



Pioneer to Black Voices: Pearl Primus and *Strange Fruit*

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Introducing My Project

Research Question: How does Pearl Primus's *Strange Fruit* affect dance and society?

Methodology: Choreographic Analysis

Motivation: Giving recognition to black concert dance artists.

By conducting a choreographic analysis of *Strange Fruit*, I will investigate how this iconic choreography by Pearl Primus advocates for the social progression of black concert dance in American society. I conclude that Pearl Primus's *Strange Fruit* is a major contribution to the dance field because Primus made black bodies legible in a humanistic lens, told real black narratives, and elevated black concert dance.

Historical Context

America in the 30s & 40s

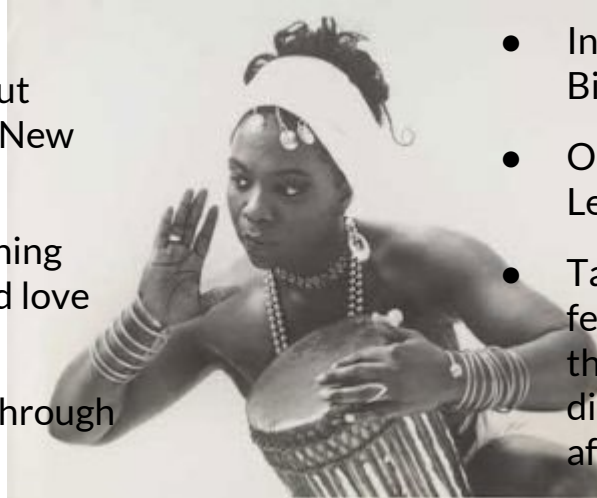
The Great Depression, Jim Crow Laws, Rise of the KKK, Emergence of WW2

Black Concert Dance in the 30s & 40s

During the 1930s many white artists took black movement and abstracted it in a generic way to make it universal. This claiming and appropriation of black movement is referred to as metaphorical minstrelsy by dance historian Susan Manning. The Workers Dance League of the Leftist dance movement provided opportunities for blacks to be on stage. However, they still held the parameters of metaphorical minstrelsy and occasional use of black face. The First Negro Dance Concert was held in 1931 by Edna Guy and Hemsley Winfield. Along the same time Helen Tamiris held her own performance. Each were themed around spirituals but Tamiris gained the critical success. Critics held bias against black dance believing it to be unsophisticated, “primitive”, lacking technique, and without depth. The black body was also not considered a “dancer’s body”.

Pearl Primus

- Born in Port of Spain, Trinidad in 1919 before immigrating to America
- She had little dance experience but caught on naturally as she joined New Dance Group
- Fused her modern and ballet training with African dance and developed love for social justice themed dance
- Studied African diasporic dance through travel and scholarly research
- She died in 1994 at the age of 75.



Strange Fruit

- Solo created in 1943
- Inspired by the song *Strange Fruit* sung by Billie Holiday
- Originally a poem by Jewish man named Lewis Allen to protest lynchings
- Takes on the perspective of a white female who just witnessed a lynching. As the lynching ends and the crowd disperses we see her emotional aftermath.
- [Strange Fruit Video](#) - Performed by Nimbus Dance Company at Jacob's Pillow in 2015

Observations

- One black female wearing a dress, apron, no shoes, and head scarf.
 - Many sudden reaches and collapses
 - Traveling mainly up and down the diagonal
 - Audible sound of body on the floor
 - Snake arm motif
 - Fist hand motif
 - Suspended whirl to the floor
 - Repetition
 - Struggle
 - Confusion
 - Crawling
 - Contractions
 - Hands clasped over head motif
 - Focus is strong on the corner but sometimes to the sky
 - Ending shift in energy/emotion
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Analysis



The dancer beginning in the corner with her back to the audience showcases the large empty expanse of the stage and puts her in a state of isolation. As she begins to move, the audience is immediately thrown into her struggle revealed in her dramatic drop to the floor and sudden reaches. She travels up and down the diagonal which suggests a cycle of emotion ranging from anger, sadness, disgust, and defeat. The way she circles the torso with hands held overhead is reminiscent of the freedom and articulation of the torso in African dance. Her face as she circles looks agonized almost like she is the person being hung. Seeing the dancer represent a white female while dancing in such a tormented way is unusual. It is unusual for a black dancer to portray a white person but also to see representation of a white female in a dark sense especially in this time period. This new representation of a white female almost parallels her with a black person which could incite rage or a sense of empathy.

