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Choreographing Black Femininity:
The Cultural Politics of Re-Staging Black Womanhood in America

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Dedication

In memory of my parents

Enid W. Chapman & Clarence L. Bristol

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Ethnic Studies
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This dissertation analyzes Alvin Ailey's seminal ballet *Cry* as a cultural product¹ for the purpose of examining how modern dance choreography has been used throughout the twentieth century in social resistance and political response to the gross depictions of black womanhood in America. In doing so, this dissertation contemplates how Ailey as a choreographer, like many modern dance artists of his era, routinely used the concert stage to account for those aspects of black life that were thought to be inconsequential to wider society. This is presumably most observable in the subject matter of his earlier ballets like *Blues Suite* (1958) and *Revelations* (1960) which helped to recast the social topography of the juke joint and the Black Baptist Church as spaces that were culturally

¹ A cultural product re-articulates or re-imagines hegemonic social formations through creative and expressive forms in the artistic format of music, theatre, dance, literature, etc. (University of California, Riverside Department of Ethnic Studies)

relevant to the broader theatrical project of staging America. Similarly, the argument being made in this dissertation research is that *Cry*'s debut at City Center in New York City on May 4th 1971, on the heels of the Black Liberation Movement, among other social and political movements of the time, served to un-apologetically restage the bastardized iconography of black womanhood in America. This dissertation research also argues that reading Ailey's autobiography, *Revelations*, alongside select revisionist histories of black women in America from slave culture to the 1970s reveals that Ailey's Male Black Feminist inspiration for choreographing, then dedicating *Cry* to his mother and in homage to all black women is a foreshadowing of the formal political organizing of the Black Feminist Movement. A foreshadowing that contemplates the modern dance choreography of Pearl Primus in *Strange Fruit* (1943) and Katherine Dunham in *Southland* (1951) as radical precursors to *Cry* (1971) in a trilogy that uses the concert dance stage as a bully pulpit in contestation to the violent sexual politics of being black in America, but more especially, being a black woman in America.

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Figure 1. Alvin Ailey and Judith Jamison

Dancing Through the Corridors of My Life: Reading Signposted Placards, Postcards,
and Posters Between Other Memorable and Revolutionary Things

I can vividly recall the first time I encountered knowing anything about Alvin Ailey's ballet *Cry*. It was from a placard positioned in the hallway of my performing arts junior high school in Brooklyn, New York just a few feet away from the door of my home-classroom. I can remember seeing it every day as a dance major, several times a day, for the entire 1984-85 school year. This would forever engrave it on my heart and my mind – especially, its mention of the indelible dedication Ailey made to his ‘dignified’ mother, Mrs. Lula Cooper, and “all black women everywhere.” I could never have imagined at the time what the magnitude or the pertinence of this dedication must of meant for black women when it debuted in 1971 – which was also the year I was born, and just a few years shy of what formerly becomes the pronouncement of the Black Feminist Movement. But I knew nevertheless, even aside from being highly impressionable at the age of thirteen, when I first saw this placard signposting the cultural and political significance of this dance and its dedication, that it was intended to pay great tribute to black womanhood, and that it would somehow hold even deeper meaning for me in the future – as it is the case for me now.

However, as I think back on exactly what the placard actually looked like itself I can't honestly state whether I remember it solely featuring the artistry of Donna Wood – a third generation soloist of *Cry* whose performativity of the ballet is presumably the most widely consumed recorded version of the dance within the history of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT); or, if the placard just focused on Ailey himself with honorable mention of Wood performing *Cry*. In a way, I'm tempted to

state that I remember that the placard actually looked like this or that, and that it had so many dimensions in height and width. I'm also tempted to state that I remember it being cut out and shaped a certain way on this kind of paper with that kind of texture where the image is partially animated and drawn from iconographic still photographs of Ailey posing for a headshot as well as the unforgettable still photography of Wood performing the opening movement sequence of *Cry*. But, I honestly don't remember. What I do remember is how it made me feel – the simple inspiration and hope that was drawn from having something I could look at every day in school that had a personal relevance to me as an aspiring professional black female dancer. I'm tickled even now just recalling all of the stolen moments between restroom visits where I would secretly take a dance solo through the halls of my junior high school stopping just to take a look at this placard featuring, what I would like to remember was primarily focused on, Wood's revered performance of *Cry* before racing back to the studio prior to the start of another dance combination. I believe now that I was probably in large part mesmerized at the idea of a black woman performing a solo that was famous enough to be memorialized on a placard for the world to see – which at that time for me as a young dance student I had certainly not yet done myself (performing a solo, that is) outside of my random detoured trips dancing through the corridors of my junior high school on my way to the girls' bathroom.

Yet, I can state without hesitation that I remember the very first time that I would come to know anything about Donna Wood as a solo artist in the AAADT it was in connection to this placard's brief biographical reference of her performing *Cry*. Three

years later while working part-time in high school as a sales clerk in the main Capezio dance supply store in Manhattan, I would also come to learn about Judith Jamison. And most importantly, her epic inaugural performance of *Cry* making her an icon in the field of dance with a performativity which continued well past her career as a performing artist unto now through several notable postcards and posters taken by dance photographer Max Waldman. Still, the broader genealogy of the dance didn't begin to make sense to me until incidentally I took notice of how April Berry and Debra Manning's striking visibility in New York City as black female soloists in the mid-1980s within the Ailey company brought these placards, postcards, and posters of *Cry* to life – just as I was launching my own career as a classically trained ballet and modern dancer for hire. Thereafter, I would be committedly involved with positioning myself as a young artist to be a regular face literally in the halls of the Ailey school. This caused me to abandon my pursuits of becoming a black ballerina with Dance Theatre of Harlem and to concentrate on using my extensive modern dance training from LaGuardia High School to go on to secure a merit scholarship at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center in 1987. Or, was it 1988? Either way, I keenly remember that I only wanted to join the Ailey company to be able to perform *Cry*. I wouldn't know for some years later that it was a dance that is only performed by the black female soloists in the AAADT.

But when Mr. Ailey died on December 1, 1989, so did my dreams of performing with his company. That's what I, we, us students called him – and unfortunately I've never had any trouble remembering just about everything about that day and the next. I

remember where I was and how I heard about it as well as the emotional aftermath of all of the frantic phone calls I made the next day to confirm that it was true. Although, I wished for years and even now that it wasn't and that I could forget it all. I wished more importantly that I could forget that the biggest dream I had as a young artist was to dance with Ailey's company when he was alive so I could be apart of his legacy through *Cry* (and of course, *Revelations*, but again, that was it). Because I had secretly hoped that I could one day bring the same kind of celebrity to *Cry* in the 1990s that Jamison did in the 1970s as we were both dark skin black women with short natural haircuts. This was a signature hair-do I had adopted throughout my last years in high school and well beyond despite the sometimes merciless teasing and taunting I had to socially endure. All because I wanted to emulate Jamison's iconographic staged photography in *Cry* which I believed was beautifully profiled in two postcards I had purchased with my discount during my short stint working at Capezio – two postcards that I took everywhere with me. Two postcards quite honestly that I only purchased because I couldn't afford the buy the large poster size version. This allows me in hindsight to completely identify with what First Lady Michelle Obama meant when she said the only inspirational artwork she could afford to own for a long time was a framed poster of Jamison performing *Cry* and how even just the poster of the dance *does something* for black women (a reference I make in chapter one of this research).

I can still recall how I was always delighted by all of the people at that time in my small circle of non-artistic friends and family who more often than not said that I “*looked like that dancer from Alex Haley's company ... what's her name?*” To which, I

would smile and proudly say “*you mean Judith Jamison*” not bothering to correct them about the fact that Alex Haley was actually the author of *Roots*. I was just happy they too saw the generic resemblance Jamison and I shared as dark-skin black female dancers with short hair – never mind the fact that she stands at about six feet tall barefooted and that I’m barely five feet two inches tall wearing heels, if I ever remembered to tell the truth about my height. And though I never could really forget the disappointment I felt after Ailey died and the feeling of not wanting to dance with his company, not even with Jamison herself serving as his replacement as Artistic Director, I did move on.¹

So twenty years later, just when I thought it was all behind me (that is, my missed opportunity of making Ailey’s *Cry* a renewed artistic subject of interest) I would re-visit remembering the disappointment of losing Mr. Ailey all over again as well as my unfulfilled dream of working with him in *Cry*. This time because I was given the reading assignment of Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* and Susan Foster’s “Choreographies of Gender” during the same week in a dance seminar as a Ph.D. student at the University of California, Riverside. Which to my chagrin, prompted several unexpected public episodes of emotional meltdowns on campus, on my part, in multiple graduate seminars

¹ I did have the opportunity to earn my one and only television credit (to date) as a dance student performing *Memoria* with the AAADT in the 1988 CBS special called *Bill Cosby’s Salute to Alvin Ailey* before he passed away. But again, I would choose to move on from pursuing work as a black concert dancer in New York City in order to gain what to me always felt like a greater sense of personal satisfaction and artistic autonomy chartering a new life for myself touring as a solo artist performing in black musical theatre and opera productions, throughout the U.S. and abroad. Along with what also felt like a natural progression for me steadily moving towards working in academia as a lecturer in dance studies and black studies. This is a path I believe Mr. Ailey would have completely supported me in taking if he had lived. I also realized as I grew older that it would be necessary for me to move on, regardless of my talent, from my highly unrealistic expectation of performing with the world’s most famous dance company with the naïve exclusive intention of only performing the ballets I wanted to perform.

and departments I can only hope, along with everyone else who witnessed it, to also soon forget. The truth behind these emotional episodes is that I never imagined living my life without Mr. Ailey (or Aaron or Dennis and many of my other teachers and friends from the New York dance community who also died prematurely of AIDS in the late 1980s and early 1990s). This is why I chose very deliberately to write this dissertation in third person. I made this decision to try as much as possible to take myself out of this research so that I could examine it objectively, since the whole discussion on *Cry* and its performativity is so personal for me. I wanted too also write it as candidly as I could, being led as much as possible where only the sources available through the archives, however scarce, could direct me toward discovering and recovering subject matter on the often discounted upward trajectories and down-right tragedies of black womanhood in America using the signature modern dance choreography of Ailey's Male Black Feminist perspective in *Cry* as a starting point. Notwithstanding in the least, the cultural politics involved with again remembering and revisiting multiple artistic performances of black femininity in America (which chapter two of my research is dedicated to analyzing).

Moreover, this would cause me almost by default to have to factor in the performance analysis of other modern dance choreographers; namely, Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham and how they confronted on stage and later in the academy through their work as modern dance choreographers the consequence of being black in early twentieth century America. As both women were concert dancers and scholars themselves who helped to blaze a trail that so many, but particularly Ailey himself,

would later be privileged enough to follow. Footsteps I also later followed in by intensively studying their dance techniques and performing with them, Primus more so than Dunham, before they passed away. Footsteps between the three of them (Primus, Dunham, and Ailey) that I found all trail back to at least one ballet in their repertoire where their focus was on signposting the brutal choreographies of systemic sexual violence in America where black men are castrated and lynched by mobs of white contented onlookers. And where there is a subtle palimpsest that references the habitual rape of black women by white men. (Chapter four of my research discusses this more extensively.)

Therefore, I'm critical throughout this dissertation research about how Black Feminism is still a marginal field of study within the academy; such that it is often the most sold out, counted out, or left out option for recovering black female subjects in the university. I believe this causes black subjects in general, but more especially in disciplines like dance studies, to be guaranteed to have a peripheral and / or watered-down interpretation of the cultural products by black women or about black women since there is always a push for black women / scholars to move on and do something new instead of what works best and what can ultimately lead to something new. I also believe this is why the approach I have chosen for extensively re-examining *Cry* through a Black Feminist lens is most relevant and necessary, albeit mostly through the Male Black Feminism Ailey employed as he was also inspired by the incomparable artistic activism and resistance of black women like Primus, Dunham, his mother, and others (which I also discuss in chapter three and four of this research). I should also

mention that not more than a few pages in any one text written on dance history or Ailey's legacy has ever been documented on *Cry*. This research would be the first to do so and with a particular attention given to advocating that cultural products about or by black women be engaged with a Black Feminist or even a Womanist lens, if even on a liminal basis of analysis.

This brings me to the point in this introduction where I must explain why I'm using a Black Feminist lens for recovering Ailey's *Cry* and not a Womanist lens. If I had to say it in one word, it would be chronology. The chronology for the dance predates the formal organizing for what is understood today as Womanism by more than a decade; therefore, it would be anachronistic to analyze *Cry* outside of what its correct window of time at the exclusion of the broader initial wave of Black Power, Black Creative Arts, and the Black Feminist Movements. It is also clear through Ailey's personal journal entries that he admired and diligently sought out the means with which to identify with the growing nationalist black radicalism of the 1960s and 70s. (This is a perspective I examine in chapter three of this research through his biography.) I must also add that I'm personally very partial to Black Feminism as a tool of theoretical science designed by American black women because to me it best articulates their own understanding and means for redressing the generational social, economic, sexual, maternal, educational, and the wider oppressive relational experiences they have inherited for merely being black women within the continental U.S. (unlike Womanism which has a purview that extends beyond these shores to the continent of Africa and the Caribbean and South America). However, I do recognize that Ailey's dedication as

previously mentioned includes these black women in his tribute. But I argue, nevertheless (throughout chapter one), that the experiences he actually gestures toward choreographically is that of black women like his mother living and working within the continental U.S. thus making a Black Feminist lens a more appropriate tool for excavating the meaning behind all the symbolism found in *Cry*.

So, the task before me with this research is to color a Black Feminist analysis into the way that *Cry* and the larger legacy of Alvin Ailey has been previously thought of, or intentionally understated, through the field of dance studies as well as through the white corporatized legacy of his company, and I have two central research objectives for having this accomplished. One objective is to expand eminent dance scholar Susan Foster's essay, "Choreographies of Gender" in which she argues that dance specifically choreography can be used as a tool for furthering the conversation of gender performance and performativity. Where she also principally argues that dance genres like ballet, modern, and hip hop have historically demonstrated the many ways choreography generally functions to re-affirm prescribed patterns for gender performance in our society. With her most pivotal argument (which advances the claims made in this research) on how a speech act involves more than just words – it involves an active body. In turn, my belief is that if Foster's "Choreographies of Gender" is expanded to reconcile the fact that race and gender for black women and other women of color are inextricably linked, then engaging *Cry*'s performativity within the construct of her analysis not only re-imagines social matters relating to race and gender on the twentieth century concert dance stage – according to Foster, *Cry* would also be a

performative statement, a speech act! A literal cry in 1971, presumably, in Ailey's effort to protest the stigmatization of black womanhood while celebrating their fortitude to survive everyday forms of hostility and violence in America, especially rape.

I mentioned quite deliberately that Ailey "presumably" used *Cry* to redress systemic forms of sexual violence against black women in America, particularly in the case of his mother, because it isn't until he is virtually on his death bed in the late 1980s that he confirms his suspicion as a child that his mother was in fact raped one night during the 1930s after working in a white family's home. While Ailey never asked his mother about the incident himself, it is the first matter of business Ailey requests for Peter Bailey, his co-author on his autobiography, to clarify on his behalf with his mother before he dies. (*Revelations*, p.11) This is why, once again, I believe expanding Susan Foster's analysis on choreographing gender to include persons who are both racialized and gendered more aptly permits an examination on how modern dance choreography like *Cry* may have been intended to break the silence on the institutional sexual violence and generational victimization of black women. Furthermore, expanding Foster's analysis on gender performance and performativity also provides a prime opportunity for raising pertinent questions like what is or is not black femininity and how has it historically been choreographed on stage? Do cultural products like modern dance choreography have social and political redemptive value to confront then remove the emblem of shame that has been historically assigned to black femininity in America? Is it possible that a gay black man like Ailey choreographically re-staged black womanhood – let alone artistically forecast the formal political organizing of

Black Feminism? If so, how and why? And, what are the ‘politics of respectability’ that are at stake or gained for him in doing so? Also, how does a choreographic reading of Pearl Primus’ *Strange Fruit* and Katherine Dunham’s *Southland* alongside Ailey’s *Cry* as a trilogy promote potentially a broader discussion on the societal conditions that have produced choreographies of rape and other forms of sexual violence against black women and girls in America? However, I must emphasize (as a side note) that the research in this dissertation doesn’t intend to define or re-define “femininity,” or “womanhood” in relation to “blackness” and being “American.” Instead, it intends to utilize a select literary review that is already available in Black Feminist scholarship provided specifically from the historical relationship between black women’s self-defining political platform in contrast to their white female counterparts from the 1850s-1970s. As I believe this best encapsulates a Black Feminist literary analysis on the bodily tensions between what perceptually are acceptable and unacceptable displays of black womanhood in America on and off stage as portrayed in the choreography of Ailey’s legacy.

The second research objective for my dissertation proposes to problematize the theoretical concept of post-racialism – particularly as it functions in the field of Critical Dance Studies – which seemingly goes beyond privileging white dance subjects when in reality it only re-inscribes topics relating to racialized dance subjects to a largely cursory and indexed / glossary framework within American Dance History. For example, if post-racialism in America really exists why has the life and career of a paragon like Alvin Ailey remained such an under-researched subject in Critical Dance

Studies? And even more importantly, why are the modern dance contributions of legendary pioneers like Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham still articulated in objectifying and elliptical legacies of Africanist Aesthetics that are always / already marked as primitive, inferior, and different? Is it because their legacies are more often than not entrenched in the marginal history of Black Dance as opposed to American or Modern Dance History? And, what is Black Dance today and should it continue to exist? More importantly, why does the discussion of doing away with Black Dance seem to only have relevance when there is a high appetite for white consumption of those artistic products that originate from black experiences in America with exponential margins of profitability like those historically found in jazz music and dance, jive music and dance, and hip hop music and dance? Yet unquestionably, other artistic products with less of an appeal for white consumerism, or ultimately, white appropriation like gangster rap styles and its accompanying clown dancing and / or krumping remain notoriously black? Lastly, why is it that one or more research projects or texts, albeit varied, on a particular black historical subject is typically regarded as exhaustive but inquiries done ad nauseam on the same white historical subjects are regarded as noteworthy? These and all of the previously mentioned historical / theoretical frameworks and questions are drawn together in this research from the academic disciplines of Black Feminism, Critical Dance Studies, and Cultural Studies as an interdisciplinary Ethnic Studies dissertation research project. A research project that once again enlists Ailey's *Cry* as an American cultural product that choreographically re-interprets the lives of black women like his mother while also

predicting the burgeoning field of Black Feminist Politics. A research project that also repositions the potency inscribed within the subject matter of Black Feminism at the center of deciding what analytical methods are best suited for recovering and interpreting black female subjects in dance.

If there are any doubts about why this dissertation is an Ethnic Studies project as opposed to a Critical Dance Studies project, then consideration has to be given to the fact that black dance scholars like Thomas DeFrantz have gained notoriety in the profession by positing the following argument. “Frustrated by the painful lack of focused research and criticism and the absence of credible source material, many historians interested in African American dance slip away from the field to the safety of literary studies, and labor studies, cultural studies, or art-making.” (*African American Dance*, p. 3) For me, this is a very telling statement for DeFrantz to make as he is still the only scholar to date that has written a full text on Ailey’s choreographic legacy, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture*, a text that like other published literary works with any mention on *Cry* barely constitutes three full pages. This in turn has warranted my decision for situating this dissertation research project outside of the field of dance studies so that it maybe better suited for an interdisciplinary analysis on recovering black subjects in dance – especially, black female subjects in dance. Because I firmly believe that rooting this dissertation research as an in interdisciplinary Ethnic Studies project better enables it to challenge what is hard to imagine, but nevertheless are arguments presented by a black dance scholar and supported by the wider field of dance studies suggesting that the engagement of a

multiple lens approach in recovering historical black dancing subjects is a “dance slip away from the field” to the safety of other academic fields.

So, I must ask... does utilizing multiple valid avenues for mapping the presence, role, and influence of historical black subjects in the field of dance – in fact – constitute a “*slippage*” from the field? Or, does this “*slippage*” result because the presumed universality of whiteness in all manner of things exists even in relation to the methods for how the histories on black dance subjects are to be recovered? Since most white subjects in dance can be understood without a multiple lens analysis, does it mean that black subjects in dance must also be sought after and understood in the same way? Wouldn’t an effort to recover black subjects in dance using multiple lenses be undoubtedly demonstrative of rigorous research? Another reasonable question to be asked is whether the “*slippage*” in recovering obscured black dance histories, that DeFrantz refers to, only occurs when using the discursive tools from other disciplines within the humanities that do not support the false premise of post-racialism in wider society or in American institutions of higher learning? Although to be fair, DeFrantz does later contradict this notion on a single lens analysis for studying black dancing subjects in another essay when he raises these questions.

Can we consider a postcolonial theory of the dancing body? What would it look like? Whom might it serve? Would we do better to consider post-colonial representations of the body on stage? But what of the dancing bodies themselves? Do dancing bodies perform cultural identity only as representation, in the ways that audiences see them? Or can we actually consider the ways that dancers mean to embody cultural identities through their motions? Can dance

construct itself, in a generative fashion, in its very gestures,
or is it always circumscribed by the peculiar geographic,
historical, and racialized circumstances of its performance?
("Black Dancer, White Dance," p. 145)

Overall, it is my opinion that researchers engaging black dance subjects are expected to capitulate to a largely white female audience that most times doesn't want to critically examine American racism and its direct connection to systemic forms of sexual violence in the context of dance studies – which is why this is an original Ethnic Studies research project because it does all of the above. How else at this time can a critical discussion on the institutional rape of black women be had choreographically? More importantly, how many graduate level dance programs in the United States today have faculty who are able and willing to vet a historical Black Feminist Dance project? Therefore, the effort in recovering the social and political activism of Alvin Ailey as an African American modern dance choreographer with specific attention to his work in *Cry* requires investigating his creative motivations beyond the convenient superficial justifications of reading his work as "(black) art for (black) arts' sake." It requires an investigation where subjects focused on blackness, gender, and dance making would be equally privileged without the customary gratuitous overtures deciding its wider merit. Even more so, this type of investigation is also deserving of a privileging that doesn't require it to have to consider whether or not its' subject matter is meaningful in dance for an audience that is largely white and female – because the matter of determining what and how subjects are meaningfully examined in dance is not something that any one group should decide. Thusly, the colorful task I have chosen for this Ethnic Studies dissertation project in analyzing how the cultural product of Ailey's use of modern

dance choreography in *Cry* resets the stage of black womanhood in America is exemplified in the following chapter titles and breakdowns.

Chapter one – *Cry: An Archetype of Alvin Ailey’s Male Black Feminist Resistance* traces the social and political inferences Ailey makes choreographically in 1971 with *Cry*’s debut using his own ubiquitous commentaries. I argue in this chapter that these commentaries are in fact undoubtedly connected to the black power and black arts consciousness of the day such that they challenge what has been the subsequent prevailing perspective espoused by other scholars in the field of dance studies that either invisibilizes the latent radical meaning of *Cry* altogether or dismisses it as simply being a “three-part plotless solo.” To do this, the methodology I employ for this chapter steers the reader’s attention (and hopefully that of future audiences’) toward the often overlooked as innocuous, but very deliberate casting and general theatrical staging decisions Ailey makes in *Cry* to ensure its exclusive casting of the visibly black female principals in his company and the perpetuity of the dance through its dedication and its global touring performativity would infectiously serve as a counter-statement to the debased, narrow, and wanton historical images of black femininity in America. Thus, the central aim of my argument in this chapter is to unequivocally magnify Ailey’s keen awareness and his stern challenges to the Western archetypal view, and more importantly a persistent present-day view of black women, even for those who are successful and powerful by all standards, as degenerative and sexually immoral “slaves,” among other essentialized identities. Again, I do this by selectively revisiting and coupling what are believed to be dominant narratives from early Black Feminists

including other women of color feminists and their allies in the field of Ethnic Studies with Ailey's modern dance choreography in *Cry* – which is being read within this research as a cultural product that symbolically redresses the intersectional racism, sexism, and exploitation of black womanhood in America. All of which is carried out in a two-part analysis that firstly vets the premiere and well known didactic nineteenth century Male Black Feminism of Frederick Douglass as a recognized standard comparatively against the unknown (before now) twentieth century Male Black Feminism of Ailey, so that this chapter specifically operates as a rescue mission for *Cry* from the margins of obscurity in the field of dance studies and firmly positions it in the field of Ethnic Studies as a Black Feminist cultural product. Then secondly, the analysis in this chapter positions Susan Foster's argument in "Choreographies of Gender" on how an active body is necessary for words to *do something* in a performative statement so that it takes into consideration how the inextricable link of race, class, and sexual violence in the modern dance choreography of *Cry* offers ripe possibilities for best gleaning how this dance and its performativity *does something* in recuperating the image of black womanhood in America.

In chapter two – From the Beginning More Than A State, A Stage for Constructing Identity and Resistance: Critical Performances of Black Womanhood in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century New York – A Historiography, I argue for the locale of *Cry*'s premiere at City Center (a prominent theatrical space in New York City) to be read as an integral part of a metanarrative involved with geopolitically re-staging black femininity in America. My support for this claim rests in revisiting the colonial origins

of New York State as a site that is still far too often disassociated with the lucrative economy of slavery as well as how those very high financial stakes were liable for generating and reinforcing laws and other social means for policing black women's bodies well beyond the abolition of slavery in the north as much as it was the case in the south. As such, I argue in this chapter for the need to revisit these histories in order to better understand how it is that black women's literal survival hinged on producing varying creative forms of active and passive resistance which produced rival geographies for them to re-imagine and cultivate their own individual and collective identities. Rival geographies that I argue were created in large part through the annals of their own oral histories, literature, dances, and photography. This avails Sojourner Truth's life as an enslaved black woman then a self-emancipated woman in nineteenth century New York to be used as a trope for this analysis in a manner that juxtaposes and reads in tandem the biographies on her life written by Nell Irvin Painter and Margret Washington. In revisiting these overlapping and sometimes contrasting historical analyses, I'm able to draw parallels in both texts between how Truth casts herself as a black woman (all the more so as a black matron) through various public legal, auto-literary, and a photographically staged personae that is spiritually complimentary in fashion to the way Ailey would also later disrupt the narrative of the down-trodden black woman when he also constructs the on-stage choreographic gender performance of the black matron in *Cry* on stage in New York City and in print through placards, postcards, and posters. This comparison is intended to demonstrate that artistically *Cry* was choreographically designed to contest the debased monolithic representations of

black womanhood like those found in popular early twentieth century midtown Manhattan (Broadway) productions like *Lulu Belle*² as well as the social and literary critiques made about the edgy, seductive, and sometimes transgressive performances of uptown Manhattan (Harlem) chorus dancers – which again brings to the forefront the cultural and political consequences of both depictions on the broader stigmatization of black womanhood on and off stage. Finally, this chapter resurrects multiple critiques made on how black women’s hard fought battles to challenge racist and sexist portrayals about themselves spawned subtle and very deliberate forms of resistance throughout the history of the State of New York.

Chapter three – Alvin Ailey’s Muse: A Grammatical Sketch On His Radical Inspirations in Dance and its Black Feminist Revelations rediscovers Ailey as a radical Male Black Feminist through the personal and professional sketches offered in his autobiography and his biography. I also argue in this chapter that in the same way he was a self-appointed cultural custodian whose mission it was to artistically document black life in America from the 1950s-1980s using modern dance choreography, Ailey’s less than wholesome personal life from his childhood into his adult life was decidedly a hindrance to the way his white corporate Board of Directors and sponsors preferred to have him iconized for the world to see. And so, I argue that there was a tug of war for most of his career about the ways in which overall he and his choreographic legacy would ultimately be memorialized – a tug a war I claim in this chapter that he lost. My

² *Lulu Belle* was a popular black musical production in the early 20th century that cast white women in blackface performing as black prostitutes. The show’s success cemented ideas about black women’s sexuality as being debased and immoral.

basis for making this claim is centered in the Black Feminist analysis that Hortense Spillers “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” offers for providing a perspective about how it is that what is African American literary culture has been produced from a matrilineal line that any number of notable American black men, “race men,” have sought to recuse themselves from through their own auto-literary ventures which still inadvertently leads them back to a black female progenitor. Moreover, I argue that this happens for Ailey on two fronts. First, with his autobiography being disputed by his subsequent biography that was very likely commissioned to a white female writer for completion by his company’s Board of Directors to make him appear less radical. This assertion is supported throughout this chapter by recognizing the corporate / capitalist evolution of the AAADT’s overall artistic agendas over the past forty years – particularly under the artistic leadership of Judith Jamison subsequent to Ailey’s demise. Then second, I argue how it is that his legacy as a modern dance choreographer is ushered in on the creative waves produced by both white and black women before him. This is why I have chosen to focus my analysis in this chapter on the interconnectivity of Ailey’s varying Muses at different stages of both his personal and professional life as well as his literary prose musings – which in the 1970s appeared to consistently fecund choreographic musings like those themes he selected for ballets like *Lark Ascending* (1972), *The Mooche* (1975), and *Passage* (1978). All of which I argue also happen to be choreographies of black femininity. Accordingly, chapter three concludes with tying the revelations of Ailey’s musings with what should be thought of as his forecasting of the formal organizing of Black Feminist Politics in *Cry* to the revisionist histories like a former

slave and early Black Feminist, and scholar named Ana Julia Cooper who advocated for black female empowerment in her 1892 text *A Voice From The South*. By doing this, my arguments in chapter three are able to grapple with the obvious contradiction Ailey has in his efforts to speak for black women as a gay black male choreographer when Cooper consistently argued in her text that black men shouldn't speak for black women in the same way that white men shouldn't speak for black men.

