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Dancin' to Freedom: A Historical Analysis of the Rise of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

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by
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> The cultural heritage of the American Negro is one of America's richest treasures. From his roots as a slave, the American Negro—sometimes sorrowing, sometimes jubilant, but always hopeful—has created a legacy of music and dance which have touched, illuminated, and influenced the most remote preserves of world civilization. I and my dance theater celebrate, in our programme, this trembling beauty. We bring to you the exuberance of his jazz, the ecstasy of his spirituals, and the dark rapture of his blues.
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> —Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Program Note[1]

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was founded in New York City in 1958. It was the creative product of Alvin Ailey, a young African-American dancer whose early childhood years were spent picking cotton, and it consisted of six additional African-American dancers. While it was not the first company of its kind, it would grow to become one of America's leading modern dance companies. Considering the times in which it began, and the fact that many young dance companies never make it beyond local performance seasons, it is amazing that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater grew beyond its meager beginnings in 1958.

Less than one year earlier in September 1957, a federal court ordered the public schools of Little Rock, Arkansas desegregated in accordance with the 1954 Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declaring segregation unconstitutional. The opening week of school at Little Rock's Central High School became

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[1]Jacqueline Quinn Moore Latham, "A Biographical Study of the Lives and Contributions of Two Selected Contemporary Black Male Dance Artists—Arthur Mitchell and Alvin Ailey—in the Idioms of Ballet and Modern Dance, Respectively," Ph.D. diss., Texas Women's University, 1973, 672.

the scene of mob violence as nine African-American students attempted to attend school. The situation received national media attention as it became nearly a personal conflict of wills and power between Arkansas' Governor Orval Faubus and President Eisenhower. Faubus was using a unit of the National Guard to prevent the African-American students from entering the school. Eisenhower, after attempting to persuade Faubus to withdraw the National Guard, federalized the state reserve units and ordered part of the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock. It was only with this federal protection that the nine students were able to desegregate Central High School.[2] This is only one example, but it clearly demonstrates the strong racial tensions present in American society. The United States of the late 1950s was not a place highly receptive to an African-American dance company whose works centered on southern African-American life.

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater struggled for many years on the fringe of artistic society. Their first performance in 1958 was at New York's 92nd Street YMHA. "It was common, in those days, for young choreographers to do concerts at the Young Men's Hebrew Association on Ninety-second Street and Lexington Avenue," writes Ailey in his autobiography. "The management made it easy for young choreographers, since their work could be performed without costing the YMHA a lot of money."[3] In 1960, the

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[2] Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1990), 12.

[3] Alvin Ailey with A. Peter Bailey, *Revelations*, (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1995), 89-90.

company's season consisted of precisely two performances—one at the Theresa Kaufman Auditorium and one at the 92nd Street "Y".[4] In these first few years of the company's existence, the mainstream press paid no attention. It was not until September 1963 that the company was reviewed in the *New York Times*. However, the review was for a performance in Rio de Janeiro, and it was far from the glowing reviews the company would receive in the future.[5] Despite the times in which it began, the Ailey company is now a highly respected, critically-acclaimed modern dance company which is also a popular success. To speak of the popular and critical success of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater without understanding and taking into consideration the civil rights movement would be a significant oversight. Furthermore, to speak of the cultural and artistic segments of the civil rights movement without including Alvin Ailey and his dance company would be ignoring a major cultural component of the African-American community. The civil rights movement—its ideals, successes, and failures—greatly affected both Ailey and the success of his dance company.

One may ask why a dance company would be a subject worthy of historical analysis. It is because dance, and a society's reaction to it, are important cultural indicators. As a part of culture, dance is both acted upon by other aspects of a society (e.g. economics, politics) and acts upon those same aspects. Anthropologist Anya Peterson Royce writes that "because dance is part of culture, it is subject to the

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[4] Joseph H. Mazo, "Ailey & Company," *Horizon* 27 (July/August 1984): 21.

[5] "Rio Festival Views Alvin Ailey Dancers," *New York Times*, 6 September 1963, 35.

same forces of change as any other aspect of culture."[6] Therefore, social change, both great and small, can be seen in the dance created by a society. "Much about change in dance form and culture is applicable to culture change in general . . . . In some cases . . . dance is a readily observable microcosm of what is happening in the larger social and cultural context."[7] For these reasons, dance is a valid indicator of a collective people's experience within a society and can be used as an historical tool to aid in the understanding of social change.

Dance is a form of communication; it is body language taken to a greater extreme. In all societies, the physical interaction between people can be as important, if not more important, than the verbal and written communication which takes place. Dance is this physical interaction, this body language, intensified. As with other expressions in a society, "dance tends to be a testament of values, beliefs, attitudes, and emotions."[8] Dance, like other arts, is a medium through which the creator and performer (sometimes, but not always, one and the same) can express themselves to the audience.

