African Americans became a dominant minority in Liberia, known during the transatlantic trade as the Grain Coast, and home to ethnic groups including the Kissi and Gola.

In 1959, Primus was sponsored with her husband Percival Bode by the Joint Liberian-United States Commission for Economic Development to establish and direct the African Arts Center in Monrovia. The project included collecting and preserving dances from among the people of Liberia, training a team of professional dancers, and building an audience interested in viewing professional performances derived from traditional arts. Primus believed in order to “salvage the still existent gems of dance before they too fade,” she had to restructure them into Western theatricality to survive the Westernization of Africa. The westernization of Africa was a process that began intensively in the early nineteenth century, and although colonialism was a significant part of this process, the association of western values with modernism and progress was detrimental to traditional culture.

Following her work with the National Dance Company of Liberia, Primus returned with her signature, Fanga. Primus set Fanga on AAADT in 1974. She taught it to Davis on the beaches of

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188 Stuckey, Slave Culture, 174-177.

189 Holloway, Africanisms in American Culture, 152-153.


191 Ibid.

192 Ibid, 171-173.

193 Ibid, 173. Fanga was written by Primus in 1959 in conjunction with her work with the National Dance Company of Liberia. Schwartz, The Dance Claimed Me, 89-93.

194 Schwartz, The Dance Claimed Me, 93.
the Gambia in the 1960s, and signature movement phrases from *Fanga* are featured in the movie *Roots* as an African dance tradition. Fanga is billed in concert programs around the United States as a traditional welcome dance from Liberia, but Primus repurposed the movements into a welcome dance. The movements were adapted from a traditional dance used to honor the earth and the sky. Although, Primus preserved the aesthetic, she reinterpreted and varied the theme in an approach characteristic of modern dance.

Primus wanted to develop cross cultural understanding and used a lecture-demonstration approach to do so. Reminiscent of Dunham, Primus stated, “I dance not to entertain, but to help people better understand each other. Because through dance I have experienced the wordless joy of freedom. I seek it more fully now for my people and for all people everywhere.” Ailey and Davis incorporated a similar desire to expand understanding through lecture-demonstrations as educational and community outreach. Davis in particular followed her path of study in Africa, developed his iconic lecture-demonstration, and mastered theatrical community in his concert performances.

In a 1986 review in the *New York Times*, dance critic and journalist Jack Anderson concluded, “Davis created a theatrical sense of community.” He accomplished this by encouraging the audience to immerse themselves in the theatrical experience of community; guiding them and teaching them how. He revolutionized the concept of performance space by blurring the distinctions between engaging the audience in the experience and facilitating a revolving exchange with performer and audience. Davis

195 Ibid, 93.


197 Ibid.


said, “Ok, now it’s your turn, repeat after me,” and in the call and response tradition, the entire audience at the BAM joined in his signature chant, “Peace, Love, Respect for Everybody.” From this point he demonstrated an accessible step, and the audience followed. He continued to build complexity until he reached just enough to stir resistance, and then redirected the focus to the performance on stage. He accomplished this by continuing the last more complex step in place of where the audience would have responded and propelled the energy to advance in intensity back to the staged performance. In this way, Davis choreographed participation and interaction of the audience and theatrically constructed a sense of community. To accomplish this construct, Davis employed a blend of modern and traditional African sensibilities he learned from African and American artists.

Davis founded two dance companies, The Chuck Davis Company in Bronx, New York in 1968 and the African American Dance Ensemble in Durham, North Carolina in 1983. His choreography included influences from modern, jazz, tap, and traditional African and African American dances, including Juba or Hambone. Davis performed with Babtunde Olatunji, a Nigerian musician and social activist and Eleo Pomare, who was a Colombian-American modern dancer and choreographer.

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202 Juba or Hambone; also called “Pattin’ Juba,” is an African American dance tradition, incorporating body percussion and dance. William Henry Lane, known as Master Juba was one of the first African American performers in the US and a master of juba or hambone in minstrelsy in the 1840s.
renown for his highly political work. Davis traveled to Africa more than fifty times after 1970, and studied extensively in Guinea, Senegal, Gambia, and the Ivory Coast. He was recognized as one of the most prominent teachers and choreographers of traditional African dance in America.

In a 2015 interview, Davis described what inspired his interest in concert performance, Davis recalled. It was a Tarzan movie...They used white actors, put what I called Negro number three paint on them and they were portraying Black people in Africa...I said to myself I have to do something to gain respect for our African heritage, our African traditions...Thus the Chuck Davis Company was formed.

Davis endeavored to show his audiences, “we are not ooga-booga,” to offer a counter-representation to lingering stereotypes and to represent African culture in theatrical presentation.

By the 1970s, The Chuck Davis company became one the highest profile African American Dance Companies in New York. Davis’ company performed at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts (FESTAC) in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977. Similar to Primus, Davis’ company was warmly received, and most reviews highlighted how audiences were amazed at the dancers’ ability to

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Ibid.

205 Fox, Margalit, “Chuck Davis, Who Brought African Dance Traditions to America Dies at 80.”

206 AAADT performed Revelations at the first festival in Dakar, Senegal for which Katherine Dunham served as cultural technical director.
capture African aesthetics as Americans. Upon their return, BAM invited Davis and his company to be in residence; out of this residency *DanceAfrica* was formed.

