Revelation of revelations

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ABSTRACT

AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

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THE REVELATION OF REVELATIONS

Advisor: Dr. Daniel Black

Thesis dated May, 2009

Dance pioneer, Alvin Ailey, created a dance legacy when he choreographed Revelations in 1960. By using Revelations as the foundation for this study, this thesis reveals ways in which Ailey uses the human body to communicate expressions of the Black aesthetic. African-American dance has always been viewed as a form of entertainment. The research gathered presents African-American dance as an art form that suggests the cultural beauty of African Americans. This thesis details the life and achievements of Ailey. It explains what influenced Ailey to choreograph Revelations. This research also analyzes the emphasis of the dancing body in relation to African-American experiences. The African Dance theory and ten characteristics of African Dance are utilized to present expressive behaviors that display the Black aesthetic. The expressive behaviors presented are body gestures/movements, music, and costuming. From these cultural expressions and the African Dance theory, the researcher determines what makes Ailey unique in the modern dance tradition. This thesis allows for future research of other African-American choreographers and how their choreographic pieces give insight into the African-American experience.
THE REVELATION OF *REVELATIONS*

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

RAYNIX D. FREEMAN

DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

MAY 2009
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................ ii

ABBREVIATIONS............................................................................................................... iii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................... 1  
  Significance of Study ........................................................................................................ 8  
  Limitations ....................................................................................................................... 9  
  Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................... 10  
  Methodology .................................................................................................................. 12  
  Research Questions ........................................................................................................ 14  
  Chapter Organization .................................................................................................... 14  
  DEFINITION OF TERMS ................................................................................................. 15

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW  
  Alvin Ailey and Revelations ......................................................................................... 18  
  The Dancing Body ........................................................................................................ 19  
  Representation ............................................................................................................... 26

CHAPTER THREE ............................................................................................................... 30

CHAPTER FOUR: REVELATIONS ....................................................................................... 53  
  Revelations Revealed ..................................................................................................... 60  
    Pilgrim of Sorrow ......................................................................................................... 60  
    Take Me to the Water ................................................................................................. 60  
    Move, Members, Move ............................................................................................. 74

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION ......................................................................................... 86

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................. 91
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I give honor to God for allowing me this opportunity. I especially want to say thanks to my mother, Delarse Woods, for her constant love, encouragement, and friendship. Her strength, perseverance, and unselfishness taught me that through Christ, anything and everything is possible. I thank the Woods Family for their prayers, love, and financial contributions. I would like to express many thanks to Mr. Joe L. Vance for treating me like one of his own. Thank you for not giving up on me. I thank my research committee, Dr. Daniel Black and Dr. Mary Twining, whose constant encouragement helped me complete this document. I thank Wayne Smith and Clarence McFerren, II for sharing their vast knowledge in dance. I thank Raquetta Dotley for listening to and loving me despite my flaws. Finally, I thank my father, Deotha Freeman. Although it has only been a few months since his passing, I am grateful to have had him as a father. Thanks “Dad” for loving me.
ABBREVIATIONS

AADC Alvin Ailey Dance Center
AADT Alvin Ailey Dance Theater
AARE Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble
DTH Dance Theater of Harlem
LHDT Lester Horton Dance Theater
UCLA University of California Los Angeles
YM-YWHA Young Men-Young Women’s Hebrew Association
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to explicate Alvin Ailey’s signature choreography, *Revelations*, in search of how he constructs a decidedly Black aesthetic through the use of the human body as text. The researcher seeks to discover Ailey’s message about who and what Black people are and to determine how he uses the body to celebrate that heritage. Alvin Ailey’s *Revelations* has become a mainstay in American dance performance. Indeed, wherever the Ailey troupe travels, audiences anticipate the performance of *Revelations* much like dance enthusiasts anticipate *Swan Lake*. Through *Revelations*, Ailey introduces an African-American aesthetic into modern dance, which audiences seem never to tire of observing.

The 1960s was a tumultuous period for African Americans. The Civil Rights Movement allowed African Americans to voice their socio-political injustices and to become major players in shaping American culture. Segregation physically divided African Americans and whites, creating resentment in those who had to enter buildings through the back door or mildly accept terms like “colored” and “nigger.”

Unwilling to yield to taunts and threats from whites as a way of life, African Americans rallied together to alter the racial and social terrain in America. The success of the movement can be attributed to organizing. Many African-American leaders and communities developed strategies that provided profound change to the racial landscape.
in America. Boycotts, sit-ins, protests, and marches were regular occurrences of this era. However, these social victories came at a huge price. For instance, Birmingham, Alabama, was nicknamed "Bombingham" for its excessive racial violence wherein African-American life was always the casualty. Attempting to eat at a lunch counter was dangerous and sometimes deadly. The number of lives lost during the battle for civil rights was certainly more than an oppressed people had anticipated.