And finally in chapter four – Choreographies of Rape: Reading Pearl Primus' *Strange Fruit* (1943), Katherine Dunham's *Southland* (1951), and Alvin Ailey's *Cry* (1971) as a Modern Dance Trilogy, I chronologically examine the aforesaid cultural products as artistic works of protest art that were created for the exclusive purpose of critiquing the anti-black institutions of rape and lynching in America. I argue most importantly that when taken collectively these artistic works illustrate how it is the social and political activism of Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham (on and off stage) quickly diminished their own performance careers as modern dance choreographers while gradually and exponentially giving rise to Ailey's prominence as a 'seemingly' socially tempered and civil thematic black modern dance choreographer. I tease out even more definitively in this chapter the inferences of sexual violence made in Primus' *Strange Fruit* where the black female solo performer is riddled with permeable movements from beginning to end drawn from the interpretative physical and psychological torment of black women who were forced to brave cutting down the lynched and sometimes charred, and oft-times castrated remains of the black men (including the forgotten sexually mutilated remains of black women and children) they

love. I revisit thereafter in this chapter how Dunham is herself professionally and financially lynched after she stages *Southland* overseas against the warnings given to her from the U.S. State Department. This chapter also reconciles specifically through this dance (as well as the aforesaid dances) why more attention is typically given to later discussions on the subject of miscegenation and its direct correlation to lynching while neglecting earlier discussions on the subject of slave breeding. Finally, this closing chapter on this dissertation bares witness to how Ailey uses a black female body juxtaposed to the controversial use of the black male body offered through Primus' and Dunham's choreographies of rape to make a similar critique on surviving the trauma of sexual violence. This is why I argue that by chronologically bridging these dances together, or better, how remembering these dance in tandem allows us to plainly to see that modern dance choreography has undoubtedly been used in measured intervals by these three legendary artists to confront and contest with specificity the historical ways systemic forms of anti-black sexual violence has been unleashed in American society.



Figure 1. Judith Jamison in *Cry*

Reading *Cry*: A Choreographic Analysis

This analysis reads the iconic performance of Donna Wood in *Cry* because no recorded live performance of Judith Jamison is currently accessible. And while the date, location, and venue of the performance being read in this analysis are all definitively unknown, this specific recorded version of Wood's performance in *Cry* is still the most popularly observed presentation of the first section of the dance since its 1971 debut that is presently available within the public domain. Therefore, this analysis launches its examination into the greater research of this dissertation by choreographically reading a video recorded presentation of *Cry* that was staged presumably just a little over a decade after it was first performed by Jamison. And it makes allowance in consideration for how it has been preserved and how it is witnessed through the artistic genealogy that Wood's presentation offers without Jamison's performance being available for the benefit of comparison. It also primarily reads the first movement of the choreography in *Cry* over the second and third movements because it is the section of the dance that is most ripe with gestural clues to Ailey's Male Black Feminist resistance and its redress to the compounded system of sexual and economic oppression that black women like his mother endured. Which through the sustained performativity of *Cry* through his repertoire, black women in America today are steadily seeking to overcome.

Thus, the opening scene of the dance begins both with what sounds like the musings of an improvised jazz orchestration and a visual cue of a speckled blue-tinted spotlight that casts away the darkness of the stage to its outer most perimeter and

focuses from on high on an African American female dancer named Donna Wood. Wood is a lauded third generation soloist in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to perform *Cry*, and she is wearing her hair in a cornrowed bun standing center stage. She is also dressed in a long sleeve white leotard and a full-length white skirt with two rows of an appliqué at the bottom hemmed slightly below her ankle. Her feet are standing in a modest parallel first position with her arms straight over her head making a small continuous circular rotation of her upper torso to the right with what appears to be six yards of fabric folded into a third of its width draped equally down both sides of her arms. From a distance, this image creates the optical illusion of her wearing a white veil. As the accompanying pre-recorded music continues to play, it sounds increasingly like a jazz interpretive twist on a John Coltrane classic from the late 1960s – early 1970s that engages a soulful ‘call and response’ with the dancer's nuanced representation of the first moments of the dance.

Again at first glance, it is hard to determine whether or not the soloist is moving to the intricately stirring sounds of the music but then you start to see that she is and that the seemingly draped fabric from the audience’s visual perspective only covers the front of her face and head. However, as the soloist begins to part her arms in a long second position allowing for the fabric to open up in a gesturing manner of presenting one's self to the world in a calculated ‘aesthetic of the cool,’ her head is facing down and it raises slowly with a piercing and determined focus out into the audience. Her next move is just as tempered as she crosses her left leg over into a small lunge with the torso remaining (en face) front and with a (également) leaning carriage of the chest as

if pulled in that direction. She then repeats the same movement to the other side and again back and forth each time including several transitional steps indicating how equally torn she is between one direction and the other of what she artistically intimates to be her triple consciousness on being black, female, and American. There is also a weighted-ness detected in her movement like she has been charged with carrying the weight of the world, if not for the entire world, then certainly for her entire race.

Next, she steps to a high demi pointe on her feet with her arms maintaining the long gesturing second position before lowering herself with a contracted torso on to her knees. She then places the fabric on the floor using her right arm in a sharp extended movement to lengthen out the crinkled fabric. Moving her arm once more in this cutting arced position over head, she gestures again in a resolved manner that extends sharply before symbolically ironing out the wrinkled fabric of her perceived circumstances without ever touching it. This movement sequence is repeated to the other side with a double Graham-like contraction to conclude the phrase communicating to the viewer her sense of agony and distress. The dancer then lifts herself from her knees into paddle turns traveling (upstage) back moving up and down (in plié and relevé) gracefully with her arms in a long third position and the palms of her hands pressed out in resistance to what appears she alone is aware of what surrounds her or may befall her.

Traveling (down stage) forward, she now proceeds as if ‘embracing the conflict’ of her feelings with another series of contractions again emoting pain and struggle whilst physically crying out against it. Her choreographic position for artistically taking on this challenge is a step into a bent knee parallel second position (plié) with her

pelvic girdle extended behind her flattened torso as she undulates her back with one arm on her waist in defiance and the other arm cutting through the space into an arc second position like the cutlass used by the Yoruba god Ogun for cutting and clearing the obstacles in one's path for laboring work and / or social progress. She does this as if it were an invocation, as if she is compelled to use the spiritual tools, the implements her foremothers have given her. This is a sequence that also repeats creating a 'high effect-juxtaposition' between the classical ballet lines, and once again, the Graham based modern dance technique that informs the precision in which she performs each step throughout the first section of the dance.

From here, the soloist (*piqués*) steps up to a high fifth position *relevé*. She does this three times contracting and pressing her arms parallel forward from her waist with cupped hands and finally above her head like fists in protests. Scurrying away, she *bouffées* profusely contracting in pain as if she has been sharply rejected or physically cut down. She does the same thing to the other side leading herself back to an upstage center stage position of twisting and reaching from one side to the other like an appeal for help or concession. For the remaining portion of the first section of the dance, the soloist continues to engage the fabric as a functional prop in a representational and transitional choreographic way to expressly signify in a profuse succession a floor rag, a noose (while on her knees), a lady's shawl, and a crown – etc. It is clear, nevertheless, that her conversation with the audience is not always intended to be obviously literal or graphic, with exception of course to the few aforementioned singular choreographic motifs that punctuates the latent message of the entire dance. But in between, and all

the more towards the end of the first section of the dance, there is a visible visceral pining that is witnessed within the free flowing and repetitive abstract movement that continues. A keening, a crying that is read in the abstract movement cloaked only to quiet the otherwise impolite conversation often heard in the vocalization of a long kept secret, one quite possibly of suffering or abuse, that is not outright revealed at the end of the first section of the dance. A first section of the dance which concludes with the soloist laid straight out on her back with her arms in out to the side like a cross facing upstage, or hanging upside down – implying exhaustion at best, or death at worse.

The subsequent sections of *Cry* choreographically entails a charade of abstract movements which have an greater reliance on Africanist Aesthetics³ and Horton-esque sequences that clearly uses the lyrics of the accompanying music as obvious hints for its radical meaning. There is also no further use of the functional prop of fabric either in the second or third section of the dance as the soloist gives way to a brief pantomime of mouthing the scream of the vocalist to the loss of her lover in the middle of the second section of the dance. Finally, the dance ends with a euphoria in the third section that whips and twirls the girth of her skirt like a prop itself making beautiful waves of white fabric trailing along side and behind the soloist as she turns around herself center stage then travels from the upstage corners of the stage downstage performing a series of long-lounge kick-ball-change with again an adulation of the back and arms with the seam of her skirt in tow. These gestures made with the skirt look like the wings of a bird ‘flying high and flying free.’ The infectious energy of her movement undoubtedly

³ See *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* by Brenda Dixon Gottschild.

is drawn from the revolutionary lyrics of the recorded musical accompaniment and it typically *does something* to move the audience either to cause them to clap their hands, stamp their feet, or sing the catchy refrain of the song – “*right on, be free.*”

Choreographically sprinkled in between as the dance closes are a few indelible moments when the dancer does running hitch-kicks into layouts and a series of (grand battements) high kicks holding her skirt in one hand and the other reaching high above her head to the once again catchy refrain of the song – “*right on, be free*” as the dance comes to a close.

Cry: An Archetype of Alvin Ailey's
Male Black Feminist Resistance

Cry premiered in New York City at City Center on May 4th, 1971. It was choreographed, rehearsed, and staged by Alvin Ailey in what is arguably record time, less than one week, for setting modern dance choreography of its caliber and later acclaim. Its first soloist was Judith Jamison – a tall, dark skinned, full-bosomed Black woman with long limbs and a short kinky Afro. Jamison's appearance in this role, as a relatively unknown dancer, wearing a brilliantly white colored leotard and a matching full-length wide-width skirt is memorably accompanied by a distinguishingly long piece of equally white fabric she dances with that choreographically served as a functional prop variably representing a veil, a floor rag, a crown, and the weight of the world, among other things, throughout the first section of the dance.

Over the years, most race conscious dance connoisseurs would come to embrace these castings decisions and choreographic motifs Ailey makes in *Cry* as signposting a radical alignment with the “Black is Beautiful” ideology posited by the Black Arts and the Black Power Movements of the day. And while this creative association may appear to be plain enough, the effect that these widely popular and potent black cultural and socio-political movements may have had on Ailey's choreographic legacy in *Cry* has always been disavowed by the white corporate management of his company. And, it has also been largely overlooked by most of his ardent critics. Even the curious dedication Ailey made to his ‘dignified’ mother, Mrs. Lula Cooper, and “all black women everywhere – especially mothers” which seemed to plainly signal a vested reverential interest Ailey had in paying tribute to the collective experiences of black women in the

reifying space of the concert dance stage – which is alone political, has always been promoted by Ailey’s handlers as a dance that was randomly choreographed both stoically and exuberantly in dedication to black womanhood and motherhood, and at the same time all about nothing. But in 2010, First Lady Michelle Obama ironically challenged this notion of *Cry* being all about nothing when she sentimentally evoked Ailey’s homage to his mother and all black women in *Cry* during an event held at The White House by honoring specifically Jamison’s many contributions to the field of dance over the past four decades – most notably her rendition of *Cry*. Mrs. Obama did this by humbly expressing in her speech that the iconographic poster image of Jamison performing *Cry* was the only artwork she and President Obama owned for some time as a young couple living in Chicago. She also mentioned how she often interjected the personification of Jamison’s beauty and strength in the poster as a meaningful symbol of black womanhood for her daughters, Malia and Sasha, to emulate.

Today, the tenor that has surrounded *Cry*’s civic inspiration, familial dedication, and black feminine performativity continues to be validated not only by the (first black) First Family, but by the fact that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) has only cast its black female dancers in this role since its inception despite the ensemble’s well-known heterogeneous racial composition. The fact is that this role is still covetously passed down from one generation of black female principals to another like a “family heirloom” makes this long-standing preferential policy toward the black female soloists in the company performing *Cry* one of the most enviable roles featured in the AAADT’s repertoire. (*Dancing Revelations*, p. 182) Thomas DeFrantz

was therefore incorrect in his text *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture* when he proscribed it as a "sixteen-minute, three-part plotless solo." (*Dancing Revelations*, p. 182) Ailey certainly went on the record himself many times defending *Cry* as being more than a plotless solo even to the disappointment of those nonblack company members of the AAADT who at the time challenged the exclusivity of his casting decision in *Cry*. This prompted Maxine Sherman, a white female principal dancer, who was one of several non-black female company members whose consternation about the exclusive casting of black female soloists in *Cry* caused her to threaten to leave the AAADT and to return to Martha Graham's company. (*Revelations*, p. 129) To which, Ailey offered the following remark: "they're convinced that I favor the black dancers and that I'm never going to put an Asian or a Caucasian above the black women in my company. My response is they've danced the other leading parts, except for *Cry*, which is dedicated to my mother and black women everywhere." (*Revelations*, p. 129) The only reasonable inference that can drawn from Ailey's retort is that women of other races wouldn't and shouldn't be allowed to perform *Cry* because it choreographically *does something* more than entertain audiences. In the same way that Susan Foster argues in her essay "Choreographies of Gender" that choreography "serves as a useful intervention into discussions of materiality and body of focusing on the unspoken, on the bodily gestures and movements that, along with speech, construct gender identity" ("Choreographies of Gender," p. 5), *Cry* overtly and very broadly recuperates the degenerative archetypal view of black femininity using modern dance choreography to reinterpret the collective

experiences of black women in America while plainly marking Ailey as a Black Male Feminist. Thus, the term black femininity is employed here and throughout this chapter to refer to the presumed general characteristics or caricature-istics of black womanhood in America as its thought to be performed socially on a day-to-day basis. And the term, Black Male Feminist, is also used here to refer to the allies of Black Feminist as the formal rise of Black Feminism as outlined in the Combahee River Collective Statement. It is also necessary to note that Ailey's brand of Male Black Feminism to redress black femininity was not unique.

During the nineteenth century, Frederick Douglass would become famously known for using his spotlight on the national political stage to also challenge the dehumanizing treatment of black women in America. Like Ailey, but even more so, Douglass was known for using his bully pulpit as a fugitive slave, turn abolitionist author / orator, and prominent figurehead of the negro race to call out the cruel racist and harsh sexist treatment of black women unleashed by both the slave owning class of white men and white women in America. By doing this, the overwhelming majority of Douglass' slave narrative helped to expose how the sadistic sexual and physical violence of white men as well as the brutal psychological and physical violence of white women was contemptuously meted out toward black women for any, little, or no offense committed at all. Since then, Black Feminist scholars like Saidiya Hartman have focused on Douglass' description of Aunt Hester in his slave narrative to point to how the routine performance of "spectacular" scenes of violence were specifically tailored for enslaved black women. (*Scenes of Subjection*) The research of other Black Feminist

scholars like Angela Davis' have gone further by also examining how the political organizing of black women during The Club Movement also reflects the oft-times conflicting support Douglass offered to the Suffragist Movement while also plainly marking Douglass as a Black Male Feminist. However, Black Male Feminist scholar, David Ikard (like Angela Davis) asserts an uncommonly suggested notion about Douglass' misguided interests and personal investments in his own manhood as the driving force behind his advocacy for enslaved black women. Ikard does this by citing Douglass' mention of his Aunt Hester (like Saidiya Hartman and others) in his narrative to point out how his own terror filled insecurity about being viciously raped like the majority of enslaved black women (and the threat in turn of being feminized) by slavery prompted him to physically fight back, but ultimately, run away as soon as he could. (*Breaking the Silence, Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*, p. 6) This is a parallel that can also be made to Ailey's personal anguish about being raped himself and presumably his attempt to choreographically empathize with his mother's and other black women's victimization.

Hence, this dissertation chapter argues that *Cry* debuted as more than a dance, it debuted as a speech act – an archetypal performance of Male Black Feminist resistance that is choreographically articulated through a black female dancing body. This is a perspective on Ailey's legacy most dance historians either choose to ignore or severely down play because of his earlier seemingly apolitical choreographic record. (*Dancing Revelations*) This is also because for far too long, a superficial reading of *Cry* has promoted the notion that Ailey's "swift" compilation of the overall piece means it was

not well thought out; or, it was simply thrown together – which is precisely the notion this research refutes. Instead, this research argues that it was more likely the case that Ailey only took a few days to choreograph *Cry* because, again, its subject matter dealt with issues of sexual violence about his mother and his own victimization he had been grappling with all his life. It is also not unusual for a solo choreographic work to require more than a few days of rehearsal before completion. Moreover, this dissertation chapter reveals how Ailey’s twentieth century Male Black Feminism mirrored the nineteenth century Male Black Feminism that is witnessed in the activism of Douglass’ Abolitionist writings and Women’s Liberation speeches all while asserting that Ailey’s artistic choices in *Cry*’s titling, dedication, musical selections, and its modern dance choreography in its entirety recuperates the historically negative portrayals of black femininity in America.

Much like Douglass’ slave narrative in the nineteenth century, *Cry*’s debut and its performativity throughout the early 1970s confronted and redressed the archetypal view of black women in America as slaves. For example, this unfettered reading of black women in America as slaves (before, then, and now) becomes undeniably apparent when taking into consideration the unfortunate 2012 international magazine cover that featured First Lady Michelle Obama’s photo-shopped image over a 19th century French painting of an un-identified bare breast black slave woman titled “Portrait of A Negress” by Marie Guilliemine Benoist in 1800. Although conservative pundits tried to down play the racism and sexism intimated by this globally circulated photo-shopped image of this nation’s first black, First Lady as a partially nude slave, the

inference drawn from art historian and race theory scholar James Smalls' on-line essay titled "Slavery Is A Woman: Race, Gender, and Visuality in Marie Benoist's *Portrait d'une négresse* (1800)" is that even by itself, without Mrs. Obama's imposed image, slavery in the West was regarded as a black and feminine institution and that [no] aspect of Benoist's painting was ever intended to be complementary to black women, then or now.

In late-eighteenth-century France, racial thinking as well as racist utterances in print and images, became increasingly normalized and naturalized. In this context, Benoist's portrait was no different from works by other artists who assumed a relationship between physical difference and cultural and national difference. Although Benoist's specific views on black people are unknown, there is little doubt that she believed in a hierarchy of classes and the races, as did everyone of the period regardless of their political persuasion. ... Nineteenth-century critical responses to Benoist's painting were varied, but reveal much about the then-prevalent attitudes towards race and gender. One reviewer, ... referred to the subject of Benoist's portrait as 'a sublime blurred *tache*' (stain),³⁰ referencing the black woman as an unclean object, a blot devoid of noteworthy human presence. (<http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/Slavery-is-a-Woman.html>)



Figure 2. First Lady Michelle Obama next to *Portrait of a Negress* (circa 1800)

Therefore, Smalls' analysis about Benoist's artwork brought into context with the disrespectful contemporaneous image of First Lady Michelle Obama as a slave demonstrates that a pause is certainly needed to momentarily stop and contemplate that if the wife of the forty-fourth President of the United States of America isn't exempt from being read as a slave (despite the fact that she also holds a bachelor's degree from Princeton and a law degree from Harvard), then no black woman in "post-racial" America is exempt from be regarded as a slave – at home or abroad. As for those fatal optimists, who in any conversation about racism, would claim that an incident such as this is an isolated occurrence, no defense to date has been offered as to how only one year later newly elected first black – Congolese born Prime Minister of Integration in Italy, Cecile Kyenge, became the victim of an attempted assault with bananas that was thrown at her while she was giving a speech on July 28, 2013. According to a CNN online article, Prime Minister Kyenge was also viciously threatened with rape to force her to step down from her new appointment and she received other insults from fellow politicians that describe her as being primitive and only suited for domestic service in the Italian government.⁴

To explain the basis of this specific brand of vile racism and sexism which deliberately targets and attacks black women in prominent positions and its relevance to re-examining Ailey's *Cry*, Andrea Smith's article, "Heteropatriarchy and the Three

⁴ "A local politician recently said on Facebook that Kyenge should be raped so she can understand the pain felt by victims of crime, which some politicians blame on immigrants. She's been called a 'Congolese monkey,' 'Zulu' and 'the black anti-Italian.' One Northern League official said 'she seems like a great housekeeper' but 'not a government minister.'" (<http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/28/world/europe/italy-politics-racism/index.html?iref=allsearch>)

Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing,” exposes the under-stated reality that in the West, black women but, blacks in general are read as slaves. “One pillar of white supremacy is the logic of slavery. . . . this logic renders Black people as inherently slave-able-as nothing more than property.’ That is, in this logic of white supremacy, Blackness becomes equated with slaveability. The forms of slavery may change – whether it is through the formal system of slavery, sharecropping, or through the current prison-industrial complex-but the logic itself has remained consistent. This logic is the anchor of capitalism.” (“Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing,” p. 67) So, it is in this vein Ailey made a choreographic intervention in 1971 with *Cry* as a dance of resistance by paying tribute to black femininity in America in a manner that problematized centuries of racist and sexist propaganda that has globally painted black women as slaves and politicized them as primitive – which in effect (as indicated by the aforementioned examples) is a problem that persists today. With that said, what remains as a critical aim in this research is to specifically delineate and parse out that the subject matter redressed by Ailey in *Cry* is not about slavery, nor is it about subjects relating to primitivity because *Cry*, once again, this research argues that it is a speech act. It is a speech act that engages the black female dancing body through modern dance choreography in a dialectic about how black women have circumnavigated their inferior and oppressed status in this society – an inferior and oppressed status that has been selectively examined and understood in this society almost exclusively through the lens of slavery.

Incidentally, *Cry* has never been regarded as a dance of resistance nor was it ever seen as a dance about primitive blackness unlike the arcane artistic shadow of primitivity that loomed over the career of Pearl Primus – especially in her work *Strange Fruit* (1943) or the well-publicized hostility that followed Katherine Dunham’s protest choreography in *Southland* (1951). Since *Cry* was never perceived as threatening or transgressive to the Ailey organization’s critics or to its long time largely white and wealthy donor base; at best, *Cry* was generically likened to Martha Graham’s *Lamentation* (1930) where she performs a solo from a bench fully dressed in a tube of fabric that represented how human grief and tragedy can “obsess the body” to which it bared the visceral resemblance of the stretching of one’s skin. Or, *Cry* was passivized as a black feminine installment to Talley Beatty’s *Mourners Bench* (1947).⁵ This is why *Cry*’s less than subtle theme of resistance, or better, lamentation and mourning, as also implied by its title, was perceived more as a keening, then and now, embodying a staged racialized and gendered performance that historically most white and other non critical race studies dance patrons comfortably interpreted as the impotent idyllic frustrations of a black matriarch. The black matriarch, of course, is another black feminine archetype like the slave, and in some cases, who is a slave that poses no threat to the white establishment. Still, she is infamously known for being responsible for castrating the role and impact of the “every(black)man figure” that could or otherwise would socially

⁵ “According to Beatty *Southern Landscape*, a three-part dance, is a description of the time right after the Reconstruction period in the South. The dance explores an event in history that Beatty read about in a book. He learned about a community of white and black farmers who had happily formed a community together. The book then describes how the community was literally slaughtered and destroyed by the Ku Klux Klan; after the slaughter, people went into the fields at night to retrieve the bodies of their loved ones. The most well-known and famous section of the dance, titled *Mourner’s Bench* is about a person who is returning from recovering a body, and explores the ideas of hope and strength.” (http://wn.com/talley_beatty/biography)

uplift the individual black family and the broader black community. Mention of this “everywoman figure” points to the way DeFrantz trivializes the general subject matter relating to *Cry* by referencing Ailey’s dedication to all black women as such without parsing out for his readers what exactly he means by an “everywoman figure.”

(*Dancing Revelations*, p. 182) Angela Davis, however, explains why this “designation of the black woman as a matriarch is a cruel misnomer” much like that of the “everywoman figure.” (“Reflection on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” p. 84) This means that Ailey’s dedication in this dance to his mother was no more intended to be a homage to a matriarch or an “everywoman” persona.

Instead, Ailey introduces the world to his mother, Mrs. Lula Cooper, who was a single parent for most of his childhood, through the majority of his memories about her reflexively recounted throughout his autobiography, *Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey*, and more especially through his ballet *Cry* as a “black motherly” figure filled with honorable intentions, little authority, and no real power to socially, politically, or economically improve their lives in the 1930s. Thus, *Cry*’s dedication isn’t about a trivial recognition of a random black maternal identity. It is about contesting the latent myth of black matriarchy and the fictive every (black) woman personae in American culture with the blatant truth about what it was really like for his mother and other black women during the Jim Crow era in America leading up to the Black Power and Black Feminist Movements. A truth that has been queried, filtered, and translated artistically through the cultural production of *Cry* and decades of its performativity, all in the purview of a twentieth century gay Male Black Feminist,

through what he referred to as his “blood memories” – which raises just as many contradictions in terms (as discussed in chapter three).

Nonetheless, the truth according to Ailey is that four white men raped his mother on her way home after working as a domestic for a white family. To this end, she later became verbally and physically abusive with him. She also became an alcoholic and for a spell she eventually became a prostitute. The truth, again by Ailey’s own autobiographical admission, is that he wholeheartedly believed she did these things although it hurt him as a way of coping with her own sense of powerlessness in the wake of the violent sexual assault she suffered. Even more so, there is the unfortunate truth that she alternatively had no other means to support him as a child other than to sell her body if she wasn’t going to continue to work as a domestic in the homes of white families. For a long time in America, this was a sad and distressing truth that placed the vast majority of black female domestic workers from Reconstruction thru the 1960s at risk of having a similar fate as Ailey’s mother. Melissa Harris-Perry makes this point in her text *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotype, and Black Women in America*.

For decades following the end of Southern slavery more than three-fourths of African American women worked as domestics workers. Their labor put them in proximity and subordinate status to white men, many of whom held deeply ingrained sexual beliefs about black women. Further, their race and gender denied them full protection of the law. These realities meant that black women were particularly vulnerable to sexual assault. (*Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotype, and Black Women in America*, p. 59)

Ailey shared very openly with his company that his mother had formerly worked as a prostitute. Although it is not explicitly mentioned in his autobiography, it best explains

her extended absence, alcoholism, and abusiveness toward Ailey as a child after her rape. Black feminist scholarship like Jayna Brown's text *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* and Hazel Carby's essay on "Policing Black Women's Bodies in an Urban Context" elaborates more on the thinly veiled sexual politics of labor for black women in the early twentieth century as domestic workers and stage performers. These texts also affirm Ailey's truth about he believed his mother was doing all that was possible to provide him with a stable home. But, the stable home she managed to create for him as he aptly put it was fraught with the instability of lodging with multiple family members, moving around frequently, as well as being left un-supervised as a child. The truth for Ailey was also that the fallout of being left un-supervised as a child caused him to be abused in a game of "sexual experimentation" by a same-sex older playmate and later by family members. Another truth is that while all of this was taking place and even for a long time afterwards, he longed to know his father, Alvin Ailey, Sr. – a man who was absent from his life. In truth, nothing about the early part of Ailey's life justified the unfair designation of his mother in this society as a "black matriarch." Until 1971 in his dedication to her in *Cry*, when his truth about her as his "dignified" mother and as a black matron despite her past, despite their past, would be powerfully embodied in tribute through the staged emblematic performance of *Cry* initially given by Judith Jamison and subsequently by other black female soloists in the AAADT in the decades that followed: dancers like Donna Wood, April Berry, Debra Manning, and Dwana Smallwood. And finally, the truth that *Cry's* radical dedication was like "a shot heard around the (concert dance) world" in which Ailey

enlisted all black women everywhere especially, mothers to be honored for having the courage to struggle and to survive the brutal racist and sexist intersectional violence perpetrated against them by American practice and policy. This adage of course is drawn from poetic references relating to the American Revolution as well as other revolutionary contexts because America is implicated in this statement because of its the historical intersectional violence toward black women and its willful neglect to enforce black women's right to equal protection under the law. *Cry's* dedication comparatively would not only become "a shot heard around the around the (concert dance) world," it became a rallying cry to begin the long over due process of recognizing black womanhood everywhere with a deference that has typically been reserved only for the Virgin Mary and Victorian principled white women thus making *Cry's* dedication polemic and revolutionary.

In stark contrast to Ailey, Douglass' recollection of his mother is bleak and resentful. His explanation for why he was emotionally and physically detached from her is stoically expressed in this lengthy citation from his autobiography.

My mother was named Harriet Bailey. She was the daughter of Isaac and Betsey Bailey, both colored, and quite dark. My mother was of a darker complexion than either my grandmother or grandfather. My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. . . . My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant – before I knew her as my mother. It was common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor. For what this separation is done, I do not know,

unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result. I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, traveling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise, unless a slave has special permission from his or her master to the contrary – a permission which they seldom get... I do not recall seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night and would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. Very little communication ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived... She died when I was about seven years old ... She was gone long before I knew anything about it. ... I received the tidings of her death with much of the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger.
(Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, p. 23)

This early nineteenth century recollection Douglass offers in candor about his mother is emotionally wry and unsettling. But, it is eerily similar to the twentieth century circumstances Ailey revealed about his life with his mother – as both men tell of a trans-generational haunting that comes from living in America either during the Era of Slavery or Segregation as black boys with black mothers that have been raped by white men, without recourse, unapologetically abandoned by their fathers, and systematically exploited by capitalist no-wage or low-wage economies. This brings to the forefront the socio-economic issue of class that Ailey openly takes on along with the issues of race and gender in *Cry* when he engages the representational use of the functional prop of fabric which, once again, transitions choreographically to represent more expansively a

veil, the weight of the world, rough clothes being smoothed out on an ironing board, a floor rag, a noose, a lady's shawl, Jim Crow, and a crown. Personal testimonies by Ailey are ubiquitously recounted on video about how this specific portion of *Cry's* choreography was symbolic of black women like his mother carrying out their domestic labor in the Jim Crow South doing the laundry, ironing clothes, and literally on their hands and knees everyday scrubbing white women's floors – all for the purpose of earning some semblance of a livable wage for themselves and their families. The gestural irony in the performance, however, is found in the way the soloist uses her arms to smoothly scoop up the balled up floor rag after simulating movement akin to vigorously scrubbing the floor to suddenly straightening out the prop of fabric with her arms raised in a high parallel position with her head hung backward in it like a noose all the while moving forward on her knees – as if she is being lynched. DeFrantz explains this as the way "... he (Ailey) created dances that project archetypal characters, or social types, through an effective gestural shorthand." (*Dancing Revelations*, p. 234) Next, the choreography prompts her to quickly and very seamlessly fashion the said noose into a lady's shawl before stepping around herself and into what looks like a box she steadily wrestles from within to break free of what is presumably symbolic of the way Jim Crow violently boxed millions of black women into repressive economic circumstances. This is followed by a causal pivot back as she then maneuvers the manipulable prop of fabric into a lengthy African head wrap, otherwise known as a gele (pronounced "gay-lay"), which she majestically parades around the stage in with a pre-

colonial African feminine pride derived from what Chicana Feminist scholar Maylei Blackwell refers to as a “retrofitted memory.”