Through *DanceAfrica*, Davis built an international network of African and African-inspired dance ensembles. Davis was committed to promoting African dance among African people on the continent and in the Diaspora. He brought together companies from Madagascar, South Africa, Rwanda, Guinea, and Zimbabwe, to perform alongside companies from Brazil, Haiti, California, North Carolina, Texas, and Washington D.C. Davis founded *DanceAfrica* festivals across America, in Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Denver, Los Angeles and Miami. Although Davis also choreographed dances that captured African American themes and aesthetics, such as *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*, and *Four Women*, he was most renown for his African dance interpretations.

Davis’ African dance interpretations were described by critics such as Don McDonagh, writing for the *New York Times* in 1976, as borrowing from the approach of the national ballets of West Africa. However, the national ballets were created through exchange. In 1966, Dunham was invited by the Senegalese President Leopold Sédar Senghor, to help train the Senegalese National Ballet and to be the cultural advisor for the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar. Dunham’s professional experience and anthropological expertise were influential in shaping an inclusive festival as conflicts


212 “Our History.” African American Dance Ensemble.


over the aesthetic style almost tore the committee apart.\textsuperscript{215} President Senghor wanted the festival to represent “the black races,” while the committee favored a more universal theme. Dunham stated “even in the farthest reaches of tribal life certain contacts with the outside world are inevitable;” and from her research, many dances were better preserved throughout the Diaspora than in their African origin.\textsuperscript{216} Dunham maintained all parts of the Diaspora had been influenced, and thus a representation that did not reflect cultural syncretism was too limiting.\textsuperscript{217} In her advocacy for inclusivity, Dunham expanded a platform for exchange that Davis committed decades to strengthening in \textit{DanceAfrica}. Furthermore, other African American contributions helped to shape the national ballets. The djembe three ring and rope system utilized by Les Ballet Africans was created by Chief Bey, an African American jazz percussionist. The transfer of the traditional three percussion parts one for each drum \textit{sangba}, \textit{kankanee}, and \textit{doundounba}, to one player was also an adaptation inspired by percussion in jazz.\textsuperscript{218}

The process of bringing traditional African aesthetics to concert dance performance required modern dance practices. For African Americans, modern dance was also largely about rooting and reframing their cultural identity among themselves and broader audiences, as well as building opportunity for future generations. Davis’ \textit{Memorial} and Ailey’s \textit{Revelations} were significant parts of an interconnected effort among African American and African artists to reframe, preserve, and evolve that cultural identity through concert performance.

\textsuperscript{215} Harnan. \textit{African Rhythm American Dance}, 201.

\textsuperscript{216} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{217} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{218} Chief Bey, (James Hawthorne: 1913-2004) an African American jazz musician and African folklorist, born in South Carolina who recorded with Babatunde Olatunji.
Revelations: A Translation of a Pan African Dance Framework in Concert Performance

Ailey reframed, preserved, and evolved African American cultural identity through his translation of structural characteristics of traditional Pan African dances in Revelations. Of those traditional structural characteristics: accordance with thematic material, extended duration, and union with the music were particularly noted at the debut performance. At its debut, Revelations was much longer; it included sixteen selections and ran over an hour. The music was performed live by a chorus of singers, with two vocal soloists on stage, and there were three sections Pilgrim of Sorrow, That Love My Jesus Gives, and Move, Members Move. Walter Terry, a dance critic who wrote for the New York Herald Tribune, between 1945-1966 described Revelations, as effectively incorporating contrast and “always in accord with the thematic material.” Selma Jeanne Cohen, a historian and editor who advocated for dance being afforded the same scholarly consideration as other art forms, agreed with this observation. She felt Revelations was too long and was burdened by the “almost literal reiteration of the musical phrase.” These particular areas of criticism are common characteristics of Pan African traditions. Additionally, the choice to incorporate live music particularly with two soloist being on stage was not a common modern artistic choice among Ailey’s African American or European American contemporaries, but was common in Pan African traditions.

In his autobiography, Ailey expressed that his early audiences never complained about the length, but he felt the audiences’ response improved with the abbreviated version. Ailey revised

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219 DeFrantz, Dancing Revelations, 17.

220 Ibid.

221 Ibid.

222 Ibid. Generally the running time of an evening length ballet is approximately 90 minutes, often with a 10 minute intermission.

223 Ailey, Revelations, 97-102.
Revelations to accommodate a performance request at Jacob’s Pillow in 1961. Unable to take the live chorus because of budget constraints, Ailey worked with Howard Roberts on a shorter recorded version using audience favorites from the original suite. The new version eliminated nine segments, “Weeping Mary,” “Poor Pilgrim,” “Round About the Mountain,” “Wonder Where,” “Morning Star,” “My Lord What a Morning,” and “Elijah Rock.” The three section titles were settled as “Pilgrim of Sorrow,” “Take Me to the Water,” and “Move, Members, Move!” The revision included audience favorites, “I’ve Been Buked,” “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel,” “Fix It Jesus,” “Wade in the Water,” “Sinner Man,” “I Wanna Be Ready,” and “Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham.” This version was featured in a weekly CBS special, broadcasted on Sunday mornings in 1962, entitled Lamp Unto My Feet.

The 1962 televised production featured a small cast of eight dancers, including Alvin Ailey, James Truitte, Minnie Marshall, and Thelma Hill. An off-camera announcer stated this presentation was “for those unnamed preachers and anonymous choirs, who from generation to generation evolve the unique expression of Christian worship.” With this announcement and the studio setting of a rural outdoor countryside, Revelations was set in connection to the ring-shout. At the opening of the scene, the cast stood in a choral formation with their gazes wide. Art historian Robert Farris Thompson

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224 DeFrantz, Dancing Revelations, 3-4.