On July 2, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law.\footnote{Ronda Racha Penrice, \textit{African American History for Dummies} (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley Publishing, 2007), 169.} Under this new law, school desegregation was implemented and racial prejudice was prohibited in public businesses, and equal voter registration was guaranteed. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 ensured equality and access to voting rights; public administrations and employment which were covered by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The hope was that this legislation would improve the lives of African Americans. Unfortunately, the new law was not well-received by many whites. A number of them became enraged and began to react to the law which they felt was absurd. Knowing that this was their time for advancement, African Americans united together even more.

In search of an accompanying identity and cultural aesthetic, many African Americans felt a need to raise the importance of self-love and self-respect in the African-American community. Leaders in the African-American community faced issues of social and cultural inequality while distinguishing themselves as activists. Cultural consciousness developed in such a way that it was more than an ideology; it was part of
daily life. Encouraging slogans filled the mouths of African Americans, old and young. "Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m proud!" made famous by James Brown, and "Black is beautiful," a phrase embraced during the Black Arts Movement, were two of the many expressions that celebrated African-American culture as precious and unique.

Other external expressions that helped define the cultural aesthetic and identity of African Americans during this time came in the changing appearance of the African-American community. The consciousness of these African Americans was displayed in fashion and attitude. Hair evolved from “fried, dyed, and laid to the side” to the “Afro.” To complement this new hairstyle, African Americans faithfully adorned their bodies with clothing that demonstrated racial pride and cultural heritage. The dashiki, for instance, became a “must have” in the African-American wardrobe. Fashions from the “Motherland” increased in popularity as leaders stressed the need for a change in America.

Many African-American revolutionaries used expressive measures to ensure that Black was indeed beautiful and a source of racial pride. Tommie Smith and John Carlos, 1968 Olympic medalists, showed their Black pride during the medal ceremony by giving the Black Power salute. This symbol was seen across the world as a declaration of Black American solidarity and pride. The Black Panther Party introduced to America that African-American people needed to be respected and were prepared to fight, if necessary.

Just as African-American revolutionaries were fighting and dying on the streets, African-American dancers and choreographers were fighting their own battles. Although
the popularity of African-American choreographers slightly increased by the 1950s, the
dance world was still heavily shrouded in racism. African-American dancers and
choreographers such as Talley Beatty, Katherine Dunham, and Pearl Primus were faced
with accusations that their bodies were not made for dancing. They were told that their
butts were too big and their feet were too flat for ballet and modern dance. The “Black
dancing body” was simply not desired, thus making it difficult for many African-
American dancers and choreographers to be classically trained in dance prior to the
1950s. However, African-American dancers and choreographers were able to cultivate
dance in order to compete with white dancers, proving that African-American dancers
deserved membership into American modern dance companies. Mary Hinkson was one
of many who proved that African-American dancers belonged in American modern
dance. Hinkson and Matt Turney were the first two African Americans to join the
Martha Graham Dance Company— an all-white troupe in 1952. Hinkson and Turney
helped pave the way for African-American dancers to study European dance.

Amidst this Black Arts Movement emerged a man and an accompanying legacy
of dance which would revolutionize American dance history. His name was Alvin Ailey.
Born in Rogers, Texas in 1931, Ailey brought to his choreography a knowledge of
African-American history and the challenges of African-American existence in America
many had not previously seen on stage. His dance legacy disrupted the traditional all-

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2 Susan Manning, Modern Dance Negro Dance: Race in Motion (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 183.
European aesthetic which had dominated American dance since its inception. Through Ailey, an African-American dance aesthetic was forged and introduced into the American mainstream.

To be sure, Ailey was not the first African-American dance choreographer to utilize the African-American body as text and experience. In fact, he stood upon the shoulders of pioneers such as Pearl Primus, Katherine Dunham, Asadata Dafora and Effiom Odok. However, none of them boasts the impact of Alvin Ailey on the American dance psyche. Through his multi-ethnic troupe, Ailey used the experiences of African Americans as a vehicle for success and exposure. His rise to fame resulted from his ability to evoke the ethos of the black experience—an act which transformed his audience both emotionally and consciously. Ailey was able to express universal concepts such as faith, the human spirit, and the importance of self-love and to do so using the bodies of human subjects.

