

The Search for Authenticity and  
Freedom of Expression in Black Dance Performances

Moriah Gibler

Missouri Western State University  
Missouri Lambda Chapter

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Author contact information is available from the Editor at [editor@alphachihonor.org](mailto:editor@alphachihonor.org).

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## The Search for Authenticity and Freedom of Expression in Black Dance Performances

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### Abstract

This article examines the connections between African American dance performances and the black freedom struggle. From minstrelsy to modern dance, black performers have struggled to authentically portray black identity onstage. Each dance form had, however, its own limitations and possibilities. While minstrelsy depicted African Americans as mindless beings, tap dancing allowed performers to impress audiences of all races and approach a more positive and realistic representation of African Americans. The choreography of each dance style is a reflection of the cultural and political conflict of the time. The article concludes with Pearl Primus and Alvin Ailey's confident and triumphant modern performances, which signaled that African American performers had overcome derogatory stereotypes and redefined the perception of African Americans in entertainment.

Key words: minstrelsy, dance, performance, blackness, African American identity

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### Introduction

African Americans have long struggled to define themselves through dance as a way of breaking through white prejudice. Historian E. Patrick Johnson writes that "the multiple ways in which we construct blackness within and outside black American culture is contingent on the historical moment in which we live and our ever shifting subject positions" (xx). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans wrestled with the chains of minstrelsy and fought for the redemption of their cultural identity in American entertainment.. Minstrelsy was the corrupt representation of African Americans by white Americans who sought to "maintain 'whiteness' as the master trope of purity, supremacy, and entitlement" (Johnson xxi). It supported the theory that African Americans were mindless and subhuman. Minstrelsy slowed progress towards racial equality and distorted the reputation of African Americans for decades

Tap dance was the first dance form that black performers used to break away from the derogatory stereotypes of minstrelsy and challenge America's social barriers for African American entertainers. Heavily influenced by the syncopated rhythms and carefree attitude of the Jazz age, tap dancing was rooted in African American culture. Tap helped transform public opinion of African American culture into something more accurate. It brought increased dignity and respect to the perception of African American entertainment.

Modern dance promoted the physical expression of cultural identity and gained popularity alongside the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, as an artistic aspect for the black freedom struggle. The foundation of modern dance was laid in the 1920s by African American women and "offered a vision of a new, more pluralistic American culture that incorporated democratic principles and racial equality" (Foulkes 54). As a fore-

runner of modern dance, Pearl Primus used dance as a means for social protest, beginning in the 1940s. She stretched the boundaries of dance and recognized that her movements had “the power to transform the observer’s consciousness” (Griffin 43). She challenged white supremacy and reinforced the black freedom struggle through her powerful choreography. In 1958, Alvin Ailey created a company of African American dancers and, in 1960, they performed *Revelations* for the first time. Ailey presents African Americans’ struggle for freedom in a very passionate way, using spirituals and blues. *Revelations* shows African American culture without distortion or negative humor as Ailey perceived it, raw in content without bias towards any race. Dance was, and still is, an essential way of communicating African American culture and perceptions.

Before delving into the dance history of the black freedom struggle, the question of authenticity must be addressed. Authenticity is a subjective truth for audience members and performers, not an objective fact. Throughout African American history, authenticity has proved to be elusive as it continuously “transforms into something else and travels in another direction” (Johnson xix). Authenticity is only reviewable within its historical context and through the perspectives of those who claim it. The quest for authenticity enabled “marginalized people to counter oppressive representations of themselves,” redefining themselves through their own experiences (Johnson xx). The first aspect of the quest was for African Americans to overcome white Americans’ degrading construction of blackness. Secondly, African American performers had to set aside audiences’ and critics’ expectations and perform characters and choreography that were relatable to their own story. Modern dance is the only dance style that completed the quest for authenticity because it allowed performers to address the political, social, and cultural aspects of their identity. Modern dance did not dictate identity but was an unaltered expression of the performer’s or choreographer’s perspective. The evolution of African American dance, from minstrelsy to modern, is a reflection of the black freedom struggle and the reshaping of African American identity through their quest for authenticity.