How dance communicates lies in the kinesthetic and the multisensory nature of dance. Anthropologist Judith Lynne Hanna states that "dance is an autonomic system with multisensory immediacy that causes excitement, fear, and pleasure for performers

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[6] Anya Peterson Royce, *The Anthropology of Dance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977), 106.

[7] Ibid., 110.

[8] Judith Lynne Hanna, *To Dance Is Human: A Theory of Nonverbal Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 28.

and observers. Dance is couched in social situations and belief systems generating energy and releasing inhibitory mechanisms."[9] Royce agrees with Hanna's conclusion on this point, saying, "It is perhaps this capacity to assault all of one's senses simultaneously that makes dance such a potent, often threatening, vehicle of expression."[10] She also states that a kinesthetic connection exists between the observer and performer. "It would not be exaggeration to suggest that this kinesthetic activity [dance] generates kinesthetic responses in the viewer although they generally are more restrained and less conscious than those of the performer."[11] The movement energy itself, attacking all the senses simultaneously, gives dance the power of communication.

Power is at the center of dance's position in culture. Dance is recognized in many cultures as a very powerful medium of expression. Its multisensory nature makes it possible for performers to seduce viewers through their movement.[12] The sense of community evoked through dance also gives it power. Hanna writes, "Westerners recognize that dance provokes a sense of personal and group power for performer and observer alike . . . ."[13] The subjects of power and dance are intertwined, so much so that it is difficult to

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[9] Ibid., 146-147.

[10] Royce, *Anthropology of Dance*, 200.

[11] Ibid., 197.

[12] Hanna, *To Dance Is Human*, 89.

[13] Ibid., 128.

find literature on dance which does not mention power—either that which dance wields, or that which is used against dance.

In *The Performer-Audience Connection*, Hanna early on discusses dance and power relations. She claims that dancers have the power to influence an audience's attitudes, opinions, and feelings. The human body has both real and symbolic power, and this is the source of a dancer's power. "A lively, skilled dancer epitomizes power and the strength and discipline most ordinary people feel they lack," according to Hanna.[14] The power that dance has to make "a strong and lasting impact upon a viewer," connects it to other sources of power in a society, specifically economic and political.[15]

This connection to economic and political power is integral when studying the dance of a culture or society. Joyce Aschenbrenner, a dance researcher, states, "In a complex society, art involves and presupposes political and economic power, as well as cultural autonomy—the freedom to pursue alternative expressions."[16] Hanna supports this theory, explaining that dance may function as a political stabilizer by releasing and neutralizing socially produced tensions, or as a political agitator as a vehicle of self-assertion.[17]

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[14] Judith Lynne Hanna, *The Performer-Audience Connection: Emotion to Metaphor in Dance and Society* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1983), 8.

[15] Ibid., 23.

[16] Joyce Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham: Reflections on the Social and Political Contexts of Afro-American Dance* (New York: Congress of Research in Dance, 1981), 23.

[17] Hanna, *To Dance Is Human*, 142.

Because of this political power, dance is often the object of censorship or suppression.

The importance of dance and other arts in a society can be seen through the actions of its government. Whether they are efforts to support or suppress, the amount of energy put into these actions is a fairly accurate measurement of the society's value placed upon the impact of the arts. In the case of Ailey, the government strongly supported the company. In the early stages of its development, the company performed abroad on its first tour under the Kennedy administration's International Exchange Program.[18] The company was once again sponsored by the government in tours abroad to Dakar and Senegal in 1966, and to the Soviet Union in 1970.[19]

Economic support is also a way to measure the value of dance in a society, and is another way of exerting power over dance. As stated before, dance sometimes challenges the current political and economic structures of a society. "Such challenges may be monitored by those in power, through controlling financial support and by means of a 'cultural establishment' operating through the popular media." [20] The role of the popular media is evident in the case of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The less controversial the company became, the more press coverage it received, as will be shown later in the paper.

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[18] Mazo, "Ailey & Company," 23.

[19] Ibid., 24; and Judith Jamison with Howard Kaplan, *Dancing Spirit: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 122.

[20] Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham*, 18.