Retrofitted memory is a countermemory that uses fragments of older histories that have been disjunctured by colonial practices of organizing historical knowledge or by masculinist renderings of history that disappear women’s political involvement in order to create space for women in historical traditions that erase them. (*Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*, p.2)

Ailey’s recuperative use of the prop of fabric into a floor rag and what ultimately becomes the esteemed symbolism of an African headdress / crown, as an accoutrement to the stride and regal strut the soloist performs, is a retrofitted memory of a pre-colonial African past; one that serves as a countermemory to the exploited demoralizing domestic labor of black women in white families homes. This intervention Ailey makes resurrects and it valorizes a legacy on stage of true, albeit romanticized, “black matriarchs” like the ones that existed prior to or during the early stages of European and American invasions and conquests of African civilizations: black matriarchs like Queen Nefertiti, Queen of Sheba, Queen Nzingah, and Queen Yaa Asantewa. Recalling the legacies of these real (not imagined, often times exaggerated, but nonetheless forgotten) powerful black women removes the historical *tache* (stain) that has blurred and burdened black womanhood with biological or “natural” characteristics associated with being inferior to white women which was reinforced for a century after slavery with black women’s compelled domestic labor at the bequest of white women. Therefore, *Cry* resonates less as an arbitrary dance featuring a fictive “every(black)woman” figure / soloist, it instead resonates more as a hymn or an ode,

then and now, to an obvious rejection of white American standards on womanhood, beauty, and femininity which has been a catalyst and a mainstay of colorism. Colorism, of course, is the belief in the superior beauty of lighter skinned complexions. It is an unfortunate consequence of white imperialism that black communities around the world have been plagued with for centuries. Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins explains the way colorism manifests / inflicts itself on to the psyche of black women as a “hegemonic femininity” in the following excerpt from her essay titled “Work That Body: African American Women and Hegemonic Femininity.”

Historically, in the American context, young women with milky White skin, long blond hair, and slim figures were deemed to be the most beautiful and therefore the most feminine women. ... Reliance on these standards of beauty automatically renders the majority of African American women at best as less beautiful, and at worse, ugly. ... Under these feminine norms, African American women can never be beautiful as White women because they never become white. (*Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, p. 194)

Hill Collins further explains in her essay how coarse short hair, otherwise regarded as black hair, cemented the archetype of black femininity in the West when she cites Orlando Patterson. “Hair type rapidly became the real symbolic badge of slavery, although like many powerful symbols, it was disguised by the linguistic device of using the term ‘black’ which nominally threw the emphasis to color.” (*Black Sexual Politics*, p. 195)

Like most African Americans, Ailey fully understood the off stage day-to-day reading of black bodies physically, culturally, economically, socially, and politically, still he chose very deliberately to use Jamison, a neophyte to the concert dance world’s

black elite, and not a well-known favorite like Carmen de Lavallade or someone else in his company who resembled her typically preferred light skin complexion with straight long hair. His choice then to personify the cultural embodiment of what was widely decided as unattractive and unfeminine in America by and large made a declarative statement about black pride and black womanhood. This is why *Cry*'s global proliferation in the 1970s of Jamison's stunning performance featuring her dark-skin and short kinky hair, again not as a *tache* (stain), but as a signifier of black feminine beauty *did /does something* (even now) in the same way Angela Davis's iconographic image wearing a large Afro and holding her fist in the air did something during the late 1960s and early 1970s to ultimately become the embodied representation of the quintessential radical black female revolutionary. Echoing, yet again, the agendas of the black creative and black liberation movements of the day.

Another resounding revolutionary echo that emerges from the functional use of the prop of fabric that actually begins at the very beginning of the choreography is the way it appears to be a veil draped over the soloist's head. Just as *Cry*'s performance begins with the sound of a jazz instrumental musical arrangement by Alice Coltrane at the same time the audience begins to see the soloist (upstage of) center stage with a cascading spotlight that starts to illuminate down on to her while she obliquely frames herself with both arms straight above her head stirring steadily. Her brief seemingly veiled cyclical motion is another retrofitted memory that reveals how veils were used as weapons of war worn by African women in Algeria. Frantz Fanon is the first to broach this discussion on how the veiled colonized African female body becomes an important

form of resistance in the Algerian Revolutionary War circa 1955. However, Francee Covington, wrote “Are the Revolutionary Techniques Employed in *The Battle of Algiers* Applicable to Harlem?” to question whether global insurgent strategies employed in North Africa in the 1950s can be translated into ghetto insurgent strategies in New York in the 1970s.

When someone says ‘Freedom by any means necessary’ and someone else suggests that the earnings of prostitutes be used for procuring guns – that’s by any means necessary. Or, ‘If the Administration does not accede to our demands, we’re going to burn the motherfucker down!’ How many state capitols, police stations, and college campuses have been burned down by Black people? ... What are some of the reasons for the success of the Algerian Revolution? Can those reasons be transported and used in the United States, Harlem, Watts, Howard University? (*The Black Woman: An Anthology*, p. 315)

There is little doubt that the soloist in *Cry* represents a veiled target given her stirring. Yet, her stirring prior to her first move, which is to part her arms open with the fabric stretched evenly across as if she holds the weight of the world does raise a fundamental revolutionary question: “What next?” ... If there was a hint for what the black female revolutionary in the 1970s could do next in America, then it was found in the lyrics of the music selections Ailey made for *Cry* as both the lyrics of Laura Nyro’s “Been On a Train” and the lyrics from Voices of East Harlem’s “Right On Be Free” point to the aspirations of women in search of a better life using revolutionary metaphors like ‘a train going north’, ‘flying free like a bird’, and ‘mothers saving their children.’ Still, the lyrics in both songs also offered a cautionary tone of being on the look out for the ravages of ghetto warfare like drug addiction and the excessive consumerism of

material possessions like a “store bought bed” – tactics and trinkets of the counter-insurgency that have undermined even the best revolutionaries.

Been On A Train

Been on a train, baby did you hear the whistle blow?
Been on a train north, baby did you hear the whistle blow?
I saw a man, take a needle full of hard drug and die slow
Been on a train and I'm never gonna be the same

There's a bright light in the north wind, gonna bring you home
Mister there's a bright light in the north wind, it's gonna bring you home
He said, "Sweet darling woman, leave me alone"
Been on a train and I'm never gonna be the same

You got more tracks on you baby than the tracks of this train
You got no guts, no gospel and you got no brain
He said, "I got just one thing, gonna soothe my pain"
No, no, damn you Mister and I dragged him out the door
No, no, damn you Mister and I dragged him out the door

He died in the morning sun and I ain't going north no more
I suspect there's a train going north in a month or two
I still hear his words he said, "There's nothing left to say or do"
But Mister you were wrong and I'm gonna sing my song for you
Been on a train and I'm never gonna be the same

Right On Be Free

I wanna go where the north wind blows
I wanna know what the falcon knows
I wanna go where the wild goose goes
High flyin' bird
High flyin' bird
Fly on

I want the sky over my head
I don't want no store bought bed
I'm gonna live until I'm dead
Mother
Mother

Mother
Save your child
Right On Be Free
Right On Be Free
Right On Be Free

I don't want no store bought bed
I want the sky over my head
Ain't no time to kneel and pray
Mother
Mother
Mother
Save your child

I wanna watch the rainbow in the sky
I wanna watch the clouds roll by
Might make my load a little light
Lord
Lord
Lord
Where will I be tomorrow night

Much like the calculated radical selection of music Ailey made in *Cry*, timing was certainly another a key element in bringing this speech act to the concert dance stage. If he had so much as hinted at making the same social and political inferences about black women on stage before or without the wide popularity of the staunch leftist activism of the Black Power and other Black Liberation Movements – namely, The Black Arts Movement, his efforts to stage *Cry* would have been quickly thwarted by the deep-seated racial hatred the white dance critics and the white dance community exhibited to black dancers in general at that time.

In the 1940s and 1950s the American dance world practiced a pervasive racism. For a variety of reasons: Our feet weren't shaped right, our butts were too big, our legs wouldn't turn out correctly; blacks simply weren't wanted; and so on. The people who ran the major and minor dance companies coldly rejected, and broke the hearts of many

aspiring young black dancers. In the dance world, at that time, we were not welcome. (*Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey*, p. 51)

Having spent most of his childhood in the south, Ailey was well acquainted with the terrible kinds of homegrown terror white racism bred in black communities through the exploits of the Ku Klux Klan. This suggests that Ailey's motives for choreographing and staging *Cry* when he did, how he did, and on whom, was not an artistic fluke. Ailey didn't simply fixate on choreographing Jamison's unmistakably black woman's physique onto the white concert dance stage in 1971 on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam War protests, various Student led Activism, and the burgeoning Black Feminist Movement, as well as the nascent stages of Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm's Presidential Campaign by chance. He was one of many artists who were making political leaps on and off the concert dance stage with their work as well as using their general artistry for activist causes. For example, Arthur Mitchell started Dance Theatre of Harlem after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. He, Mr. Mitchell, literally walked away from a promising career as the first black dancer to join the principal ranks of New York City Ballet in order to teach classical ballet to under-privileged black children in Harlem. Other dance and performance artists made comparatively similar interventions more specifically as Ailey did in response to the essentialized identities that willfully framed black femininity in America either as a slave, matriarch, mammie, whore, bitch, welfare queen, prisoner, addict, prostitute, or victim. One such artists was Ntzoke Shange, whose award winning 1976 Broadway production, *For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, cast

seven black female characters in a choreopoem, each representing a different color of the rainbow, for the purpose of confronting and reconciling many / or all of the above identities with dance, spoken word, prose-poetry, and song. Shange, a self-professed bi-product of the Black Feminist Movement, stated the following.

I came to understand these twenty-odd poems as a single statement, a choreopoem.... in the words of a young black girl's growing up, her triumphs & errors, our struggles to become all that is forbidden by our environment, all that is forfeited by our gender, all that we have forgotten. (*For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, pp. xx-xxi)

What increasingly is forgotten behind the resounding political overtones made in *For Colored Girls* and *Cry*, not surprisingly, is the underlining Africanist spirituality that aesthetically grounds both of these pieces. (*For Colored Girls*, p. 23-26) Douglass' also has his own encounter with Africanist spirituality which in hindsight he denied and offered contrition for after using a talisman to protect himself from slave overseer who was known for mercilessly whipping enslaved men to break their will. (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, p. 80) For Ailey, this is especially observable in his overall costume and movement choices for *Cry*. While his other ballets, namely the "Take Me to the Water" and "Move Members, Move" sections of *Revelations* (1960) are most recognizable in this regard because of their obvious invocation of Diasporic African and African American Baptist affectations, *Cry*'s solo performance in the full regalia of the soloist's black skin dressed in an all white body suit and full colonial length dance skirt complete with its traditional girth and appliqué is consistent with most Judea Christian Afro-Caribbean and Yoruba meanings and symbolism of archetypal African purity,

redemption, and transcendence. Most specifically, the Yoruba deity Obatala, owner of white cloth and the maker of human bodies – the only Orisha who paths represents both male and female energy, lives on the mountain top in solitude and provides clarity to all his / her children comes to mind in the opening of the section of *Cry* as the soloist’s arms are raised with the long white prop of fabric (as stated previously) obliquely draping above her head – the area of the body Obatala is believed to govern. In female form, Obatala is best known for representing a mature woman in age wearing a white shawl. She is also known within the pantheon of Catholic Saints for representing the Virgin Mary as “Our Lady of Mercy” wearing all white, as opposed to her traditional multiple shades of royal blue – which happens to be the spiritual / symbolic color of motherhood – like the mother of all Orisha and living creatures, Yemonja. Additionally, Ogun is another deity whose presence is evoked by just the thematic subjects addressed in *Cry* – particularly, all things relating to iron, labor, and railroad tracks. Ogun is also the god of war and *Cry*’s central theme surrounding black feminine domestic labor and resistance against white supremacist economic oppression coincides with his supernatural avenging forces for clearing all obstacles. There is even movement in the choreography’s first section where the soloist steps into a deep second position plié with one arm on her waist and the other arm cutting through space like a machete clearing a path much like Ogun’s signature dance of cutting and clearing while simultaneously undulating her chest and back in a kibba.⁶ This integration of symbolic reference to

⁶ Kibba was a term used in the black dance community of New York City in the 1970s to describe the undulation of the chest and back. During that time, it was even formally defined as such in most mainstream dictionaries.

Obatala, Ogun, and even Yemonja's Orisha presence, symbols, and movement vocabulary with the Western technical dexterity of the soloist's experience in Graham based modern dance technique displayed primarily in the way she cups her hands and engages a series of contractions as well as the balletic prowess she demonstrates in the way the lines of her body are poised and positioned throughout the first section of the dance highlights the cultural hybridity of Ailey's choreographic genius.

But looking once again at how Susan Foster deals with the subject of choreography itself and the efficacy of the term "performance," this research embraces her analysis as to the ways and means gender explicitly as the labor of a social construction is choreographed and performed and that dance (like the "performative" discussed in the field of linguistics) *does something* to perpetuate the codes and conventions of choreography. Foster's analytic approach therefore affords a ripe exploration about how dominant cues on femininity (and masculinity) are socially imbued and can be theoretically deconstructed. For example, Foster argues making choreography a rubric for understanding gender "(l)ike performativity, choreography consists in sets of norms and conventions; yet unlike performativity, or at least its general usage thus far, choreography encompasses corporeal as well as verbal articulateness." ("Choreographies of Gender," p. 5) The push Foster makes for having choreography used as the measuring stick for sizing up how ideas about gender are formulated comes out of Teresa De Lauretis' research for avoiding the biological arguments made in and about essentialism. De Lauretis insists that biological arguments supporting the ideology of essentialism is as unproductive as the agenda pursued by

antifeminists. It is from this platform that Foster then begins to probe at the notion for her audience of dance studies scholars that if gender is not biological then it is obviously a social construction / social choreography of society. Specific to the earlier citation, Foster advocates for choreography to serve as a means for exploring how social codes and traditional conventions in dance can be used as an ideal framework for learning more about gender. She argues that there are many similarities that can be made between the way choreography mirrors cultural values about bodies and identities making a distinction – yet again – between choreography and performance. For Foster, performance refers only to the skill needed to demonstrate the represented idea or theme. Alternatively, she credits choreography for being responsible for shaping and contouring as necessary the parameters for demonstrating or representing the idea or theme. She also goes as far as appropriating the linguistic term of “performativity” for discussing how the repetitive choreographic conventions of codes in staging dances is synonymous to the reiteration of a spoken discourse like those found in the fields of philosophy and theatre. "By distinguishing between choreography and performance, the process of generating corporeal significance can be made apparent." (“Choreographies of Gender,” p. 11) Therefore, it is reasonable to deduce from Foster’s analysis on choreographing gender that *Cry*’s performativity through the aegis of the AAADT over the last forty plus years is a performative statement on race, gender, and class – more specifically the devalued class status of black femininity in our society, as interpreted by Ailey. It is more importantly a performative statement in the form of modern dance choreography that specifically hones in on how the codes and conventions of the

historically rehearsed and performed simultaneous oppressions of race, gender, and class are inextricably ‘intertwined’ to lives of black women in America – as meticulously outlined in “The Combahee River Collective Statement.” At its most basic level, *Cry* is speech act (based on the paradigm Foster provides) that expresses Male Black Feminist resistance against white supremacist ideas about black womanhood in the context of patriarchy and the every black woman figure. If Foster’s analysis were ever revised to be “Choreographies of Race, Gender, and Class,” *Cry* would be an ideal primary choreographic subject of interest and analysis. This begs to reason why more dance studies scholars are not exposing the intersectional choreographies of violence that has cemented in shape around the general distorted perceptions American society has about its black female citizenry? Given the extent to which black women’s artistic and cultural expressive forms have significantly influenced what is uniquely referred to as “American” dance forms. This is an important question to be answered by twenty-first century students of dance history and theory who are avid, but far too many times naive and premature proponents of ‘post-racialism.’ They are also even more unwilling and quite commonly unable to adequately engage, or openly contest, the epistemologies made available through Black Feminism, Womanism, Chicana Feminism, Women of Color Feminism, Third World Feminism, and even Black Male Feminism and Womanism to investigate and in many cases re-interpret the historically inaccurate portrayals of black female (and male dancing subjects, including other non-white dancing subjects) on the concert dance stage including the silver (or now, flat) screen. What is at stake for holding these decolonizing tools of critical analysis and thought for

investigating intersectional racial, sexual, exploitative violence at bay? Most importantly, why is feminist activism read exclusively by default in dance through the lens of white modern dancers (i.e., Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham – among others)? Is it because the majority of dance scholars in the academy are white women and historically most white American women have earned a higher place in society at the expense of neglecting black American women’s experiences and cultural expressive forms; except, of course, when the cultural products of black female artists are primed for co-optation like the legacy of Irene Castle and many, many others? Or does it have to do with what Audre Lorde discusses in her essay “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” about the ways that “MUCH OF WESTERN EUROPEAN history conditions us to see human difference in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant / subordinate, good / bad, up / down, superior / inferior.” (*Sister Outer: Essays and Speeches*, p. 114) In fact, Lorde’s research points to the positionality of most white female scholars on this matter relating to the bodies of knowledge that are created specifically through the literatures of black women and other women of color in which she outlines what can also be used to examine a similar phenomenon in the field of dance studies.

I believe one of the reasons white women have such difficulty reading Black women’s work is because of their reluctance to see Black women as different from themselves. To examine Black women’s literature effectively requires that we be seen as whole people in our actual complexities – as individuals, as women, as human – rather than as one of those problematic but familiar stereotypes provided in this society in place of genuine images of Black women. And I believe this holds true for the literatures of other women of Color who are not Black.

The literatures of all women of Color recreate the textures of our lives, and many white women are heavily invested in ignoring the real differences. For as long as any difference between us means one of us must be inferior, then the recognition of any difference must be fraught with guilt. To allow women of Color to step out of stereotypes is too guilt provoking, for it threatens the complacency of those women who view oppression only in terms of sex. Refusing to see difference makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us as women. (*Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, p. 118)

The plain reality undergirding this analysis is that white women can't be socially positioned on top in our society unless black women and other women of color are accordingly positioned at the bottom. This means in the United States with black women always / already marked as 'slaves,' 'primitive,' and even more so as 'castrating matriarchs,' the historical penchant for privileging the universality of white womanhood has been built on very little – as it is a fiction. And, without the kind of uncomfortable inquiry that Lorde states is needed on all sides of the American racialized, sexed, and classed equations of our society, the fore-mentioned epistemologies and clearly the very deliberately made artistic choices like the ones Ailey made contesting the labeling of black women like his mother as matriarchs and every black woman figures in *Cry* will remain habitually overlooked, or completely lost. This is the same with Douglass' choice of literary subjects because the stoicism he expressed (as cited earlier in this research) about his mother's premature and preventable death as a field-working slave is also habitually overlooked or completely lost within dominant epistemologies that conveniently read him as a pacifier of the negro race and not as an ardent critic of the slave owning class of white men and more especially of white women in America. Case

and point, this retrofitted memory that Douglass offers in his autobiography about the way his grandmother is left to live out her remaining days on the earth as a vulnerable old dying slave is offered in hindsight as a stinging indictment against colonial white America.

If any one thing in my experience, more than another, served to deepen my conviction of the infernal character of slavery, and to fill me with unutterable loathing of slaveholders it was their base ingratitude to my poor old grandmother. She had served my old master faithfully from youth to old age. She had been the source of all his wealth; she had peopled his plantation with slaves; she had become a great grandmother in his service. She had rocked him in infancy, attended him in childhood, served him through life, and at his death wiped from his icy brow the cold death-sweat, and closed his eyes forever. She was nevertheless left a slave – a slave for life – a slave in the hands of strangers; and in their hands she saw her children, her grandchildren, and her great-grandchildren, divided like so many sheep, without being gratified with the small privilege of a single word, as to their or her own destiny. (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, p. 61)

The same stinging indictments were made in his essay “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” when Douglass brought attention in 1852 to the agonizing cries of grief enslaved mothers and daughters exhibited as they were regularly put on display en route to slave auctions.

Cast one glance, if you please, upon that young mother, whose shoulders are bare to the scorching sun, her briny tears falling on the brow of the babe in her arms. See, too, that girl of thirteen, weeping, yes! weeping, as she thinks of the mother from whom she has been torn! The drove moves tardily. Heat and sorrow have nearly consumed their strength; suddenly you hear a quick snap, like the discharge of a rifle; the fetter clank, and the chain rattles simultaneously; your ears are saluted with a scream, that

seems to have torn its way to the center of your soul! The crack you heard, was the sound of the slave-whip; the scream you heard, was from the woman you saw with the babe. Her speed had faltered under the weight of her child and her chains! WHERE, under the sun, you can witness a spectacle more fiendish and shocking. Yet this is but a glance at the American slave-trade, as it exists, at this moment, in the ruling part of the United States.” (“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” p. 12)

Saidiya Hartman’s research (once again) narrows in on Douglass’ focus on the “spectacularized” aspects of black women’s treatment during slave culture illustrating how the black identity was heinously altered and fatally constructed by the dominant culture in 19th century America. ...“where terror can hardly be discerned – slaves dancing in the quarters, the outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage, the constitution of humanity in slave law, the fashioning of identity, and the processes of individuation and normalization.” (*Scenes of Subjection*, p. 4) Hartman’s vivid descriptions (from the previous citation) in her text of the dehumanizing slave coffle and the auction block antics of enslaved men, women, and children details a strange staged merriment through dance. She does this by recounting how enslaved people chained together in what was called a coffle were made to convincingly dance and sing as they entered a town where prospective slave owners would soon separate them from their families. Dancing, as Hartman also points out, was a very important part of slave culture as it primarily served as a means for exercising enslaved blacks and masking the horror that awaited them on the auction block. Obligatory dancing was also a form of protection for the enslaved from the lash that awaited them for any open display of resistance or defiance. From the perspective of slave traffickers, dancing also served to

appease the comfort levels or, better the cognitive dissonance of the white slave owning class de-sensitizing them from the human atrocities they committed against the enslaved which is what Douglass' indictments call out.

Years later, Douglass together with Ida B. Wells would also choreograph and perform their own pas de deux of defiance in the entranceway of the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 in order to confront the apparent implications of a deliberate racial absence and silencing of the black community. "In a pamphlet protesting the exclusion of a significant African American presence at the fair and presenting a counterimage of American life to that was presented by the exposition, ...Douglass and ...Wells labeled the exposition's center a 'white sepulcher'." ("Imagining America," p. 65) In response, "the fair's organizers in fact underscored the separation between viewers by designating particular days for African Americans to attend." ("Imagining America," p. 69) However, this wasn't the only time these two partnered up to challenge the systemic oppression against blacks in America after slavery ended. Douglass wrote Wells a public letter of support to her text *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States 1892 – 1893 – 1894* that was published in the preface of the text stating the following.

Let me give you thanks for your faithful paper on the lynch abomination now generally practiced against colored people in the South. There has been no word equal to it in convincing power. I have spoken, but my word is feeble in comparison. You give us what you know and testify from actual knowledge. You have dealt with the facts with cool, painstaking fidelity, and left those naked and uncontradicted facts to speak for themselves. Brave woman! you have done your people and mine a service which can neither be weighed or measured. If the American

conscience were only half alive, if the American culture and clergy were only half Christianized, if American moral sensibility were not hardened by persistent infliction of outrage and crime against colored people, a scream of horror, shame, and indignation would rise to Heaven wherever your pamphlet shall be read. (*A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States 1892 – 1893 – 1894*, Preface)

Douglass and Wells would team up again and again with other Suffragists to gain the right to vote for all women. Here, Angela Davis singles out the more controversial side of Douglass' Black Male Feminism that is attributed to his own gender biases regarding black women's right vote.

Even Frederick Douglass was sometimes uncritical of the prevalent stereotypes and clichés associated with women. But his occasionally sexist remarks were never so oppressive as to depreciate the value of his contributions to the battle for women's rights in general. If Douglass deserves any serious criticism for his conduct in the controversy surrounding the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, it is not so much for his support of Black male suffrage, but rather for his seemingly unquestioning faith in the power of the ballot within the confines of the Republican party. ...The real tragedy of the controversy surrounding Black suffrage within the Equal Rights Association is that Douglass' vision of the franchise as quasi-panacea for Black people may have encouraged the racist rigidity of the feminists' stand on woman suffrage. (*Women, Race, and Class*, pp. 85-86)

As indicated in the above passages, the thread connecting Ailey's *Cry* to Douglass' writings, speeches, and most especially his slave narrative is a complex web of intersectional violence, political resistance, Africanist spirituality, and a literal weeping / crying out against the cruel treatment of black women (namely, black mothers) in America. Whether it was through the potency of modern dance

choreography or Abolitionist and Suffragist activism, the Black Male Feminism of both Ailey and Douglass were peaked by their personal interactions with their mothers and the general suffering of disenfranchised black women – which prompted an interventionist acknowledgment and advocacy on their part. As a result, Ailey’s artistic and Douglass’ literary indignation have levied an on-going chilling and formidable critique as well as contradictions against the tenants of white supremacy and the white establishment while it has also publically chartered an on-going discussion and sometimes debate by all whose work identifies, interrogates, and confronts the irreprehensible historical experiences of black women in America – discussions and debates that are continuing centuries and decades after their own lifetime. It is for these reasons that *Cry* must be re-examined within the context of American Dance Studies, not merely as a dance of contestation, but as an archetypal performative statement that critiques the United States government and the wider white establishment in America for its historical neglect and vicious treatment of its black female citizenry. Alvin Ailey should also be viewed much in the same way as scholars are re-writing the legacy of Frederick Douglass as a nineteenth century Male Black Feminist harbinger for justice. In doing so, these revisionists histories and her-stories in the fields of African American, Women’s, and Dance studies will provoke fresh ideas and commentary about the social and political implications of the past one hundred forty plus years’ and its interconnection to the political fruitful and sometimes futile labor of archetypal Male Black Feminist resistance in dance like the one found in Ailey’s *Cry*.

From the Beginning More Than A State, A Stage for Constructing Identity and Resistance: Critical Performances of Black Womanhood in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century New York – A Historiography

This dissertation chapter reads the State of New York as a stage – a rivaled geopolitical and theatrical space that has literally necessitated performances of black feminist activism and resistance throughout various historical moments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In doing so, this dissertation chapter considers the many ways black women living and working in New York City before, during, and after the turn of the century have used the potent suggestive art of literature, photography, dance, nudity, and sexuality in print to challenge and to symbolically re-fashion their private personae and public image – as well as the extent to which their successfully refashioned self-representations have been exploitatively appropriated and distorted by white women (and others) for the purposes of mere entertainment, profit, and in deference to the politics of respectability. For instance, this dissertation chapter conducts a close examination on how black women like Sojourner Truth (and others) offered resistance to their enslavement and / or labor exclusion in the State of New York in a manner that also reveals a striking similarity to Alvin Ailey’s Black Male Feminist debut of *Cry* in New York City at City Center in 1971 (staging his soloist, not as a slave or as a black matriarch, but as a respectable working class black matron as discussed in chapter one of this dissertation). Even more so, this dissertation chapter unpacks the specific ways the modern dance choreography staged in *Cry* undoubtedly bares an intimate resemblance to Truth’s recalibrated portrayal of herself as being greater than an ex-slave from the State of New York, particularly as she very

deliberately cloaked her chosen identity in that of a reformed spiritualist and (arguably) as an asexual feminine black matron in the 1870's – which (by all accounts on her life) was a divinely rehearsed and modest staging of herself she often claimed was choreographically inspired and directed by the Holy Spirit. Further, this dissertation chapter uses Truth's life as a trope for bringing all of the aforesaid analyses together by first grounding it with how the general racist and sexist colonial and early industrial era practice of unfair and inhumane legislative and economic policies against black women in the State of New York warranted a series of artistic, social, and political activist disruptions to the many grossly invented (but, highly profitable) literary and theatrical depictions about black women which are continuously articulated and resisted even today. Likewise, the arguments being made in this chapter are designed to specifically advance the overarching assertion made thus far in this dissertation research which is that Ailey's *Cry* was not staged as “art for art's sake,” certainly not with its debut and its perpetual performativity having been christened in New York City and continuing globally (to date) for over forty years. This is a meaningful observation that is highlighted throughout this chapter's research because of the region's historically hostile legacy of culturally erasing the pretext for *de facto* discriminatory policies and practices while steadily culturally engineering unfair *de jure* legislation thus promoting the need for performances of black feminist activism and resistance from slave culture to present times in the State of New York.

This is the case because it wasn't until construction workers in lower Manhattan unexpectedly unearthed a Negro Burial Ground near Wall Street in 1991 bringing

millions of dollars in architectural development to a halt, that colonial New York became less of a gravely under-examined geopolitical space within the context of recovering historical black subjects in the northern United States. Most Americans (New Yorkers, especially) knew (and continue to know) very little or absolutely nothing about the state's early history as a lucrative slave-holding colony before discovering this monumental archeological find. (*Slavery in New York*, p. 3) There are several reasons that very broadly explains this historical oversight, and in some cases racialized and gendered omission. One reason is that Dutch, British, and American colonial rule over the region has almost exclusively been recounted through a conservative public school curriculum that has historically advanced a white patriarchal agenda on U.S. policies seldom accounting for the lives of people of color or women. While another reason for subsequent historical gaps about black subjects, especially black female subjects, during the era of slavery in New York can be attributed to how the partisan politics of Abolitionist's campaigns (bolstered by pro-Union propaganda about the Civil War) have been (again, very broadly) distilled into a national memory that masculinizes all slaves and collapses all of the northern continental United States (including Canada) into what was supposedly an inviting safe haven for both enslaved and free blacks alike – although, this was never the case.