### Minstrelsy

Minstrelsy, a dance form that originated with slaves and was exaggerated by whites, showcased an unauthen-

tic, subservient view of African Americans. In the 1830s, the minstrel character was created by a white performer, Thomas Rice, who considered a deformed, old black man, known as “Jim Crow,” to be so amusing that he decided to mimic him (Ukpokodu 73). From these roots, a comedy show arose that imitated whites’ perception of African American movements and speech. The traditional minstrel performance consisted of “cultural song and dance representing back-stooping labor of shoveling and carting dirt... and being uprooted from family and home for long periods of time” (Lhamon 66). In order to take on the persona of a black man, white performers rubbed burnt cork on their faces and created the American tradition of blackface. Minstrel shows became popular in the 1840s and projected prevailing white American attitudes towards African Americans (Lhamon 57). The characters in the shows were presented as stupid and clearly inferior to white men. This ideology was widely accepted in both the North and the South. Due to an economic depression in the 1840s, minstrel shows gained popularity among poor, white audiences “who were spending their money to discover their identity on the stage” (Lhamon 57). These lower class Americans were experiencing class anxiety, and their appreciation of minstrel shows was “an attempt to shore up ‘white’ class identities by targeting new enemies such as immigrants, blacks and tipplers” (Lott 141). While minstrel shows were comedic, they also spread white supremacist ideas. The shows contained the “ideological products of a white imagination that reinforce white paternalism, patriarchy, and patriotism” (Brody 738). While many thought slavery to be unethical, the idea that African Americans were “unjustly oppressed yet inferior” was widely accepted (Nowatzki 12). This idea lingered long after slavery had been abolished and was a key part of the American ideology that fought against African American equality. Even as minstrel shows gained popularity, white audiences were more accepting of white performers in blackface than of actual African American performers.

It was not until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that African American men became regular performers in minstrel shows. George Grant states that “the minstrel was the starting point for the Negro actor, but he could not be held down forever, to buffoonery” (21). Many black performers found opportunity in minstrel shows. Bert Williams is the best example of a minstrel performer who broke down barriers as an African Amer-

ican performer. With the popularity he gained as a comedic minstrel in the 1890s, he advanced to vaudeville and to more serious theater performances (Forbes 603). Throughout his long career, he paved the way for other African American performers to perform in mainstream shows, including those with white audiences. Nevertheless, the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a turbulent time for African American social rights as Jim Crow segregation prevented mixed audiences. Therefore, it is significant that Williams' popularity enabled him to perform in front of black audiences and white audiences. In 1902, Williams became the first black actor to perform a full-length musical on Broadway, and he was also the first black performer with the Ziegfeld *Follies*, performing from 1910-1919 (Forbes 604-605). Performing for both black and white audiences, placed Williams in the middle of a moral dilemma. He was caught between giving the white audiences the stereotypes they desired and giving black audiences the genuine performance they craved (Forbes 607). His solution was to present race as "performative," meaning "it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (Forbes 604-605). He portrayed the "Jim Crows" and the "Zip Coons," but regarded these roles as simply characters, nothing more. By changing these characters into fictional, comedic ideas, Williams appeased the expectations of white audiences while maintaining his integrity as an African American performer. His career anticipated the creation of the "New Negro," which was "reframing and reforming the image of blacks in response to existing derogatory stereotypical representations" (Forbes 608). Although minstrelsy was detrimental to black freedom, African American performers like Bert Williams were able to utilize their popularity to create opportunities for more accurate character growth. The popularity of minstrel shows faded early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, overshadowed by the beginning of vaudeville and tap dancing.

### Tap dance

Just as Bert Williams manipulated minstrelsy to advance African American performers, cultural blending created a new means for African American expression. The amalgamation of Irish clogging and African American dancing formed a new style of dance: tap. Tap dancing became popular as America moved away from minstrelsy and on to vaudeville (Ukpokodu 73). At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many great tap dancers, who were veterans of minstrel shows, used their popularity

to enter new entertainment venues. One of the most notable dancers who started this way is Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. He used his popularity in the vaudeville circuit to break the "two colored" rule, an unwritten supposition that no audience wanted to watch a solo African American performer. In 1916, Robinson's solo show made him one of the first African Americans to perform alone (Dodds 28). Robinson proved that he did not need someone to compliment his routine; his performance was enough. His performances not only entertained but also empowered his "all-black audience's sense of racial pride" (Dodds 28). However, Robinson's performances were not restricted to all black audiences. As he advanced to Broadway and Hollywood, he became loved by many white audiences who appreciated his smooth dancing and cheerful character.