The Ailey company did not receive widespread economic support by means of a paying audience until ten years after its formation. In fact, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater received acceptance abroad much before it became a standard segment of the American dance season. The company's first tour was in southeast Asia and Australia under the Kennedy administration's International Exchange Program, as stated earlier.[21] The company continued to travel abroad before finding a permanent home in New York City in 1968. They performed in Rio in 1963, Dakar and Senegal in 1966, and at the Edinburgh Festival in 1968.[22]

The progress of the civil rights movement helps to explain why an American dance company financed by the federal government to travel abroad, where it received widespread acceptance, did not have a full New York season until 1968. As stated earlier, the civil rights movement was a non-violent movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s which faced violent opposition. Key civil rights actions during the early years of the Ailey company's existence included the sit-in movement beginning in 1961; the freedom rides; the grass-roots voter registration drives in the rural South known commonly as freedom summer; the Albany, Georgia, movement; and the great march in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. All of the aforementioned actions became scenes of nationally televised violence. Students at sit-ins across the country were beaten. One violent attack against the freedom riders occurred in Anniston, Alabama. Rider James Peck

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[21] Mazo, "Ailey & Company," 23.

[22] Ibid., 24.

described the violent scene vividly one year later. "When the Greyhound bus pulled into Anniston, it was immediately surrounded by an angry mob armed with iron bars. They set upon the vehicle, denting the sides, breaking the windows, and slashing tires."[23] Eventually the police arrived, allowing the bus to depart. However, the mob pursued and continued to attack the bus until the bus burst into flames. The freedom riders were attempting to desegregate interstate bus travel. An integrated dance company glorifying southern African-American culture would not be easily accepted in a society wrought with such racial tension.

By 1966, the civil rights movement had entered a transition period. More and more, the activist cry changed from "Freedom Now" to "Black Power."[24] The civil rights movement's goals shifted from integration to black nationalism and separatism. It is at this point in history in which Alvin Ailey's goals of universalism became more easily accepted in the mainstream American culture. With the company's first tour of Southeast Asia and Australia in 1962, Ailey realized the great power his creations had to cross cultural boundaries. Audiences throughout the tour responded with great enthusiasm to the performances, especially Ailey's signature piece *Revelations*. Ailey vividly recalls his audiences in Australia, "They screamed from beginning to end; there was thunderous applause that went on and on, people throwing flowers, people crying."[25] Ailey

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[23] James Peck, "Freedom Ride," in *Let Freedom Ring: A Documentary History of the Modern Civil Rights Movement* ed. Peter B. Levy (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1992), 77.

[24] Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound*, 200.

[25] Ailey, *Revelations*, 105.

later states, "The dirt and grit of Revelations and Blues Suite and the power of Brother John's singing had a profound impact on audiences all over Southeast Asia but especially so in Japan."[26] The impact of Ailey's dances will be discussed further later in the paper, but it is important to recognize the profound impact this audience response had on Ailey and his ideals.

The intentions, goals, and actions of Ailey and his company must be known to completely understand the interaction with the civil rights movement. "I started out. . .to create a black folkloric company, to present to the public what black artists had created in music and dance," Ailey has said.[27] That vision quickly grew into something much grander and more controversial. The company was founded in 1958 performing works based on the African-American experience as Ailey had both seen and experienced it. As soon as 1962, however, this "black folkloric company" included a white dancer.[28] The concept of integration became one of the most important blocks upon which the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was built. Along with employing non-black dancers, the company performs works by choreographers other than Ailey—both black and white. In a 1969 interview Ailey said, "No, it's not token integration . . . . I feel an obligation to use black dancers because there must be more opportunities for them but *not* because I'm a

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[26] Ibid., 106.

[27] Mazo, "Ailey & Company," 21.

[28] Ibid., 23.

black choreographer talking to black people."[29] What Ailey meant by that statement is that it was not his race which caused him to feel an obligation to give African-American dancers more opportunities, but his beliefs as a humanist. Ailey has been quoted on more than one occasion as saying, "I don't care whether they are white, black or green as long as they are talented."[30] This second statement does seem to contradict Ailey's statement quoted earlier about the need to provide more opportunities for African-American dancers. Ailey continually wrestled with the opposing values of integration and supporting the African-American community. The structure and policies of his company reflect this.

The company was and is integrated, but has always remained primarily African-American. The company presented work of non-black choreographers which clearly did not deal with the African-American experience. Many followed the modern dance ideal of the time—art for art's sake. They had no themes or stories, just movement. Even Ailey's work was not limited to African-American themes. His piece *Streams* was based on the concept of water moving, similar to *The River* which he choreographed originally for the American Ballet Theater and is now part of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's repertory. As a general rule, however, Ailey is remembered, and the company is known, for his works

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[29] Ellen Cohn, "'I Want to Be a Father Figure'," *New York Times*, 13 April 1969, 35(D).

[30] Clive Barnes, "'As Long As They Have Talent'," *New York Times*, 14 April, 1968, 23(D).

which express the African-American experience and are based upon Ailey's memories of his childhood.