Nell Irvin Painter's research in, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, based on the life of Sojourner Truth,⁷ a prominent eighteenth century New Yorker (as well as a former slave, successful litigant, itinerant preacher, Abolitionist, and early Black

⁷ Sojourner Truth's former name as a slave was Isabella Van Wagner. (*Sojourner Truth*, p. 74)

Feminist) assists to critically affirm and mend the gaps on the collective experiences of blacks (more especially of black women) in New York State during its nascent stages.

When Isabella [Sojourner] was born, the American North as well as the American South was a land of bondage. The effacement of the memory of northern slavery has skewed American regional identities by exonerating white northerners and blaming white southerners. This erasure complicates the task of situating Isabella's life history, for by the mid-nineteenth century, when Sojourner Truth was a familiar presence in anti-slavery circles, New York belonged to the metaphorical land of liberty. With *southern* slavery as the symbol of *American* slavery, Truth's early life automatically migrated into a vague, composite antebellum South, a Southern Nowhere that for all its lack of specificity is definitely south of the Mason-Dixon line. (*Sojourner Truth*, p. 8)

Painter's biographical portrait of Truth also gleans the extent to which the slave labor of black men and women and its profitable bi-products (cotton, tobacco, sugar, etc.) were the backbone of New York's thriving economy. This best explains why New York's urban slave population was the largest in the country (second only to the state of South Carolina) by the end of the eighteenth century and efforts to preserve its profitability never permitted for slavery to be outright abolished in the state, not technically. Instead, the state's legislature gradually phased slavery out over a grueling period of twenty-eight years. This protracted phase out to end slavery helped to preserve the State of New York's greater financial interests well into the industrial age and beyond. For Abolitionists, however, the rollout approach to emancipation would create a much-contested dilemma because slavery would be legally banned; yet many blacks would

remain as slaves.⁸ “With federal power deployed on the city’s streets in support of the interests of slaveholders and in opposition to the [overall] interests of black New Yorkers, the stage was set for a decade in which metropolitan politics became divided ever more deeply on the issue of slavery.” (*Slavery in New York*, p. 282) Painter’s research also indicates that this inherently flawed policy did very little to fully liberate enslaved blacks as much as it somberly re-invented the travesty of bondage for many black families in the State of New York. Contrary to the one allowance in the legislation that accounts for black women in what appears to be a chivalrous display of mercy by releasing them from slavery at the age of twenty-five (as oppose to the age of twenty-eight – like the age of manumission set for black men), the reality is that this caveat in the law only factored in black women’s shorter life expectancy to that of black men as a consequence of slavery.

Faced with the everyday threat of a premature death while waiting for a chance at freedom in the State of New York, brave souls like Truth openly walked away from their slave owners before they either met the emancipation age requirement not taking the chance to wait until the proposed July 4th, 1827 date for the total eradication of slavery in the state. Slave-owners in New York would retaliate by illegally selling their remaining lot of enslaved blacks to southern slavers to avoid losing their financial investment in total due to the impending creed of emancipation or slaves running away. This would be a tragic reality for Truth whose son Peter was illegally sold out of state

⁸ “In New York, discussion of abolition began in earnest in the 1780s, and in 1799 the state began the process of gradual emancipation. Slavery would end on the Fourth of July 1827. For those born before 1799, emancipation would be unconditional; but those born after 1799 might have to serve a further period of indentured servitude: until they were twenty-eight, if male, or twenty-five, if female.” (*Sojourner Truth*, p. 23)

from New York to Alabama. Even though she would successfully challenge his illegal sale in court securing an unprecedented win for the time as a black woman fighting to get her son back, most black women would not be as fortunate in the same regard. This is because enslaved black women in the State of New York were typically dissuaded altogether from having children. Driving the support behind this pervasive rationale for slave population control was the fact that urban slave chattel conditions didn't easily accommodate for large families – white or black. Also, the obvious necessity for enslaved black women to have to care for their own children was considered by many New York slave owners a distraction that would have prevented them from giving their undivided attention to their subservient role as a domestic slave caring for white children and white families in general.

In New York City, unlike the rest of the colony, black women nearly always out-numbered black men. In 1703, for instance, women of childbearing age constituted about 45 percent of the city's black population; in 1737, 35 percent. But they bore very few children. Most enslaved women were dead by age forty and or their complications of childbirth, exacerbated by poor nutrition and years of toil. Some were simply driven mad. ... Slave's low fertility rate failed to concern their owners. On the contrary, female sterility became a selling point in a city with limited housing. ... One owner sold his female slave 'because she [bred] to fast for her owner to put up with such inconvenience.' Infant mortality was high, and infanticide not uncommon, although it is unclear who was committing the infanticide – mothers or masters. (*Slavery in New York*, p. 64)

These everyday hostilities toward black women's reproductive and maternal interests made Truth's court victory in having the State of New York return her son back to her from the State of Alabama all the more sweet – even by current standards. Yet, almost

two centuries after Truth's compelling, but unusual, legal performance as a maternal character witness on her own behalf, and decades after all of the fanfare surrounding the discovery of the mother lode of an excavation in 1991 (as stated earlier - just blocks away from Wall Street⁹), the overwhelming majority of historical black female subjects in early New York are principally remembered for either being slaves who were visibly absented, near death, or just dead (in lost and forgotten graves).

Now whereas historical black female subjects have been virtually erased from the geopolitical canons on colonial New York, the theatrical scene throughout the state's history has otherwise been littered with obscene caricatures stigmatizing black women's physical appearance and moral character as a means of justifying their under-privilege class status in American society. Major cabaret acts, Vaudeville, Broadway, including Hollywood film screen productions have extensively used New York City as a cultural backdrop to produce eons of humiliating depictions of black women as recklessly wanton individuals with no honor befitting anyone's (but especially, any civilized white man's chivalry) or respect. This was because "the only way theatergoing white men of all classes could safely camouflage their sexual desire for black women was through ridicule." (*Sojourner Truth's America*, p. 121) *Lulu Belle* a stage "mulatta melodrama by Edward Sheldon and Charles MacArthur serves as a prime example of how this theatrically common and vulgar black feminine archetype was developed and steadily employed by Broadway producers. (*The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, p. 77)

⁹ Un-covering a "Negro Burial Ground" just blocks away from Wall Street really should not have come as a surprise to anyone (least of all, New York Historians) because one of the first and main commodities sold or traded on Wall Street were enslaved Africans.

Dubbed by one reviewer as ‘the Carmen of Harlem,’ ... “[t]he play follows the career of Lulu Belle, a calculating and capricious light-skinned nightclub entertainer and dancer (played on Broadway by the white actress Lenore Ulric in blackface) who achieves world fame but is, in the end, murdered by one of her many discarded suitors.” (*The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, p. 77) The play was hugely successful on Broadway and later became a Hollywood movie thereby cementing a theatrical archetype about black women as artistic subjects that could be vehemently disparaged with minimal public outcry for rebuke or redress. Both the stage and film screen scripts of *Lulu Belle* were hugely successful in the portrayal of an every black woman as an undeserving, untrustworthy, and irresponsible city dweller that couldn’t manage the many lucrative opportunities that a place like New York City afforded young single women. Not surprisingly, “[c]ritics were less impressed with *Lulu Belle*’s plot or acting than they were with the verisimilitude of its staging: a black street scene (complete with a four-story tenement, functioning fire escapes, and a Ford automobile), a Harlem boarding house, a luxurious Parisian apartment, and most highly praised, a recreation of a Harlem cabaret, where the performance of the Charleston was a show stopping number.” (*The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, p. 77) All of which reinforced notions about black women and black femininity in general as being unsuitable for upward social mobility. It was also the case that female impersonators in Drag also re-appropriated the *Lulu Belle* archetype after 1926 to fuel their own utility and visibility. (*The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, p. 78)

And once again, whereas enslaved black women's lives in the State of New York's early history is more often than not remembered for not being remembered (despite the fact that at various times they historically out-numbered enslaved black men in New York City by 4-1). Or, where the national memory of black women is like a *Lulu Belle*, lacking any noteworthy genteel attributes and qualities, the metanarratives out of many scholarly texts (even those with a black feminist slant) suggest that black women first enter into the commonwealth of the State of New York and settle into New York City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century through a steady stream of roving exiles from the southern United States during The Great Migration. In effect, the historical erasure of black female subjects as denizens (enslaved or otherwise) in colonial New York including the deliberate Broadway and subsequent Hollywood staging of black women as crude misfits has caused the greater majority of black women in America to be read as interlopers and not as historical residents. An illustration of this is observed in, *Southern Colored Girls in the North: The Problem of Their Protection*, written by Francis Kellor (a white woman) who works as the General Director of Inter-Municipal Committee Household Research in 1905 when she writes this short article detailing her concerns about the challenges young black women who are migrating from the south are encountering upon their arrival to the north. Kellor points out that she is particularly concerned about the employment options available to these black women because they are not skilled and laziness prevents them from getting work in places that would hire them. She also acknowledges the fact that there are deceptive employment agencies that prey on these women leaving many no other

alternatives than to resort to prostitution as a means of survival. The vulnerability of black women migrating from southern to northern cities appears to be Kellor's genuine concern. Albeit her "genuine concerns" disavow the fact that black women had somehow managed to survive Dutch, British, and American slavery, pre-Civil War race riots, The Civil War itself, and the era of Reconstruction in the State of New York without her or anyone else's interest in their well-being. Hazel Carby's black feminist research (some eighty years later) brings to light what turns out to be Kellor's hidden racism and sexism behind the apprehension surrounding the mobility of black women at the turn of the century.

However, Elise Johnson McDougald's essay titled "The Task of the Negro Womanhood," makes an explicit intervention in 1925 as a black female literary scholar of the era thereby accounting for the presence of black women in New York City during the Harlem Renaissance as law abiding and hard working native residents, migrants, and immigrants. She does this by acknowledging that black women are confronted with numerous challenges that affect them both because of their race and their gender, and her analysis reads as if it is in direct response (two decades later) to Kellor's critique challenging its notion that black women are incompetent and lazy. Johnson McDougald states that New York City in the 1920s is ripe with opportunities for black women; however, these opportunities are not without their obvious racist and sexist setbacks. She asks about the black woman in her essay... "What are her difficulties?" and "How is she solving them?" ("The Task of the Negro Womanhood," p. 369) Then, she articulates in great detail the fields that black women have been able to attain

employment in as well as the harsh realities of being a black woman living anywhere in America during the early 20th century. One of the ways that she does this is summed up in the following passage.

She is conscious that what is left of chivalry is not directed toward her. She realizes that the ideals of beauty, built up in the fine arts, have excluded her almost entirely. Instead, the grotesque Aunt Jemimas of the street-car advertisements, proclaim only an ability to serve, without the grace of loveliness. Nor does the drama catch her finest spirit. She is most often used to provoke the mirthless laugh of ridicule; or to portray feminine viciousness or vulgarity not peculiar to Negroes. This is the shadow over her. ("The Task of the Negro Womanhood," p.370)

Additionally, Johnson McDougald categorizes black women at this time in the following manner: 1. Negro wives and daughters of privilege. 2. Negro women in business and profession. 3. Negro women in trades and industry. 4. Negro women in domestic service. She states that the first category is the minority in number because few black women marry or are born into an upper class status that affords them the luxury of leisure. She also points out that marrying into this type of fortune is often a result of the beauty of the women – which allows for the conclusion that these black women probably resembled white standards of beauty. Moreover, she also addresses the fact that black men are severely un-employed, under-employed, and are either dead or have abandoned their families. Thus, the struggle for black women to raise children is even harder. The women in the last category serving as domestic workers, of course she acknowledges, are the ones that are most vulnerable and disenfranchised. Unlike Kellor (some twenty years earlier), Johnson McDougald finds it necessary to inform her audience of readers that there are self-motivated and competent black women working

as secretaries and in other high profile clerical positions in New York City within college settings including public schools, large department stores, clinics and hospitals, and even libraries. She does point out, however, that these women were still confronted with lower salaries than their white counterparts and both black and white men working in New York City. Mention in her essay is also made of successful women's organizations and sororities like Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, and the National Association of Colored Women to show that black women were contributing to the improvement of their community and wider society. Johnson McDougald defends the honor of black women (again, unlike Kellor) by claiming that they are no more prone to act out in a sexually immoral way than women of any other race that are economically disadvantaged and mentally overwhelmed from raising children alone in a place like New York City. Together with a tragic production like *Lulu Belle*, highlighting the dialectic of Kellor and Johnson McDougald's essays work to re-enforce this dissertation chapter's central premise and that is the regional politics surrounding black women's enslavement and selective labor exclusion in nineteenth and twentieth century New York helped to promulgate blatantly racist and sexist theatrical and literary misrepresentations about black womanhood. This has ultimately rendered New York as more than a state, but as a stage for pro-socio-literary performances of black feminist resistance long before Ailey's choreographic intervention in the same way with *Cry*.

But by the time Hazel Carby's black feminist research is explicitly calling out Kellor's racism and sexism in the 1980s, she too is directly engaged in launching a literary intervention for the way most especially The Great Migration has been

previously thought, both in literal socio-cultural policies and theatrical performances – especially social dances, to impact the lives of black men and women migrating from the south to the north. Accordingly, Carby asserts that the way Kellor and others have depicted these black migrant men and women as dumb and lazy because they are arriving from the south is actually in error considering there was an urbanization that was transpiring in the south before many of these individuals moved north. While Carby doesn't dispute that some black men and women were certainly victimized once arriving to cities like New York, she nevertheless states that this type of victimization was more or less a direct result of the exploitation of their migrant status and this exploitation that transpired did not have anything to do with a natural proclivity as blacks to succumb to an illicit life style. It is from this platform that Carby openly makes a sharp and piercing criticism of Kellor's racist analysis for the protection of black women and she claims that this "protection" was really a means of policing the migratory movements of black women's bodies as well as policing the possibility of them exhibiting any type of agency. This spawned what Carby calls a "moral panic" which caused individuals and institutions to rally together on the premise that black women migrating and ultimately settling in urban areas was a moral and social problem (as if black women were not already self-sufficient and self-respecting residents in the north). It was also responsible for spawning, then furthering, a rational particularly within the black middle class to postulate these distorted ideas into theories about black women in urban communities (much of which presently exists). The following passage summarizes this notion well.

The need to police and discipline the behavior of black women in cities, however, was not only a premise of white agencies and institutions but also a perception of black institutions and organizations, and the black middle class. The moral panic about the urban presence of apparently uncontrolled black women was symptomatic of and referenced aspects of the more general cries of social displacement and dislocation that were caused by migration. (*Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context*, p. 24)

The operative words of this citation are “social displacement” and “dislocation.”

Carby's introspection identifies by name the systemic social and economic concerns plaguing the better interest and image of migrating black women in the early 20th century. On some levels, the concepts of social displacement and dislocation could also be used to argue that this has been the predicament of African women since being forcibly brought to the shores of the Americas during the *Maafa*.¹⁰

Still, Carby is actually making the above commentary in direct response to a passage that she cites from the autobiographical work of a black woman named Jane Edna Hunter who assumes a role similar to the one discussed in the Kellor article that is available for European immigrant women at Ellis Island. The organization Hunter founded and operated was called the Phyllis Wheatly Association, which by all appearances seemed to have the sole endeavor of protecting (policing) black women in urban communities once they have arrived from rural southern communities. Carby uses Hunter's cause and mission to rescue black women from their own will / agency as a means of emphasizing the charge she makes against the black bourgeois for attempting to regulate the movements of black women. The irony of Hunter's case is that she too

¹⁰ *Maafa* is a Kiswahili term for “The Trans Atlantic Slave Trade.”

was a migrant who encountered similar challenges based upon the misperceptions of her own mother and society at large. Yet, she makes a career of promoting negative conjecture about other black women falsely warranting the need to police their movements under the guise of protecting them. It also appears as though Hunter is one of the first individuals to blatantly oppose the dance halls and nightclubs as suitable spaces for black women.

Dance halls and nightclubs are particular targets of Hunter's reformist zeal, and she identifies these cultural spaces, located in the 'heart of (the) newly created Negro slum district(s),' as the site of the production of vice as spectacle: 'Here, to the tune of St. Louis voodoo blues, half-naked Negro girls dance shameless dances with men in Spanish costumes... The whole atmosphere is one of unrestrained animality, the jungle faintly veneered with civilized trappings' (NP, pp. 132-3). Places of amusement and of recreation for black people are condemned as morally dangerous and described as being filled with 'lewd men and wretched women' (NP, p. 132). Nightclubs where black women perform for a white audience threaten the very foundations of Hunter's definitions of acceptable interracial relations... (*Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context*, p. 29)

Carby continues her critique on policing black women's bodies by juxtaposing the work of white and black male writers from The Harlem Renaissance like Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926)¹¹ and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928)¹² as means of

¹¹ "[B]oth *Lulu Belle* and *Nigger Heaven* pivot on a notion of a corrupted and corrupting black female sexuality. Like *Lulu Belle*, Lasca Sartoris, the campy sexual predator of Van Vechten's novel, condensed sociological stereotypes of nightlife's moral pathology and cultural stereotypes of the light-complexioned or 'mulatta' temptress into a singular sexual and racial threat." (*The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, p. 77)

¹² It is important to note the hypocrisy of several of the closeted gay male writers from the Harlem Renaissance Movement for ignoring that "just as heterosexual single black women would inevitably bring about the downfall of the race, homosexual men and women threatened the suitability of Harlem's two strongest institutions: The church and the family." (*Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, p. 98)

demonstrating the how the literati also participated in demonizing the sexuality of black women dwelling (and dancing) in urban cities like New York in their literary work.

Leading the charge, nonetheless, to contest the habitual despicable array of literary stereotypes steadily portrayed about black women living, working, and dancing / entertaining in northern cities like New York long before Carby (in the 1980s) or Johnson McDougall (in 1925) was Sojourner Truth (in the 1860s) – who was forced to use photography as a means of recuperating nineteenth century distortions written about her by two of her “so-called” biggest white feminist allies, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frances Dana Gage. According to Painter, “[e]verything we know of Sojourner Truth comes through other people, mostly educated white women.” (*Sojourner Truth*, p. 174) This is the case because Truth was not formally literate and had to rely on others throughout her entire lifetime to read to her and ultimately to pen her narrative. So, Truth’s life (both in the private and public sphere) has been preserved primarily through the repetition of wildly fabricated stories based on the ones told in Stowe’s 1863 publication of “Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl” and Gage’s infamous letter that included her invented “Ar’n’t I Woman?” speech. This was a speech that was written in competition with Stowe’s piece twelve years after the 1851 Akron, Ohio event where Gage and Truth first met.

As a result, the experiences of Truth’s life were unabashedly transformed into an exotic literary character conjured by Stowe that was described as a gaunt Amazon like

Carby also cites Houston A. Baker as stating the Harlem Renaissance was actually “the failure of the black bourgeoisie to achieve cultural hegemony and to become a dominant social force.” (*Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context*, p. 35)

figure born in Africa who was responsible for having bore thirteen children (all, or, most of whom were sold away). Stowe's narrative even more interestingly tells of a Truth who unwittingly managed to stump (or, better yet, silence) her contemporary Frederick Douglass with the (unlikely) blasphemously posed question, "*Is God Dead?*"¹ Additionally, Truth was made to be older in age than she really was at the time both Stowe and Gage were writing about her. And, what's worse is that she was somehow killed off at the end of Stowe's south of the Mason-Dixon, nineteenth century soap opera about her life – although, it was well known that she lived for some twenty or more years beyond the publication date of "Libyan Sibyl." This is a point of clarification on Stowe's work that Gage pointedly makes in her published letter. But, Gage only does this for the sole purpose of promoting her own fictional narrative on Truth. Therefore taking into consideration this dissertation chapter's earlier analysis on slavery in New York and it's historically offensive and un-chivalrous treatment of black women in general, one can only presume that the necessity for Truth's premature literary death in Stowe's "Libyan Sibyl" was not only to sell a more theatrically interesting story, but that it was a commonly preferred anecdotal ending by white readers about black women in general in nineteenth century New York (as also later observed in the intersectional racism and sexism of twentieth century white audiences that supported Broadway plays and Hollywood films like *Lulu Belle*). This of course does not withstand the exaggeration that Gage also makes on Truth's fertility, and by default all black women's fertility; including, the matter of fact sale of all of her children, exaggerated or not – which was also indicative of slavery in New York.²

Painter's biography goes on to explain how Truth must have understood that staging her own photographic narrative would be necessary for the aforesaid reasons.

Truth in public was extraordinary as an ex-slavewoman, and her vitality needs an explanation. The key lies in Truth's refashioning herself over long years of adult life and through access to uncommon sources of power. Relying on the gifts of the Holy Spirit and a remarkable network of abolitionist, feminist, and spiritualist supporters, she healed the fear and insecurity embedded in her wretched childhood. A powerfully re-made character attracted Stowe and Gage. (*Sojourner Truth*, p. 178)

The photographic images Truth sat for not only served to refashion the optics on her publically racialized and gendered persona for all, then and now, to see her as she saw herself – as middle-class and feminine. These photographic images also, very decisively, and publically redressed the offense Truth took from being made to look and sound like an ignorant Yankee with a southern drawl in Gage's "*Ar'n't I Woman?*" "As an older woman, Truth took pride in speaking correct English and objected to accounts of her speeches in heavy southern dialect. This seemed to her to take 'unfair advantage' of her race", writes Painter. (*Sojourner Truth*, p. 7-8) Truth must have taken an even greater level of offense to this accusation because she personally identified as an American born African with Dutch cultural heritage and her accent would not in any way have sounded like men and women enslaved in the south. As a result, Gage's "*Ar'n't I Woman?*" is presumably one of several reasons that provoked Truth to find it necessary to stage seven photography sessions that produced a total of fourteen iconographic images (commonly observed of her today as a black matron) dressed in a modest Quaker style attire with a white bonnet and a white shawl. One photo, in

particular, where she is wearing a similar outfit and spectacles while she is seated at a table with flowers and a book placed on it, she is also seen holding yarn and knitting needles in one hand (as she curled up her fingers in the other hand to conceal an injury from slavery), the caption underneath it read: “I Sell The Shadow To Support The Substance.” (*Sojourner Truth*, p. 189). For Truth, the photographic shadow she sold supported her desire to be viewed most obviously as a black matron and not as a slave. It also supported her internalized self-portrayed substance as a mature black feminine woman from the State of New York.

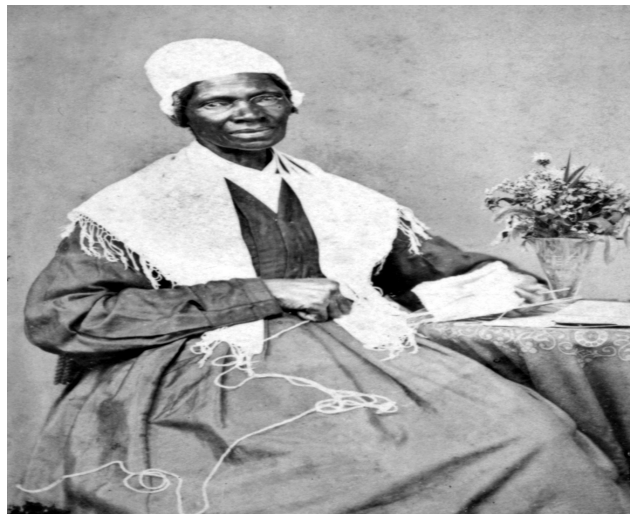


Figure 3. Sojourner Truth

Moreover, Truth’s photographic staging of herself as a feminine black matron dressed in a quintessential nineteenth century white shawl and bonnet foreshadows (in many respects) Ailey’s choreographic staging of Judith Jamison in his ballet *Cry* (again) not as a slave or as a matriarch but as a black matron (as previously discussed in chapter one of this research). Ailey (once again) chose to artistically stage and costume Jamison as a soloist in all white along with the accompanying white functional prop of fabric

choreographically used to briefly symbolize a lady's shawl – an image that has generated its own photographic iconography since 1971 because of its global performativity. Brought together, however, these solo iconic photographs of Truth and Jamison perform a rarely portrayed genteel aspect of black femininity because of both women being very dark skinned, tall, and certainly considered highly attractive by African standards of beauty. Together, they also aesthetically mirror Yoruba (Nigerian) spiritual references to the Orisha, Obatala, in the form of the mature woman, who is wrapped in a white shawl with a white head wrap on her head as a follower of Obatala. Who is, yet again, the owner of the white cloth and owner of the practitioner's head and divine inspiration. Obatala is also the saint for the disabled. Historically, this clarifies within the context of an African cosmology Truth's choice of dress and its correlation to her keen spiritual awareness and heightened intuitive thought processes as she matured as well as her injured hand. It also explains by comparison the indelible choreographic moment in *Cry* when Jamison wraps the white functional prop of fabric around her head like a gele, (which is an African headdress worn like a crown by ordinary women) and proceeds to gracefully parade in a stride around the stage (as also discussed in chapter one of this research). Not forgetting, of course, *Cry's* curious dedication to Ailey's *dignified* mother, Mrs. Lula Cooper and all black women everywhere, this analysis considers how the symbolism of the dedication aesthetically and gesturally is synonymous to the seven photographs Truth used to stage a dignified portrayal of herself which also spiritually relates to the mother of all the Orishas, Yemonja. Likewise, Yemonja features prominently as an Orisha in both Truth's photographic

legacy and Ailey's choreographic legacy in *Cry* because she is the divine mother of all creation and her maternal embodiment in the world appears in colors of blue and white (worn especially by women) as well as in all numeric denominations of sevens. She is always believed to be present in all forms of conception literal, figurative, and creative as she is present in the notion of most creation stories around the world or within the premise of rebirthing – especially, within the transformative period of seven days. Once again, this becomes a pertinent reference on rebirthing of sorts when thinking about black femininity within the broader context of this research, one that Truth delivers through photography and one that Ailey uses Jamison's black female dancing body (by proxy) through modern dance choreography to deliver on stage.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that Obatala embodies both the patron and matron saint for those with an ambiguous sexual identity. This is a very significant spiritual reference to Truth's experiences since most of her public life as an adult was lived challenging the widely embraced perception of her being androgynous while she (arguably) later in life supported the presumption of being asexual in order to simultaneously strike a balance between distancing herself as best she could from her own sporting and sinful past for the benefit of maintaining a creditable itinerant preaching ministry. This does not discount her efforts in kind to also avoid permitting her hand injury from becoming a complete disability and liability for her. Having survived simultaneously being her slave master's 'man' and his 'wench' as well as the wet nurse (and biological mother of his child /children) for most of her youth and well into a significant portion of her adult life, Truth was forced to labor in the fields as hard

as any enslaved man (like most enslaved women) despite the fact that she was physically injured and despite the fact that she was also repeatedly sexually injured (raped) like most other enslaved woman of her day at her owner's whim. This certainly would have summoned for Obatala and Yemonja's supernatural powers of spiritual healing, renewal, and purification on her behalf. (*Sojourner Truth's America*, p. 45)

This was also very likely the case for Ailey's mother who was sexually injured (raped) due in part to her status of being a domestic worker in a white home / community – a violent space where neither of these women had the ability to seek legal recourse for restitution in their life time. This is yet another justification for why both Truth and Ailey may have felt compelled to redress and ultimately re-interpret their concept of black femininity (albeit monolithically) in contrast with that of American society. Truth and Ailey used what was most potent at their disposal, photography and choreography for preserving their record of black femininity for their generation and others to come. Unfortunately for both Truth and Ailey, many historians have previously chosen to examine their lives (almost entirely) through a very narrow nineteenth or twentieth century Judeo-Christian white feminist cultural lens. This is why much of the general references made about Truth (most especially) in the preceding analysis with regards to her possessing an Africanist spirituality and her eloquently contrived photographic personae are articulated in Margaret Washington's biography titled *Sojourner Truth's America* as a fundamental effort on Truth's part to be primarily identified as African. This was clearly done (much like Ailey's *Cry*) to remove the *tache* (stain) of slavery

and to establish Truth's lifelong humanity, although it was legally denied for most of her life as an America slave.

For Washington, this perspective is so important that it opens the first chapter of her biography recovering Truth in the first sentence of the first chapter as having stated "I am African ... [y]ou can see that plain enough." She also traces Truth's "maternal grandparents [as] first-general 'salt water' people who experienced the brutal Middle Passage." Adding that her mother was "most likely that of West Central Africa[n ancestry] – [from] the region of the Kongo, north of Angola" and her father (because of his unusual height and stature) was more than likely a Gold Coast African "of esteemed, militaristic Denkyira or Ashanti ethnicity." (*Sojourner Truth's America*, p. 9-10)

Washington recovers, most importantly, Truth's own words to discuss the widely held notions and debates about her formative years as a slave in Ulster County, to which she states she was "bred" then born – if born at all "in the State of New York among the Low Dutch People." Truth also expresses how being "bred" as a slave in New York was the primary cause of her "illiteracy" which she clearly blamed on her environment.

"The Low Dutch... were very close and ignorant, and so naturally, to this day, I can neither read nor write." (*Sojourner Truth's America*, p. 12, 18) To her defense (against others), Washington offers a pivotal perspective on how Truth should be thought of on matters relating to illiteracy. She states: "... reject the term 'illiterate' when referring to Sojourner Truth; 'illiterate' suggests 'ignorant,' as indeed some writers have labeled Sojourner because she could not read and write. I view literacy as but one form of

learning, not the only means of knowledge, wisdom, or understanding.” (A WORD ON LANGUAGE, *Sojourner Truth’s America*)

Yet guided by the Holy Spirit like a dancer is directed by a choreographer, Truth often claimed that she was spiritually led to move and position herself socially and politically in and out of the State of New York – particularly, New York City as a younger free woman. Folks who knew her before she walked off to freedom said she “was long ‘fond of liquor and tobacco, and used both when she could get them ... but greatly changed in these respects afterwards.’ ... [They also said she] quit drinking when she embraced Methodist holiness in the 1820s, but it was another forty years before she gave up smoking. (*Sojourner Truth*, p. 27) Another account given on Truth as a young woman describes Truth and other young enslaved black women as active participants reveling during the much anticipated, Pinkster holiday celebrations practiced each year in Ulster County, New York.