Robinson has been criticized for the "socially acceptable" African American roles that he took, specifically being the servant or slave in several Shirley Temple films. Beginning in 1935, Robinson's partnership with Shirley Temple became an iconic part of her movies, and audiences, black and white, all over America saw their movies. It was Robinson and Temple who performed the first interracial dance on film. Even though they only briefly held hands in *The Little Colonel* (1935), it was so controversial that the scene was cut when the film was shown in the South. In spite of Robinson's significant achievements, the negative sides of his characters cannot be ignored. The characters he played "maintain the fiction that blacks happily submitted to supremacy" (Dodds 28). Not only that, it also confirmed that as late as the 1930s and 40s, the subservient ideals glorified through minstrelsy were still intertwined with tap dancing (Dodds 28). Despite these limitations, Robinson was a key figure in the early years of tap dancing and was devoted to advancing his race in the entertainment industry. He was an African American actor in mainstream Hollywood films at a time when that rarely happened (Durkin 2). He brought dignity and masculinity to every role he played, replacing the subservient, weak stereotype of the minstrel character with his own genuine charisma.

Robinson's unparalleled rhythm inspired popular tap dancers of all colors, like Fred Astaire, who endeavored to immortalize Robinson in words and dance. Regardless of Robinson's career work supporting African American performers, Fred Astaire's portrayal of Bojangles in his 1936 film, *Swing Time*, was racially distorted. Astaire attempted to honor his tap hero through a tap

routine with blackface and loose posture, lacking the smoothness that was a crucial characteristic of Robinson's performances. Astaire's routine continued to skew the line that determined what was artistically appropriate in racial performances by white performers. Even though he was misrepresented, Robinson continued to make tap dance musicals popular as well as promote other African American performers.

Tap was eventually able to escape the minstrel roles and give black performers artistic legitimacy. The tap musical *Stormy Weather*, released in 1943, is a rare example of an all-black cast in which the all-star performers were able to express themselves artistically and rework stereotypes. Bill Robinson and Lena Horne played successful black entertainers and each represented social opposites. Robinson's character is dark skinned, from the South, and works his way up the social ladder to find success. Horne's character is light skinned, a Northern gal, and appears to be very wealthy. The film focuses not on folksy, traditional black characteristics but on a "new Negro" finding opportunity in America (Knight 155-156). *Stormy Weather* showcased the extraordinary talents of Robinson, the Nicholas Brothers, Cab Calloway, and Fats Waller, among others. Tap musicals were a step towards racial equality in entertainment, but segregation in films still needed to be changed. Even with some Hollywood success, African Americans were still unsuccessful in breaking through to white film audiences.

### Modern dance

African American modern dance not only entertained black and white audiences alike, but it also respectfully remembered African Americans' journey. In the early years of modern dance, women had a great influence over the style, and through modern they were able to break social barriers. The mothers of modern dance, Ruth St. Denis, Loïe Fuller, and Isadora Duncan, used modern to "convey philosophical, religious or artistic ideas and beliefs" (Foulkes 9). The feminist movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century empowered these dancers to challenge restrictive, antiquated Victorian expectations and embrace their rights as women. Modern dance provided the confidence they needed to defy social norms and "freed young women psychically from the residue of Victorian notions of women's bodily weaknesses" (Foulkes 11). Until now, the focus has been on African American males in entertainment; how-

ever, modern enabled African American women to express themselves and pursue cultural authenticity. Modern kept the control and structure of ballet but allowed self-expression and creativity. It reflected the times, and the performances were often strongly influenced by the political aspirations of the choreographers. Performers such as Martha Graham and Pearl Primus "took the charged political atmosphere of the 1930s as fodder for artistic ambition" (Graff 283).

Martha Graham was a modern pioneer; she confidentially "conveyed emotion through structured form," and she believed that dance was not just "appearance" (as in ballet), but was "being" (Foulkes 11). Graham wanted to create a purely American art form that truly represented the people. She adopted both Native American and African American movements in an effort to embody America's melting pot of cultures. Through these styles, Graham represented the awareness of life in Native American culture and the fight for freedom and integration in African American culture (Foulkes 11). Because she was Caucasian, Graham brought modern to white audiences and helped the public accept this art form that was heavily influenced by diverse cultures. Pearl Primus continued this cultural preservation by travelling to the South in order to understand life as an impoverished African American.

Pearl Primus studied anthropology at Columbia University, receiving federal grants to travel throughout Africa, the Caribbean, and the U.S. South to research native dances and cultures. She used her choreography to protest the conditions of African Americans and to bring African dance to America (Schwartz and Schwartz 1). In the early 1940s, as her career took off, Primus performed several numbers that relayed the evils of the South, especially lynching. Unlike the dance forms before it, modern had no barriers and enabled performers to relay feelings, stories, and opinions. In 1944, Primus spent a summer in the South to gather material for her choreography. She blended into society by working side by side with sharecroppers and worshipping in black churches. She sought "to use dance to communicate the dignity, history, and political aspirations of black people" (Griffin 40). At the end of the summer, when Primus left the South, she emerged as a more politically minded dancer. Modern was an appropriate venue for politics: "dancers aggravated and pushed against the racial preconceptions that divided American society and that indelibly shaped the course of their artistry" (Foulkes 54). Primus' pas-

sionate performances engaged audiences emotionally just as the modern civil rights movement emerged, challenging America's political and social positions.