Ailey’s origins of dance include strong emphasis on movement and dance in indigenous and diasporic African societies and the emergence of the human rights Movement. His earliest influences were the aesthetic philosophers of the Harlem Renaissance. Alain Locke and Langston Hughes, for example, promoted the importance of African-American artists and artistic self declaration. During this time, standards created by whites governed Black artistic production. Locke explains the importance of African-American artists incorporating cultural experiences into art in an essay published in 1925 titled, “The Legacy of Ancestral Arts.” Locke examines African-American art
through an historical eye, connecting it with forms of African art expression to provide a
detailed comprehension of Black cultural arts. Locke suggests that the African American
has a far more interesting story than the European. In Hughes’s 1926 article, “The Negro
Artist and the Racial Mountain,” he asserts that African-American artists must create art
from the life they have experienced—not what European Americans want them to create.
Hughes mentions that African-American artists hold the ability to create African
American “art as life” while breaking down negative stereotypes. In other words, the
African-American artist defines the race while representing its beauty to European
America. Ailey was able to incorporate the philosophy of Hughes and Locke into his
choreography, allowing him to ascend as a dance legend.

Ailey’s early pieces speak about his evolution as a dancer and a choreographer.
His first attempt at choreography was under the direction of Lester Horton, and he
choreographed the following three original dances for The Horton Company: Creation of
the World, According to St. Francis, and Morning Mourning. In 1958, the famous Blues
Suite was created on the basis of traditional jazz and is presently a part of the Ailey
Company’s repertoire. At a time when music was a major outlet for African Americans,
Ailey took advantage of the music’s popularity. His choreography in Blues Suite
reflected the jazz genre, pulling from the aesthetic of the jazz era. Blues Suite takes place
in a “sporting house.” The characters of Blues Suite are men and women who visit
frequently. Participants enjoy drinking, dancing, and flirtatious acts that last an entire
night, only ending by the sounds of trains and church bells. The “sporting house” in *Blues Suite* is synonymous with what is commonly known as jook joints in small rural towns. The experience of attending a Saturday night jook joint may not be fully understood by modern day African Americans; however, Ailey was able to capture the spirit and intensity of the place and present such a mood in *Blues Suite*, allowing the viewer to become one with the past.

Deriving *Blues Suite* from his childhood memories, Ailey expresses the importance and power of black culture. In a note in the 1958 program for *Blues Suite*, he writes: “The musical heritage of the southern Negro remains a profound influence on the music of the world . . . during the dark days the blues sprang fullborn from the docks and the fields, saloons and bawdy houses . . . from the very souls of their creators.”

Although the arrangement of *Blues Suite* has changed since its debut nearly fifty years ago, the historical components are still present. After *Blues Suite*, Ailey conceived his signature piece that demonstrates cultural strength and pride; no other creation by Ailey more significant than *Revelations*.

On January 31, 1960, *Revelations* debuted at the 92nd Street Young Men’s-Young Women’s Hebrew Association or YM-YWHA in New York, City. Ailey relived his childhood with memories of True Vine Baptist Church, the church he attended as a child.

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5 Ibid., 410.
in Texas. Aliley integrated into Revelations memories from his own childhood as well as images from the book of the Bible. After the first performance of Revelations, the audience broke into a thunderous applause and insisted on another performance.

By 1969, Revelations had become a classic in modern dance repertory. It is representative of strength and hope held by African Americans involved with the struggles of life, political equality, and being African American in a white-dominated society. Revelations is representative of the African-American religious experience in the rural South. The suite utilizes a selected palette of movements that highlights the beauty of the body and character--motivated communication developed solely from Ailey’s childhood memories. The artistic variety gives examples of the Black aesthetic and how it is a part of the African-American tradition, thus explicating how Alvin Ailey uses his choreography to construct a Black aesthetic by using the human body as text.

The Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is that it provides essential information about how the experiences of a people can be expressed through a cultural medium. More specifically, it unearthed the aesthetic complexity of Ailey’s signature choreography and the revolutionary act of using the body to retell and celebrate the African-American experience. It is also significant because it further explains how Ailey does through

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dance what cannot be done on paper. This research is important to the discipline because it reveals the multi-faceted nature of Ailey's talent, exposing him as one committed both to entertainment and public intellectual transformation.

By looking at Ailey's *Revelations*, other researchers will gain insight into how his choreography can transmit historical and cultural experiences. Researchers of the subject will also discover the importance of African-American dance as a continuum of the African-American experience. *Revelations* tells a story representative of the African-American experience. Throughout history, African Americans have experienced both tragedy and triumph and this experience has shaped, at least in part, the larger American experience.