As a Pinkster reveler, [Truth] engaged in European folk dancing as well as rhythmic, ‘double-shuffle, heel-and-toe-breakdown’; the ‘jug’; and the sexually provocative ‘Totau’ or ‘Toto Dance,’ accompanied by drum, tabor, fiddles, lyres, and fifes. One eyewitness described the Totau as ‘the most indecent dance that can well be imagined.’ When dancers ‘from time to time imbibed,’ movements became more intense, and their dresses developed an enticing décolletage. The *Pinkster Ode* highlights the scene, including an erotic female presence: [referencing] ... ‘*Afric’s daughters full of glee*’ (*Sojourner Truth’s America*, p. 45)

Known principally for her speech act performance of partial nudity in revealing her breast upon demand (to a crowd at a Feminist rally in Indiana in 1858), the above passage informs us that as a youth Truth was a dancer (and quite possibly a seductive

dancer at that) while Alice Walker quite simply reminds us that Truth, above all else, was first and foremost a woman. She was the complete package with a working (and clearly a very pleasing) vagina. Walker offers this reminder by stating: “Sojourner Truth certainly had a vagina... (a vagina the color of raspberries and blackberries – or scuppernongs and muscadines – and of that strong, silvery sweetness, with as well a sharp flavor of salt.)” (*But Some of Use Are Brave*, p. 43) This is a colorful but necessary reminder which draws a palatably vivid image of Truth’s most feminine parts because it cuts away at a conveniently orchestrated nineteenth century reduction of a spiritually, socially, and politically powerful black woman to that of a sassy back-talking mammie from the State of New York, at best. For most Americans, Truth has been consistently and selectively remembered for only having (one naked breast or at most) breasts that suckled white children (more than her own children). White and black historians love to remember Truth’s breasts as this nation’s favorite black breasts (certainly more so than Janet Jackson’s). More especially, her naked breast, the one that has been on consignment since 1858, long after the Abolition of American Slavery (even within the State of New York), is one that has been reliably available for nurturing white Feminist agendas and the general national historical consumption of the quintessential mammie, or national alter ego, the black matriarch who always manages to socially and politically castrate black men like Fredrick Douglass, then and now. Yet, all of these notions disavow that Truth also had a vagina. A vagina that was pleasing to her (when she could enjoy it as such – given her marriages / relationships with black men she loved). She possessed a vagina that also rivaled her mistress’ (like millions of

other enslaved black women) and a vagina that always competed with and clearly offended the strict moral tenants of nineteenth century Victorianism in a rough and tumble space like the State of New York. Therefore, the routine historical castration of Truth's vagina is a grossly typical erasure that once prompted a student after reading Walker's mention of Truth having a vagina to sincerely question: "*you mean, Sojourner Truth had a titty AND a pussy?*" To which this research sincerely and resoundingly replies: "YES. IN FACT, SHE HAD TWO TITTIES AND A PUSSY! She was a WOMAN." Walker offers the following important commentary on why it is important to remember Truth (and other black women like her) for having more than just breasts especially in a place like New York (at any historical moment).

It occurred to me that perhaps white women feminists, no less than white women generally, cannot imagine Black women have vaginas. Or, if they can, where [their] imagination leads them is too far to go. However, to think of Black women as women is impossible if you cannot imagine them with vaginas. Sojourner Truth certainly had a vagina, as note her lament about her children... Surely a vagina has to be acknowledged when one reads these words. (*But Some of Use Are Brave*, p. 43)

Recognizing that black women have vaginas (but even more so that Sojourner Truth had a vagina) also means that black women don't push their children out of their ass. It also means that black children are not shit that must be quickly discarded before societal contamination begins. (Or, before they become adults – especially, adult men like Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, and Michael Brown.) Walker goes further by also arguing: "and through THAT vagina, [they bare] children." (Again, just like the

mothers of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, and Michael Brown.) (*But Some of Use Are Brave*, p. 43)

Perhaps it is the Black Woman's children, and certainly not having to offer them slavery or a slave heritage or poverty or hatred, generally speaking: segregated schools, slum neighborhoods, the worst of everything – resents. For they must always make her feel guilty. She fears knowing that Black women want the best for their children just as she does. But she also knows Black children are to have less in this world so that her children, white children, will have more (in some countries, all). Better to deny that the Black Woman has a vagina. Is capable of motherhood. Is a woman. (*But Some of Use Are Brave*, p. 43)

But most importantly, what recognizing Truth for having a vagina also affirms is the agency displayed through her photographic self-proclaimed identity. In this vein, it is plain to see how she pushed back against the verbal and sexual abuses she endured throughout her adult life about her muscular appearance – whether it was by white men (again) at a Feminist rally in the State of Indiana in 1858 that wanted proof that she was in fact biologically a woman provoking her to reveal her breast in response as a speech act in the first place. (*Sojourner Truth*, pp. 138-140) Or, whether it was from the unwanted sexual advances from even white women like her former mistress, Sally Dumont and Ann Folger, her ministerial colleague who sexually exploited her racialized status. According to Painter, “Truth was no longer a timid victim who might let herself be fondled by Sally Dumont¹³ or Ann Folger¹⁴ or beaten by John Dumont or the Prophet

¹³ “Then, as now, the sexual abuse of young women by men is deplored but recognized as common. Less easily acknowledged, then and now, is the fact that there are women who violate children. The sexual abuse came from her mistress Sally Dumont, and Truth could tell about it only obliquely, in scattered pages in her *Narrative*. ... We have no statistics for the early nineteenth century, but in the late twentieth century, the assailants of about 5 percent of sexually abused girls are women.” (*Sojourner Truth*, p. 16)

Matthias. She was a forceful, indefatigable speaker for political causes that needed the strength and the body she brought to them.” (*Sojourner Truth*, p. 178) By photographically re-staging herself as a black matron and not as the statuesque androgynous ex-slave, Truth is able to resist all former depictions of herself as anything less than a respectable mature black and feminine woman. What is made increasingly apparent is the agency Truth demonstrates when she carefully alludes to her sexual abuse from Sally Dumont and Ann Folger in her narrative. She exemplifies, once again, her own determination and her own will to consciously cast herself as feminine and genteel in her photographs despite the innuendos about her being less than feminine and seemingly more coarse and masculine. Her candor about same-sex molestation and abuse by two different white women also condemningly confirms that while Truth may not have been perceived as a *lady* by the standards for the time, bi-sexual / lesbian / pedophilic white women like Dumont and Folger obviously sexually exploited Truth’s social position as a black female during slavery in order to conceal their own sexually forbidden desires.

Additionally, Truth’s traveling work performing as an itinerant preacher brought her in contact with black and white women of all ranks in New York society. Painter cites in the passage below the extent to which Truth was acutely aware of how evangelizing to poor women and prostitutes was a danger to her own

¹⁴ “Ann also used Isabella as an audience and as an erotic object. When the men were away in the city, she would get into Isabella’s bed and kiss and embrace her, under the pretext of demonstrating how Matthias showed his affection for ‘Mother’. Isabella later described Ann’s caresses without hinting at her own response, but she might well have been reminded of the behavior of her Ulster County mistress, Sally Dumont.” (*Sojourner Truth*, p. 56)

image and how she adamantly refused to be affiliated with these sorts of women (black or white) – not even to save their souls.

In the early 1830s, ... Isabella was at the dawn of her public career. She had the magnetism and asceticism that characterized New York perfectionism, and her physical stature, fervor, eloquence, and singing were making her reputation. ... Miss Grear and Mrs. Latourette introduced Isabella to moral reform by taking her with them to visit the most despised class of female New Yorkers. Isabella did not take well to the work. ... Grear and Latourette probably assumed, with the thoughtfulness that accompanies privilege, that poor black Isabella would have a special rapport with the down trodden. This turned out not to be the case. (*Sojourner Truth*, p. 45-46)

Evangelizing to the poor and down trodden also ran the risk of Truth being read outside of the context she had so diligently re-fashioned for herself. Hence, Truth's success in using photographs to reconstruct herself from a physically and sexually abused ex-slave in New York into an archetypal highly spiritual and identifiably *feminine* (but desexualized) black matron whose self-portrayed iconography over a century after her death is still globally recognized and honored as an American legend is nothing short of brilliance.

Truth probably never imagined that her photographic portrayal of how she saw herself would be later primed to be intellectually co-opted and politically patented generations later by scores of Feminists, Black Feminists, Womanists, scholars, thinkers, activists, playwrights, and even more black actresses, including politicians at will. For example, New York State's first black Congresswoman, Shirley Chisholm, (who bore a striking physical resemblance to Truth) used her gravesite to announce (rather, to stage) her bid to run for President of the United States of America in the 1972

election. And in 2009, First Lady Michelle Obama alongside former Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton and former Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi commemorated a bronze statue of Sojourner Truth's Bust in the Visitor Center of Emancipation Hall of The Capitol. This was a tribute that featured (yet another problematic rendition of) Gage's *Ain't I A Woman?* performed by film star, Cicely Tyson – a tribute that nonetheless was foretold by Harriet Beecher Stowe at the end of “Libyan Sybil,” when she wrote: “the Libyan Sibyl shall adorn the Capitol at Washington.” ([sojournertruth.org /Library/Archive/LibyanSibyl.htm](http://sojournertruth.org/Library/Archive/LibyanSibyl.htm)) Making this quite possibly the only truth that has ever emerged from Stowe's “Libyan Sibyl.”

Finally in this dissertation chapter's quest to recover then critically examine the lives other black women who bravely and uniquely challenged being pigeon held by American society simply because of their race and gender, Zora Neale Hurston in the early twentieth century, much like Sojourner Truth in the early nineteenth century, emerges as a subject of interest because she also used the State of New York as a stage for performing resistance against the racist and sexist limitations placed on her as only being a literary artist. Born and raised in the State of Florida at the end of the nineteenth century, Hurston lied about her own age for the majority of her life affording herself the opportunity to go back to school at a time when her age as a twenty something year old (despite her youthful appearance) would have permanently forced her into the workforce as either a sharecropper or a domestic laborer in the south. Although she was no stranger to field labor, by means of farming, Hurston spent her formative years as a young woman working as a personal assistant for several stage performers and

theatrical productions before enrolling as a student at (what is today) Howard University. After helping to found and name the campus newspaper called “The Hilltop” – which continues to exist today under the same name, Hurston would eventually connect with Charles Johnson, and later Alain Locke, Langston Huston, and several others in New York City to become one of the most admired and (one of the most ridiculed by the male) progenitors of The Harlem Renaissance’s Literary Movement.

In, “*Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston,*” Anthea Kraut shines a spotlight on the Broadway dance and choreographic contributions Hurston made which were intentionally compromised by her producers to keep her from eclipsing her own earlier famed literary accomplishment in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Kraut’s text additionally outlines the specifics that led to the undermining and beholdng relationship Hurston had with her white benefactor / “*god mother*” Charlotte Osgood Mason and her black mentor / colleague Alain Locke as she tried to choreograph and ultimately stage a successful production based on a day in the life of a railroad work camp in Florida entitled *The Great Day*. In turn, a complex relationship with Mason and Locke that was historically witnessed before in Truth’s relationship with Stowe and Gage evolves. Nevertheless, Hurston’s Broadway production process was met with opposition because she chose, despite the counsel and severe admonishment of Mason through Locke, to work artistically in the highly contested space of theatre utilizing black dancing (thus feminized) bodies. Hurston’s subject matter of folk dances performed by Bahamian dancers added further insult to

injury for Mason and Locke who were staunch conservative advocates of the Harlem literati (or, as Hurston colorfully referred to them – the *niggerati*). Using their written correspondence to magnify these occurrences that depict a mindset for Hurston that was contemplative, Kraut writes about how determined Hurston was to have her cake and eat it too. This determination uncovers why Hurston vacillated between honoring the commitment and support of Mason and Locke and why she continued to forge ahead with her plans to literally '*choreograph the folk*.' The passage below succinctly illustrates these arguments.

As a final upshot, she saw the sanity of the program order as I presented it to you and agreed to take it exactly. I wrote out fleshly on her kitchen table - she leaning over me as I did it, and with the explanations she saw its logic and I believe adopted it from within as if she herself was clearing it all up. In this way it will be more effective and will seem part of her own imagination. So, I think and believe all is again on the right path toward the goal of our hopes and plans. (*Choreographing the Folk*, p. 14)

Unpacked, this passage clearly suggests that Hurston did not have exclusive ownership or even artistic agency for her own dance-related work. She was contractually obligated to Mason for monies used to produce *The Great Day*. Likewise, she was also indebted to Mason's previous loyalties of support to her literary career. It is for this reason that Mason takes great pains to have her mouthpiece (Locke) oversee even the most remote details of the program order in an all out effort to salvage their prior financial and literary investments in Hurston. Most disturbingly, Locke's choice of words in his letter to Mason reporting his manipulation of Hurston due to her financial vulnerability are condescending and menacing. Locke boasts of his success to get Hurston to comply

with his demands while making it seem as if it was all her own idea. His phrasing of words like “*she saw the sanity,*” and “*I wrote it out fleshly” could serve as an explanation for why Kraut writes: “ her patrons’ belittling portrayal of her as a stumbling child illustrates the barriers she faced as a black woman artist striving to present her work in New York City on the Broadway stage.” (*Choreographing the Folk*, p. 101) Moreover, Locke’s description of Hurston standing over his shoulder as he charts his action plan for reining her in could be seen as a metaphor for their broader relationship with regard to matters pertaining directly to the New (York) Negro Movement – where Hurston also surfaces as an outsider, a Floridian (a black woman from the south, like so many before her) looking in despite her significant contributions to the overall (male dominated) regional movement. As if she didn’t have enough to deal with, Kraut’s work also indicates Hurston had to skillfully negotiate her dissatisfaction with the way another (lesser known) black female dance researcher at the time (Katherine Dunham) was later positioned in New York to steal the thunder of her anthropological research and work on cultural performances in Jamaica relating to African Diasporic religious dance forms. Much like Truth, Hurston also embraced her African heritage and sought through her literary and bodily artistic work to exemplify those aspects of African American culture that were perceived as not being worthy of mention. Even Hurston’s personal style of fashion was ahead of her time in the way that she too adorned herself with geles and other Africanist fashion aesthetics, none of which ever sat well with her white female sponsor or her black male mentor. It is presumably from this perspective Hurston rooted her conviction not to abdicate her*

ambition for dismantling the eroticized racial stereotypes constructed about black dancing (thusly, feminized) bodies on Broadway – which was unequivocally rejected by Harlem’s literary elite as an artistic / expressive *taboo*.

To best appreciate the complexities involving Hurston’s controversial conversation with her sponsor and mentor surrounding dance and ultimately black female sexuality within the black middle class community in early twentieth century New York, it is necessary to examine more closely (yet, again) the interconnection with historiographies justifying the necessity for the Harlem Renaissance. The truth is that much of what was being proposed and written about “*The New Negro*” by “*The New Negro*” was for the sake of deconstructing the absurdities from America’s Reconstruction Era created by white Americas about black Americans having a bestial nature and deviant sexual tendencies. So, early literary masters from the black community worked tediously to ensure their efforts to posit cultural ideas that maneuvered fairly close alongside black middle-class conservative southern agricultural values that weren’t going to be easily picked off by liberal northern industrial progress. This uphill battle of moral scholarship was hard fought with regard to demonstrating a respectable image around the northern geopolitics of race, gender, labor, and citizenship in cities like New York – particularly for, single black women. Likewise, Hip Hop artists from New York in the 1980s and 1990s very similarly would later rebel and go on to earn record breaking levels of notoriety and profits partially through the commodification of sexualized *black bottom*¹⁵ video vixens in music videos and on the

¹⁵ A popular dance created and performed by African Americans in the early twentieth century.

covers of urban magazines. These artists have likewise been routinely chastised by today's religious and political conservatives in the African American community for their reckless portrayal and exploitation of the black female dancing body. But, it is important to question whether or not African Americans of the new millennium should remain tenderly tied to New York's 1920s, Harlem bourgeois etiquette of evading the economies of erotic noire? And, better yet, to also question why there is still a persistent apprehension surrounding the urbanity of black female bodies and its eroticism as if it were an expression some type of forbidden fruit?

African American playwright, Ntozake Shange, begins the "*Fore/Play*" (foreword) of the anthology *Erotique Noire: Black Erotica* by stating how overdue a sensual / sexual textual genre is in giving cultural dignity and agency to the relational intimacies of African Americans. Further, Shange does this while aptly recalling the chronology of time and collective memories of suffering and pleasure on how long African Americans have waited for the freedom to move about reading, writing, and discussing a sensual and sexual text of this nature.

A collection of Black erotica at the end of the twentieth century, five hundred years into the Diaspora, one hundred and twenty nine years since emancipation, thirty-seven years since Emmett Till's slaughter, three years from Bensonhurst, [New York] and in the time of 'sexsational' personalities of Prince and Michael Jackson... To be a 'good' people, to be 'respectable' and 'worthy citizens' we've had to combat absurd phantasmagoric stereotypes about our sexuality, our lusts and loves, to the extent that we disavow our own sensuality to each other. ... Here in these stories and poems we are not myths or stereotypes, art forms or sex objects. We are simply folks at intimate play;

our fierce rhythms of desire, the exotic unencumbered by the 'other,' close and hot. (*Erotique Noire*, p. xix, xx)

In one of several introductions, co-editor Miriam Decosta-Willis explains how in jest she and the other editors stumbled upon the idea of creating a text just around the subject of black eroticism and how immediately their middle class tendencies worked hard at deterring them from this course. One of the first reservations they faced was justifying to their faculty of peers at distinguished institutions of higher learning why they had chosen such a forbidden topic. Decosta-Willis also cites the extent to which she musters the courage to confront the longstanding widely unchallenged reticence around black sexuality – as well as the extent to which a call for papers for the book is submitted with a criteria that carefully and respectfully delineated Judeo-Christian hetero-normative values and preferences. Summarily, this search for material led the editors through the annals of early nineteenth century and twentieth century African American literature that both cautioned against and abandoned caution to write in an erogenous vein.

... Black memorabilia, including books, toys, records, films, photographs, greeting cards, party items, and 'fucking books' (erotic comic books), were mass-produced from the mid-1800's to the present as novelty and souvenir items. ... Black erotica has not been considered an art form and has not been the subject of serious study for a variety of reasons, some historical, others cultural. One of the legacies of slavery was the 'genteel tradition' which shaped Black life and letters. Many nineteenth-century and early twentieth century Afro-American writers and artists felt compelled to prove the moral worth and intellectual integrity of Blacks by avoiding the literary representation of physical desire and sexual pleasure. (*Erotique Noire*, p. xix, xx)

Though the editors were successful in getting submissions from high-profile African American authors and scholars, more than a decade after this text has been published it still remains a text that is obscurely read. This is more of a result of the gross stigmatization of black sexuality (but even more so, the gross stigmatization of black female sexuality) during slavery.

“Black women’s sexuality is often concealed, that is Black women have had to learn to cover up all public suggestions of sexuality, even of sexual abuse”, writes Elsa Barkley Brown. This is much like the public life and historical recovery of Sojourner Truth as a Woman. “Black women especially middle-class women, have had to learn to present a public image that never reveals their sexuality.” (*What Has Happened Here*, p. 306) The central argument for Barkley Brown’s article is the need for a revisionist approach to writing women’s history especially as it relates to minority women. She also uses an original concept called “*gumbo ya ya*” to make a very salient point about linear histories not creating access for other voices usually traveling (migrating) across transverse planes to be heard and acknowledged. In turn, she also points out the need for the challenges within the labor market for black women and other minorities to be fairly addressed. Further, her work teases out the forms of sexual harassment endured by black women who maintained employment as domestics – which she explains is a result of the appropriation of gender differences between white women and minority women. “The effect of this is that acknowledging difference becomes a way of reinforcing the notion that the experiences of white

middle class women are the norm; all others become deviant – different from.”

(*What Has Happened Here,* p. 300)

In summation, this dissertation chapter concludes by reiterating its fundamental premise that a general hostility towards the mere historical existence, presence, and movements of nineteenth and twentieth century black women in New York State has either been unequivocally denied, misrepresented, or swept under the rug for broader national reasons having to do with the systemic inequalities of race, gender, labor, and citizenship in American geopolitics. Likewise, this chapter also concludes by restating that black women have responded in turn to these injustices through staging various performances of black feminist activism and resistance to the demoralizing theatrical and literary portrayals of black femininity, sexuality, and womanhood by literally rewriting their own historical accounts including black feminine bodily performances in literary texts, photography, dance, nudity, along with embracing the *taboo* of erotic literature using New York City as its main stage and bully pulpit. Even the centuries old unmarked and unknown burial remains of black women have challenged their invisibility to the regional history and socio-economic politics of New York State by bringing previously scheduled multi-million dollar architectural plans in 1991 to a screeching halt in lower Manhattan without accounting for (at least) the presence of their physical remains. To this end, this dissertation chapter closes by once again recognizing how Alvin Ailey’s debut and performativity of *Cry* is part of a long heritage of using the State of New York (more especially, New York City) as a literal stage for black feminist activism and resistance.

Few choreographers have been so overtly autobiographical as Ailey. His oeuvre is the record of a personal history; his works are rites de passage. Almost all of his creative activity may be traced to events in his past.
- Olga Maynard

Alvin Ailey's Muse: A Grammatical Sketch
On His Radical Inspirations in Dance
And its Black Feminist Revelations

Alvin Ailey's autobiography, *Revelations*, was co-authored with A. Peter Bailey – an accomplished black journalist who formerly served as the managing editor for *Ebony Magazine*. During the early stages of his career as a writer, Bailey worked with several prominent African American literary publications like *Black Enterprise*, *Essence*, and *Jet Magazine*, including mainstream major newspaper outlets like *The New York Times* and the *New York Daily News*. He also subsequently held a lecturer's position in journalism at Howard University. However, as a younger man, Bailey was a comrade of the honorable (late) black radical, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (otherwise known as, Malcolm X). He was also one of the last people to communicate with Malcolm X on February 21, 1965, the day of his assassination in Harlem, New York. Together, both men had helped to found the Organization of Afro-American Unity the previous year.

When it was announced that Ailey had hired Bailey to assist him with writing his autobiography, it created a series of controversies with his Board of Trustees. As a result, the governing body of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) franchise in the late 1980s sternly made their objections known about Ailey's radical choice as a co-writer including their heightened anxieties about his forth-coming gritty black dance tell-all manuscript. For this reason (among others), harsh formal and less

informed criticism (often in the form of dressing room chatter) surrounding the highly racialized, commercial, and capitalist agendas of the Board of Directors of the AAADT were often speculated upon. But it was flat out denied and dismissed by those in charge as un-substantiated gossip. This was until Edele Holtz, Ailey's first business manager, revealed (through an unlikely source) that as early as 1968 the young black dance company's (then) newly established largely white corporate driven Board of Directors was about to make an irreversible administrative shift unbeknownst to many.

The brute fact is that NYC is becoming – and has become – one of the most racially polarized cities in the country... Because there is no united fund raising as in other cities, boards of directors of private agencies are all from the wealthy white structure in order to raise money. We have reverted to an awful colonialism where the wealthy white is now raising money for all black staffs and all black clientele. I must confess that is why I was so disturbed at the board composition of AAADT – I thought here we go again – white wealth raising money for black causes.
(Ailey, p. 236)

Ailey would eventually come to embrace and openly share the above sentiments years later in his autobiography. He would also use his autobiography (with the assistance of Bailey) to speak out publically about how he had come to regret having relinquished most of his say-so over his company in order to secure white corporate financial support that was being made available in large part through his Board of Directors, among other things. This is why within the introduction of *Revelations* which was completed and published six years after Ailey's death, Bailey explains (as if compelled to do so by a conservative black readership and the wider-white dance community) why he believed he had been chosen “over New York City's well-known

dance writers” to assist Ailey in penning his autobiography. (*Revelations*, p. 11) Bailey stated: “ I began to understand why he might want a black writer. There were things he dealt with in talking about his childhood years [and throughout his career] that a black writer would probably understand without his having to provide a lot of explanation.” (*Revelations*, p. 11) Those ‘things’ Bailey references (aside from the previously mentioned professional challenges) were also about Ailey potentially not wanting to have to explain on a personal level to a white co-author the importance of black music and attending church in black children’s lives. Notwithstanding (quite possibly), Ailey’s desire to also not have to try to explain to a female co-author (black or white) the pain and confusion of what it was like growing up not knowing your biological father as a reluctantly gay black man in America. (*Revelations*, p. 11) So after multiple years of vetting Bailey against a host of well-established (mainly) white female dance authors and journalists, Ailey selected Bailey to serve as the co-author for his autobiography.

Guarded, yet unassuming from the outset of the writing process, the very first personal detail Ailey would ask his co-author to discreetly confirm for him was whether his most enduring and painful childhood memory of seeing his mother return home from work late one night after being obviously beaten and presumably raped was true. Another very intimate and wary detail that Ailey asked Bailey to confirm with his mother was whether Alvin Ailey, Sr. was in fact his biological father. To both of these longstanding un-verified details about his life while living in rural Texas during the early 1930s, Ailey’s mother responded, yes. Bailey later explained that when the answers to these questions were relayed to Ailey: “He listened but said nothing.”

(*Revelations*, p. 11) However, when discussing these events autobiographically in his text Ailey is quoted as remembering: “When I was about five years old, my mother was raped by four white men. ... She probably had been working in some white people’s kitchen. That was the other kind of work, along with picking cotton, available to black people. It was very clear to me that my mother was crying.” (*Revelations*, p. 19) And regarding his daunting childhood memory of rumors about his father, Ailey mentions that he recalled being told “that [his] father was a violent man and that he and his brother used to chase the Ku Klux Klan on horses.” (*Revelations*, p. 27) These recollections (among others) must have played a major role in his decision to choose Bailey as his co-author given his own out-spoken radicalism and personal connection to Malcolm X in their struggle against anti-black oppression in America. What happens next to the literary co-venture between these two men would come not only as a shock for those within the now severely fractured Ailey organization, but it would also come as a shock for the broader dance community as well. Immediately following *Revelations*’ publication in 1995, the governing body of the Ailey establishment posthumously discredited Ailey’s account on his own life and his career in the field of dance in his autobiography by banning it from being sold at The Ailey School and all other Ailey retail affiliates. In its place, a biographical text published one year later titled, *Alvin Ailey: A Life In Dance*, written by Jennifer Dunning – a well-known (white-female) dance critic and journalist from the New York Times, retailed in its place. This text was widely believed (then and now) to be a product commissioned directly by the handlers of the Ailey organization as Alvin Ailey’s official life story.

Jennifer Dunning, who was a lauded (long time) New York Times dance critic, and certainly no literary dilettante to the world of black concert dance especially the AAADT, managed to produce a mammoth size secondary sourced and third person narrated account of Ailey's life without ever interviewing him, this is only one year after his authorized autobiography was initially published.¹⁶ At first, her text seems to read as if she was operating as an agent for the Ailey Board of Directors after he dies. But, her compilation from interviews she conducted with over one hundred individual friends, family members, and professional colleagues of Ailey's including articles, reviews and private entries taken from Ailey's very own journal is nonetheless a relatively stunning final product. Dunning's text has also proven to be just as important to Ailey's legacy as his autobiography because it is lush with formerly lost pertinent information (including a few gritty details Ailey willfully understated or left out) about all of what was happening with him and those closest to him – both in his personal and professional life. However, it can never nor should it ever (despite the malaise of the Ailey corporation) replace *Revelations* because *Alvin Ailey* (the text) unfortunately whitewashes (or, at a minimum, it diminishes) what are several of the most controversial aspects that Alvin Ailey (the man) brings to the forefront in his autobiography. For instance, Dunning writes that Ailey's mother was raped by only one white man, not four white men as Bailey had previously reported back to Ailey. This is un-mistakenly a huge discrepancy between what Ailey's mother reported to Bailey and what she (allegedly) reported to Dunning. The reason Dunning's account is considered

¹⁶ The implication here is that Dunning was probably commissioned to write an un-authorized biography on Ailey shortly after his Board of Directors realized that Bailey would be Ailey's co-author and that he would soon die.

the most questionable source in this research is because the details she provides in her text on the day of the rape are offered in a very peculiar manner that oddly includes a possible suspect of the sexual assault. These are details highlighted in the biography in a precise manner that only Ailey's mother could have recalled herself (particularly since Ailey was too young to remember and because, once again, he nor Bailey were ever interviewed by Dunning). Either way, Dunning mentions that the start of what would become that dreadful day for Ailey's mother was filled with the normal routine of performing daily domestic chores for whites in the Texas neighborhood where they lived at the time. Dunning also describes that Mrs. Cooper (Ailey's mother - whom she alone in a casual way refers to by her first name, Lula) didn't notice anything different about her day until she saw a strange white woman from a distance staring at her. Then, she said she saw this woman abruptly wave and disappear. This woman was later believed to be Bonnie from the nationally infamous "Bonnie and Clyde" crime duo. Dunning then states as a matter of fact that Bonnie may have been hiding out with gangsters in the area who were of some kind of familial relation to her. All of which suspiciously transpires hours (maybe moments) before Mrs. Cooper is violently sexually assaulted.