Much of Ailey's choreography was a result of his early life experiences in rural southern Texas. Ailey was born January 5, 1931.[31] He spent the first twelve years of his life in various Texas small towns with only his mother to provide for the family since his father abandoned them when Alvin was only six months old.[32] Ailey grew up in the stereotypical black, impoverished South, constantly surrounded by religion. When describing his childhood at one point, Ailey said, "I was miserable then and felt very alone."[33]

Biographer Jacqueline Latham includes a vivid description of the experiences in Ailey's early life which gave him the basis for choreographing his most popular and well-known piece entitled *Revelations*. "In Southern Baptist churches such as True Vine, baptismal ceremonies were held in rivers or ponds in the vicinity of the church. All of those to be baptized wore white clothing and were marched to the baptismal site with dignity and solemnity . . . ." The ceremonies were followed by singing, shouting, and dancing as expressions praising God.[34] Ailey's inspiration for *Revelations* came directly from witnessing events like the one described above. *Revelations*, choreographed in 1960, is a suite of spirituals in three sections.[35] Spirituals, like the blues, are a distinctly African-

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[31] Ailey, *Revelations*, 26.

[32] Latham, "A Biographical Study," 435.

[33] Ibid., 443.

[34] Ibid., 445.

[35] Jamison, *Dancing Spirit*, 115.

American form of music. In *The Spirituals and the Blues*, James H. Cone writes that the spirituals arose out of the black experience in America—one of servitude and resistance, "of survival in the land of death."[36] *Revelations* transforms the feeling of spirituals and the experiences from which they arose into movement.

The first section is entitled "Pilgrim of Sorrow" and includes the spirituals "I Been 'Buked and I Been Scorned," "There is Trouble All Over This World," "Ain't Gonna Lay My Religion Down," and "Fix Me, Jesus." The movement in this section is weighty to convey the sense that "the burden of the world is on your shoulders."[37] The second section is called "Take Me to the Water," recalling images from the baptismal scenes of Ailey's childhood. All the dancers are completely costumed in white. The movement is much more spirited than that of the first section, communicating the ecstatic nature of the baptismal experience. The third section, "Move, Members, Move," is the most energetic section of the piece. As Judith Jamison, current artistic director of the company and former Ailey dancer, describes it, "The dancers carry large yellow fans and wear Sunday-go-to-church straw hats."[38] The movements are both large and fast, a combination which requires an incredible amount of strength and energy. By this point in the piece, the dancers seem to be nearly in a trance, and the audience is transfixed. The section closes with the

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[36] James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), 20.

[37] Jamison, *Dancing Spirit*, 115.

[38] Ibid.

spiritual "Rocka My Soul." Jamison describes the power of *Revelations* thusly:

> There is a spirit within *Revelations* that keeps it fresh every time. At the end of "Rocka My Soul" the audience is indeed moved, taken to another place in their lives, someplace lasting that's touched their hearts and minds and changed their perspective.[39]

Adding to this power is the fact that the music is often performed live. Originally, Brother John Sellers performed the spirituals for *Revelations*. He was a powerful vocalist and a protégé of Mahalia Jackson, one of the most well-known American gospel singers.[40] *Revelations* remains the most popular piece performed by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

The tensions between whites and African-Americans in southeast Texas also had an influence over Ailey's outlook on life and his later choreography. Ailey once said that as a child "it appeared that every adult black male had either been to the penitentiary or lived in constant fear of being sent there."[41] This impression and "frequent discussions among black adults of the lynching of blacks by whites, and of fights and shootings within the black community" influenced his choreography for works such as *Blues Suite* and *Masekela Language*.[42]

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[39] Ibid., 116.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Latham, "A Biographical Study," 446.

[42] Ibid.

Blues Suite has been called Ailey's first choreographic success. Performed at the company's premiere in 1958, and many times since, the piece is based upon Ailey's memories of the Dew Drop Inn, a honky-tonk bar in Texas. The Dew Drop Inn is an example of a jook—a dance-hall-type place in African-American communities, and a vital part of cultural identity. The jook was the first secular institution to emerge after emancipation. In *Jookin'*, sociologist Katrina Hazzard-Gordon writes, "Like the blues, the jook gave rise to and rejuvenated a variety of cultural forms. And, like the blues, the jook was a secular institution rooted in West African traditions that intertwined religious and secularized elements."[43]

Ailey remembers it as having "an atmosphere of sensuality always accompanied by fear or a sense of impending trouble. There were always fights and talks about so and so's love affair—there were killings."[44] The characters in *Blues Suite* are exaggerated in both movement and costume to appear comedic, but the work still contains a serious tone. Judith Jamison describes *Blues Suite* well in her autobiography. "*Blues Suite* is funny and sad at the same time in its depiction of people trying to get out of a situation they're trapped in. They're still celebratory, they still go on with their lives, but there is an underlying sadness."[45] This message did not escape the critics, either. Clive Barnes said in 1969, "It has a hard-grained sense

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[43] Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 77.