Critic's Reaction

Primus received a lot of praise through *Strange Fruit* which allowed her to travel and perform it along with several other pieces. However, she did receive negative criticism that were more racial biases than critics.

- A critic reviewing her 1946 *Strange Fruit* performance at West Virginia State College said "Miss Primus appeared without benefit of music or sound, and so completely gripped her audience that even the most unimaginative would agree she is a great artist in her field."
- Dance critic Lois Balcom writing for the *Dance Observer* in 1944 described *Strange Fruit* as "formless and undisciplined". She complained of the energetic physicality and thrashing stating "...the Negro has no choice but to master expressing with economy and tautness". She also insisted her personal interpretation of *Strange Fruit* was more true than Pearl Primus's interpretation.

Social Impacts



Humanistic Lens



Strange Fruit humanizes black people by...

- Empathizing through the lens of a white woman
- Letting audience see/hear the destructive horror of racism
- Causing audience to question their actions
- Universalizing on the black body instead of white
- Defying what the stereotyped black body could do = to a white body
- Presenting the black body in a serious and non-exoticized way

Claiming Narratives & Elevating Black Dance

The popular narratives of black people in concert dance in the time were made by white people with distorted intentions which created black stories without black voices. Previous attempts for blacks to make serious concert dances with deep stories like The First Negro Dance Concert somewhat failed. The general public was not interested in black narratives especially from black people. Stereotypes derived from minstrelsy and racist ideologies only recognized blacks as goofy background characters. *Strange Fruit* provided the self representation that allowed black people to claim their movement and stories back.

Strange Fruit was one of the first black concert dances to really gain some critical acclaim and be performed in respected theaters. I believe that was partially due to the provocative creativity of a black woman playing as a white female. It really forced the audience to confront themselves and this new idea of reverse minstrelsy. Confronting racism in such a gritty and intellectual way proved black ability for depth.

Connecting Past to Present

How Primus continues to live on today...

Strange Fruit is still performed to this day. In the “Reclaiming Heritage Through Dance” article, John Perpener, dance scholar, connects Pearl Primus to Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, founder of Urban Bush Women, by comparing and contrasting their lives then revealing Zollar’s works to commemorate Primus. Zollar was very interested in Primus’s life and created the Walking With Pearl Project. This created a weeklong intensive of learning Primus’s choreographies like *Strange Fruit* and *Hard Time Blues* and studying her life. From this project Zollar created the award winning dance piece *Walking With Pearl* which premiered in 2004. It encapsulates journal and diary entries from Primus as well as movement inspiration from her works.

Generations later we see the living proof of Primus’s impact in encouraging the continuation of black dance. Zollar carries Primus’s legacy through *Walking With Pearl* but also her work with Urban Bush Women. Urban Bush Women fights for social change, disenfranchised people, and legitimizing African dance taking the path Primus paved one step further.



Conclusion

In conclusion, *Strange Fruit* is a major contribution to the world because it humanized black people, told real black stories, and helped legitimize black concert dance. Through her work as a professor, anthropologist, and dancer Pearl Primus paved the way for African dance to be viewed on the level of ballet and modern. Her fusion of Modern and African dance made African dance more legible for hesitant white audiences. She is a pioneer for voicing black struggle and removing stigma through her art and scholarly pursuits.



Pearl Primus conducts masterclass
at Brooklyn Academy of Music.

'Dance Black America' Festival.

Photo: Tom Caravaglia

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