225 Howard Roberts was a composer, conductor and musician performing and directing on Broadway in productions such as Raisin and also musical director for AAADT, Donald McKayle Dance Companies and Harry Belafonte.

226 DeFrantz, Dancing Revelations, 3-4.


explained, this was characteristic of spirit possession and spiritual worship in Yoruba traditions.\textsuperscript{229} A chant begins, repeating percussively, “Praise Him.” The dancers begin to raise their hands and sway as if possessed by this voice and compelled to worship with their bodies.\textsuperscript{230} Drumming interrupts the chant and dancers disperse from their tight formation into a series of solos. Each solo is marked by intense contractions of the torso and percussive trembling. This section was staged for the filmed production, it is not performed in the concert version.\textsuperscript{231}

In the first dance “I’ve Been Buked” Ailey embodies the shared experiences of oppression, resistance to slavery, and the ring-shout. Gathered in a tight cluster, the dancers slowly lower their bodies towards the earth externally rotating at the hips and bending at the knees. Their arms stretch in opposition towards the heavens, conveying directional contrast and expressing resistance. The recurring choreographic theme of dancers gathering with hands raised and gaze upward as in worship and then traveling outward in driving counterpoint expresses both the diversity of experience during enslavement but also the ring-shout. As the dancers travel the rounds of the shout, the experience is individual and collective, flowing from unison to individual expression. Ailey depicted the ring-shout as a rooting practice to which African Americans returned despite the specifics of their individual experience much the same as dancers returned to this cluster formation. In the counterpoint groups, Ailey conveyed the important role the ring-shout played in providing a place for resistance to an oppressive identity, a place for cultural expression, and fortification cultural identity.


\textsuperscript{230} \textit{Lamp Unto My Feet: Revelations}.(1962).

\textsuperscript{231} James Truitte recalled this segment was requested by the producers to fill out the program. It is at the beginning and end of the production, with an approximate additional running time of 2 minutes. DeFrantz \textit{Dancing Revelations}, 5.
In an interview with *New York Times*, dance critic, Gia Kourlas at Revelation’s 50th Anniversary, AAADT dancer, Amos Machanic Jr expressed the complexity of the dual somatic representation of oppression and resistance in his performance of “I’ve Been Buked.” Mechanic describes the experience as feeling weighted by sorrow, simultaneously hopefully, and committed to perseverance.232 Ailey described the childhood memory that inspired this first section in his autobiography.

As early as I can remember, I was enthralled by the music played and sung in the small black churches in every small Texas town my mother and I lived…No matter where we were during those nomadic years Sunday was always churchgoing day. With profound feeling, with faith, hope, joy and sometimes sadness, the choirs, congregations, deacons, preachers, and ushers would sing black spirituals and gospel songs…as a small child I could not only hear it but almost see it. I remember…hearing the pastor’s wife sing “I Been Buked, I Been Scorned,”…I tried to put all of that feeling into *Revelations*.233

The process Ailey describes in *Revelations*, preserving a shared experience through oral codification, is characteristic of traditional African dance, where the theme, the focus of the memory, is embedded within the music and the dance functions to relive this memory. Moreover, his intention to capture “the feeling” of this memory and transfer it inter-generationally further embodies a traditional framework.

“Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel,” is a trio that follows “I’ve Been Buked.” The dance begins in unison and transitions through a series of contrasting duets and solos. The movement vocabulary emphasizes contractions and percussive undulations of the spine. Its choreographic form also mimics the structure of the ring shout and employs polyrhythm. The duets represent the community dancing in

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unison that is the balance to the soloist in the “spirit.” Ailey varies the spatial relationship from the traditional circle, but the exchange of leadership is consistent with the structure of the ring shout, a flow, a kinetic conversation between the music, the community, and an unseen divinity. Additionally in this dance, the choreography follows polyrhythmic contrast, a signature of traditional African music where there is a fundamental rhythm working in a call and response pattern, much like a conversation.\textsuperscript{234}

“Fix It Jesus,” at first impression is a modern dance interpretation of the classical ballet \textit{pas de deux}.\textsuperscript{235} However it does not follow the thematic tradition of \textit{a pas de deux}, which often has a romantic overtone. Although “Fix It Jesus” is a duet for a male and a female dancer, the interaction between the two dancers is not romantic. On the contrary, in this duet Ailey expressed an interaction between the physical and spiritual world. The male dancer represents a guiding spirit, perhaps an orisha, a loa, or an ancestor interceding in the somatic supplication of their charge or their descendants represented by the female dancer. In the last iconic motif of the piece, the male dancer lifts the female dancer in a varied fetal position. He then turns her in a circle as a parent would a child, carefully and with ease. He lifts her to stand on his upper thigh; supporting her as a base. She extends her leg to a long arabesque line, as she lifts her sternum and arms upward. In the classical sense, this is a virtuosic and sculpturesque ending. However, my interpretation of it is a somatic representation of the essential Kongolesic cosmogram, the \textit{tendwa nzá kongo}.\textsuperscript{236}

The \textit{tendwa nzá kongo} in its simplest form overlaps with the symbol of the cross. Thompson describes it as a “coded cross…the sign of the four movements of the sun…the Kongo emblem of


\textsuperscript{235} The \textit{pas de deux} follows a strict pattern, a supported \textit{adagio}, a solo variation for the male dancer, a solo variation for the female dancer, and a coda in which both dancers dance together. \textit{Adagio} refers to slow and sustained movement; usually displaying extension range, balance, and control.

spiritual continuity.”