**Limitations**

Ailey's untimely death constitutes the greatest limitation of this study because he cannot be interviewed. To be sure, he would have been the most reliable source from which to gain most profound understanding of how and why *Revelations* was created. No published source seems to corroborate that Ailey created *Revelations* as an inheritance to African Americans or that he created it simply as art for mainstream society. Therefore much of this research analysis hinges upon logical conjecture and analytical possibility as the researcher attempts to determine the varied functions of this remarkable moment in American dance history.
Theoretical Framework

To support and guide this research, the theoretical framework that is conducive to this study is one by Kariamu Welsh-Asante. Welsh-Asante presents an afrocentric view of dance consisting of aesthetic, historical, and philosophical information. The contribution of the afrocentric framework is historical and philosophical in nature. Welsh-Asante explores the theory of African dance as it relates to movement and music in the text *African Dance*, where she gives insight into the origins of dance in the African tradition. She also speaks with different individuals who show a wealth of knowledge in African dance. The afrocentric theory, African dance, derives from Keita Fodeba who asserts that the African dance tradition is closely created by the occurrences and experiences in the daily lives of the people. African dance permits everyday life to become dance. It can be stated from this theory, that an individual may dance or choreograph a piece that demonstrates a happening in their life which is a part of their memory.

According to Welsh-Asante’s text, African dance provides a method of communication that expresses feelings through movement. This theory helps to formulate that self awareness, and past experiences is key in developing dance movements. For instance, in many African societies, it is common for individuals to mimic everyday experiences to create a dance. The same is true for enslaved Africans in America during the 1600s. For enslaved Africans living on southern plantations, dance

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CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the arrival of Africans on the American continent, African dance in America and African Americans in modern dance have been studied. After slavery, the strong impact of dance allowed early African-American performers to gain entry and recognition into mainstream America. In the 1930s and 1940s, many African-American forms of dance emerged. This communal creativity allowed African-American choreographers to make their way into the arena of modern American dance.¹ Many of these choreographers, such as Asadata Dafora and Effiom Odok, added elements of African dance and culture to their choreography. Choreographers soon began to create a new dance vocabulary that expressed the struggles present in the African-American community. In 1960, Alvin Ailey gained success when Revelations was introduced to American dance. Many scholars discuss the beauty and popularity of Revelations; however, few discuss how Ailey uses choreography as a vehicle to teach the history of African Americans. Since this research hopes to reveal ways in which Alvin Ailey uses the choreography of Revelations and the body as cultural representations, the research will examine literature on Revelations, the dancing body, and the politics in representation.

Alvin Ailey and Revelations

Edward Thorpe’s *Black Dance*, provides a chronological sequence of African-American dance. Thorpe highlights the longevity of African-American dance, beginning with enslaved Africans on southern plantations. He also includes biographies on notable individuals and their contributions that helped to shape modern dance in America. Thorpe writes a chapter on Alvin Ailey, discussing his life achievements, yet he provides little analysis of *Revelations*. According to Thorpe, *Revelations* helped to catapult Ailey’s success, and is one the most known pieces in modern dance. The information on Ailey is general, in a sense, without any unique details on Ailey or *Revelations*. Considering the vast amount of information presented by Thorpe, it is understandable that it lacks thorough examinations of individual choreographers. Thorpe only discusses basic information when dealing with individuals who paved the way in African-American dance, such as date of birth and death, place of birth, and what made them accepted in mainstream dance; however, he does not mentions the significance of expressionism through dance.

Unlike Thorpe, Richard A. Long’s The *Black Tradition in American Dance* gives details of Ailey and *Revelations*. Long introduces cultural themes such as religion/spirituality, tradition and history, and celebration that are important to African-American life and applies them to dance. He discusses how the composition of *Revelations* has changed since its inception in 1960. The first performance of *Revelations* was simply too long, for the average viewer, causing many to become bored and uninterested. Ailey edited the piece, and the resulting masterpiece won crowds over. Long gives the edited program of the suite that remains unchanged
today and examples of how Ailey managed to integrate certain aspects of African-
American culture through dance. Long understands that the African-American
experience is present in Revelation. Fortunately, Long offers a more detailed
exploration than Thorpe as to the power and cultural relevance of Revelation.

Ailey’s life is center stage in, Revelation: the Autobiography of Alvin Ailey in
which his own thoughts, frustrations, and joys are presented. Although many feel that
Ailey left out portions of his life, Revelation provides enough information for
researchers to know what it was like as an African-American male choreographer
during the pre-Civil Rights Era. Ailey paints a colorful portrait of his life in dance,
leaving a legacy to anyone who shares an interest in dance.