[44] Latham, "A Biographical Study," 447.

[45] Jamison, *Dancing Spirit*, 77.

of reality to its flippancy that you will find hard to forget."[46] Don McDonagh described the character portrayed in 1968 by James Truitte as "the sensuous paradigm of a man engaged in the here and now with a wary ear cocked for tomorrow."[47] Ailey's interpretation of the blues through movement communicated the struggle to live happily despite wretched conditions which faced most African-Americans in the 1950s, and for many through to the present, but which could be understood by people of other races as well. As dance photographer Susan Cook said, "*Blues Suite* succeeds because it is a visual equivalent of the blues."[48] Cone writes that the blues are the secular equivalent of spirituals. "The blues are about black life and the sheer earth and gut capacity to survive in an extreme situation of oppression," says Cone.[49] The blues came directly out of African-American experience, as did Ailey's *Blues Suite.*

Masekela Language is a piece which deals with the pain of being black in South Africa during the era of apartheid. It is set to the music of Hugh Masekela and described in 1969 as Ailey's most militant work.[50] The same critic who called it militant was quick to point out, however, that both "its framework *and message* are

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[46] Clive Barnes, "Dance: Two Premieres by Alvin Ailey," *New York Times*, 24 November 1969, 62(D).

[47] Don McDonagh, "Alvin Ailey Troupe Dances in Brooklyn," *New York Times*, 8 April 1968, 62(D).

[48] Susan Cook, *The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1978), 39.

[49] Cone, *Spirituals and Blues*, 108.

[50] Anna Kisselgoff, "Dance: Militant 'Masekela Language'," *New York Times*, 21 November 1969, 57(D).

universal rather than specific in a sectarian way."[51] Even Ailey's most militant piece is also described as universal.

In her review of the premiere performance, Anna Kisselgoff wrote a passionate description of one moment in *Masekela Language*. "Another beats her fists against the floor. Suddenly, life and love are interrupted by violence—read race conflict or Chicago—as a wounded man rushes in and the lyrics speak mockingly of 'Fuzz all around to protect me. . .from Mace and grenades.'"[52] As the aside in this passage mentioning Chicago indicates, Ailey's work was not only important for the specific issue it addressed—South Africa—but also for the issues closer to home which it invoked in the audience's minds, such as the violence at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. African-American themes could also apply to incidents which involved mostly white Americans.

Ailey's idea of American culture was also integral in the development of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Ailey has always been open about his intentions for the company and his beliefs regarding art. As a repertory company (a company which performs the works of various choreographers and often more than once) they have reconstructed the works of the great African-American dance artists Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham. Reconstruction is always a challenge, but Ailey was determined to face that challenge because these pieces are important to the history of the art, and therefore the history of American culture. "We have

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[51] Ibid.

[52] Anna Kisselgoff, "Ailey Dance Theater Presents A Rousing Finale," *New York Times* 18 August 1969, 28(D).

been able to keep alive some of the black stuff—by Pearl Primus and Katharine Dunham [sic], for instance—that nobody would have seen otherwise," Ailey said.[53] Ailey's intent is best expressed in an introductory statement which has appeared in many of the company's printed programs, and which appears at the beginning of this paper. It is the combination of a variety of influences which Ailey viewed as American culture, and African-American experience is an integral part of this varied ideal of culture. African-American dance is itself a combination of movement and cultural influences from West African culture, Afro-Caribbean culture, and Euro-American culture. Therefore, it is not surprising that Ailey would see American culture as a mixture, since the segment he was most closely involved with clearly was one.

In 1942, Ailey moved with his mother to California where he came into contact with many of the influences which would form his beliefs on integration. Latham's study of Ailey's life indicates that he did not have much contact with those outside of the southern African-American community until this time. Ailey recounts that he first lived on the east side of Los Angeles, "the black section of town," but then moved to a predominantly white area soon after.[54] Ailey enjoyed urban life much more than his experiences in rural southern Texas. "I was absolutely overjoyed to be part of so much activity, in the midst of all that street life. It was a very good time in a very good, active place. Because of the booming war economy everybody

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[53] Mazo, "Ailey & Company," 21.