A logical question to ask here is *what if* there is a discrepancy in the number of rapists who attacked Ailey's mother creating a contradiction between the autobiographical and biographical accounts on Ailey's life? And the most earnest response to that question is that even the slightest assertion of there only being one rapist, and not four, of only a probable criminal gang of three or more on-lookers is that

it reduces Mrs. Cooper's rape to a simple misfortune, an incident of bad luck that could of happened to any woman (even a white woman who was in the wrong place at the wrong time). Then, what follows is post-racially convenient in that this unfortunate event does not have to be read in the proper historical context of what was indicative of the systemic sexual rape and assault of black female domestic workers at the hands of white men in America and the long-term affects it has on black families – especially, black children, black male children – to be exact. Mrs. Cooper also now becomes a liar. She is also now guilty of falsely accusing several “innocent” white men of raping her in Texas during the 1930s without recourse. This potentially lends itself to question whether other or all black women have historically lied about being raped (gang raped, at that) by white men while working as domestics or slaves in their homes, communities, and on their plantations. What Mrs. Cooper first reported back to her son through Bailey about what happened to her that terrible night he saw her crying must also now be retracted, or at least significantly redacted. Additionally, it not only deflates the hint of any suggestion that Ailey developed an un-resolved psychological trauma about what happened to his mother when he was a child, but it quickly renders his literary and choreographic messaging in *Cry* and in his autobiography *Revelations* as a response about this event and others related to racial and sexual violence as overstated, or plainly exaggerated – despite the fruit of evidence that a closer analysis into Dunning's biography later bares. This is especially true since Dunning's text does make the subtle mention that these gang members, including the one suspected rapist, were arrested and prosecuted for (no less than) other crimes that were menacing specifically

to whites in the area shortly afterwards. The implication here is that reporting the crime as one committed by only one white rapist (and not four) quells the discomfort of white donors and readers who are also members of the white power structure that are likely to be squeamish about discussions or matters related to white racial / sexual violence towards blacks (especially, black women) particularly as the whole point is made moot anyway because justice would eventually be served for the Ailey - Cooper family, albeit vicariously. But what continues to remain all the more problematic with sweeping this huge discrepancy under the rug is that the literary subtraction from four rapists to one usurps the authority Ailey attempts to gain in telling his most troubling experience as a black male child with a poor single black mother and the targeted unprovoked sexual violence unleashed on their lives without the ability to ever pursue a legal form of contrition or vindication. This also works to undermine the dedication Ailey makes to his *dignified* mother and “all black women everywhere” in *Cry*. Ironically however, it does affirm the necessity of Ailey’s daring choice of a race-conscious black male co-author like Bailey – a writer who was undoubtedly outside of New York’s mainstream concert dance community’s cadre of white female journalists and critics given the opposition Ailey faced with the Board of Directors of his own company.

Therefore, the analysis for this dissertation chapter draws principally on Hortense Spillers’ groundbreaking essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Lesson” for its Black Feminist productivity which conveys the challenges involved with how constructing authorship for U.S. born black radical males like Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X and their oft-times unresolved psychological

traumatic relationship with their mothers (as it is induced by the constraints of white supremacy) creates the need for a vocabulary to articulate the experiences of countless black women on these shores (or at least give it a name, a sign, symbol, chapter, verse, or dance – as Ailey does in *Cry*). In so doing, this dissertation chapter proposes a radical ordering (a choreographic nomenclature at the very least) that privileges through an autobiographical account about Ailey’s early encounters with black women during the formative years of his life like his mother (Mrs. Lula Cooper), his most influential dance partner (Carmen de Lavallade), and his mentor, (dance legend, Katherine Dunham). All of who and the broader oppressed subjectivity of black womanhood in the continental United States (at one point or another) became his Muse – aesthetically and thematically as observed in his ballets like the second movement of *Cry* (1971), *Lark Ascending* (1972), *The Mooche* (1975), and *Passage* (1978). This dissertation chapter thereby argues that a categorical and sequential reading of these thematically controversial dances together within the proper context of the personal relationship Ailey had with the aforementioned women in tandem with key black feminist authors, reveals a radical custodial and artistic guardianship Ailey takes on as a (gay) Male Black Feminist for preserving and exposing the experiences and cultural products of black women while articulating their ‘simultaneous oppressions’ through the semantics of modern dance choreography (much like the historicization that is readily witnessed as a methodological mainstay found within the literary practice of Black Feminist Scholarship). One that echoes a central premise, and that is, ... it really does matter who is performing, writing and thereby telling our stories.

One reason that Spillers' essay is so apropos for analyzing Ailey's controversial literary legacy is just how well suited the substance of her arguments are in revealing the specific ways that radical authorship has been used by even an unsuspecting American born black man like Ailey (who also happened to be a mentally troubled gay artist) but who was in just as much need of redressing his violently interrupted maternal relationship which had been irrevocably undone by systemic forms of racial and sexual violence that systematically worked to sexually violate and psychologically shame while economically entrapping and undermining black women (like his mother). These are the majority of black women (again, like Ailey's mother) who had been condemingly forced (due to no fault of their own) into becoming the head of their families in a white patriarchal capitalist society. This is why Spillers said that when she wrote "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" that she "wrote it with a feeling of hopelessness. I was very emotional when I wrote it. I was on the verge of crying about what I was writing. And I was trying to explain what seemed to me impossible to explain. ... I knew that none of it was new¹⁷. But what was new was that I was trying to bring the language of a postmodern academy to a very old problem." ("Whatcha Gonna Do?," p. 308) The very old problem Spillers references was what she would also describe as the way that "[t]here is not a subject that you can speak about in the modern world where you will not have to talk about African women and new world African women. But no one wants to address them." What her statement pronounces all the more here is the prevailing white supremacist tactic of discounting the value of black women as human

¹⁷ Underline added for emphasis.

subjects as well as the pervasive white supremacist tactic of discounting their many important contributions to the larger project of assisting their children (especially, their sons) to survive the repressive volatility of American culture and legislative politics respectively. Likewise, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” serves like a major artery working hard at pumping new life back into a very old conversation that goes to the heart of which the forced removal of black men from their families since the slave trade has had generational consequences. Whether it was for the avarice purpose of profit through their literal capitalist sale in a coffle on an auction block by their captors or for the purpose of undercutting their rightful indignation and defensive propriety over their wives, daughters, or sisters sexual integrity, Spillers’ argument is that black men, no less, are the only group of men as a race in the Western hemisphere to not have inherited a patrilineal heritage. The systemic rape of black women by white men without any legal recourse both during and after slavery has only served to exacerbate this matter – as Ailey’s candor about his maternal woes demonstrate. The lived reality of this black matrilineal heritage¹⁸ created through rape in the Americas also speaks to the reason that many Nation of Islam followers like Malcolm X (then and now) used the mathematical symbol “X” for the unknown as their last name in order to openly demonstrate their rejection of the Anglo-Christian sir name of their former white colonial masters who were also, in many cases, their biological forefathers. In turn, Spillers cradles the support for her analysis on the subject of the “illegitimate” birth of

¹⁸ Black Kemetic scholars like Dr. John Henrik Clarke, Dr. Yosef Ben Jochanna, and many others argue that the notion of a matrilineal heritage is also steeped in pre-colonial African history - which is why it is not surprising that it carried/s over into the colonial histories and present day experiences in the Black Diaspora. This was also often the basis for their very contentiously and controversially received philosophical argument that “The Black Woman is God”, thus challenging the point Spillers makes in a matrilineal heritage for black men beginning in America or the Americas more broadly.

black men again through the systemic rape of black women in America as one of the least discussed topics in the academy by spelling out several of the names given to African women because of racist and sexist agendas that have perpetuated and normalized a generational absenting of a paternal presence in the black family structure. These are names that are also commonly used today which further stigmatize black women and diminish any modicum of productivity, modesty, and chastity they could possibly exhibit collectively as a race. Names like “Peaches,” “Brown Sugar,” and “Sapphire,” and other names that mark black women’s activism and their multi-varied socially charted and much contested roles within the black family and the larger black community. Including, but not limited to references made about black women like “Earth Mother,” “Aunty,” “Granny,” “God’s Holy Fool,” “Miss Ebony,” and “Black Woman at the Podium.” Speaking for herself as a Black Feminist scholar as well as all American black women (who by default of colonial and imperial violence) have inherited these vile misnomers Spillers says: “[‘ve] describe[d] a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.” (“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”, p. 203) Again, whether it is in the form of a name, a sign, symbol, chapter, verse, or dance – as Ailey does in the second movement of *Cry*. So to trace the literary genealogy of unassuming race men like Ailey and their personal redress to their matrilineal legacy, Spiller cites the first recorded autobiography in the West written by a formerly enslaved African man, who then becomes a displaced

free black man roaming the seas during The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, named:
Olaudah Equiano.

“[W]ritten by Himself”¹⁹ and first published in England in 1789, Spiller argues as do many other scholars, that Equiano is presumed by the academy to be the first “illegitimate” son of African American Literature because of the first date of publication of his slave narrative / travelogue, also because he is African born, he never settles in the continental United States because of the perverse economy of Slavery, and because he writes his own story. However, the analysis provided in this dissertation research offers a counter argument to this analysis which points to the fact that Equiano has a literary predecessor, who is still a black woman. Phyllis Wheatley, who was also born in Africa like Equiano, enslaved and brought to America but is unfortunately never released from bondage until her master’s death – despite her demonstrated intellectual and literary prowess with a published book of poetry in 1773. Instead, she dies at a tender age in childbirth after her husband is sent to debtors prison leaving her ill infant son alone to die shortly thereafter. Dr. Henry Louis Gates accordingly recovers Wheatley in his *Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers* series as the progenitor of African American Literature, thereby proclaiming the field itself as one of a matrilineal legacy. So once more, black men are positioned to take their lead even into the discourses of American poetry, literature, and history from a black woman – even if she was originally bought as a slave / pet project for her master’s daughter who inadvertently taught her to read and write out of eighteenth century sport and

¹⁹ Capitalization is the author’s emphasis.

entertainment. Nevertheless, the crux of Spillers' argument allows this research to claim that the autobiography, whether it is in the form of a slave narrative or travelogue, becomes a viable means for black men in America to establish and re-enforce a black patrilineal genealogy in a white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society. This better explains the pervasive assertion of black hetero-masculinity (as well as closeted gay identities) found within the wider literary and social activism of the Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights, and Black Power Movements – not excluding, the expatriates who participated in the Francophone Negritude Movement. Whether radical or conservative, the autobiographies of American black men or Diasporic African men have created a literary genealogy for a landed black hetero-patriarchy in the West. The genre of the autobiography then becomes the means by which American black men can speak for themselves since there is no “father” or patrilineal legacy speaking for them collectively on these shores other than one of submission and bondage to the white patriarchal capitalist power structure. Thus, the genre of the autobiography does the literary work to facilitate space for these men to be free to become meaningfully visible by those who will choose to engage them on their own terms. It also gives an accounting for their own existence as they have known it and would prefer to have it remembered while always / already working to redress what is in most cases their actual illegitimate birth, like Ailey's.²⁰

Likewise, the research in this dissertation chapter asserts that Ailey found himself dealing with the same quagmire in the arts because the legacy of modern dance

²⁰ There are conflicting accounts on whether Ailey's biological parents were ever legally married.

technique was spawned through American white women like Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, among others. So, Ailey inherited his positionality even as a famed cultural producer of modern dance choreography through a matrilineal line that also stems by extension most famously through the legacies of American and Caribbean black women like Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, and others – which he always publically acknowledged. Thusly, Ailey’s autobiography was clearly meant to serve as a tool for legitimizing himself as an independent black man – a man who was no longer reliant on his mother or any other Muse in his life, white or black, for guiding his way. In turn, it is easy to see how as a young choreographer Ailey made his career doing just the opposite. He often discussed at length in various interviews how he relied on inspirations for some his most signature works from those aspects of black culture that were most accessible to him as a youth by extension of his mother and other black women around him. Other than *Cry* (1971), *Blues Suite* (1958) and *Revelations* (1960) are inarguably two of his most enduring ballets and by far the best examples of how Ailey artistically harvested some of the more general or common aspects of black feminine culture as a creative resource. While both dances demonstrate a very strong black hetero-normative, Judeo-Christian, and capitalist male presence, the black female dancers in these casts still figure very prominently throughout each of these dances. This is the case mainly because both of these choreographic works are representative of black spaces, rival geographies, that were critical to the relatively unhampered cultural expression, the steadily exchanged commerce of coping, and basic survival for the majority of African Americans during the height of Jim Crow Segregation –

particularly, black women. The spaces Ailey specifically references in *Blues Suite* and *Revelations*, of course, were the Baptist church and the juke joint in the American south, despite the surprising fact that both ballets debuted in New York City and were instantly a hit by all accounts all around the world even onto now. Nevertheless, the second movement in *Cry* is evidence of Ailey kinesthetically exploring the private spheres of black women's lives through his soloist based on what he could recall and what he couldn't forget (his blood memories) as a black boy growing up with a poor single black mother. He often stated in rehearsals and including formal interviews with the national press "I remember very well²¹ seeing my mother on her knees scrubbing these white folk's rooms and halls. That image is in my ballet *Cry*." (*Revelations*, p. 32)

Unlike the first movement of *Cry* where the dancer's gestural movements alternate between being socially and politically burdened and liberated while also being thematically ambiguous as it is danced to the jazz orchestration of Alice Coltrane's "Something About Coltrane," *Cry*'s second movement is choreographically solemn in its psychological depiction of a woman in anguish from watching a man presumably, her man, a black man die with a needle in his arm. Quite sadly, this choreographically foreshadows Ailey's own premature demise due to his chronic substance abuse problems; and finally, his positive HIV status thereby leading to his mother's grief in losing the black man she birth. Ailey would go on to use this very same plot of a man dying because of his addiction to drugs and alcohol when he choreographed *For Bird-With Love*, which was a piece many of his company members believed was in fact about

²¹ Underline added for emphasis.

how much of himself he saw in the life and tragic early demise of jazz great, Charlie Parker. (*Ailey*, p. 304) It is for these reasons Spillers work in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” becomes crucial to this dissertation chapter’s overall analysis due to the contradictory information offered in the way Ailey auto-narrates himself as a conflicted gay black man with no father to speak of and the way the governors of his company choose to biographically re-gain control of him and his legacy as he is about to die by rewriting him through the viewpoint of his mother and others, especially as it is filtered through the lens of a white female New York City dance critic. For example, *Ailey*, Dunning’s text, points to one such incident when Ailey’s mother talks after he died about the fact that Ailey actually had male figures in his life referencing one or more men she dated after she was raped and before she married Mr. Cooper, a man who Ailey always resented with a fierce Oedipal complex as a child. This was obviously Mrs. Cooper’s attempt at speaking for Ailey on how she believed she had adequately replaced the paternal role Alvin Ailey, Sr. had abandoned in his son’s life with one particular romantic interest of hers, an older gentleman named Amos Alexander. While Mrs. Cooper references Alexander fondly as a consistent paternal figure for her son, Ailey subtly references him as his mother’s “sugar daddy” or “pimp,” someone who cared about him and his mother, but someone who was no less her / their “sugar daddy,” at the very least and quite possibly, her “pimp.” Of course, Ailey does this respectfully, without ever using Alexander’s name, however, the details offered by both him and his mother describes their very dependent relational and monetary support afforded by

Alexander. What then gets established is that both Ailey and his mother interpreted Alexander's role in Ailey's life as a boy very differently.

To further illustrate the unsettling way Ailey internalized his interactions with others very differently from those around him, Dunning's text also shares the time Ailey had one of his first public mental meltdowns after being asked to play a role in a 1960s Broadway play that mirrored a little too closely those afore-stated most sensitive and vulnerable aspects of his life. Ailey was specifically sought out for a lead role as an actor to perform alongside soon to be black Hollywood stars like Cicely Tyson and Al Freeman, Jr. This was one of many opportunities that unfolded after he was prominently featured in other very successful Broadway and concert dance productions as a young performer and choreographer before starting his company. The production was titled *Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright*. Written by a Jewish playwright, named Peter S. Feibleman, the play was "about a black matriarch in New Orleans in the 1940s who nearly destroys her children in her blind ferocious attempt to raise them right." (*Ailey*, p. 170) The subject matter of the play clearly struck a cord with Ailey's fragile psychological and emotional state of comfort at the time because shortly after completing a scene in rehearsal, for what appears to be no reason at all Ailey "raced across the stage and buried his face behind the curtain. There was a moment of silence, followed by the terrible sound of howls of laughter and then uncontrollable weeping. [During and after which no] one moved." Several members of the cast would eventually laugh openly about it making crude jokes about his embarrassing mental episode arguing that it came out of nowhere. But many claimed, "[a]fter[wards,] he [seemingly

collected himself and] just seemed to turn back to dance [full-time] and dance seemed to consume him – particularly, his fixation on starting a black dance company.” (*Ailey*, p. 171) What this dissertation chapter witnesses here is the extent to which few people who knew Ailey then, including the dance scholars nowadays that purport to know him through their scholarship are unwilling to give any real credence to contemplating how what is commonly referred to by a growing number of black psychologists as a “post-traumatic slavery disorder” may have contributed to his pathological behavior – especially, later in his life when he was abusing alcohol and cocaine to compensate for his un-explainable manic-behavior.

Given the fact that Ailey was as much a victim of systemic racial discrimination encumbered by just as much poverty for most of his life as well as the often dismissed sexual violence he experienced from his own same-sex rape as a child by a peer and relatives – including his mother’s rape, that is still either being referred to as experimentation on his part and a case of bad luck on hers, the tendency for willfully overlooking how systemic patterns of combined economic, racial, and sexual violence have historically caused many enslaved men and women and even their free descendants decades later, living under the same and varying conditions to essentially go mad is as much an understated variable at work here. Similar notable instances of “post-traumatic slavery disorder” are mentioned in Frederick Douglass’ slave narrative when he discusses how enslaved women frequently went insane under the weight of the cruelty unleashed on them during American Slavery by quotidian plantation life itself. The case is the same with Malcolm X whose mother was eventually locked up in an

insane asylum after local white Jim Crow terrorists (aka, KKK) murdered his father and Malcolm and his siblings were forcibly taken away from their mother by the State because it was believed by the white female social workers assigned to their family that she couldn't adequately provide for them after her husband's death – as if the State has ever, but certainly at that time, held genuine empathy about the quality of care black children received from their mothers or anyone else. Undoubtedly, this brings to the surface just how reasonable it is to now believe that Ailey set out just like most autobiographers particularly, black male authors like Douglass and Malcolm X to give his side of his own partially sane and partially sober literary story apart from the one he gave on stage with his choreography. He more importantly sought out a literary means for conveying to the world what it is HE understood on how he came to be where he found himself at the close of his life both personally and professionally. It also explains why the very first thing he attempts to do through his narrative is to confront where much of his pain began, with his mother's rape, then his own, and of course being abandoned by his father in a systemically hostile anti-black nation. This quite surprisingly is something that Dunning's research never mentions as being apart of his psychiatric and / or psychological record as much as she makes the case through the access she had of his medical / psychological records that he was essentially losing his mind toward the end of his life. (*Ailey*, p. 220) And yet, Ailey confronts these matters head-on with the assistance of Bailey in writing his autobiography through a radical ordering of oppression, which this dissertation research proposes as a nomenclature to be called a *quadrant of violence*.

As a paradigm, the concept of a quadrant of violence is employed in this research to take into consideration how the ‘simultaneous oppression’ of four sources has historically worked as a violent catalyst psychologically, physically, economically, and sexually targeting black women on all sides like insurmountable walls of oppression. These sources are widely noted as the State, white men, white women, and at times, black men – with two of these sources being the most pervasive and powerful at undermining black women’s safety, sanity, and progress at various historical moments, the State and white men.

This means that Ailey’s decision to speak candidly about his mother’s rape as well as his own in his manuscript is certainly a literary radical act of defiance which prompted his Board of Directors to put him on a short leash in order to yank him back into their perceived white corporate sponsorship friendly place for him. Therefore, the unabashed candor in his autobiography is made plain for the purpose of stripping away at all or any pretense of him being concerned about whom or what his reflections will potentially offend – especially, among his white patrons including the uppity black ones. This is why the deliberate mention of where his mother was at the time she was raped and the number of white men who raped her speaks volumes on the quadrant of violence that he and his mother faced in the absence of his father and legal justice – as it also does with his fore-bearers, Fredrick Douglass, Malcolm X, (as previously stated) including Harlem Renaissance and Negritude writer, scholar, and political activist Richard Wright who was also believed to have bouts with chronic depression and other possible forms of mental illness brought on by systemic forms of racial oppression in America and Europe. Notwithstanding, of course, legendary athlete, scholar, singer, actor, and civil rights activist Paul Robeson – whose own bout with chronic depression brought on by

the systematic forms of American racism in the 1950s were also used against him by the House Un-American Activities Committee marking him as a mentally insane, treasonous, and Communist. And, the same holds true for countless other black men in America, many of whom their names and circumstances will never be fully known. This is why in taking a closer look at how Robeson's so-called mental illness relates to Ailey in context with the following citation it is apparent why he (Ailey) had so many unresolved mental issues with his personal politics as a homosexual lasted well into his adult life – especially when also contemplating his same sex rape and abuse as a child.

[Because] like madness, and as a form of “mental illness,” homosexuality [like Communism and Negroes] during the cold war era was a marker of treason. It was even considered a threat to national security when, in 1950, the Senate Appropriations Committee alleged the presence of homosexuals in the federal government and required prompt expulsion of “sexual deviates” (in Corber 1993:62). Yet the discovery of “such persons” would be no simple task for the government, since it was assumed they were passing undetected, as they showed, according to “The Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government” released by the US Senate, “no outward characteristics or physical traits” which could confirm that they “should be considered as proper cases for medical treatment.” (*The Red Mask of Sanity*, p.28)

Hence, Spillers analysis broke new intellectual ground in 1987 around the same the time Ailey was vetting Bailey to begin writing *Revelations* that profoundly brought attention to the highly contested and grossly misrepresented matrilineal heritage that American black men have inherited. Even as to the ways a theatrical production like *Tiger* causes them to have to carefully navigate amid the theatrical terrain of the Broadway stage and Hollywood cinematic exploits of opportunistic Jewish and other white promoters and

profiteers because of their unfortunate legacy of slavery and segregation in the continental United States. This is an analysis that Spillers would also later use to attest to how “[t]he need to confront psychological violence, epistemic violence, intellectual violence is really powerful. (“Whatcha Gonna Do?,” p. 301) As well as how, “[e]thnicity’ perceived as mythical time enables a writer to perform a variety of conceptual moves all at once. [And the way] [u]nder its hegemony, the human body becomes a defenseless target for rape and veneration, and the body, in its material and abstract phase, a resource for metaphor.” (“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” p. 65) Yet at the most basic race-conscious level, the decision Ailey made in selecting Bailey to assist him in writing his autobiography and not Dunning or anyone else despite her / their acumen to the field and intimate relationships with most of the major players in his company and within the field of black concert dance is very powerful. It would also explain why Ailey was increasingly resistant to being thought of as an apolitical choreographer as he grew older and why particularly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., he would seriously revisit his long-standing proposal to choreograph a ballet about one of his most admired fallen heroes, who was at a surprise to most, Malcolm X – Bailey’s former comrade.²² (*Ailey*, p.229) This demonstrates once again within the overarching analysis of this dissertation that dance scholar, Thomas DeFrantz, was incorrect in his text when he implied that Ailey’s noticeable absence from the prevalent “black arts movement experiments” of the late 1960s had to do with

²² “Throughout his career, Ailey planned dance tributes to individuals. Although most of them went unrealized, his eclectic group of proposed subjects included Ernest Hemingway, Henri Christophe, Langston Hughes, Harriet Tubman, and Malcolm X.” (*Dancing Revelations*, p. 167-168)

his own “strict integrationist stance.” It is probable that DeFrantz made this implication without ever accounting for how The Ailey Company’s pro-longed history of bleak finances from the late 1950s through the late 1980s despite its highly profiled and celebrated appearances, not overlooking its rigorous touring scheduling overseas and how its Board of Directors’ politically centrist artistic objectives, excluded Ailey and his company from participating in most of these kinds of radical black art movement events. (*Dancing Revelations*, p. 114) All the more, Dunning’s research on Ailey recovers personal notes that reveal the complete opposite of a “strict integrationist stance” DeFrantz once again references.

‘Next fall in August change to all black co – with publicity – rehearse for two mos,’ Alvin wrote. ‘Re-emerge with new statements of Blackness!! In the co only modern classes or classic classes adapted modern dance. Let go all white dcrs. Replace with black & P.R. Very RACIST? No.’
(*Ailey*, p. 306)

Accordingly, Dunning was also incorrect in the same vein, maybe even delusional, if not intentionally deceptive after conducting her own research like DeFrantz to refer to Ailey as “an eloquent model of the integrationist philosophy of the 1960s in America” given the above citation from her own text. (*Ailey*, p. 245) This rightfully raises the question once again about whether she, including DeFrantz – who also makes the argument that Ailey’s mother was raped by one man (whose race he conveniently does not mention), were in fact tailoring aspects of their work on Ailey particularly, his biography for the sake of his white Board of Directors, sponsors, and all of their white readers. Otherwise for whose benefit could either of them possibly have been making or intimating these contextually diminished statements on Ailey’s views on race relations

in America? Especially as Dunning's own research, once again, exclusively recovers materials on Ailey accounting for his extreme distress when receiving news about the Chicago Police Department murdering several members of the Black Panther Party in cold-blood.

In this time that tested the most resolute racial equanimity, Alvin's private anguish was to spill over later that year when he heard the news of the shooting of Fred Hampton. Hampton, the Illinois chairman of the Black Panther Party, was shot and killed in his Chicago home with another Panther official in a predawn police raid in December 1969. 'How can you not be angry: How can you not be bitter? How can you expect to just – act like it never happened?' He was just beside himself. 'The same rage, although he didn't say it, was in *Blues Suite*,' [Sylvia] Waters observed. 'But at least there was more hope there, perhaps.'
(Ailey, p. 246)

There is also his personally written notes from the same source (Dunning's text) in a thematic radical form that was emblematic of the black revolutionaries of the times like Fred Hampton as indicated in piece below titled, "Instructions: How to Play the Drums."

Be born in Africa
(even centuries ago)

Run free on the white sand of
the beach –

Laugh! Throw your black body
against the white sand –

Pick up a tiny stone –
Throw it out toward an island –
(a world you know is there
but cannot see –)
Wait and see if the waves
bring it back – (they do not)

Splash in the water like a
Black fish – walk slowly
home thru the green leaves
Becoming emerald with nite –

Then –
 Try to run away when they
come for you with whips & guns & nets

 Feel anguish & terror as they
lash you together with others of
your kind in a dark ships hold –

Sweat, get sick, vomit –
Become thin & weak &
your eyes yellow & empty –

No more sand
no trees –
only perpetual night in a forest of malignant Black
Bodies – caged like sweaty
panthers in a cave without light –

Then –
Arrive & be sold
Stand on a block

Work

Do not speak your own language
Sing his songs – not yours
Do not dance – its bad they say

wonder

think
going home to “his” Jesus – not Obatala

Go to Memphis, New Orleans, Atlanta

sing

blues

spirituals

Be jazz

and that is how to play drums.

The above unrhymed but metered stanzas hardly suggest, once again, that Ailey was anyone's 'model candidate for integration' as his increasingly public manic-depressive behavior would steadily and quite embarrassingly demonstrate to the entire New York City dance community and the rest of the world. Still, the title of this hardly random jotting signals a grammatical interpretation on Ailey's prose-poetry that could also very easily been re-titled "How to Survive As a Black Man in America," by metaphorically casting the drum as a phallic symbol for the black man's source of life with the instructions on how to play it serving as the rules necessary for his survival. In-kind, this type of allegorical reference reflects the new age, circa 1960s, Garvey-ite "Back to Africa Movement" at least within one's consciousness that Amiri Baraka and others within the poetry circle of the Black Arts Movement embraced. The drum also becomes representative of the virility of black manhood as much as what Ailey reflexively and relatively understood about his ancestral beginnings, and how he understood it to have all taken shape and form for him by the mid 1960s both personally and professionally. Moreover, the time at which he was writing this particular prose-poetry in a random notebook, the call and response effect of the drum rhythms of his own life and the world around him also symbolically resonated with what he believed was lost during the *Maafa* and it is also what becomes transmuted in the distortions of the American identity that is created for displaced, then enslaved, Africans as well as

their decedents. Ailey's prose-poetry then becomes a reminder of the maligned inheritance of Africa's children whereby they are forced to learn to play drums that are not theirs and they are forced to dance to drums that are not to their own cultural benefit in the same way they are brutally forced to pray to gods that are not their own. Finally, this prose-poem demonstrates that Ailey, left to his own devices, was by no stretch of the imagination an example of "an eloquent model of the integrationist philosophy of the 1960s in America." It is instead indicative of the musings of a black panther (much like the one he references) one that has been caged for too long and one that is now perfectly poised and unexpectedly lying in wait for its chance to kill. Or, at least terrorize those in its path. Much in the same way Ailey became infamously known years later during his more serious manic episodes for setting off the fire alarm in his upscale Manhattan apartment building, calling the fire department to report the blaze, then proceeding to either chase his old white female neighbors in the hallway back into their apartments or literally knocking them down while trying to get out ahead of them from the otherwise safe apartment building. Only for him to be found afterwards across the street sitting on a park bench watching the mayhem he created as if nothing was wrong. This sort of disturbing behavior doesn't stem from out of nowhere for a middle-aged black man with Ailey's professional pedigree and it clearly isn't representative of, yet again, "an eloquent model of [anyone's] integrationist philosophy of the 1960s in America" or any place else, for that matter.

Another point of contestation that Dunning's biography creates in juxtaposition to Ailey's autobiography has to do with those specific individuals that supposedly

influenced his artistic musings. As such, Dunning references Ailey as a very versed and learned young choreographer. But, Ailey explained in his autobiography that he was initially very negligent in broadening his own horizons as a young choreographer. To this end, he attributes how the firm mentoring and the directed musings he shared with Karel Shook [an older white man] served as a chief source for fueling his void of self-education.

I met Karel Shook, who helped to found Dance Theater of Harlem and who had a little postage stamp of a dance studio on Eight Avenue between Forty-four and Forty-fifth Streets. ... His classes were filled with dancers like Mary Hinkson, Carmen (de Lavallade), Geoffrey (Holder), Arthur (Mitchell), Matt Turney, and other members of the black dance world who were serious about performing. ... [He] attracted black dancers because nobody else wanted us to study with them. He welcomed us. We all owed him money, but he insisted that we still come to class. ... Arthur Mitchel, at the time, lived with Shook on Thirty-fourth Street and First Avenue. He was not yet in New York City Ballet. I used to go to their place, and they would feed me. ... Shook often said to me: "You say you want to be a choreographer, but you don't read history. You don't go to museums. Alvin, you're full of shit. You're not going to be a choreographer. You don't even know anything about music. ..." (*Revelations*, p. 76-77)

Dunning's perspective on this matter is framed very differently throughout her text. She actually refers to Ailey as a well-read individual – which would only become true after his mentoring and grooming with Shook. Moreover, where Dunning goes wrong again is when she indicates the following about the catalyst of his later musings and the Muse that inspired the success initial his company.

