perimental artworks were pushed to the borders of the art world in the 1940s and 1950s; the intellectual thrust of Merce Cunningham strengthened the common belief that modern dance was an exclusive and esoteric activity. It is not surprising, then, that modern dance ascended in universities and colleges. Modern dance began with a vital intellectual foundation, and while modern dancers of the 1930s maintained hope for populist appeal and social relevance, these elements largely fell victim to more strict aesthetic and philosophical goals among the next generation of modern dancers.

The diffusion of modern dance after World War II—into Broadway show dancing, ballet, and other artistic genres, and throughout universities and colleges—revealed its strength as a malleable technique able to be used in a variety of ways. That diffusion, however, also contributed to its inability to gain institutional support or financial stability, or to retain and market its beginnings as an original American art form (something jazz music has been able to do more successfully). These modern bodies proved too confrontational. As modernism marched on in the postwar world, drawing more institutional force and popular credence, modern dance sloped to the high end of the cultural spectrum. On the edges of society, modern dancers found what power they could on the edges of the arts.

coda THE REVELATIONS OF ALVIN AILEY

In January 1958 the New York City Ballet premiered George Balanchine's *Stars and Stripes.* To music by John Philip Sousa, ballet dancers displayed military precision in straight lines and unison movements of the corps. In Cold War America, the Russian émigré Balanchine celebrated America's military prowess and apparently unified (and uniform) populace. The New York City Ballet reigned supreme in the dance world, suited to the times by waging a dance battle on the European turf of ballet—and winning with an aggressive and speedy American style. After World War II, the American takeover of ballet was a powerful cultural weapon. The success of American ballet, wresting dominance from the Soviet Union, was a more important artistic battle than upholding the disparate, experimental, and confrontational style of modern dance.

Despite ballet's winning the dominant place in American concert dance in a changed political environment, the concurrent emergence and success of Alvin Ailey points to changing social dynamics in modern dance as well. The same year *Stars and Stripes* premiered, Ailey made his choreographic debut in New York City at the 92nd Street Y. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, formed in 1958, fused in movement and theme the nationalist political focus of the 1930s with the racial heritage of America—thus embracing and altering American modern dance.

Alvin Ailey was born in Texas in 1931 just as Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Ted Shawn, Katherine Dunham, Helen Tamiris, and others were solidifying the new modern dance. Ailey grew up amid fierce racial segregation; when he was five, his mother was raped by a white man. Ailey moved to Los Angeles as a teenager and there became fascinated with Bill Robinson, Fred Astaire, and the Nicholas Brothers. He took gymnastics in

school and went to a performance of the Katherine Dunham company, at which time, he recalled, he became "completely hooked" on dance.[1]

Soon after, Ailey sought out dance lessons at the school of Lester Horton, the progenitor of modern dance in Los Angeles. By the 1940s exclusion of African American students from dance classes had diminished, with the New Dance Group in New York City and Lester Horton in Los Angeles leading the way in active integration of African Americans. Some of the most famous African American dancers, including Ailey, Carmen de Lavallade, and Janet Collins, received training from Horton. Ailey had to travel an hour and a half on the bus each way to Horton's studio, but once there, he received vital support and opportunities. After Horton's death in 1953 Ailey became the company choreographer.

The year 1954 marked a transition for Ailey. From an appearance in the movie *Carmen Jones,* Ailey caught the attention of its choreographer, Herbert Ross. He took up Ross's invitation to appear in his next Broadway production, *House of Flowers,* a rendering of love and life on a Caribbean island with a story by Truman Capote. In New York Ailey trained with Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey, Anna Sokolow, and the ballet teacher Karel Shook. As was quite common for modern dancers at the time, he performed primarily in Broadway shows. Concerned that African American dancers lacked concert opportunities, Ailey pulled together dancers for a concert appearance at the 92nd Street Y in 1958 and debuted *Blues Suite.*

Two signature Ailey dances, *Blues Suite* (1958) and *Revelations* (1960), focused on the experience of African Americans. Ailey felt that *Blues Suite* was "a somewhat angry statement about the racial conditions [of the United States], and that *Revelations* was a very positive, very spiritual expression of our creating an environment in which we could survive" (a combination that paralleled Primus's expression of a fuller vision of the United States in *Strange Fruit* and *Hard Time Blues*).[2] In movement terms *Revelations,* first choreographed in 1960 and edited substantially during the 1960s (primarily in cutting the length and changing from simple voice and guitar accompaniment to that of chorus and orchestra), combined the dance technique contributions of Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Lester Horton with those of Asadata Dafora, Katherine Dunham, and Pearl Primus. *Revelations* began with a solid group center stage on wide, deep-bended legs, arms spread sideways, arcing at the elbows, and heads focused on the floor (see