[54] Ailey, *Revelations*, 31.

seemed to be doing well."[55] Ailey's experience of W.W.II California was similar to many African Americans since the changing war economy spurred a great urban migration. The atmosphere in Los Angeles, however, was somewhat different than in other urban centers. There was more cultural mixing, which Ailey experienced first-hand. In his autobiography, Ailey recalls two of his close friends at George Washington Carver Junior High School—Kiyoshi Mikawa of Japanese descent and Tony Hernandez of Hispanic descent. Ailey says insightfully, "The idea of a multiracial world was always there in spirit, even when I was very young. I was part of it."[56] Ailey's experiences in Los Angeles clearly had a lasting impact.

As a teenager in Los Angeles, Ailey was introduced to dance through a friend and became quite active with the Lester Horton Dance Theatre. Lester Horton became Ailey's mentor. "Horton had founded . . . the country's first multi-racial dance company (he was white and these were the 1940s), an example Ailey has followed."[57] It is with Horton that Ailey received the majority of his dance training, and it is with Horton where Ailey would have begun developing ideals and beliefs regarding dance. It is not coincidental that Ailey sustained a strong conviction supporting integration and that the base of his training as a dancer and choreographer was in an integrated environment. While neither Ailey or anyone writing about him has ever directly connected his experience with Lester

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[55] Ibid., 32.

[56] Ibid., 33.

[57] Mazo, "Ailey & Company," 23.

Horton and his proponence of integration, the relationship is clear. In Ailey's own words, "In the 1940s and 1950s the American dance world practiced a pervasive racism. . . .Lester—a happy exception—opened his arms to talent when and where he saw it."[58] Along with preserving Horton's technique, Ailey continued Horton's tradition of talent, above all else, being the ultimate factor.

Ailey's conviction about integration was in complete opposition to the values being proclaimed by many leaders of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was at this time that the Black Panther party took Malcolm X's words "by any means necessary" to heart and gained publicity by arming its members. The non-violent approach of the earlier civil rights movement which sought desegregation had been pushed aside by the separatist, and often violent, approach of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. These activists believed in the power of strengthening the African-American community above attempting to integrate. One prominent voice in the artistic realm of the black nationalist movement was Amiri Baraka, named LeRoi Jones before he took on a Muslim name. Baraka was a writer and dramatist who first gained acclaim as part of the Beat Generation. As the civil rights movement progressed, however, he became more well known for his political ideas and actions than his writing, but art was always an important arm of the civil rights movement in his view.

In Baraka's estimation, art and politics could not be separated. "To me, social commentary and art cannot be divorced. Art and life

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[58] Ailey, *Revelations*, 51.

are the same: art comes out of life, art is a reflection of life, art is drawn from life."[59] Baraka also said, "Art is political by its very nature. It has an ideology and reflects its creator's value system."[60] Baraka's beliefs that art responds to society and therefore interacts with the political and economic forces in society is supported by both Hazzard-Gordon's and Aschenbrenner's research on dance.

Aschenbrenner claims that the African-American dance tradition is characteristically responsive to social crises. "The power of Afro-American dance to change and shape human consciousness under extremely adverse conditions, as well as to constitute a therapy in times of crisis has been well documented . . . ."[61] Dance as an expression of power began before African-Americans were even brought to America as slaves and has continued since then.

As cargo on slave ships, African slaves were forced to dance as a form of exercise on the Middle Passage. "'Dancing the slaves' was a regular activity . . . . Usually several crew members paraded on deck with whips and cat-o-nine-tails, forcing the men slaves to jump in their irons, often until their ankles bled."[62] Female slaves were also "danced." From the beginning of their experience as Americans, slaves experienced dance as an expression of power. Therefore, it is not strange that the slaves used dance to defy the power held over

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[59] David Ossman, "LeRoi Jones: An Interview on *Yugen*," in *Conversations with Amiri Baraka* ed. Charlie Reilly (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 6.

[60] Mel Watkins, "Talk with LeRoi Jones," in *Conversations* ed. Reilly, 92.

[61] Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham*, 16.

[62] Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin'*, 7-8.

them. "Once the slaves reached North America, they exploited dance as an opportunity to resist domination."[63] Dance was used as a "means of solidifying the slave community."[64] Through dance they communicated with each other by a means not clear to overseers and slave holders as a form of social intercourse. After slavery, dance in the African-American community remained a vital part of cultural identity and a widespread form of social critique.

The jook was created in the South, and the rent party took its place in the North after urban migration occurred during World War I. Dance halls and membership clubs were under the control of the white establishment through the politics of licensing, so another venue for African-American dance needed to be created.[65] The rent party was the perfect answer because it solved two problems simultaneously. It gave economically depressed African-Americans a way to earn extra income, and it created an environment for African-American dance which was free of white political influence. Hazzard-Gordon points out that "had a political organization or strong tenants' movement addressed housing needs, the rent party might not have developed. However, with practically no political power and virtually no economic clout, African-Americans had few options."[66] The example of the rent party illustrates how the lack of

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[63] Ibid., 13.