In her solo to the poem *Strange Fruit*, Primus portrays a woman watching a lynching. She constantly throws her body to the ground, to demonstrate the terror and helplessness she is experiencing. Her movements are "the embodiment of the recognition of an irreversible human cruelty" (Schwartz and Schwartz 35). Black and white audiences alike could not ignore the pain they felt just from watching this performance. Primus regularly performed as someone recited the poem but her dance was even more powerful performed in silence. The sound of her body hitting the floor, her gasps, and her feet pounding as she ran, added to the intense emotions she portrayed. The nakedness of her performance enabled the audience to imagine a Southern lynching. Primus punctuated her anti-lynching message at the end of the dance by taking a wide stance and thrusting her fist into the air, as if to state "never again" (Schwartz and Schwartz 35). Primus' long career was dedicated to understanding cultures anthropologically and preserving their uniqueness. Her radical work in the 1940s helped America see the injustices happening to black citizens.

Though he was not an early pioneer, Alvin Ailey's work in the 1960s secured the future of modern dance. In 1960, Alvin Ailey and his company performed *Revelations* for the first time. *Revelations* is a celebration of African American history through dance, with traditional spirituals and blues. Ailey choreographed this dance to "show the coming and the growth and reach of black culture" (Schwartz and Schwartz 36). *Revelations* powerfully displays the African American slaves' pain and longing for freedom. It moves on to completely embody Southern blacks, both in spirituality and society. The first section, choreographed to "I've Been 'Buked," is a beautiful group piece. Seven to ten dancers move in unison, expressing the humility forced upon southern slaves. Their bodies communicate the weight of being rebuked by their master but also their hope in better times as they stretch their arms toward heaven. This number captures its audiences with the sorrow and strength that emanates from the dancers.

*Revelations* is a sophisticated, enthralling expression of the black experience. DeFrantz states, "They transformed complex encodings of political resistance, musical ability, and religious narrative onto their bodies to imply a historical reach of black culture, contin-

ued here by the act of concert dance" (Schwartz and Schwartz 36). *Revelations* was based on Ailey's childhood memories. It is so engaging because of the raw emotion it radiates: "Blood memories about Texas, old blues and spirituals and gospel music and rag time music all the things that, folk songs, all those work songs all that kind of thing that was going on in Texas in the early 30's, the Depression years... I had very intense feelings about all those things," Ailey remembered (Grimm). Ailey did not choreograph to please his audience but to share his experience and convey the emotions of African Americans in America's turbulent society.

Part of Ailey's success was due to that fact that he was not striving for fame. Instead, he "brought the mainstream audience to modern dance, and he continued to lure the middle class Americans into the dance theaters" ("Black Integrity"). For 56 years, the Alvin Ailey dance company has preserved the history of African Americans and performed all over the world. *Revelations* was built on the strength of African Americans, and has endured because of its ability to pull in audiences empathically to join in the experience. Ailey authenticated America's stereotypical African American characters by choreographing his perception of the genuine spirit of African Americans. He liberated the view of slaves and southern blacks through the strength and dignity of his choreography. *Revelations* debuted in 1960 to white, urban audiences, the same year student sit-ins, protesting segregation in public accommodations, began. Ailey's choreography invited his audiences to visualize and empathize with the experiences of his dancers, crossing over racial barriers and impacting all who saw "Revelations." Even today, audiences of *Revelations* continue to leave the theaters with a positive and hopeful outlook on the black freedom struggle.

## Conclusion

The journey of African Americans in entertainment was not an easy one. Some leaders, Williams and Robinson, fought the degrading message of minstrelsy to rise to popularity. The stereotyped characters of minstrelsy clung to American culture for decades. Its encouragement of white supremacy was a weight on the freedom movement. Robinson broke down racial barriers in film and represented African Americans with dignity. However, during the tap era, African American talent and musicality was appreciated by few white audiences. It

was not until the appearance of modern that African American style and movements were celebrated. Primus laid the ground work for self-expression and cultural preservation. Ailey used some of the same ideas as minstrel shows, such as depicting poor southern African Americans, but he gave them the authenticity they lacked. African American history lives on today in *Revelations*. Throughout its evolution African American dance has supported and mirrored African Americans' fight for freedom.

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