It predates European contact and the influence of Christian missionaries in the fifteenth century. The Kongo yowa cross represents the Bankongo understanding of life as a cycle and the relationship between humanity and divinity that bears some overlap with Christianity. The Bakongo believe life is a cycle with no end and this process continues on two sides, the realm of the living and the dead. This intersection is represented by a horizontal line through the center of a circle, where the world of the living is above the world of the dead below. The Bakongo also believe in a supreme deity, Nzambi Mpungu. A vertical line through the center creating the cruciform symbol represent the supremacy of God above, the dead below, and the interconnectivity of the spiritual and physical worlds with the cycle of the sun. The rising and setting of the sun was connected to the cycle of life, rising representing the life in the earthly realm and setting in the realm of the dead. Stuckey illustrated the predominant influence of the burial rite traditions from the Congo-Angola region in the practice of ring-shout due to similar value systems among the Bantu ethnic groups of Congo-Angola region and their dominant populations in southern states. “Fix It Jesus,” may express a Kongolese ideological system represented in the tendwa nzá kongo that was preserved under the disguise of African American Christian practices in the Baptist churches of the South.

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239 Ibid.

240 Ibid.

241 Ibid.

242 Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory*, 11-14. Stuckey notes, Togo women moved in a clockwise circle; but the dominance of the Bakongo influence informed the direction of the shout in a counterclockwise direction, which followed the direction of the sun in the Southern hemisphere.
The similarities between Christianity and Kongo cosmology combined with European American misconceptions about the importance of dance and music to African religious practice provided disguise for African retentions. In *Rituals of Resistance*, historian Jason Young, comparatively analyses how Africans in the Kongo and in the Deep South resolved the tensions that existed between their ancestral belief systems and Christianity. He demonstrated how Africans in the Deep South and the Kongo recognized points of commonality between their ancestral beliefs and Christian rites, and adopted the language and practice of Christianity rather than true conversion. They reclaimed the ritual and the symbols without psychologically accepting the religious doctrine.

In the signature ending of “Fix It Jesus,” Ailey somatically replicated the *tendwa nzá kongo* with such detail, the connections are striking as a continuance of Bakongo cosmology. The male dancer forms the base with legs shoulder width apart and knees bent at right angles forming a horizontal line. The female dancer’s base is at his hip crease forming a vertical intersection point. Together they form a cross. The cross is representative of the interconnection between the physical and spiritual world, the connection between the ancestors who are unseen in the spiritual world and the descendants in the physical world. As the female dancer extends her leg to the back and the male dancer his arm to the front, the arch represents the counterclockwise direction of the sun. “Fix It Jesus,” can represent a matriarchal balance of male and female energies participating in this cycle of life within the Bakongo polyvalent perspective; the interconnection of the living, God above, and the realm of the ancestors.

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244 Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, 44-53.

below. Bakongo ideologies were passed down in action through ritual practice, but the origins were disguised under Christian precepts. Ailey’s choreographic choices in “Fix It Jesus,” reflect this process. His choices in later sections of Revelations express Pan African retentions that were formed in Africanized Christian practices such as water baptism.

In the second section of Revelations, “Take Me to the Water,” Ailey captures the ritual of river water baptism in three parts, a processional, “Honor, Honor,” and “Wade in the Water.” In the processional, the dancers enter in different roles in the ritual, members of the procession carrying banners, one in the front and one behind, a protector, an elder, or priest carrying a white umbrella in the center, and two initiates or candidates for baptism, one male and one female in the center of the procession. To a chant with repressed drumming and clave or bell, the dancers enter with turns in a cannon that unfold to a choreographed walk. The costumes are all white, female dancers in long swaying lyrical skirts with ruffled neckline, the male initiate in white pants and bare chest, and those carrying the banners, white pants with white mesh shirts. Against a backdrop of blue, the dancers process with a sway of the hips against a calm torso. Representative of deep water, calm on the surface with great power underneath the procession gives way to “Honor, Honor,” a choreographed ritual of baptism. Two dancers bring out a white drape of flowing fabric and run it above the heads of the initiates and the elder or priest holding the umbrella. The two return and stand in front of the initiates and the priest. With a slow and deliberate bow forward at the sternum and slow rise up, depicting the baptism, the two holding the fabric begin to shake or ripple it vigorously. The ritual breaks when the white fabric is raised and then used to cover the initiates. Two additional dancers run long strips of blue

246 Elders in many traditional societies hold positions of honor and authority and are extensions of parental figures in the home and in the community. Their perspectives are valued as authorities on custom and ethnic heritage and they have a responsibility to pass their wisdom to the next generation.
fabric in front and behind the ensemble moving forward creating the image that they are standing and will soon be dancing in the water. The female dancer with the umbrella, begins the signature sequence based on variations of Yonvalou, a Haitian dance with origins in Vodun and a supplication to the spirit Dambala.\(^{247}\) The two initiates walk forward stepping over the blue fabric, metaphorically crossing into the water and begin variations of Yonvalou with turns, falls, and rolls in between the fabric, as if dancing in between the waves in the troubled waters. The cast returns to reform a variation of the procession off stage with the female initiate carried by the male initiate who dances with a series of rhythmic isolations and undulations as if possessed or troubled by the spirit(s) of the water. \(^{248}\)

