**Primus, Pearl (b. 29 November 1919, Port of Spain, Trinidad; d. 29 October 1994, New Rochelle, NY)**

**Summary**

Dancer and choreographer Pearl Primus made significant strides towards securing a vital role for dance artists of colour in American modern dance. Sparked by the Depression-era mandate that dance aid the cause of social justice, Primus imagined and represented the world through the lens of the African diaspora. Her early performances fuelled a critical debate within modern dance circles over reigning priorities regarding artistry, authenticity, and innovation. Travel to Africa for a year in 1949 prompted her to reconsider her assumptions about theatricality in modern dance from the perspective of ritual experience. A student of anthropology throughout her life, Primus pioneered approaches to choreography and to dance pedagogy that adapted ethnographic research, obtained largely through participant-observation, to the stage. Increasingly, over the span of her life, Primus participated in an international discourse about the African diasporic cultural continuum, advocating that black dance be defined on its own terms and not in relation to white dance aesthetics or cultural standards.

**Training**

Primus began her dance training as a young adult, while studying biology and premedical sciences at Hunter College. While she dreamt of becoming a doctor, difficulty finding work after college prompted her to pursue other professional avenues in dance and anthropology. In college she took occasional dance classes at different studios in New York City. In 1941, Primus received a scholarship to study at the New Dance Group (NDG), a racially integrated school and repertory company in New York known for its inclusivity and use of dance in the pursuit of economic and social equality. Primus studied modern dance technique and choreography with leading artists Martha Graham, Charles Weidman, and Doris Humphrey. Graham once famously commented to Primus that ‘she no longer needed her classes, [because] … she already had the strength of a panther and should create her own choreography’ (Schwartz and Schwartz, 30). Graham’s comment betrays a reigning assumption at the time, that serious training in dance technique might squelch the ‘natural’ talents of dancers of colour. It also illustrates the recognition members of the modern dance establishment gave Primus for her potential as a choreographer.

**Major Contributions to the field**

Starting in the 1940s, Primus worked professionally as both a dancer and a choreographer. As a member of the NDG, she performed in works by Sophie Maslow, while also receiving encouragement from fellow dancers, such as Helen Tamiris and Anna Sokolow, to compose her own dances. Although the NDG boasted racial diversity, a recollection by fellow dancer Muriel Manings reveals that even in this context Primus ‘just didn’t seem to fit in with the company ... Her body was very different than most dancers’ bodies. She was chunky’ (qtd. Schwartz and Schwartz, 31). Considering Primus’s physicality, scholars have argued that her strength and athleticism not only distinguished her from other dancers, but ultimately had the effect of broadening critical and audience standards of beauty and physicality when applied to mid-century modern dancers (Perpener, 162; Schwartz and Schwartz, 133-134).

In 1943 Primus received widespread critical notice for her commanding performance in the African Dance Festival Asadata Dafora directed at Carnegie Hall. Reviewing this performance, a critic from *Dance Observer* called Primus a ‘genuine modern dancer’, and the most ‘ethnic’ of the cast (qtd. in Perpener, 124). Primus made her choreographic debut the same year in a shared program at the 92nd Street Y, where she premiered *Strange Fruit*, *Hard Time Blues*, *Rock Daniel*, and *African Ceremonial*. The program blended narrative and protest elements associated with the NDG with Africanist material drawn from Primus’s life and research. *Strange Fruit* and *Hard Time Blues*, for example, railed against Southern racist practices, the first decrying lynching and the second sharecropping. *Rock Daniel* and *African Ceremonial*, by contrast, celebrated African diasporic expressive culture and ceremonial practices. In the former, Primus drew on American jazz musical traditions, whereas in the latter, she presented what she knew of a fertility rite native to the Belgian Congo. Eventually Primus developed a structural template for mixed concert programs, presenting what she called ‘primitives’ first, followed by protest dances, more formalist works, and finally, groupings of spirituals.

Within a mid-century modern dance tradition that saw as paramount an artist’s expression of knowledge about the world through the lens of personal experience, Primus’s decision to organize her worldview through an Africanist lens was consistent with the artistic strategies of her predecessors, notably Katherine Dunham and Zora Neale Hurston, who had previously advanced the legibility of dancing diaspora. At first, Primus gleaned what she knew about black expressive cultures from sources close at hand – familial knowledge of West Indian dancing, study with Trinidadian Beryl McBurnie, library research, and informal interactions with Nigerian students at Columbia University. Later, trips to the Southern United States in 1944, when she disguised herself as a sharecropper, and then to Africa in 1949, sponsored by the Julius Rosenwald Foundation, allowed her to develop a choreographic method that connected field research to performance.

