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## The Impact of the African Diaspora on 20th Century Dance

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## The Impact of the African Diaspora on 20th Century Dance

Cover Page Footnote

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# The Impact of the African Diaspora on 20th Century Dance

Jaina Dinino

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*sponsored by* Jonette Lancos, MFA

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## ABSTRACT

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has been recognized as an era of integrating African American dancers into modern dance. During this period there was an overarching sentiment of inclusion, cultural expression, and weakening the significance of race defining identity. This universal sentiment among African American dancers and choreographers throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century influenced dancers like Arthur Mitchell to establish companies and dedicate their careers to uplifting African American dancers. Overall, the emphasis of inclusion, cultural expression, and the popular notion that race shouldn't define one's identity as a dancer during the 20<sup>th</sup> century led Mitchell to establish the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969, which paved the way for the integration of African American dancers into ballet.

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The integration of African Americans into popular culture was a historically long struggle. For generations, the culture and customs of African Americans were absorbed into American popular culture without proper recognition or accreditation regarding the origins of these cultural practices. During the evolution of modern dance during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many African American dancers and choreographers began to reclaim their culture by making a name for themselves in the dance world. During this time of integrating African American dancers into modern dance, there was an overarching sentiment of inclusion, cultural expression, and weakening the significance of race defining identity. This universal sentiment among African American dancers and choreographers throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century influenced dancers like Arthur Mitchell to establish companies and dedicate their careers to uplifting African American dancers, as seen in his work *Forces of Rhythm* (Johnson, 2020). In return, Mitchell transformed the world of ballet to include young African American dancers, resulting in the development of notable African American dancers such as Mel Tomlinson and Debra Austin. Overall, the emphasis of inclusion, cultural expression, and the popular notion that race shouldn't define one's identity as a dancer during the 20<sup>th</sup> century led Mitchell to establish the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969, which paved the way for the integration of African American dancers into ballet (Johnson, 2020).

Since the times of slavery, African Americans had a very strong cultural impact on the evolution of dance in America. By definition, African American dance is its own genre,

defined as dance forms that are native to and developed by specific African, Caribbean, or Afro American culture groups (Kraus et al., 1997). Dance has historically remained an integral part of African society and culture as a key aspect of worship, entertainment, education, and celebration (Kraus et al., 1997). With the progression of slavery in early America, these African cultural elements pertaining to dance transferred over to American culture. For example, early shuffling movements originating out of slave worship practices known as “buck dancing” eventually evolved into modern tap dancing (Kraus et al., 1997). Other plantation dances, such as the Cakewalk, developed into popular social dances and influenced the overtly racist themes of the American minstrel shows (Kraus et al., 1997). Eventually, the turn of the 19th century involved a maturing of African American roles in dance in the form of dance halls, nightclubs featuring African American entertainers, and African American concert dance groups (Kraus et al., 1997). Shortly after this era of maturity began the emergence of African American choreographers such as Alvin Ailey, Rod Rodgers, and Garth Fagan. The growth of African American dancers as professional choreographers initiated the growth of a universal mindset among the African American dance community. Though they acknowledge the importance that their race has on their heritage and cultural upbringing, which is incorporated into their work, the majority of African American dancers did not want their work to be defined by their race. Fagan describes this way of thinking as a “double-edged sword,” stating: “I think I, and other black choreographers deserve the right to change, grow, and explore without being forced into categories” (Kraus et al., 1997 p. 243). A similar view is expressed by Rod Rodgers: “I have little patience with people who suggest that to be a black choreographer one must limit one’s scope and deal exclusively with Afro-American material” (Rodgers, 1998, p. 189). Alvin Ailey expresses the frustration he has with racial prejudice in the dance world in his essay “It’s About Dance,” claiming that dancers should be defined by their talent, ability, and personality, not by their race (Ailey, 1998). This mindset was essential for the professionalization of African American choreography and its integration into modern dance forms.

It was this sentiment that led Arthur Mitchell to develop his Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969. Mitchell himself was the first African American to be officially contracted by the New York City Ballet (Kraus et al., 1997). Though Mitchell’s contract didn’t spark an immediate trend, it was the first step promoting integration within the highly segregated genre of ballet. Mitchell started the Dance Theatre of Harlem with the intention of extending his professional experience through exposing it to his community of Harlem (J. Lancos, 2022, personal communication). Similarly to other African American artists, Mitchell did not want his company to focus solely on skin color. One of the company’s most notable works is “Forces of Rhythm” created in 1971, which highlights the diversity of the company while paying homage to African dance and culture as well as the struggles African Americans have faced in America. The piece is divided into two parts; the first features sixteen dancers paying tribute to their Afro Caribbean culture and ancestors (J. Lancos, 2022, personal communication). The piece goes through a history of African American dance starting with four

men performing plantation dances such as the Cakewalk and buck dancing, then they transition into classical European ballet performed by four males, then four women perform Afro Caribbean dance, then they finish with four women performing traditional ballet (J. Lancos, 2022, personal communication). Not only is this reflective of the diverse heritage of the company, but it also represents the diversity in talent and knowledge among the company and their education and capability with several areas of dance. Ultimately, part one of the piece breaks the barriers of the stereotypes behind African dance. The second part of the dance is more symbolic in its efforts to reflect the brutal and tragic history of African Americans and their struggle between appreciating their past and heritage all while fighting for representation in modern popular culture. The dance features a trio composed of one woman and two men, the woman representing the common identity of the African American community while one man represents heritage and cultural roots, whereas the other symbolizes African Americans integrated within popular American culture (Johnson, 2020). The dance is broken up into duets between the female and each male, representing the identity struggle African Americans experience between acknowledging their origins and embracing their culture while participating in popular culture and modern society (Johnson, 2020). The accompanying music, “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother” lyrically describes a long and winding road which represents the historical journey and struggle of African Americans (J. Lancos, 2022, personal communication). “Forces of Rhythm” emulates the common identity struggle among African American artists of integrating into modern dance but still appreciating their rich cultural history without letting it define their work.

The integration of African Americans into American society and culture was a long and strenuous process. It demanded a lot of hard work and dedication among the African American community to be taken seriously in the dance world. Once that level of maturity was achieved the struggle then transitioned towards an identity crisis between appreciating their heritage and continuing to integrate into modern American dance. Artists such as Alvin Ailey, Rod Rodgers, Garth Fagan, and Arthur Mitchell all expressed their desire to not be defined by their race, but rather their dance as a whole, with race being a unique element within the themes of their works, but not a defining characteristic. These artists and their identity struggles paved the way for African American dancers today who now have a better understanding of how to comfortably balance both components of heritage and modernity into their identity and work.

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