When Ailey performed with his company as a principal dancer from 1958 to 1965, his mastery of subtlety and flow as the male initiate in “Take Me to the Water” was divine. In the 1962 program, *Lamp Unto My Feet*, it is difficult not to be mesmerized by his intricate initiations through the articulation of his spine, to his shoulders, to his fingertips as if he became water, continuously yielding and building one action on another.\(^{249}\) In a 1986 interview in *An Evening with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater*, Ailey recalled the profound impact of river baptism on his inspiration to create *Revelations*, he remembered being deeply moved by the ritual.\(^{250}\) Ailey did not make mention of the Christian dogma attached to baptism, but to his individual experience and the collective response to the ritual and the “drama of the experience.”\(^{251}\)

\(^{247}\) Yonvalou is a sacred dance of Haiti that imitates the movement of the Dumballa represented by a serpent. Damballa in Haitian Vodun is a creation spirit that is believed to enliven the movement of water. Water is significant as an element of life creation, and separates the world of the living from the dead. Damballa represents a rainbow-snake, the union of heaven and earth. Damballa is significant in Vodun, believed to be a divine serpent, symbol of creation and connector between the living and ancestral world. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 164-179.


\(^{250}\) *An Evening with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.* (1986).

\(^{251}\) Ibid.
In a 2010 interview with *New York Times*, journalist Gia Kourlas, then Artistic Director and former principal dancer, Judith Jamison, described baptism as “…a serious ritual…one of the holiest events in the black church, so completely submerged in that water and brought up anew.” Though baptism is a pillar of the ‘black church,’” the transformative focus, both in Ailey’s and Jamison’s accounts was on the ritual and the water. This connection is profound because, the significance of water rituals are pervasive throughout West and West Central Africa in the traditions of Dahomey, Yoruba, Kongo; and the South. In “Take Me to the Water,” Ailey captured the significance of these Pan African retentions in the Black Church experience.

In Dahomey and among the Ewe, Fon, and Yourba living in modern day Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Nigeria, syncretism of the *loas* of Vodun, and the *orishas* of Yoruba began before the religions of Kongo and Roman Catholicism were added into Haitian Voodoo. Dahomean and Yoruba beliefs are centered on the worship of deity spirits under one Creator: Damballa among the Haitian and Oshumare among the Yoruba. Deity spirits, *loas or orishas*, reveal themselves and communicate with their devotees through possession, similar to the Christian belief at Pentecost of the descent of the Holy Spirit. The revivals during the Great Awakening provided opportunity to experience possession under the disguise of Christian worship. Revivals with their evangelistic and “awakening” missions also led to baptisms at the river as these tent revivals were often in rural outdoor settings. This practice of worship leading to spiritual intercession or possession and water ritual is a Pan African retention with

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252 Kourlas. “Moved by the Spirit: Celebrating Revelations, at 50.”


connections to Haitian Voodoo, Dahomean Vodun, and Yoruba that also manifested in the “Black Church,” and in Ailey’s depiction of his memories of it.

Damballa is worshiped with the dance Yonvalou, which has a signature of uninterrupted rhythmical undulations of the spine and arms, seamless like the motion of a snake and like the ripples of the water. This is the signature movement motif in all three sections of “Take Me to the Water.” Damballa is associated with blue and white. Blue for the water which he is believed to embody and white for the purity of this spirit. The colors in “Take Me to the Water” are white and blue. Fabric is also used in a number of ways in rituals for Damballa. First, fabric is shaken before initiates to mimic the serpentine movement of the Damballa spirit. Second, a white sheet is laid over devotees or initiates possessed by the spirit of Damballa. Third is the use of fabric in flags. Practitioners in Vodun carry flags in ceremonies to announce the presence of a deity in possessed devotees. The flags represent the boundaries of two worlds, between the living and the ancestral realms. Lastly, the umbrella made from fabric is also symbol. The umbrella is a symbol of importance and royalty in Ghana and signifies the position of the dancer carrying it as elder, priest, a possessor of power and authority. From the processional to the exit, inspired by his “blood memories,” Ailey incorporated these ritual uses of fabric.

Water baptism traditions of the Kongo and the Deep South that conveyed blessing, cleansing, and renewal resemble the color symbolism of white and blue as the water and the salt were significant. In Kongo it was the salt and in the Deep South the water. In the Kongo, during the late fifteenth century, Catholicism spread among the royal court through school or mass attendance. In the village,

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256 Thompson, Flash of the Spirit. 164-179.
257 Ibid.
258 Young, Rituals of Resistance, 44-53.
259 Ibid.
it spread through baptism involving salt sacrament. Christian missionary efforts in the village were not as extensive as in school or mass. In the village, the missionary efforts encouraged church sanctioned marriage, confession, and salt sacraments.\textsuperscript{260} The missionary priests were not successful in persuading the Kongoles to adopt their definition of marriage or participate in confession, but baptism and particularly salt sacraments were embraced. Before the missionaries arrived, the Kongoles held high reverence for water spirits and believed offerings to these spirits were necessary.\textsuperscript{261} Water baptism did not oppose existing beliefs about the intrinsic powers of water. The Kongoles also believed evil people and spirits were repelled by salt and avoided a baptized person who accepted the salt sacrament.\textsuperscript{262} The Kongoles accepted the salt as a spiritual rite, not its connection to Catholic theology. They believed the salt, not the prayers of the priest conferred the blessing.\textsuperscript{263}