In Africa, she visited over thirty cultural groups in nations such as Nigeria, the Belgian Congo (later renamed Zaire and then the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Ghana, Angola, British and French Cameroon, Liberia, and Senegal. Anticipating the importance of this trip on her personal and creative life, she wrote: ‘I have been chosen to go on a serious mission … to learn from [the peoples of Africa] the basic truths of dance and life, to salvage for America the beauty, dignity and strength of a threatened culture – to bring back music, folklore, dances, and to interpret them honestly for audiences’ (qtd. Schwartz and Schwartz, 70).

Prior to her trip to Africa, Primus’s performances ignited debates within the dance field that reveal much about mid-century dance modernism. *New York Times* dance critic John Martin, for example, who had championed the careers of Graham among other modern dancers, was a fierce advocate of Primus. Although he applied a double standard to Primus because of her race, he lauded her performances in 1943 exclaiming: ‘It would be hard to think of a Negro dancer in the field who can match her for technical capacity, compositional skill and something to say in terms that are altogether true to herself both racially and as an individual artist.’ He continued, ‘if ever a young dancer was entitled to a company of her own and the freedom to do what she chooses with it, she is it’ (qtd. Kowal, 123).

Other critics, such as Lois Balcom of *Dance Observer*, neither granted Primus the recognition Martin had for her modern dance artistry, nor found enough grounds to deem her creative work ‘authentic’. In Balcom’s words: ‘Of course, the African heritage enters into her attitudes, her insights, her ambitions, and her dance movements; nevertheless, what she knows about tribal ceremonies she has learned actually from books. With the trustworthy intuitions of her blood to guide her, her interpretations achieve a closer approximation of authenticity than would those of a white dancer – but they remain approximations’ (qtd. Kowal, 126).

Mid-century debates among critics surrounding Primus’s dancing and choreography shed light on dance modernism’s vexed attempts to reconcile an artist’s racial identity with reigning aesthetic assumptions and artistic priorities. Critics’ beliefs that an artist’s statement about humanity would be grounded in a personal, and thus racial or ethnic experiences, appears to be in conflict with modernist aesthetic concerns that valued equally innovation, originality, and authenticity.

Primus did not remain quiet on this matter. While in Africa, she wrote letters to New York dance critics that were subsequently published in *The New York Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, and *Dance Observer*. Most pertinent for the subject of Primus and modernism are her comments in these letters about her perceptions of African dance practice. In one, for example, she wrote: ‘Here form and function are intricately related and dependent on one another: This is a course in choreography. The basic patterns of life – the circle which is the embryo – the force of the straight forward line which is birth – the spiral, the Xing, the jagged line which denote growth and struggle – the return of the circle again – the shrinking of the circle to a tiny speck and the dropping of that speck into the vastness of eternity which is death’ (qtd. Kowal, 141).

In these letters, and in subsequent publications about her trip, Primus illuminated the connections between everyday life, ritual, and dance based on her fieldwork in Africa. She drew pertinent correlations, for example, between Western notions of theatricality, facilitated through choreographic structures that built toward a thematic or expressive climax, and the basic elements and purpose of ritual experience, which were also efficacious by design. In her theorizations of a choreographic theatre rooted in transformation, Primus offered a new approach to modern dance aesthetics while, at the same time, contradicting American critics who had expressed concern that her decision to ground her work in Africanist cultural forms held her back from becoming a ‘good’ choreographer of modern dance.

On her return from Africa, Primus formed a small company and toured extensively throughout the US, Europe, Israel, the West Indies, and Africa in the 1950s. In the later decades of her life, however, Primus refocused her objectives, dedicating more time to dance advocacy, scholarly research, and education, and increasingly less time to performing and choreographing. For example, between 1959 and 1961 Primus and Percival Borde (whom she married in 1961) established the Konama Kende Performing Arts Center in Monrovia, Liberia, where they served as co-directors. Soon the couple returned to the continent, travelling widely throughout West Africa in 1962-1963. Parallel to Katherine Dunham’s dance advocacy in Senegal around the same time, Primus’s efforts in and around Liberia served to link the US and Africa and thus strengthen transnational connections across the span of diaspora. This ambassadorial work advanced the cause of the Black Arts Movement, ‘embrac[ing] African arts as they were, not as a step toward ‘white’ standards’ (Foulkes 2005, 90).