[64] Ibid., 22.

[65] Ibid., Preface xi.

[66] Ibid., 97.

political and economic power is directly related to the development of the African-American dance tradition.

African Americans consciously realized the capabilities of dance and art as a social force long before the civil rights movement. Leaders in the dance community have attempted, and continue to attempt, to utilize this potential intrinsic in their culture. African-American dancer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham was one of the most devoted to the cause. Aschenbrenner says that Dunham regarded dance "as a primary factor in the unification of the Haitian people in their successful revolt against their masters," and she believed in "its revolutionary potential for blacks in the United States as well."[67] In writing about the work of Dunham and African-American dance in general, Aschenbrenner also makes the following observation. "Afro-American culture apparently produces in many individuals the basic conditions of expressiveness and self-acceptance that are important to successful performance . . . ." Also, there seems to be a tradition in the community to preserve these expressions as is seen in the integration of music and dance into religious activities and other aspects of society.[68]

Ailey's work conforms to Baraka's ideology of art as a reflection of life and the traditions of the African-American community as illustrated by Hazzard-Gordon and Aschenbrenner. His work did reflect the creator's value system. Ailey formed the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater as a forum in which to present

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[67] Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham*, 6.

[68] Ibid., 34.

his choreography, that of other young African-American choreographers, and as a way to keep the choreography of older African-Americans, such as Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, alive. Both Ailey and Baraka, as others before them, understood the power of art within a society.

Baraka is also similar to Ailey in that he too creates out of personal experience. "Most of the time I move from real people that I know, or I move from real experiences."[69] He envisioned the duty of the black artist, however, as more rigid than did Ailey. "The duty of all Black people is to liberate themselves, to see that eventually Black people have political, economic, and social self-determination; that we become a politically powerful nation of people."[70] As his statements indicate, Baraka had a separatist view of blacks in America. It is on this subject of separatism versus integration that Baraka and Ailey part company.

Complementing Ailey's belief in integration was his belief as a humanist that all people, regardless of race and culture, could relate on some level of emotion and experience. He believed that dance had the power to bring people to this level. The international popularity of the Ailey company lends evidence to support Ailey's belief in the universalism of dance. The dance *Revelations* moved audiences around the world, as the even not-so-favorable first review of the company from Rio in the *New York Times* stated.[71]

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[69] Theodore R. Hudson, "A Conversation between Imamu Amiri Baraka and Theodore R. Hudson," in *Conversations* ed. Reilly, 72.

[70] Mike Coleman, "What is Black Theater?," in *Conversations* ed. Reilly, 85.

[71] "Rio Festival Views Alvin Ailey Dancers," 35.

Ailey once said that "the dance speaks to everyone . . . . Otherwise it wouldn't work."[72] The Ailey company's performances in the Soviet Union clearly spoke to those audiences who followed each performance with twenty minutes of applause.[73] Journalist Joseph Mazo writes that Ailey's first tour to Asia and Australia with his integrated company convinced Ailey "that the emotions and the experiences that produced spirituals and the blues are present within all cultures, and artists of any culture can express them."[74] These music and dance forms grew out of the particular experience of African Americans, but Ailey truly believed in the universalism of their emotions. As Judith Jamison poignantly states, "When we danced, no translator was needed."[75] The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was built upon and continues to operate on this belief. Its success is strong evidence to support the truth of Ailey's beliefs.

While it is true that dance can be a form of cultural identity, as explained in the work of Hanna, Royce, Aschenbrenner, and Hazzard-Gordon, this does not exclude the possibility that dance can move beyond this function. The power that dance has to communicate comes from the body, as previously explained, and the body is a universally human source of strength. Dance has the power to make an impression regardless of its cultural context. The impression may

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[72] Jennifer Dunning, "Alvin Ailey, a Leading Figure In Modern Dance, Dies at 58," *New York Times*, 2 December 1989, 14.

[73] Jamison, *Dancing Spirit*, 126.

[74] Mazo, "Ailey & Company," 24.

[75] Jamison, *Dancing Spirit*, 129.

not be the same in each culture, but it is made nonetheless. Its kinesthetic energy surpasses the boundaries of race and culture, connecting individuals on a strictly human level. It is to this level that Ailey successfully raised his audiences.

Analyzing the success of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in the mainstream press is another way to see its relation to its historical context. The patterns of media attention and critical success demonstrate how the rise of the company followed the progress of the civil rights movement.