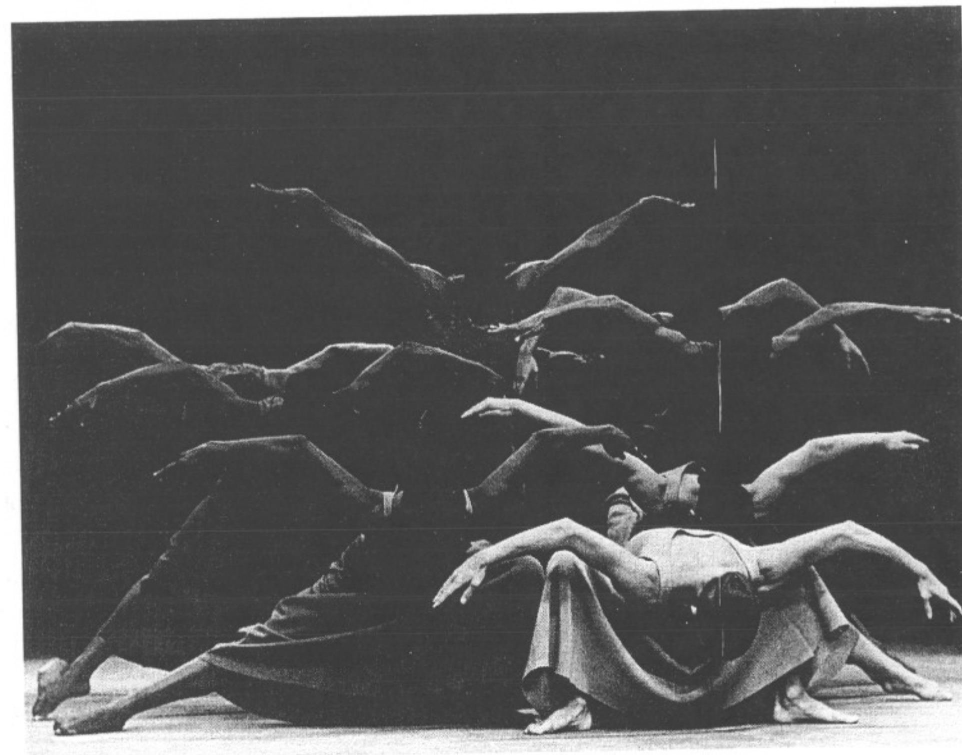

FIGURE C.1. *Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in* Revelations. *(Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)*

figure C.1). The winged image subtly shifted as the spiritual "I Been 'Buked" played on. Stretched arms and heads that angled downward slowly lifted upward, swaying, to the sky. From this gentle transformation the piece grew in intensity and excitement through solos and duets and ended in a rollicking church scene to "Rocka My Soul." Ailey used the sunken torso contractions of Graham throughout *Revelations,* but placed them on the musical beat and in rhythmic succession. Agonizing backward falls to the ground appeared in the duet "Fix Me Jesus," where the man caught the falling woman, but they were repeated in a quick series that emphasized the upswing of the movement rather than the gravity-laden force of the fall. The section "Wading in the Water" featured colorful costumes, shoulder isolations, and

full body contractions reminiscent of Dunham and Primus. Even more, the joy and hope of survival of the piece aligned Ailey with Dunham and Primus. Invariably, *Revelations* roused the audience to their feet in the final section, clapping and swaying along with the dancers on stage.

Ailey focused on the theme of African Americans' struggle for freedom and opportunity in his choreography, employed African American, Asian, white, and Latino/a dancers in one company, and fused African and Caribbean movements with modern dance technique—all under an American banner. His company cemented the small triumphs in the changing social composition of dance that had occurred since Edna Guy's difficulties in the 1920s. In 1944 Martha Graham had employed Yuriko, a Japanese American who came to the Graham school from a California internment camp; in 1951 Mary Hinkson and Matt Turney, African American women trained at the University of Wisconsin, joined the Graham company. Janet Collins and Arthur Mitchell broke color barriers in ballet: Collins performed with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet from 1951 to 1954, and Mitchell debuted as a soloist in the New York City Ballet in 1955. Ailey, on the other hand, deliberately placed the experience of African Americans and African American dancers themselves at the core of his American dance.