In the 1960s Primus lent her voice to artistic calls for concert dance to play more vital roles within communities of colour, her former integrationist stance now sharpened by the politics of black separatism (DeFrantz, 23). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Primus dedicated herself to disseminating her knowledge of Africa and African dance traditions, presenting lecture-demonstrations in New York City public schools, at colleges and universities around the US, and as a professor at Hunter College. Primus also furthered her own education during this period, obtaining an MA in educational sociology and anthropology from New York University in 1958, and completing her Ph.D. in the same subject in 1977.

**Legacy**

Following in the tradition of dancing diaspora established by her predecessors, Primus’s work as both an artist and a scholar drew on diverse Africanist movement and ceremonial practices. In this way, she contributed to the development of modern dance as both a synthetic and syncretic movement idiom. In honing a method of research to performance, Primus introduced new audiences both to Africanist material and to modern dance. Through her activism, Primus participated in a broader movement amongst black artists to find meaningful ways of representing themselves, while, at the same time, honouring the elements of humanity common to all. Finally, her life long advocacy of dance has become a model for artists who see outreach and audience engagement as necessary ingredients in artistic practice.

**Rebekah J. Kowal**

**Selected Works**

*A Man Has Just Been Lynched* (later *Strange Fruit*) (1943)

*African Ceremonial* (1943)

*Hard Time Blues* (1943)

*Jim Crow Train* (1943)

*Motherless Child* (1943)

*Rock Daniel* (1943)

*Yanvaloo* (1944)

*The Negro Speaks of Rivers* (1944)

*Our Spring Will Come* (1944)

*Shouters* (1944)

*Slave Market* (1944)

*Study in Nothing* (1944)

*Mischievous Interlude* (1944)

*Dark Rhythms* (1944)

*Steal Away* (1944)

*Wade in the Water* (1944)

*Americana Suite* (1944)

*Freedom Train* (1945)

*Play Dance* (1945)

*Primitives* (1945)

*Dance of Thanksgiving* (1945)

*AfroHaitian Conga* (1945)

*Lost* (1945)

*American Folk Dance* (1945)

*Spinster’s Hop* (1945)

*Songs of Africa* (1945)

*African Stick Song* (1945)

*African Crying Song* (1945)

*Soleil Malade* (1945)

*Dja oh rele dja* (1945)

*I Know a Secret* (1945)

*Chamber of Tears* (1946)

*No – There is No Music* (1946)

*Just a Throbbing in My Veins* (1946)

*Even Like the Ticking of a Clock* (1946)

*Te Moana – The Deep* (1946)

*Study in African Rhythms* (1946)

*Dance of Beauty* (1946)

*Dance of Strength* (1946)

*Myth (1946)*

*Shouters of Sobo* (1946)

*Afro-Haitian Play Dance* (later *Haitian Play Dance*) (1946)

*To One Dead* (1946)

Calypso (later *Bongo*, and finally *Caribbean Carnival*) (1956)

*Santo* (1947)

*Shango* (1947)

*Welcome Dance* (1947)

*Dark Rhythms* programs (1948)

*Primitive Pastel* (1948)

*Another Man Done Gone* (1948)

*Waltz Boogie* (1948)

*Dark Rhythms* programs(1948-49) include *Benis Women’s War Dance*, *Dance of the Fanti Fisherman*, *Everybody Loves Saturday Night*, *Egbo Esakapade*, *Fertility*, *The Initiation*, and *Hi-Life*

*Excerpts from My African Journey* programs (1951) include *Dance of the Benis People*, *Fanga* or *Dance of Welcome*, *Blind Beggar Woman*, and *Initiation*

*Impinyuza* (1951)

*Kalenda* (1953)

*Limbo* (1953)

**Artist’s Writings**

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**References and further reading**

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**Paratexs**

Primus in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” photograph by Barbara Morgan

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2011649753/> or alternate source for image

<http://museum.marquette.edu/eMuseumPlus?service=RedirectService&sp=Scollection&sp=SfieldValue&sp=0&sp=0&sp=2&sp=SdetailList&sp=0&sp=Sdetail&sp=0&sp=F>

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two images of Primus, first from Jacob’s Pillow and second from University of Massachusetts Dance Department

[www.danceheritage.org](http://www.danceheritage.org)

A digitized video of Pearl Primus in Spirituals (1950) available via Jacob’s Pillow Dance Interactive at <http://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/artist/o-p>