As stated earlier, the civil rights movement turned its focus to black power and black nationalism in the late 1960s. It is at this point that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater rose in prominence in the mainstream press, though the company had been in existence since 1958 and, as a repertory company, still performed many of the works which had been premiered many years before. In 1965 there were four articles in the *New York Times* which mentioned either Alvin Ailey or the dance company. In 1968 the number increases slightly to five articles. A drastic change occurs in 1969 when thirteen articles appear in the *New York Times*. In 1970 the number increases to sixteen, and by 1971 there are twenty-five.[76] The aim of the company did not change over this time period, and while it is possible that the quality of the choreography and performances improved, that alone does not account for such drastic changes. Such growing attention in the mainstream press indicates

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[76] *New York Times*, January 1958-December 1971.

acceptance, something the Ailey company did not find until after the civil rights movement moved in the direction of black nationalism.

Another change in the mainstream press which merits analysis is the change in focus of both reviews and feature articles on Ailey and the company. It is not until 1965 that reviewers delve deeper into the African-American context of the pieces other than to mention it. Of *Revelations* a reviewer in 1965 said, "For here is a profound Negro document, a dance realization of the roots of the Negro spiritual, full of chain-gang anger, human aspiration, a rich buoyant compassion and, eventually, a joyousness, shadowed and yet deep-felt."[77] However, in this same account, the reviewer denies the importance of Ailey's heritage and experience which have contributed to this work. "Mr. Ailey is, of course, a modern-dance choreographer by design and only a Negro by chance, and the interest of the work is not specifically Negro despite its use of Negro spirituals."[78] While it is true that Ailey wanted his work to be seen as universal, it is telling of the social context in which the company was performing and the reviewer writing that it was necessary for the reviewer to validate Ailey and his work by pointing out that he was "only a Negro by chance."

As the American dance audience grew to accept Ailey's company, the mainstream press paid more attention to his intentions. In the years 1968, 1969, and 1970, three separate and lengthy feature articles appeared in the *New York Times*, one each year. All

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[77] "Dance: Nothing Less Than Superb," *New York Times*, 18 December 1965, 37.

[78] Ibid.

three dealt with Ailey's message of universalism and his beliefs in integration. None of the articles placed Ailey or his beliefs in a negative light.[79] Compared to those proclaiming black nationalism, Ailey's message was friendly and more easily accepted by mainstream America. Such a powerful figure in the African-American community who held beliefs opposite to those of the black nationalists, and who was achieving both fame and economic success, could not have helped the black nationalist movement.

By 1969, Ailey was clearly accepted in mainstream society, and was held up as a model for race relations by the mainstream press. Critic Clive Barnes wrote in 1970 that "every performance he gives is the greatest lesson in race relations you are going to get in a month of Sundays."[80] Ailey's opposition to the tide of the times is often mentioned in the articles written about him both at the time and in later decades. In Barnes' 1970 article he said, "Ailey is an equal opportunity employer in a field and at a time when equal opportunity is not all that fashionable."[81] Barnes also said of Ailey, "He is no black apostle of apartheid, and I love him for it."[82] Ailey's opposition to what was fashionable at the time also made a distinct impression upon himself, as is illustrated by his mentioning it in a 1984 interview. "I got a lot of flak about it during the 1960s," Ailey

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[79] Clive Barnes, "'As Long As They Have Talent';" Ellen Cohn, "'I Want to Be a Father Figure';" and Clive Barnes, "A Great Lesson in Race Relations," *New York Times*, 26 April 1970, 30(D).

[80] Clive Barnes, "A Great Lesson in Race Relation," 30.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid.

said, referring to his ideals of integration.[83] That flak did not deter him.

The rise of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater from artistic obscurity to international acclaim, and finally to acceptance in mainstream America follows the progression of the civil rights movement. When the ideals of universalism and integration which Ailey upheld were the central focus of the civil rights movement, mainstream America did not accept this integrated "black folkloric" dance company. As soon as black nationalism moved to the forefront of African-American activism, the earlier movement's goals of integration became less difficult for mainstream America to accept. It is at this same point in history that the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater rose to the place where it has remained—both a critically and popularly successful American modern dance company at home and abroad. Black nationalism has still not taken hold in American society, but integration has become accepted across the country, and has even become commonplace in some sections. Thirty-five years after its founding, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater continues its tradition of active integration.

Alvin Ailey died at the age of 58 in 1989. He was an important activist for integration at times when it was the goal of most of the African-American community, and also at times when it was not. As critic Jennifer Dunning said in a memorial article, "The choreographer never stopped being an eloquent spokesman for the universality of

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[83] Mazo, "Ailey & Company," 24.

the black experience in America."[84] His pieces will continue to speak for him to the next generation.

[84] Jennifer Dunning, "Alvin Ailey: Believer in the Power of Dance," *New York Times*, 10 December 1989, 30(H).

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