Edele Holtz [a white woman] had come into Alvin's life just as he needed unwavering emotional support and a home for his new little company. Before Holtz, Mickey

Bord [another white woman, albeit Jewish] had appeared when Alvin needed a loving and admiring friend to help him with the scattered, endless chores of founding the company. Now, in the late fall of 1968, the third of Alvin's muses materializes in Ivy Clarke [a black woman], who would serve as a feisty midwife in the company's final birth throes." (*Ailey*, p. 237)

While all of this is true impart, Ailey never referred to Holtz, Bord, or Clarke as ever being his Muse. In fact, he explicitly mentioned (not only in his autobiography, but throughout his career in countless written and oral interviews) how he was inspired to dance and to create dances about the overall black experience of living in the Jim Crow South including the lived black experiences throughout other enduring forms of systemic racial oppression at the hands of a white ruling majority and its aftermath. His mother's and other black women's back-breaking labor as a domestic workers and their general lives were also his inspiration for his most notable choreography in *Cry*, as well as the initial dance performances he saw of his childhood friend and life-long professional colleague Carmen de Lavallade, and his icon and future mentor, Katherine Dunham performing on stage. This is does not mean that Holtz, Bord, and Clarke weren't extremely instrumental in making his vision for a black dance company an enduring success during the company's most uncertain times of viability and longevity. But as crucial as these women were to administratively creating and supporting the Ailey brand, Dunning's reference to them throughout her text as his Muse misrepresents their influence on Ailey's creativity. This raises the question once more for whose benefit was Dunning wanting to appropriate Ailey's inspiration for his choreography and his company's legacy? The oddity in this analysis stemming from Dunning's

biography is peculiar mainly because Ailey's entire legacy as the founder of world's most successful modern dance company (to date) is accredited overwhelmingly to the administrative efforts of two emotionally supportive and well organized white women and one "feisty" black woman who all met him after he had already begun to make a name for himself as a key player in the game of concert dance. Here again, it is fair to surmise that by affording credit to white women like Holtz and Bord as his principal Muse for establishing the AAADT, with Clarke joining after the fact as the stereotypical sassy, emotionally blue, hard rock of a black woman – aka "Sapphire" as Spiller pointed out previously, the company's Board of Directors would be able to re-write the origins of the organization as one that was always apolitical to American radical black politics and thereby suitable for sponsorship from its long-time and future conservative white corporate and viewing audience donor base. So even though Dunning was correct in her text when she suggested that Ailey had three Muse, she was in fact incorrect in her text when she suggested that his three Muse were Holtz, Bord, and Clarke. As the historical record along with Ailey's autobiography shows (once again) his primary inspirations were personified through the blood memories he could recall in his adult life as a child living with his mother, Mrs. Cooper and by extension all black folks everywhere, especially black women folk in his life like Carmen de Lavallade and Katherine Dunham.

Case and point, Ailey expressly noted the following in his autobiography: "In junior high school and high school, I had no idea of becoming a dancer – no feeling or desire for it at all. Men didn't dance; you were a sissy (sissy was a big word back then)

if you danced. You couldn't even think about dancing." (*Revelations*, p. 36) Still, he admitted that after seeing De Lavallade perform at a high school assembly he was smitten by the art of concert dance through her artistry including her conventional attractiveness as a light-skin young black woman with long wavy hair much in the way he was smitten by the famous Hollywood movie star, Lena Horne. Sometime thereafter, he would come to feel the same way about Katherine Dunham an established performing and choreographing dance artist whose success was tantamount to Lena Horne as a dancer and whose beauty as a light-skin black woman with long wavy hair also happened to resemble De Lavallade and even his own mother. He was also equally fascinated with the way the men in Dunham's dance company appeared so masculine and strong on stage performing alongside her. Thusly, a black feminist choreographic reading of Ailey's life long friendship with De Lavallade brings his ballet *The Lark Ascending* to the foreground (which like *Cry*, also debuted at City Center)²³ and it has been viewed as being a dance that "explored hunting as a metaphor for male-female coupling, suggesting the transformative ability of heterosexual partnership to enable growth from puberty to maturity." (*Dancing Revelations*, p. 128) Several years later, Ailey would reveal that critics misunderstood his intentions in the dance's meaning and explained that it was about "a girl becoming a woman" and that all of his "ballets were about transition." (*Dancing Revelations*, p. 232) The connection ideally to be made here within the overall analysis of this dissertation is how *Cry* is staged in 1971 in dedication to Ailey's mother and all black women everywhere when just eleven months later in the

²³ April 2nd, 1972.

same venue he choreographs another aspect of black femininity when *The Lark Ascending* premieres. More than any other work in his repertoire, the choreographic plot of *The Lark Ascending* is very reminiscent of the profound admiration and respect Ailey had throughout his life for De Lavallade as a friend, colleague, and business associate; including, his regrettable unrealized romantic affection for De Lavallade and his very open envy for many years of her martial relationship with Geoffrey Holder. In fact, when The Ailey Company first started it actually alternated between being named based on multiple variations on the name De Lavallade-Ailey Dance Theater and the Ailey-De Lavallade Dance Theater. This was until De Lavallade forced him to just pick a name for the company and stick with it after she married Holder. Ailey more importantly details in his text how vital De Lavallade was to his introduction to dance and to assisting him with starting his own dance company by dedicating the whole third chapter in his autobiography to her; titled, “Carmen Introduces Me to Dance.” She was definitely one of his favorite principal dancers, closets business partners, and certainly one of his Muse.

Another lesser known, but still very intriguing fact having to do with the significance of De Lavallade’s influence on Ailey’s overall legacy in dance as his Muse (recovered by closely reading and re-reading Ailey’s autobiography and his biography against each other) has to do with how the word “American” was subsequently added to the title of the company’s name. This takes place at the same time Ailey officially defaults to naming the company exclusively after himself at De Lavallade’s bidding. It is also at this precise moment, by invitation of the United States, State Department’s good-

will ambassador's tour throughout Asia in the early 1960s (just after the Korean War and just at the start of the escalating tensions in Vietnam with France) that Ailey and his dancers accept this position formerly held by Katherine Dunham and her dancers to travel and perform in the aforesaid nations as well as other smaller Asian nations. This is done with the provision made by the State Department of accounting for their broader dispersed racial identity as Negro (Black) to be nationally marked specifically within the actual name of the company at least while in Asia as American.²⁴ The company's name as the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater thereafter would ultimately stick. This serves, yet again, as another striking contrast to how Ailey writes about De Lavallade and the early years of founding his company and how Dunning writes very briefly (and mainly through the numerous interviews she conducted with other dancers) about both the early years of his company with De Lavallade as merely someone that created a number of very tense moments with the other dancers, especially while she was on tour with the company in Asia. This erroneously creates the appearance that Dunning only viewed De Lavallade's relationship with The Ailey Company as an interloper, particularly, after she married Holder. As a side note: another intriguing fact about the relationship Dunning eventual takes on with De Lavallade and Holder – the black power couple in dance of all times - is seen when only a few years later when she assists Holder in writing his beautifully illustrated text titled *Geoffrey Holder: A Life in Theatre and Art* which features De Lavallade prominently and accurately, of course, throughout

²⁴ Katherine Dunham's company lost the contract to perform in Asia by invitation of the United States, State Department because of her decision to premiere *Southland* in South America and Europe critiquing the US government's unwillingness to assert an anti-lynching campaign ensuring the safety of black men, women, and children against the whim of home grown white terrorists.

the text as his Muse. Talk about irony, or at the very least, the possible opportunism on the part of Dunning as a writer and the presumed selective amnesia on the part of the De Lavallade-Holders in the dismissive way she writes about De Lavallade in Ailey's biography. This is perhaps why Anna Julia Cooper, an early Black Feminist and nineteenth century scholar, educator, and cultural thinker noted quite famously in her text *A Voice from the South: By A Black Woman of the South* (and in other sources) that white men (women) should not speak for black men in the same way that black men (white women) should not speak for black women because she firmly believed that even with the best intentions, the perspective of the most vulnerable party in each scenario gets distorted and possibly lost. In this instance, it is again the voices of a black man like Ailey and a black woman like De Lavallade that either gets distorted or lost. Although, Ailey himself could very easily come under the same critique for his use of black womanhood as the main subject of many of his choreographic musings despite the celebrity and global fame associated with his career as a legendary choreographer. This is precisely where Cooper's stinging nineteenth century critique on a black man, however oppressed, speaking for black women is firmly rooted and where it is most productive as it goes to the heart of revealing Ailey's possibly unconscious, but nevertheless, uncompromising Male Black Feminism. Particularly, as this research gives thought to how in 1975 Ailey choreographs black femininity for a third time when he stages *The Mooche*.

In what is very likely his third inspired installment of choreographing black femininity on stage, *The Mooche* emerges as a dance that was initially televised in order

to pay tribute to the hugely successful body of musical work produced by jazz legend, Duke Ellington after he passed away. Its television debut was aired in tandem with another Ailey masterpiece titled, *Night Creatures*. Both pieces would eventually be re-crafted for the concert dance stage replete with a program note specifically indicating that in dedication *The Mooche* was “For Florence Mills, Marie Bryant, ... and Bessie Smith.” (*Dancing Revelations*, p. 252) These were early to mid twentieth century black female performers whose lives as performance geniuses have only been recovered a decade or more after Ailey’s ode to them in *The Mooche* and subsequently through the academic research extensively produced about them as blues singers and vaudeville variety act performers and no less historical black female subjects by Black Feminist scholars like Angela Davis, Hazel Carby, and Jayna Brown. Uniquely enough, the name of the ballet itself, *The Mooche*, was taken from a popular social dance in the 1920s from Harlem – as DeFrantz described in his text *Dancing Revelations*. He also describes how the enchanting black songstress, Gladys Knight delivered the introduction of the piece during the television broadcast, which initially only featured three soloists and that it was later revised notably to feature a fourth soloist figuring as the Mahalia Jackson personae for the stage performance. Thus, the dye was cast, according to DeFrantz, for marking this dance as an official homage to African American culture while also marking Ailey as a cultural historian through modern dance choreography on black life in America, wherein this dissertation research asserts possessed an expressed focus on black women’s lives as his Muse. DeFrantz further describes the interpretation of the dance below.

The Mooche provides a thinly drawn character sketch of three undeniably glamorous stage (black female) archetypes. ... [T]he women are visually distinguished by chic 1920s-style dresses, each in a single bold color of black, white, or red. Arranged as a suite of dances, *The Mooche* begins with a group introduction, followed by three contrasting dances and a short, full-group coda. (*Dancing Revelations*, p. 164)

And whereas the televised version of this dance permitted Ailey to stage the accompanying chorus of eight male dancers around the leading female dancers as either ensemble members, “eager fans, and in the final selections ... as impassive angels of death.” In the stage version some months later, DeFrantz claims that Ailey went as far as casting the chorus of male dancers to additionally play roles as pimps and members of the Ku Klux Klan donning white masks on their faces literally staging a quadrant of violence around his black female performers on stage. (*Dancing Revelations*, pp. 164, 171) Thereby, recounting all over again his daunting experiences as a black boy helplessly watching black women having to negotiate the vile and sexual maleficence in the white world all around them, even onto death as the final scene of the dance actually funeralizes one of the female leads. All while presumably, maybe even presumptuously, Ailey does the same thing in speaking by and large for black women much in the way Cooper forbade. However, it is again the contention of this research that Ailey’s position as a black cultural custodian in the field of dance, one that afforded him license to speak for black women in their absence, was one that he inherited by default from Katherine Dunham.²⁵ This is also principally observed when Ailey choreographed *Passage* in May of 1978 – a dance that cast Judith Jamison again

²⁵ See chapter four.

as a soloist in dedication to Marie Laveau “the most powerful voodoo woman in this country, her ceremonies involving snake worship, mystical spells and magic. Beyond her role as a priestess, her influences extended deeply into the social and political fabric of 19th century New Orleans.” (*Dancing Revelations*, p. 202) The later statement is a perspective that the academy has embraced about Dunham’s anthropological and ethnographic research in dance as well as her other forms black religious and cultural arts research on voodoo in Haiti. Unfortunately, the reviews for the dance were wanting as Ailey was charged with appropriating the theme and subject matter of *Passage* from Martha Grahams’ *Lamentations* 1930 and Mary Wigman’s *Witch Dance* series 1926. *But did he?* Because “[w]riting for the *New York Times*, Anna Kisselgoff offered: ‘*Passage* is an abstraction. It shows a woman going through stages of development into a trance, then into rest. She is as affected as those she is trying to affect, and in her concentration and commitment, Miss Jamison carries off a tour-de-force.’” (*Dancing Revelations*, pp. 202-203) Jamison, herself, would also later admit that she really didn’t know what the dance was about much in the same way she had previously admitted that she had not fully understood the magnitude with which Ailey sought to redress black womanhood with *Cry* in 1971. Even though, it is quite plausible that Jamison might have sought to avoid racially controversial subjects relating to Ailey’s choreography and her own brand by deliberately choosing to feign ignorant to not have to explain anything contentious to white audiences.

So, as this dissertation chapter concludes it does so by re-stating that the power the autobiography offers American black men like Ailey is one that permits them to state

for themselves as a matter of record how they have come to know themselves and where they find themselves throughout various stages of their life while living in a white racist, capitalistic, and patriarchal State. It is also the case that their autobiography functions as a reflexive tool that empowers American black men like Ailey, once again, to be able to assert their own agency by offering resistance to having their identities inadvertently usurped by their birth to single mothers, their creative Muse, or other sources like their corporate handlers as with the AAADT's Board of Directors. And while contracted biographers like A. Peter Bailey and Jennifer Dunning may not have any personal or professional racially motivated intention of playing into a conundrum like the one that existed between Ailey and his Board, they are no less culpable for the sometimes miscommunicated and / or mis-interpreted information purported by the narratives they produce for profit. Hence, the grammatical lessons on Ailey's radicalism and its Male Black Feminist revelations reveals much more than previously thought on how the generational absence of black men from their families and the systemic proliferation of black single-motherhood, along with wide spread form of sexual violence targeting black women endures and how on to itself, it is autobiographical. And, it reveals the extent to which this conversation on fully understanding and appreciating Ailey's choreographic musing in *Cry* has only just begun.

Choreographies of Rape:
Reading Pearl Primus' *Strange Fruit* (1943), Katherine Dunham's *Southland*
(1951), and Alvin Ailey's *Cry* (1971) as a Modern Dance Trilogy

The modern dance choreography of Pearl Primus in *Strange Fruit* and Katherine Dunham in *Southland* radically emerged onto the concert stage during the 1940s and 1950s confronting the systemic lynching of black men by white mobs throughout the American South. Decades later in the 1970s, Alvin Ailey's modern dance choreography in *Cry* would also radically emerge onto the concert stage. However, it would do so by inadvertently incorporating the bold tradition of Male Black Feminism to artistically redress the many ways that specifically black women's intersectional lives have been consequently marked by systemic socio-economic and sexual violence throughout the continental United States. Each piece during its respective era would in turn courageously engage the concert stage as a space for artistic protest and change. But, what latent social issues exactly were these black choreographers creating these particular dances to socially protest and to change on the concert stage? This culminating dissertation chapter answers this question by offering a close thematic and contextual reading on how all of these ballets taken together (*Strange Fruit*, *Southland*, and *Cry*) as one chronological piece – a trilogy, harkens an awareness back to a collective choreographic voice of social protest and black feminist resistance that was raised by Primus, Dunham, and Ailey with regard to the brutal subject of rape in America.²⁶ To do this, the literary crusade of Ida B. Wells in *A Red Record: Tabulated*

²⁶ This chapter reads the themes and contexts of protest, resistance, and redress in these dance and is intentionally not relying on solely reading the choreographed movements of each piece because it is an Ethnic Studies dissertation project that is focused on

Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States 1892 – 1893 – 1894 is used in this analysis to historically situate the stream of contestation from which Primus and Dunham’s brand of artistic corporeal protest for lynched black men flowed. And, Diana Taylor’s “Acts of Transfer” from her text *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* is also used to trace how Ailey’s childhood memory of his mother being raped by four white men while working as a domestic during the 1930s in rural Texas resets the stage for black femininity socially through the performativity of his ballet *Cry* and its dedication. (This is an assertion made throughout this dissertation research positing that AAADT’s prolific performance touring schedule continues to function as a living archive years after his death.) There is also select mention in this chapter’s analysis from seventeenth through twentieth century visual works of art as well as from black women through their slave narratives and other literary sources included throughout this dissertation chapter to support the basic premise of this overall research – and that is... The proper context, justification, and artistic rationale for these three independent choreographic works to be read as one installment of a black choreographic social commentary on the culture of rape in America is made all the more legible from the purview of a black feminist lens.

But prior to honing in on the analysis this chapter makes on the black concert dance trilogy of rape, it is important to recognize that what was the wicked past-time of white men lynching black men in America began after the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments granting African Americans equal rights under federal

analyzing the said modern dance choreography as black feminist cultural products. As such, the research in this chapter is primarily concerned with how the social and cultural politics of violence in American society at large inspires the artistic choices these choreographers make ultimately made on stage.

law. These amendments proved to be a juridical move that would frighten most white southerners especially poor whites and former slave owners. Such that lynching was strategically instituted as a means to usurp federalism at the state level by severely supplanting the physical, economic, and social mobility of black men in southern as well as in northern cities for the ostensible purpose of preventing miscegenation between black men and white women. It was also no accident that at the same time the propagandistic advent of *The Myth of the Black Rapist* flourished quite conveniently in order to fuel a volatility among poor whites and immigrant Europeans against black men to cripplingly thwart their national progress to be politically franchised at the state level anywhere in the US. In effect, these things were done to reduce, if not eliminate, the competition of black laborers with white laborers particularly in their efforts to homestead west of the Mississippi. It was here that Wells would make her intervention documenting the metrics of *A Red Record* using the data she compiled from white newspapers and other literary sources that numerically accounted as fact based evidence on the unjust murder of thousands of black men and sometimes their wives and children to make a more gruesome point of white supremacy and black inferiority. It is also here, from this basis that Wells would famously call out white men's need through their news publications at the turn of the century to repudiate black men for having sexual relationships with white women thereby earning them a sentence of castration and other gross mutilation, and ultimately death by illegal hangings as a condemning overreach. Subsequently, Wells' critique would most notably be recalled for illuminating how white men's persistent overreach in this way would end up reflecting more on the

staggering ‘so-called’ (lack of) mores on the part of white women rather than black men’s unlawful and insatiable need for white female flesh – an accounting for which she too would ultimately receive death threats.

So when Pearl Primus’ career as a modern dance choreographer debuted in New York City in 1943 performing *Strange Fruit*, it was within the socio-political context of the afore-related history serving as a cultural backdrop. It was also within the socio-political construct of what was already a growing national series of widely promoted protest art (in this case, protest song and dance) that highlighted legal cases like the 1931 spectacle of a trial involving The Scottsboro Boys, where several black youth are falsely accused of raping two white women. This is notwithstanding other examples of protest art from this era that allowed for *Strange Fruit* to follow in thematic-kind and also be met with rave reviews. However with no recorded video-footage ever taken of its debut, *Strange Fruit* has survived on to now in large part by being reconstructed, recorded, and ultimately preserved in the repertoire of black dance companies like The Philadelphia Dance Company (Philadanco).²⁷ Which makes it plausible, by even today’s standards, through the film-recorded format offered in Philadanco’s rendition of the piece how this dance received the accolades and later notoriety that it did in the 1940s. Particularly as it was performed to the recitation of the poetic verses of what was initially titled *Bitter Fruit* – written by a Jewish schoolteacher named, Able Meeropol,²⁸

²⁷ It is probable that Pearl Primus reconstructed the dance herself during the 1990s while working with Philadanco’s principal soloist Kim Bears at Howard University in 1992.

²⁸ *Strange Fruit* was produced under the pseudonym Lewis Allen.

which was later made extremely popular by the vocal rendition of legendary jazz and blues singer Billie Holiday under the name *Strange Fruit*. What is all the more intriguing about this dance is that the actual full-title is *Strange Fruit: A Man Has Been Lynched*. This was a strikingly literal title and polemic subtitle for even protest art of that day, albeit a full-title that is seldom referred to or ever used in connection to the dance today. And, it suggests even more so that audiences who saw it in the 1940s were under no illusions that this less than four minute dance was meant to do anything other than to capture the sheer horror of a black woman who in many ways is thematically running for her life, among other choreographically physically writhing gestures and movements and things. To see whether this time around, it is the black man she loves her husband, brother, father, or son who is hanging from a tree.²⁹ Which taken collectively (that is – the casting, full-title, and music of the dance) were undoubtedly a dangerous combination of artistic choices for Primus to use while debuting herself as a modern dance choreographer given the racial tensions in the US at the time.

But in the essay “(Up) Staging the Primitive: Pearl Primus and the Negro Problem in Dance,” Richard C. Green explains how in the 1940s the US government indirectly encouraged the support of protest art that aided in contesting tyranny, specifically those artistic projects created explicitly for taking aim at Fascism and Nazism abroad. Green also cites how the US did this, of course, knowing that most black performers like Primus would also take liberties to critique the blatant

²⁹ Or, lying dead in the street much like the summer of 2014 where grief stricken black women like Eric Gardner’s wife in State Island, New York and Michael Brown’s mother in Ferguson, Missouri were similarly observed in present day instances of lynching.

contradictions found in domestic policies and practices on race relations. As demonstrated in *Strange Fruit* which the US government only quietly withstood until the end of World War II. This is why the polemical sub-title that Primus chose for *Strange Fruit: "A Man Has Just Been Lynched"* could presumably state so plainly in 1943 her own artistic corporeal critique on the pervasive manner with which white men lynched black men without garnering what could have otherwise been indicative of rampant forms of physically violent retaliations from whites. With that said, it is fair to presume that Primus dared to use this opportunity to openly challenge fascism and racism in America probably hoping that she would be able to do so with as few repercussions of obstructionism in her career that typically accompanied this type of open social and political activism. Still, Primus would ultimately be subject to retroactive harassment by the US government after World War II.

In the fall of 1945, World War II came to an end; less than a year later, the House Un-American Activities Committee began investigating the activities of alleged Communist sympathizers. Like other artists and writers who had shown some interest in social issues before and during the war, Primus was called before the committee. As a result, her passport was revoked, and she 'later was stoned, spat upon and called a 'Red' outside a theater in Harrisburg, Virginia, where she performed.' (*(Up)staging the Primitive*, p. 119)

The inevitability of this fallout between Primus and the U.S. government is not surprising, even though it was after the fact, and it better explains why *Strange Fruit* remains one of her most important but least remembered or reconstructed choreographed works. This is alongside the fact that discussions about what were, and what presently are, white anti-black hostilities and violence are still a taboo subject in

most American seminar / lecture hall classrooms and studio art classes. And while this dance is oft-times screened in more liberal artistic and academic spaces, it is done without a black feminist lens or even a critical race theory lens. This is essentially because of what one scholar has noted as a history “white folks don’t like to hear about”³⁰ which results with no one else hearing about it either. And it also results in a very slim and careless reading of the dance that then only references and frames the soloist in *Strange Fruit* again as the typical all-purpose black ‘slave’ woman and black female suffering at large – to which most contemporary observers are both apathetic and quick to dismiss. It also becomes easier to dismiss a dance like *Strange Fruit* because the overall theme, lyrics, and all of its choreography gestures toward physical and emotional pain of black life that without use of the full-title of the dance when it is performed live or screened in a recorded format causes the choreographic radicalism of the dance to lose its historical potency and relevance for contemporary audiences.

To say the least, this loss of historical meaning also results primarily from little or nothing being taught in most secondary level classrooms today on the subject of lynching in America. This too is evident in the cursory attention these histories receive at the university level. It is also clear this historical omission in American classrooms does not happen as a general oversight as most people might like to think. It mainly happens because in places like the State of Texas the subject of lynching and the general topic of black oppression during American Slavery have been stricken statewide from the curriculum. This is because many white conservative legislators in Texas have

³⁰ Gregory Smithers, *Slave Breeding: Sex, Violence, and Memory in African American History* (University Press of Florida, 2012)

determined that these histories hurt the feelings of white children. Needless to say, the rationale behind these politics makes no moral or pedagogical sense outside of a white supremacist construct given how as recent as 1998 three male white supremacists lynched James Byrd, a black man, in Jasper, Texas by chaining him alive then dragging him behind their pick-up truck until a culvert in a bridge sliced off his head and arm. But if nothing else, what this deliberate historical omission does make sense of is why a black feminist lens is still very much needed to prevent the intended social and political activism that tragically inspired the creation of dances like *Strange Fruit* in the 1940s from being permanently blurred or erased altogether. This is reason alone for why conversations about doing away with black dance history should be vehemently contested. How else will ballets like *Strange Fruit* be ensured artistic longevity and survival in its proper historical context?

As it stands now, black dancing bodies and dances premiering subjects featuring black dancing bodies in the United States are always / already read through a euro-centric lens, or not at all. This is precipitated by what is the dialectic of “objectification vs. historicization” in reading black bodies in dance. What results next is that this euro-centric reading implicitly disguised as a neutral, a general reading of dancing bodies designed to typically portray whiteness as universal, modern, and symbolic of progress in a manner that also works in tandem to typically portray blackness as alien, primitive, and as the archetypal degenerate. This is all indicative of the racist legacy that unfortunately plagued Primus throughout most of her career as a dancer and a choreographer. And although twenty first century post-racial ideas blur the ways

American and European standards have (and oft-times continue to) mediate the expectations set upon black dancing artists (particularly those performing western dance forms), racialized disparities still persist in the studio art and academic professions of dance studies when it comes to reading bodies within a present day U.S. context. One such common disparity, which has persisted from slave culture, is the useless comparison of the presumed physical characteristics that belong to whites that are hierarchically positioned to those presumed physical characteristics belonging primarily to blacks. These efforts to distinguish superior and inferior traits based on contrasts in skin color, phenotype, hair texture, as well as the arch of the back and feet (or lack thereof) have only served to re-enforce fictive presumptions of white supremacy and black subordination that are disturbingly lodged in pseudo nineteenth century science which was designed solely for the purpose of justifying American and European imperialism. But, these inherent comparisons found in reading dancing bodies aren't limited to physical differences. The very subjects of choreographic interests offered by black dance choreographers like Primus and many others that are reflective of black life (or loss of life) have also been subject to a similar type of ridicule as either being perfunctory or inferior in social thought, political meaning, and broader cultural value. Likewise, the codified rudiments of classical ballet and its fanciful romantic themed dances have centrally occupied a privileged position to then distinguish the 'trained' from the 'un-trained' as well as defining the etiquette and deportment of the ideal dancer. All of which should also be seen as re-enforcing the previously mentioned fictive presumptions – which is where most dance studies programs both in the social /

contemporary and concert dance arenas still take its cues for reading bodies and as ‘a site for meaning making’ from society at large.

Even though artistic hierarchies are often thought of as purely aesthetic constructs that function independently of sociopolitical dynamics, they play an important role in supporting the interests of particular groups in a given social order. As the art historian Evan Alderson points out in his essay “Ballet as Ideology,” dominant groups have a vested interest in reinforcing their ideologies by shaping the way that individuals perceive art. As he puts it, “The values become instruments of social domination insofar as they are accepted by subordinate groups as universal truths.” (*African American Concert Dance*, p. 201)

It is even more important to note here that there continues to be an inherent problem with a single lens perspective in dance studies because, more often than not, it strategically positions namely American white female practitioners and scholars as the principal gatekeepers responsible for reading, validating, engaging, and preserving cross cultural dance forms. This is done despite the fact that urban black culture, which is increasingly code for ghetto black culture, has since the early twentieth century been the primary progenitor of most social dance trends and other uniquely Africanist expressive bodily forms that is massively consumed even today in America and on a global scale through the entertainment industry including the internet.³

For example, much of this racial exclusion stems from the overarching sexist marginalization of white women in dance resulting from “traditional epistemologies [that] exert an androcentric bias in the exclusion of women as agents of knowledge, [while demonstrating how] ... history has in the past generally been written from only one point of view, that of the dominant white male.” (“Retracing Our Steps,” p. 199)

This is why there is omission or generally limited bits of information about even white women from the historical record on Renaissance court dances of Europe. It also suggests that this omission has facilitated the coveting manner that Isadora Duncan and other white female pioneers later used to seize their place in early American modern dance creating a historical stronghold for white women as dance artists and scholars even unto today. (“Retracing Our Steps,” p. 199) This concedes to how (white) waves of feminism have played an influential role in the dominating agenda middle to upper middle class white women have held in the cultural politics of American dance. And with this, the following feminist advice is likely given to black feminist dance artists and scholars to counter it.

Whereas white women have been over-exposed in western art, black women, still largely invisible in mainstream dance productions, have not figured prominently. Their invisibility needs to be countered by the active intervention of the feminist in both explaining this absence and positively re-inscribing [their] presence. (“Retracing Our Steps,” p. 204)

As a result, what are currently the projects of reading-dancing bodies and black thematic dances is an un-even racialized project that is largely authorized by white female dance scholars who mediate the historicization of white subjects and obscure the objectification of black subjects under the guise of a critical analysis which consistently mirrors the historical subjugation of black dancing artists in American cultural politics. Therefore choreographies focusing on reading the sexual violence of black men and women by white men as a legitimate thematic artistic subject are not likely to be made readily available for viewing. They are even less likely to have their intended explicit

artistic interpretation on the long-term effects of sexual violence thoroughly examined. This is why once again this research argues that a closer combined thematic and contextual reading on a dance like *Strange Fruit* and the circumstances behind its inspiration for a young black female choreographer like Primus' is better articulated in the field of dance studies through the dialectic offered in a black feminist perspective.