Throughout the Deep South, it was the water that conferred the blessing. In \textit{Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negros}, Elizabeth Roberts, a former slave, from Sunbury in Liberty Country, recounted her experience with river water baptism.\textsuperscript{264} She explained, “baptisms must be performed when the tide is going out,” because it was the water that washed away sins.\textsuperscript{265} The pull of the tide drew the sins out of a person, the flow of water granted rebirth.\textsuperscript{266} The congregation processed to the river banks and the preacher prayed to the river, not the

\textsuperscript{260} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{261} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{262} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{263} Ibid, 52-53.
\textsuperscript{264} Georgia Writer’s Project, 113. Young, \textit{Rituals of Resistance}, 43.
\textsuperscript{265} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{266} Ibid.
Trinity, to take their sins away. It was the blue water and the white salt that washed sins away, cleansed, revived, transformed, and it is my interpretation this collective memory was translated in Ailey’s “Take Me to the Water.”

In “Sinner Man,” an all male trio and the woman’s section of “Move Members Move,” Ailey captured secular and sacred retentions. Jamison, described “Sinner Man,” as a rites of passage for male dancers in AAADT. She perceived the virtuosity of the choreography, demanding leaps, turns, falls, running, escaping, and pressing the limits of athleticism as a force that bonded the male dancers together. Yet, it was more than the difficulty of the choreography that fortified that bond. Rites of passage dances establish collective identity through memory and experience; the shared experience and the memory of “Sinner Man” bonded them together and initiated them in a “feeling of shared community.”

As a dance, “Sinner Man” marked this transition for the male dancers. The women’s section in yellow dresses, large brim hats with yellow flowers of “Move Members Move,” was its feminine counterpart. In Sunday morning dresses, with church fans, percussive lateral articulations of the head, and polycentrisim in the shoulders and torso, Ailey captured more than social constructs of femininity in the Black Baptist Church, but a tradition that resembles the Poro and Sande societies of Mande in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Ivory Coast. Men and women are traditionally prescribed different life paths and different secret societies. The Poro is a male secret society, and the Sande, the female counterpart. Initiation into each society requires rites, and the transition to inclusion is often marked by physical

267 Young, R. Rituals of Resistance, 44-53.

268 Kourlas. “Moved by the Spirit: Celebrating Revelations, at 50.”

269 Ibid.
symbols and through dance. In his autobiography, Ailey described the physical demands of dancing, the discipline, the painful muscle spasms, and the difficult life continually on the road traveling, performing, and maintaining a ready dancer body. Ailey and members of AAADT were “initiated,” into this lifestyle as “cultural ambassadors,” and dedicated artists through continually practiced commitment and repeated as tradition through dancing *Revelations*.

*Revelations,* is an expression of cultural identity presented in concert dance performance that captures Pan African cosmologies in somatic reference, roots a community in a sense of shared community, functions as a rite of passage for African American dancers, and is a ritual yearly blessing. It is performed practically every season. It holds a sacred value and a perception of blessing. In his autobiography, Ailey stated,

…When we were setting out on a European tour, I said, I want to stop taking this piece… I made up my mind to leave *Revelations* home. But after two performances the dancers and audiences were asking, “Where’s *Revelations*?” and of course we had to relent. Even after all these years, we still feel that our season at New York City Center,…hasn’t really begun until we do *Revelations,*...the stage somehow hasn’t yet been blessed.

When Ailey created *Revelations,* the act of presenting in Western elite concert theater a somatic narrative from his “blood memories” of African American culture was a revolutionary action, a modern intervention and a resistance against ballet themes. Ailey stated, “I wanted to explore black culture and I

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270 Primus was initiated into the Sande society and describes part of the ritual involving “cuts,”or marks. “The members are marked down the back and over the shoulder down the front to the public region. I shall plead for fewer cuts though the sign is beautiful.” She does not go into further detail to maintain the secrecy of the society. Schwartz. *The Dance Claimed Me.*, 76.


wanted that culture to be a revelation.” However, the process he used to create this revelation, was a translation of Pan African traditional dance frameworks. Ailey effectively brought the shout to the concert hall, his roots of African American cultural identity into concert performance, and preserved this legacy generationally. The testament to this tradition is evident in audiences’ responses after sixty years, standing, singing and clapping in the aisles at City Center.

**DanceAfrica: Memorial - A Modern Framework Reconstructing Pan African Traditions**

Between 1977 and 2015, Davis created a bridge for African American, African, and Afro-Latin American companies to explore their commonalities and distinctions in concert performance through an international ring-shout in *Memorial*. This process expedited the development of contemporary African dance, as dancers, choreographers, and company directors engaged in aesthetic exchange. Although some efforts at written codification such as the Umfundali technique and the Acogny technique have been made, contemporary African dance is predominantly continued through oral tradition. In this regard, *DanceAfrica* has contributed to the shift away from traditional African dance towards a codified style closer in structure to ballet and modern dance that use an established body of movements to define an aesthetic form.