Ailey's work, though, contrasted with that of other modern dancers in the 1960s. Modern dance burgeoned again in the early 1960s, led by the small but influential group of innovators associated with the Judson Church, including Robert Dunn, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, and Trisha Brown. Influenced by the collaboration of Merce Cunningham and John Cage, the Judson Church choreographers forsook the technical precision and nationalist concern of the 1930s moderns and, instead, celebrated pedestrian motions, challenged the strictures of choreography with the use of improvisation and chance, questioned the dependency of dance on music, and eschewed narrative and theatrical elements of performance. The development of postmodern dance paralleled the rebellion of Pop Art to Abstract Expression, and the continued experimentation contributed to the rise and definition of postmodernism in the arts within the avant-garde of New York City.[3] Ailey, however, retained the attention to narrative and theatricality and to a harmonic dependency between music and dance; consciously evolving an American style of modern dance, he drew audiences outside New York City and the avant-garde. From the segregation of African American dancers and choreographers in the 1930s, Ailey successfully secured a place for African Americans within self-consciously American works in the 1960s. If many postmodern dancers and choreographers used the modern dancers of the 1930s as a springboard against which to rebel, Ailey incorporated and carried on the political orientation and broad appeal of the earlier dancers.

What the prominence of Ailey shared with postmodernists was the continued leading role of gay men in modern dance begun in the late 1940s. While women, both white and African American, had led the movement in the 1930s, by the 1960s men, both white and African American, led the art form, even though it continued to attract far more women than men. In 1973 the Alvin Ailey company revived Ted Shawn's *Kinetic Molpai* and merged the tradition of white gay men with that of African American men. The achievement and influence of choreographers such as Trisha Brown and Twyla Tharp demonstrate that modern dance offered a welcoming place for women leaders, and still more so than ballet. But the continued prominence of men in modern dance, particularly relative to their small numbers, suggests that men still retain an advantage in this female-dominated profession.

The emergence of Ailey in the trajectory of modern dance illuminates how social dimensions of our bodies shaped artistic movements in the United States in the twentieth century. In the 1930s dancing pictures of America remained white; the depictions of Africa and the Caribbean by African American dancers only reinforced the whiteness of physical portraits of America. Racial integration in the dance world occurred slowly and correlated to increasing political activism for civil rights. But the rise of Ailey was definitive. His success occurred at a time of political liberalism and redefinition of the United States as fundamentally ethnically diverse. He formed his own company, called it American, and proceeded to choreograph America. The U.S. government's choice of Ailey to represent America's concert dancing prowess abroad as cultural envoy in the John F. Kennedy International Exchange Program in 1962 finally sanctioned African Americans' rightful place as practitioners in, and creators of, modern dance.

Ailey's success in the 1960s rests on the foundation established by Dafora, Dunham, Primus, and other African American dancers in the 1930s and

1940s. If the debate between the freedom and distinctiveness of the individual and the need for and belief in collective harmony formed the creative tension of modern dance, Dunham's and Primus's position as dancers and anthropologists highlighted what was at stake. In bringing insights on this question from the Caribbean and Africa, they shed light on the social dimensions that structured the concert stages and neighborhoods of the United States. They insisted upon a broadened definition of art and culture and a loosening of rigid social categories of race, gender, sexuality, and class. The history of modern dance reveals the limitations that remained despite their push: divisions of art into high and low went largely unchallenged and perpetuated class and racial prejudices. But the revelations of Alvin Ailey show that these bodies could indeed rearrange the "headlines that make daily history" and move the world.

notes

ABBREVIATIONS

CUOHROC
: Oral History Research Office Collection, Columbia University, New York, New York

DC/NYPL
: Dance Collection, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, N York, New York

DH
: Doris Humphrey Collection, DC/NYPL

FTP-GMU
: Federal Theatre Project Oral History Collection, Special Collection and Archives, George Mason University Libraries, Fairfax, Virginia

RSD
: Ruth St. Denis Collection, DC/NYPL

TS
: Ted Shawn Collection, DC/NYPL

INTRODUCTION

1. *New York Times,* 5 January 1930.
2. *New Yorker,* 18 January 1930, 57–59.
3. Margaret Gage, "A Study in American Modernism," *Theatre Arts Montl* (March 1930): 229–32.
4. Humphrey quoted in Humphrey and Cohen, *Doris Humphrey,* 89.
5. Sayler, *Revolt in the Arts,* 12, 13.
6. Reminiscences of Jane Dudley, 20 December 1978, CUOHROC, 21.