Yet as *Southland* takes to the concert stage eight years after *Strange Fruit* first premiered, it debuts leaving no room for ambiguity on Dunham's perspective on this controversial corporeal topic and as the second installment on this black choreographic commentary on rape in America. But for Dunham, who chose to tackle the subject abroad in Santiago, Chile in 1951 at the height of her career as a promising dance scholar in anthropology, this ballet is immediately regarded as being tantamount to artistically declaring war on the US government. And it is staged at the total risk of jeopardizing her simultaneous rising stardom as a silver screen Hollywood (light-skin negro) darling.³¹ So whereas Primus' is found at the onset of her career to have aesthetically broached the subject of lynching from the perspective of a black female soloist, observer, mourner with merely the use of the cadence of her own body on stage, primarily emerging from her feet dancing to the verses of the poem *Strange Fruit* being read like a dirge. Dunham is found at what will be the end of her career as the Director of her own company because she has in many ways suicidally launched a full-scale production on America's hypocrisy on lynching. Which she does complete with a cast of lead and chorus dancers, carolers, live orchestration, a magnolia tree, and a written

³¹ Katherine Dunham's *Southland: Protest in The Face of Repression*.

script on an international stage. Dunham then goes dramatically further by staging a white female dancer to gesture to being raped and literally yell in a shrill ‘nigger.’ This was to empathically punctuate the subsequent violence that choreographically ensues. Such that her choreography works to aesthetically demystify what were the logics perpetuating the castration of black men, which also is a form of rape, leaving once again no room for ambiguity on what happens to black men who get involved with white women in America’s Southland. But unlike Primus, whose choreography in *Strange Fruit* literally responds to what a black woman sees and feels when a black man is lynched, Dunham’s theatrical choreography in *Southland* leaves no misunderstanding about why it is more often than not black men were being lynched. Indicating all the more, when examined through a black feminist lens, that what were white anxieties formulated around inter-racial sexual relations and therefore used as a basis for justifying lynching didn’t begin with the perceived sexual misconduct of black men with white women, which through a late nineteenth century / early twentieth century white supremacist lens was regarded as rape. It began with the lawful systemic rape of black women by white men during slavery and beyond. Thus, Dunham’s choreography in *Southland* historically pronounces that it was white men who in fact promulgated miscegenation through rape, not black men’s sexual liaison with white women, and they often did it with the knowledge and sometimes with the expressed consent of white women. This is again the central point made in Well’s *A Red Record*, which Gerda Lerner also supports as a premise when she recovers the following in her text *Black Women in White America*.

This moral debasement is not at all times unknown to the white women in these homes. I know of more than one colored woman who was openly importuned by white women to become the mistresses of their white husbands, on the ground that they, the white wives, were afraid that, if their husbands did not associate with colored women, they would certainly do so with outside white women, and the white wives, for reasons which ought to be perfectly obvious, preferred to have their husbands do wrong with colored women in order to keep their husbands *straight!* And again, I know at least fifty places in my small town where white men are positively raising two families – a white family in the “Big House” in front, and a colored family in a “Little House” in the backyard. (*Black Women in White America*, p. 156)

Lerner’s text also cites an anonymous colored woman in 1902 who identifies herself as a wife and mother who makes the following piercing indictment when she states: “[a] colored woman, however respectable, is lower than the white prostitute. The Southern white woman will declare that no negro women are virtuous, yet she places her innocent children in their care.” (*Black Women in White America*, p. 167) Here, Lerner uses this anonymous black woman voice to narrate what should be thought of as the cognitive dissonance of most racist whites at the time, but especially – racist white women’s notions surrounding *The Myth of the Bad Black Woman*, the fraternal twin of *The Myth of the Black Rapist*. (*Black Women in White America*) Narrated also from another anonymous colored woman commenting in the year 1912, “WE ARE LITTLE MORE THAN SLAVES,” (*Black Women in White America*, p. 155) Lerner goes on to point how it is that white men, raping black women (even after slavery) was so common place in America that it functioned like the application of a vicious pattern woven deep into the familial tapestry of the South almost without question, as if it were normal – as it

was by all accounts. A fact to which Dr. Henry Louis Gates would startlingly add quite recently through his genetic research that “it was [so] common for white men to impregnate black slaves, that today, the average African American is a quarter European.” (*Finding Your Roots*, PBS) This undoubtedly brings to the forefront how the broader subject of white men raping black women facilitated the profitable antebellum industry known as slave breeding⁴ – which was a legally sanctioned and financially lucrative institution built literally on the backs of enslaved black women; including the social engineering of black single motherhood in America which all the more has become the predicament of a steadily growing majority of their free descendants. Simply put, the savagery of slave breeding has been created and sustained through social and economic currently policies promoted that even now promulgate the cultural rampancy of black single motherhood in America.³² And while Dunham’s *Southland* does not directly gesture to all of the particulars surrounding the racial histories of white men maintaining white families in the ‘big house’ and black families in the ‘little house,’ her deliberate dramatic staging for what had been used as justification for white men to lynch black men to prevent miscegenation with white women perceptually motivates a black feminist examination beyond the obvious to unveil these more latent metanarratives also communicated within the broader choreographic context to the afore-mentioned violent racial and sexual histories.

Still, another point of consideration that ought to be given to this analysis on *Southland* is how the political impact of the dance was regarded stateside. This is

³² This argument considers the consistent historical link between the rates of mass incarceration and un-employment of black men in America and black single motherhood.

because it was staged at a time when the US government had a lot of social currency to lose both domestically and abroad because the 1950s by design were the post-baby boom World War II era. Likewise, a new brand of American Exceptionalism as well as American Imperialism was being cultivated into the psyche of the continental populace and the rest of the world which rested its laurels even more so on white middle class family values that were (at least in the public sphere) heterosexual, Judeo-Christian, capitalist, and democratic. For this reason some scholars and critics have questioned, if in part, Dunham's decision to stage *Southland* how and when she did was more of an effort to be taken more seriously as an artist and to not have her success be seen as just the good fortune of another light-skin black woman with a pretty face aspiring to be white. To which, Dunham's spoken prologue to the dance program (that she read in Spanish) helps to explain her artistic intentions.

The [wo]man who loves [her] country is the [wo]man who is able to see it in the bad as well as the good and seeing this bad declaim it, at the cost of liberty or life. Though I have not smelled the smell of burning flesh, and have never seen a black body swaying from a southern tree, I have felt these things in spirit... Through the creative artist comes the need to show this thing to the world, hoping that by exposing the ill, the conscience of the many will protest." (*Katherine Dunham's Southland*, p. 289)

This prologue to *Southland* that Dunham reads at its debut is clearly meant to be apart of the choreographic record, – a choreographic record on modern dance protest this research argues would very likely be intentionally blurred or lost with out it. It is one that also functions in many respects like the performative statement made in Primus' polemic subtitle in *Strange Fruit* and Ailey's dedication in *Cry*. Where the

choreographic message of protest is an iteration that is carried out expectedly through the performativity of the perpetuity of their dance companies or the borrowed legacy of these artists choreographic portfolio each time these specific dances are scheduled to be performed. There is also the chronological manner that seemingly prompts *Southland* to automatically be read as an elaboration on Primus' *Strange Fruit* that in many respects coldly forecasts the 1954 murder of Emmett Till and so many other lynched or murdered black men before and certainly after him.³³ And, it is sufficiently explains in a historical manner what tanked the upward trajectory of Dunham's career in Hollywood and her ability to maintain her otherwise very successful dance company. As it was clearly tied more so the 'so-called' liberalism that was temporarily extended to Primus' domestic staging of *Strange Fruit* in the 1940s which was never extended to Dunham's international shaming of America in *Southland* during the 1950s. In fact, Dunham only presented the dance twice: once in Chile, and then two years later, again in France in 1953. Even the popularity that she had formerly earned from having her company featured with her in the Hollywood box-office hit *Stormy Weather* in the 1940s didn't secure a pass for her. This was the case because she was repeatedly warned by the US State Department not to stage *Southland*. As a consequence for disobeying this governmental mandate on artistic censorship, Dunham and her company members would experience swift and severe micro-passive aggressions through malicious attempts to sabotage their European tour. These heavy financials blows to Dunham's

³³ Sadly, Till is known for being the dead black adolescent boy who is killed while visiting with family in America's Southland when he gets kidnapped in the middle of the night, brutally tortured, castrated, and killed for allegedly whistling at and eyeing a white woman earlier in the day.

company from the US State Department would intentionally create cancellations or mix-ups on the details about their paid performances at several venues leaving Dunham and her entire company stranded after they arrived to their sponsoring host country. Thereby, forcing Dunham to exhaust her personal and her company's resources just to sustain the basic necessities of her worn-out troupe of emotionally frustrated and disillusioned American dancers. The majority of whom were black American dancers that felt, that were abandoned by their own government in a foreign country that wasn't permitting them to earn any money while on tour. Demonstrating all the more just how much Dunham's bold criticism on America's silence and blind eye on the lynching of black men was an affront to the United States government. Especially, when contemplating the government's unwillingness to protect black men who were accused by those white women that would then cry rape after being confronted with the charge of miscegenation by white men. Dunham thereafter would receive multiple warnings and threats from the US State Department to cease and desist from producing *Southland*. Finally, the threat of this backlash on her and her company was so widespread in its intimidation that 'even newspapers and other publications were unwilling to cover the reviews on the dance.' (*Katherine Dunham's Southland*) Causing Dunham to later go on record to comment more formally in interviews that she chose not to stage the dance anywhere else again because of the emotional toll it took on her dancers – who were already challenged by simply being black and trying to make a living as artists in 1950s America.

Cleo Parker Robinson, nevertheless, would go on to re-stage *Southland* on her black dance company in Denver, Colorado in 2012, some sixty-one years later. Although, there was very little buzz about it nationally within the dance world. The reticence around the dance resulted quite possibly because so few dance artists or American audiences in general know *Southland's* history or even the broader historical and cultural context in which it was staged. This is also quite possibly because the news was not thought to be noteworthy enough to be widely circulated since it was about a black dance company preserving a black ballet about lynching. But for those who did have an interest in it, questions were raised as to whether Robinson was merely using *Southland* to stir up a relatively safe controversy in today's "post-racial" artistic social economy to make her black dance company more relevant and visible. While others supported her decision to reconstruct *Southland* as productive and as a means of resurrecting what would otherwise be an important lost work of black feminist protest art. This wouldn't be the first time that *Southland* helped to bolster the visibility of a black dance company. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's international stardom was most notably spawned in the 1960s by the misfortune of Dunham's artistic protestation on lynching.

In the 1960s, the State Department continued to give Dunham the excuse that [her] company was too large and therefore too expensive to sponsor. Dunham to no avail, offered to send as few as five dancers and two pianos abroad, despite the fact that Alvin Ailey's company of dancers, singers, and musicians toured the Far East and Australia for thirteen weeks in 1962... For Dunham, these inconsistent policies, embarrassing oversights, and reports that she was under secret investigation by the F.B.I. indicated an intentional blackballing. 'I had fallen from

grace. I never had aid from the State Department. I had all sorts of encouragement and cocktail parties wherever we went, but never financial aid.' Physically exhausted and financially bankrupt, the Katherine Dunham Dance Company gave its last performance at New York's Apollo Theatre in 1965. (*Katherine Dunham's Southland*, p. 310)

Rumors have long since circulated throughout the black dance community claiming that the opportunities which were brokered from the US State Department's sponsored tour in Asia during the 1960s was responsible for instigating the global success of Ailey's dance company at the expense of Dunham's dance company. This is also why it has been rumored that Ailey's Board of Trustees would go to such great lengths over the past forty plus-years to paint him as apolitical, despite his penchant to want to produce more radical choreographic work. It is from this quagmire of using dance to protest the sexual violence targeting black men and women that *Cry* emerges (from what is Ailey's seemingly less threatening to the white establishment choreographic repertoire) to take its place, as a radical Male Black Feminist piece. Nonetheless, *Cry* completes the third installment in this black trilogy on choreographies of rape. But, this time around *Cry's* installment offers a danced perspective that doesn't gesture toward a mutilated black man's body or the white hate, shame, and guilt that produced it – as the inflammatory artistic choreographic work of Primus and Dunham had previously done. *Cry* instead emerges as an artistic social commentary in the form of modern dance choreography that embraced a genre it would certainly have contributed to – as also seen with a number of actors especially comedians from the 1970s and onward. Where a black female body or personae is used – especially in theatre and film through cross-dressing, to make hyperbolic satirical commentaries on race related issues and black oppression

in general. The examples where this is also most observable is on mainstream television with Flip Wilson performing as “Geraldine,” and years later in Hollywood films with Tyler Perry performing as “Madea” – among a host of other black female impersonating performers. The obvious justification for this approach would be to use the black woman’s experiences as a non-threatening conquered subject to engage a dialogue or a remembering of white oppression that wouldn’t generate the kinds of violent aggressions that both Primus and Dunham experienced (including many other well known and lesser-known politically conscious performers). The following passage properly historicizes and summarizes the gist of this choreographic slight of hand played by Primus, Dunham, and eventually Ailey in this choreographic trilogy.

Indeed, the sense of powerlessness that enslaved men recalled in being unable to protect wives and daughters from white male sexual exploitation during slavery was, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, seemingly replicated in the sexual abuse of African American women who worked in white homes as domestics and in the lynch mobs that targeted black men with the hangman’s noose and the castrator’s blade. Strikingly, the vast majority of the public statements made by black Americans about slave breeding during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were made by [black] men. . . . African American women’s public statements about sex and sexuality meant that black women exercised circumspection when it came to such matters, especially in the company of whites.
(*Slave Breeding*, p. 60)

Again, the above bespeaks of the legacy Primus, Dunham, and Ailey all inherited.

Where the ‘politics of respectability’ among black Americans more readily would permit black men like Ailey (including Male Black Feminists dating all the way back to

nineteenth century like Fredrick Douglass)³⁴ to take on the challenge of remembering how black women have in fact been habitually raped by white men. As well as how in turn black men have instead been falsely accused of raping white women. These are conversations (and others like it) that black feminists have been openly contesting and encouraging others to remember and to fervently resist since formally organizing under “The Combahee River Collective Statement” in 1974.

Over time, however, these concerns have certainly made speaking out about the historical sexual abuse of black women by white men, and men in general, very difficult. But for black women in the nineteenth century and thereafter this would be an increasingly difficult topic to broach in part because the tenants surrounding the “politics of respectability” simply made it impolite discourse. This has engendered – altogether, even within a present day context, a peculiar silence on topics related to rape, molestation, and incest in America. Not surprisingly, scholars like Nell Irvin Painter and Margaret Washington have staked much on their academic careers to undo this socially inflicted censure by investigating, then pronouncing, literarily the ways that a formerly enslaved women like Sojourner Truth alluded to her own sexual victimization by her master, her mistress, and her church leaders (albeit discreetly) in her slave narrative (as examined in chapter two of this research) at the height of the Women’s Era. Also, the unconventional approach of Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative which would be come most famously known for using its abolitionist potency to decry one of the most unspoken horrors of Slavery in America, which is the predatory aspect

³⁴ Referencing Frederick Douglass’ slave narrative’s mention of the victimization of Aunt Hester.

involved in most sexual assault, abuse, and rape scenarios involving black women in the plantation south, a subject that remains an important topic of discussion among many feminists groups that organize more broadly around preventing rape today. Still what remains a steadily overlooked subject of discussion is the extent to which black women were both raped (or ravished, as they would say) and lynched in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵ This is something once again that both the findings of both Ida B. Wells and Gerda Lerner recover.

Oklahoma, 1914. Marie Scott of Wagoner County, a seventeen-year-old Negro girl was lynched by a mob of white men because her brother killed one of two white men who had assaulted her. She was alone in the house when the men entered, but her screams brought her brother to the rescue. In the fight that ensued one of the white men was killed. The next day the mob came to lynch her brother, but as he had escaped, lynched the girl instead. No one has ever been indicted for this crime.

- The Crisis, June 1914



Figure 4. Laura Nelson, a mother, in Oklahoma lynched on May 23, 1911³⁵

Other instances also show how even pregnant black women were lynched. Evidence of this is noted at “burial on the second day following [the lynching], that the movements

³⁵ This photograph of Nelson was taken from a postcard. Her son was also lynched at the same time but no photo of her son has yet to be found.

of [the] unborn child could be detected.”⁶ This was all apart of the very necessary two-fold lesson that all black men in America were required to learn “if the system of oppression [was] to survive. ‘*Defend black women – and die!*’ is one. ‘*Touch white women – and die!*’ is the other.” (*Black Women in White America*, pp. 162-163, 173)

Similarly, this underscores Diana Taylor’s reading of the archive where she argues that memory functions as an epistemology forming diverse fields from which knowledge through recollection can be harvested for a historical accounting that goes beyond the textual to inhabit the non-textual as well as how the repetitive labor employed by the repertoire of memory (including the bodily repertoire of choreography) establishes its performativity. This is a remembering that Primus, Dunham, and Ailey all harken back to through their modern dance choreography involving either the castration and lynching of black men or the systemic rape of black women. Ailey was, however, even more so apart of a wave of artists many of whom were on the literary front “[f]rom slavery times to the era of the civil rights and Black Power movements in the twentieth century, [that was responsible for creating] representations of strong black women – mothers, sisters, wives – punctuated [by] an often terrifying history of sexual exploitation and racial violence.” (*Slave Breeding*, p. 151)

Homage to black women and ‘activist motherhood’ came in different forms [particularly] from other African American writers. Gwendolyn Brooks, for example, left us haunted by her moving poem ‘The Mother,’ a stirring piece of poetry that evokes images of the past and present, rape and the physical and emotional pain that accompanies sexual violence. Other black authors have added their voices in admiration for black womanhood and motherhood. Alice Walker, for instance, wrote with compassion and insight about black women surviving centuries of cruelty and

oppression, and of navigating the fraught sexual politics of the civil rights and women's liberation movements in the twentieth century; and Maya Angelou has written prosaically about the dignity of black womanhood with the words 'Phenomenal Woman.' ... [And w]riters such as Michele Wallace ... and bell hooks continue to remind readers of the connection between violence and sex, race, and gender discrimination. (*Slave Breeding*, p. 152)

Much like the literary work of these aforementioned writers, the confirmation Ailey would receive from his co-author shortly before he died about his vague memory as a child on his mother's rape affirmed the decision he made years earlier for the choreographic redress he staged for his mother and all black women, especially mothers, in *Cry*. It is also makes the case through his dedication that remembering the socio-economic and sexual violence black women survived at the hands of white men and women are often indistinguishable; hence, his dedication being made to all black women everywhere. Moreover, Ailey's redress on the rape of black women as an artistic subject isn't merely connected to its choreographic predecessors offered through Primus and Dunham's choreographic works on lynching. It is in fact stirringly reminiscent of the seventeenth century visual artwork of Christiaan Van Couwenbergh in *Three Young White Men and a Black Woman*. This is a piece that is sometimes referred to as *Rape of the Negro Girl (1632)* which visually demonstrates how pervasive the culture of sexual violence was against black women that it could be used as the subject of what ultimately becomes a very famous work of European art for several centuries. Particularly, as this piece is not known for having received the wide-scale querying or rebuke from within the religiously austere and devout polity in which it was conceived. The fact that Couwenbergh also chose to depict the black woman in his

painting so grotesquely, even monstrously to say the least, frames her and all black women everywhere at that time as non-human. Subliminally, this suggests to the viewer that the woman in the painting and quite reasonably all black women everywhere then warranted being attacked by several white men at a time. This is a distorted mindset that perhaps assists to more adequately frame the rationale of the four white men who raped Ailey's mother in rural Texas during the 1930s as well as remembering so many other cases like it before and after.



Figure 5. Christiaan Van Couwenbergh's *Rape of the Negro Girl* (1632)

By comparison, *Rape of the Negro Girl* is a striking contrast to how in *The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies* painted by Thomas Stothard in 1801 depicts the black woman's body as beautiful and proportionally seductive with the sanctioning of the gods of the heavens and the sea escorting her on what looks like a

large oyster shell as if she is a precious jewel, a black pearl to be exact. Therefore Stothard's efficacy in illustrating the black woman's body attractive and inviting in this piece, unlike Couwenbergh's, is due to the fact that his painting imagines black femininity as a visual metaphor for the profitability of slavery which was considered beautiful. More especially because slave ships sailing West with human cargo represented how the society as a whole was also being psychologically and sociologically ushered into western society in large part through questionable Christian values and seventeenth century artistic propaganda and beyond.



Figure 6. Thomas Stothard's *The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies* (1801)

There is also the following disturbing pieces of artwork that historically demonstrates the violent beatings and torture black women would commonly be subjected to for rejecting white men. And for those skeptics who might argue there is no need to rehash

these unpleasant histories or those who might argue that these events transpired a long ago and aren't relevant now, they should consider the implications behind the following images where a black woman's body is cake as well as the only part of the cake that was sliced and consumed was the vagina. This is why recalling these examples of literary and visual works of art are once again relevant to the way that Ailey chose to choreographically pay homage to his mother as well as what were his ideas about black femininity. Mainly because it establishes that *Cry* wasn't a random artistic thought in 1971 without a concrete basis for artistic work esteeming black womanhood, and because it also establishes that Ailey isn't just thinking about this in a vacuum. He was instead very likely responding artistically to a centuries old practice of dishonoring black women in every gruesome way imaginable and then disavowing it in the effort to historically forget it ever happened.



Figure 7. *Punishment Aboard a Slave Ship* (1792)



Figure 8. *Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave* (1796)³⁶



Figure 9. Swedish Internet source unknown #1.

³⁶ This image is presumably reminiscent of what Fredrick Douglass referenced in his narrative regarding the sadistic violence Aunt Hester endured.



Figure 10. Swedish Internet source unknown #2.

This is why the analysis provided in this dissertation has consistently argued that Ailey's choreography in *Cry* is a performative statement. It is because *Cry* operates through Ailey's company legacy with a performativity that is always / already remembering how black women have survived being systemically raped and abused and continue to survive being forgotten and conveniently left out in various aspects of America History. It should also be noted that Ailey is doing all of this on a time line years before the formal organizing of the Black Feminist Movement in 1974.

In conclusion, the research in this chapter comes to an end by advocating for black cultural products in the form of modern dance choreography like *Strange Fruit*, *Southland*, and *Cry* to be revisited in a manner that permits for historicization rather than objectification using a black feminist lens to avoid the habitual absentia, white-washed interpretations, or down-right fictions commonly found outside of the field of Ethnic Studies on black female dancing subjects. This is why preserving and readily revisiting

the histories of black female subjects must never be seen as un-necessary as it is the primary means to avoiding the cultural and historical theft or misinterpretations of black cultural products that is still so common in the field of dance and other studies.

Conclusion

Robert Battle currently holds the coveted distinction of being the third Artistic Director that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre has formally known. But prior to accepting this post, he was a successful modern dance choreographer in his own right who worked with the company many times before being hand picked by Judith Jamison in 2011 to become her successor. Jamison, of course, retired after serving for over twenty years as Ailey's immediate replacement. Her tenure in this position, however, was not without its controversy. This is because Ailey made the following indicting remarks in his biography, *Revelations*, just before he passed away.

After thirty years as head of the company, I've given a lot of thought to a successor. There are several candidates. My choice would be Gary Delaotch, who I think would lead the company in new and exciting directions.³⁷ I believe the board, though, would prefer somebody like Judy Jamison because of fund-raising possibilities that are inherent in her. Time will tell. (*Revelations*, pp. 131-132)

It is for this reason many in the black dance community have long suspected that she (Jamison) and his Board of Directors conspired to, and was ultimately successful in banning Ailey's autobiography from being sold at his own school and from all other Ailey affiliated retail outlets. Undoubtedly, this would have to be done to avoid the embarrassment of this inconvenient truth – particularly as Jamison's appointment to the company as its new artistic leader was essentially sold to the general public and the broader dance world as one of Ailey's dying request. What is also inherent in Ailey's controversial commentary is the notion that there was exponential opportunism in

³⁷ Principal dancer who presumably died of HIV / AIDS shortly after Ailey in 1993.

Jamison's appointment by his Board of Directors – which rested on her global rise to fame after becoming a star in the dance world subsequent to her regal performance of black femininity in *Cry*. Yet, the names of both Joan Weill and Glorja Kaufman, two white female billionaire philanthropists, now proceeds that of Ailey's own name on both his school and his company – a fundraising administrative move that was orchestrated and secured under Jamison's tenure as Artistic Director. It is also alleged that this will be the case for perpetuity in exchange for their continued financial generosity. This raises many troubling consternations about the future of this company and its steady departure from the radical, grassroots, and community-oriented as well as (dare I say) its Male Black Feminist artistic penchant and vision of its creator. For instance, how long will it be before the artistic policy on a ballet like *Cry*, which has exclusively cast its black female soloists in the company in this role since 1971 eventually come to an end? Also, can future audiences expect to see the composition of the company members increasingly become white, or significantly lighter in skin complexion? Does white female philanthropy finally own the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater? And lastly, has the argument on the absolute necessity for preserving black dance already been lost? To close this dissertation research borrowing from Mr. Ailey, I would answer these questions saying 'time will definitely tell.'

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End Notes

¹ “Less than a month after the appearance of Stowe's "Libyan Sibyl," Gage published in the Independent the account of Truth that we recognize today . . . Gage quoted Sojourner Truth as saying that she had had thirteen children, all of whom had been sold away from her (although Truth had five children and said so in her Narrative). In this letter these famous lines appeared for the first time: ‘And ar'n't I a woman? Look at me. Look at my arm. . . . I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me- and ar'n't I a woman?’ Stowe and Gage let many years intervene between meeting Truth and writing about her by name. But while Stowe drew Truth as a quaint, minstrel-like, nineteenth century Negro, Gage made her into a tough-minded, feminist emblem by stressing Truth's strength and the clash of conventions of race and gender and by inventing the riveting refrain, ‘And ar'n't I a woman?’ During the mid-nineteenth century, Stowe's rendition of Truth captured American imaginations, and the phrase ‘Libyan Sibyl’ was endlessly reworked, even by Gage, who termed Truth the ‘Libyan Statue’ in her letter to the Independent, and Olive Gilbert, who in a letter to Truth written in the 1870s spoke of Truth as the ‘American Sibyl.’ Along with another phrase that had appeared in Stowe's piece -Truth's rhetorical and possibly apocryphal question to Douglass, ‘Frederick, is God dead?’ versions of the ‘Libyan Sibyl’ personified Truth until the end of the nineteenth century. As an expression of enduring Christian faith, she became the authentic Negro woman, the native, the genius of spiritual inspiration uncorrupted by formal education.” (“Representing Truth,” pp. 19-20)

² “Gage had chaired the 1851 woman's rights convention in Akron where Truth had come to sell her newly published Narrative. She did not write an essay dedicated entirely to Truth immediately, but Gage recognized the attractiveness of Truth's persona and used her as the model for an October 1851 episode of a series she was publishing in Jane Swisshelm's Pittsburgh Saturday Visitor. In ‘Aunt Hanna's Quilt: Or the Record of the West, 'A Tale of the Apple Cellar,'” Gage drew the fictional word portrait of a fugitive slave whom she called Winna: *She was black- black as November night itself- tall, straight and muscular. Her wool was sprinkled with grey, that showed her years and sorrows, and her countenance was strikingly interesting. Her features once must have been fine, and even yet beamed with more than ordinary intelligence; her language was a mixture of the African lingo and the manner of the whites among whom she lived.* Winna lamented that all her children had been lost to the slave trade: ‘I've had thirteen of 'em. They are all gone-all gone, Miss, I don't know where's one [of them].’⁴⁴ In 1862 and 1863 Gage was in the South Carolina Sea Islands working with freed people in the ‘rehearsal for Reconstruction,’ and after her return to the North, she undertook an interstate tour to solicit support for freedmen's relief. Reading Stowe's article twelve years after the meeting in Akron, Gage may well have realized that she could produce a more riveting and true-to-life version of Sojourner Truth than Stowe's quaint little character.” (“Representing Truth,” p. 19)

³ In “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies”, Jane Desmond argues that “the academy’s aversion to the material body” (with rare exception) is rooted in the notion that dance is an activity of leisure and entertainment and it is not taken seriously because the majority of its practitioners are minorities - white women and people of color. (p. 30) While acknowledging that Western hegemonic ideas about race and gender plays an important part in diminishing the broader cultural meaningfulness of dance, Desmond articulates that the prevailing structure of white racial privilege is primed such that in most cases it is the key beneficiary of dance and other artistic trends formulated by urban black culture. Moreover, Desmond’s article provides the often missing context for the common place “‘whitewashing’ of (black dances, namely) the hip hop style” when she states: “Members of the hegemonic group reap economic success built on the exhibition of a black-derived movement and song style”. (p. 39) This “whitewashing” phenomena, however, is neither unique nor specific to present times. It is instead a systemic pattern of privileging white bodies over black bodies to sell and profit from black cultural materials that is also witnessed in the social dance scene of the early 20th century.

“Performing in elegant dance clubs, and running their own dance school in New York City, they (Vernon and Irene Castle) built their reputations (in the 1920s) on popularizing (among the middle and upper classes) social dances that originated in the lower classes, especially within the black population. They ‘toned down,’ ‘tamed,’ and ‘whitened’ such popular social dances as the Turkey Trot and the Charleston. Such revisions tended to make the dances more upright, taking the bend out of the legs and bringing the buttocks and chest into vertical alignment. Such ‘brokering’ of black cultural products increased the circulation of money in the white community which paid white teachers to learn white versions of black dances.” (p. 34-35)

⁴ “Antebellum abolitionists linked western expansion to slave breeding by arguing that the upper South ‘raised’ slaves for sale in the lower South and Southwest. Abolitionists charged that the infertile soil in states such as Virginia and Maryland, which allegedly made large plantations based on agricultural production unprofitable, encouraged the breeding and sale of vast quantities of slaves into the lower South. One anti-slavery writer explained that ‘the northern slave States, whose soil the system exhausted, have acquired a new interest in [slavery], by humbling themselves to the condition of slave-breeding and slave-trading communities.’ Accusations of this nature crystallized in abolitionist discourse over the course of the antebellum era. Theodore Parker, for example, labeled Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri as ‘the slave-breeding States.’” (*Slave Breeding*, p. 28)

⁵ “Authorities accused her of killing a deputy sheriff who supposedly stumbled on some stolen goods in her house. Why they lynched her child is a mystery. The mob raped and dragged Nelson six miles to the Canadian River and hanged her from a bridge.”

(NAACP: One Hundred Years of Lynching in the US 1889-1918) Posted on-line August 1, 2008 by Henrietta Vinton Davis.

⁶ Drawn from an [i]nvestigation conducted by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. NAACP, *30 Years of Lynching in the United States* (New York; NAACP, 1919.)