In addition to creating a platform to catalyze aesthetic exchange, Davis also expanded the performance setting to include concert stages, as well as outdoor and community locations. He brought the traditional village concert format to American performance and blurred the lines between concert and communal dance through his particular talent for dramatizing home, family, and as he put it, “the

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273 Acogny Technique was created by Senegalese choreographer, Germaine Acogny as a Contemporary African dance technique and philosophy based on West African and Western dance styles. Umfundalai technique is a Contemporary African dance technique created by African American dancer, choreographer, and professor at Temple University, Dr. Kariamu Welsh, that is based on key movements and aesthetics characteristics of African people on the continent and in the Diaspora.
village.” He was able to maneuver through different cultural perspectives, styles, and aesthetics and was considered a Baba in West Africa, America, and Latin American countries. Baba, a title of respect and familiarity, captures how Davis bridged cultural differences across geographical regions, proliferated cultural legacy, and maintained appreciation of aesthetic distinctions in a spirit of Pan-Africanism.

In addition to his personal charisma, I propose Davis was able to bridge cultural differences through *Memorial/Tribute to the Ancestors*, which was a signature of *DanceAfrica*. Bridging solidarity based on shared beliefs about the ancestral realm and burial rites, is a practice Stuckey identified as influential in developing a Pan African identity among African Americans in the ring-shout. Davis may not have consciously made this association, but his desire to expand understanding and construct a Pan African cultural village that included ancestral reverence embraced a similar approach.

At the first *DanceAfrica*, the program note read, “In essence you are visitors to our village which is wherever we are. We welcome you with…drums and …chant. Through the chant we ask that you not only enjoy your stay with us but form with us a comradeship that will remain a lasting association.” With this approach, Davis reframed the function of traditional dance to root an ethnic community in collective memory, to expand inclusion to diverse communities in his performance of a metaphorical village. Compared to Ailey’s “blood memories,” that lived in his personal, somatic, and collective memories among his family, his formative shared sense of community, *Memorial* did not exist in Davis’ memory in this way. *Memorial* was inspired by Davis’ research on his many trips to Africa, and became a tradition created through research and individual interpretation.

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274 Mama and Baba are titles of respect, (Mother/Father) especially for elder with a distinguished authority or knowledge.


In *DanceAfrica*, Davis’ intention to encourage appreciation for his cultural heritage is a reconstruction accomplished partially through overlooking memories that do not align with an idealized reality. *DanceAfrica* passes over the ring-shout, the church experience, civil rights, and jazz for a largely pre-colonial African identity. Although in later iterations, the festival included tap and hip-hop, the overall aesthetic style remained connected with an African visual representation. However, without embracing the totality of the cultural identity of African people wherever they are, the intention to show the beauty of African people and a Pan African village remains incomplete.

Davis directed the opening of *DanceAfrica* like an invocation captured from a ritual or celebration from an uninterrupted African past. The costumes invoked tribal exoticism, with raffia, face paint, colorful wax fabrics, djembes with calf and goat skin heads, *akeles*, carved wooden staffs, Egungun dancers, Chicaba, chants, incense smoke, and the expectations that often comes to mind with the words traditional African dance. Davis’ intention was not to elicit audience appreciation through exoticism, but to demonstrate the splendor of Africa and foster appreciation for African cultures. His approach included a dramatized representation of African aesthetics that required a modern approach. Davis revised his perception of cultural belonging and identity and offered that opportunity to his audiences and his artists, as he phrased it, “I am because you are, you are because we are…the village.”

*Memorial*, shares commonalities with *Revelations*. *Memorial* is perceived as a blessing and a festival rite; *DanceAfrica*, would not be complete without it. The experience of *Memorial*, is like being transported to one of the villages Davis visited among the Jola of Gambia or the Susu of Guinea, and being welcomed to sit among them. In its progression *Memorial* is consistent with the levels of

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278 PBS NC. Biographical Conversations With Chuck Davis: Inspired by Tarzan. PBS NC. Biographical Conversations With Chuck Davis: Pursuing the Authentic.
escalating intensity as the ring-shout. It has a pattern of a break, a dynamic shift usually initiated by an attention grabbing display of virtuosity, and mysticism. This is followed by a heightening of intensity, a stabilization of that intensity, and then a shift, to the sacred. *Memorial*, is a dramatization of the moment of the shout, the connection to memory, to ancestral realm, and the conscious break with the physical world into spiritual connection. *Memorial*, begins with a cleansing through dance with rhythm and chanting, a masked or similar figure representing connection to the spiritual realm, naming of ancestors, and pouring of libations.279

In nearly half of the iterations of *DanceAfrica* after 1978, Dinizulu African Dancers, Drummers, and Singers, performed this opening cleansing dance, rhythm, and display of virtuosity.280 Nana Yao Opare Dinizulu founded the Dinizulu African Dancers, Drummers, and Singers in 1950.281 Dinizulu was born in Augusta, Georgia in 1931, and traced his lineage to Ghana, where he traveled frequently to study dance and culture.282 He created a repertoire for his company that reflected the attitudes, characters, and intellect of the people they represented from Ghana and South Africa.283 Davis incorporated his expertise in the opening at *DanceAfrica*.284

Dinzizulu’s company performed an opening for *Memorial*, staging an Egungun ritual before the signature Candle-bearer section of the *Memorial*. The Egungun ritual has its origin among the Yoruba of

279 Libation is a drink poured out as an offering, or in memory of the dead. It is commonly poured on the earth or into a basin and then poured into a potted plant on the earth outside.


281 Nana in the Twi language of the Akan of Ghana and Ivory Coast is a title of respect. It denotes distinctive authority and reserved for highest office in society and respect of esteem elders.


Nigeria and Ghana and is celebrated as a family of masquerade customs. The Egungun ritual is a masquerade ritual dedicated to ancestral reverence believed to be “the embodiment of spirit.” It is believed that the spirits of the ancestors possess the Egungun, and create a point of interaction where the people honor the ancestors and the ancestors have a place among the living where they give advice and blessings to their descendants. The Egungun masquerade gives warnings and blessings through movement and this ritual is often the beginning of subsequent festival practices. The ambience of the opening of *Memorial* is as if being transported to such a ritual among the Yoruba and invited to participate. Davis bypassed the African American retentions of Yoruba, Dahomean, and Ibo masquerading traditions in John Kunering from his hometown of North Carolina in search of what he perceived was a more accurate representation.

As the lights gently fade to a point of soft illumination across the stage, from the shadows figures of a small group of female dancers dressed in white garments hit the edge of the lights like a vision, a memory, or a dream. Adorned with colorful African wax print fabric, bare shoulders, and carrying bright green branches, the dancers repeated a sweeping moving pattern in a ritual cleaning style. The percussion rose to an enchanting cyclical 6/8 meter and as the layers of polyrhythm intensified the dancers moving across the stage gradually progressed to more virtuosic movement, whirling turns and quick weight shifts. The movement was smooth yet percussive, flowing from one evolution to the next then into a series of turns.


286 Ibid. In addition to the use of a counterclockwise circle, Stuckey pointed out the prevalent use of “masks…to represent ancestral figures,” across Central and West Africa, and the use of masquerades as an act of resistance and retaining African practices.

In a break from this kinetic vortex, masked dancers entered in vibrant colorful costumes dancing with an elevated intensity than the preceding female dancers. The masked dancers performed higher leg extensions with angular shapes yet flowing execution. A priest, a guardian figure entered in the next break, signified by his dress, and that he does not carry branches but an akele, or horse hair whip. He is dressed with gold ropes across his bare chest, and an elaborate colorful head piece. He turns and ushers in the Egungun. Covered from head to toe, so that the identity of the carrier of the Egungun is concealed, the vibrantly died pink, purple, and red raffia of the Egungun accentuate the dancing, a combination of turns, gestures, and interacting with the onstage musicians. The priest performs sweeping action, cleansing the space and the scene folds to a starry blue night sky.

The invocation of the Egungun has transitioned to the Tribute to the Ancestors, in which Davis calls his traditional chant as male and female dancers dressed in white process to the stage in a slow sustained movement sequence, or adagio. In a commanding yet inviting voice, Davis calls…

Listen more often to things rather than to beings. Hear the fire’s voice,

hear the voice of water, in the wind, hear the sobbing of the trees, it’s the voice of the ancestors who are not dead, not gone, not beneath the ground.

To those who have passed on to the ancestral grounds we will not forget you … Call out the names of ancestors.288

As the audience calls out the names of ancestors, the candle bearers, and musicians repeat “modupe ibae” and all of BAM is engaged in a ritual of reverence.289 As the audience is encouraged to participate

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289 Yoruba: rest in peace, gratefulness.
by naming aloud names of their ancestors who have impacted their lives and those of the larger community, the adagio with candles continues as well as the chant.

The dancers form a circle, one dancer, at times Davis, enters the center and dances a solo with the theme of pulling down or receiving from the stars above. In this moment, the traditions of the ring shout and the Egungun unite. The soloist in the center is representative of a practitioner connecting with spirit individually and collectively for members of the community present in the physical world and beyond. As the soloist moves in a rhythm of inhalations and exhalations, lengthening arms to the sky and lowering gaze to the earth, the names ring crisp on the thick air in the Opera House. As the lights dim and the chant subsides, libations are then poured on stage often accompanied by this phrase, “To all those who rest at the foot of God at the river’s edge,” we remember you.290 The pouring of librations, ends Memorial at DanceAfrica.291

Memorial, is not visibly reminiscent of the shout, but functionally it is similar. Both have a strong sacred and ritual connection. Memorial does not travel in a counterclockwise circle, but the layers of intensity are guided by subtlety and flow between music, dance, and memory. The soloist in the center dances with syncopated, uneven, and often jagged flashes of accent and tension juxtaposed with elongated contractions, similar to the opening of Revelations. The dancers surrounding the soloist move slowly representing the time differentiation between the spirit and physical world. This rhythmic contrast and the musicians’ response increased the intensity of the experience incrementally in Memorial, similarly to the ring shout.


Davis engaged in a traditional practice of ancestral reverence through an interconnection between spirituality and artistry to build Pan African solidarity in *Memorial*. He used choreographic processes characteristically modern, to expand its inclusivity and to return cultural roots reconstructed through research and innovation. Ailey and Davis shared similar objectives to root cultural identity in collective memory, community, and appreciation for its intrinsic beauty and complexity. They approached this through different creative processes and during periods of social change that influenced their methods. At this juncture in the progression of African American concert performance, an intervention that is a combination of Ailey’s and Davis’ creative approaches, comprehensive of collective memories, and inclusive of difficult experiences that reconsiders perspectives about classifications may enliven both traditional and modern dance practices. Traditional and modern creative practices can be used reciprocally to maintain alignment with cultural identity. However, to have the most effective reciprocal relationship, visual aesthetic cannot be the determination of the creative process; the theme, function, and purpose must be the root.
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