As Ailey communicates in Revelation, many areas of the suite are
introduced, but not thoroughly exposed. After the release of Ailey’s autobiography, a
host of biographies were published in attempts to divulge any information that Ailey
did not put in his autobiography. Some of these include Andrea Davis Pinkney’s
Alvin Ailey, Linda Lewis-Ferguson’s Alvin Ailey, Jr. A Life in Dance, Jennifer
Dunning’s Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance, Barbara C. Cruz’s Alvin Ailey: Celebrating
African-American Culture in Dance, and Judy Gitenstein’s Alvin Ailey.

In Alvin Ailey, children’s book writer Andrea Pinkney gives exact
representations of African-American spiritual worship and how Ailey executes those
representations in Revelation. Pinkney creates an introductory text to the life of
Ailey. Considering the text was written for children, it relied heavily on colorful
drawings by Pinkney’s husband Brian to convey the story of Ailey’s life.
Unlike Pinkney, Julia Lewis-Ferguson writes a more compelling overview of Ailey’s life in *Alvin Ailey, Jr.: A Life in Dance*. She speaks of the universal language *Revelations* communicates through movement and imagery. Lewis-Ferguson differs greatly from Pinkney because she researches the pains and struggles of Ailey, not only as a child, but as an African-American male dancer and choreographer. She offers one of the first inclusive accounts of Ailey as an individual who broke down barriers and made a name for himself on the American dance stage. In brief, she depicts the harsh conditions of rural Texas and how Ailey used the experiences of his childhood as cultural expressionism.

Jennifer Dunning’s biography of Ailey, *Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance*, is by far one of the most comprehensive texts concerning a very complicated man. Dunning’s text offers a two-sided look at the life of Ailey— the marriage of his professional and personal self. She introduces many components of Ailey’s life that were kept secretive to mainstream America, while celebrating the successes of a choreographer who was conscious of the socio-economic world around him. Throughout her research, she demonstrates that Ailey was a man shaped by his cultural milieu. He arrived on the scene in the midst of the Civil Rights era, burgeoning cultural and global perspectives on African Americans in theatrical arts. Dunning uses these historical perspectives to parallel what Ailey may have endured socially and politically at the time of his success. Ailey had to constantly live two simultaneous lives. The world saw him as an African-American dancer and choreographer, while he dealt with addictions, homosexuality, and torment of being successful with nothing to show for it.
Like Dunning’s text, Thomas DeFrantz’s *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance* views *Revelations* as a direct display of the history of African Americans. He introduces cultural, traditional, and historical roles involved in explaining African-American experiences through dance. DeFrantz shares that the choreography may possibly be linked to religious practices, political emergence, and the representation of African-Americans living in the rural south who were voiceless. According to DeFrantz, *Revelations* utilizes different methods of dance, making the choreography of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater an important area of interest in African-American dance research.² DeFrantz’s discussion on Ailey and *Revelations* is short-lived; nevertheless, his next text continues to examine *Revelations* and how it represents African-American culture.

In contrast to other researchers, DeFrantz’s *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture* discusses *Revelations* as the most acclaimed pillar in Ailey’s repertoire. DeFrantz argues that *Revelations* is by far one of the most creative works in concert dance. He applauds Ailey’s creativity and ability to present rich cultural elements within the choreography of *Revelations*. These cultural elements could be thought of as Africanisms. He analyzes three different versions of *Revelations* performed in 1962, 1969, and 1975 to ascertain how the underlying cultural representations present in the piece are preserved, despite generational changes to the piece. DeFrantz separates himself from other published

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Ailey researchers by focusing on cultural interpretation provided in *Revelations*.

He expresses:

My project does not involve rehearsing the ‘problems’ in Ailey’s works as a choreographer, nor am I looking for chinks in the armor of a widely celebrated African-American cultural institution. Rather, following art historian Richard J. Powell’s assumption, I hope to provide an interpretation of Ailey’s work that acknowledges its particular aesthetics and cultural processes in formation ‘from an a priori position of cultural wholeness, conscious historicity, and unapologetic humanity.\(^3\)

DeFrantz offers a detailed analysis of Ailey and *Revelations*. He also voices how other researchers have misrepresented *Revelations* in text. DeFrantz demonstrates how Ailey uses his imagination and lived experiences to establish one of American dance’s greatest pieces. DeFrantz increases the standard of research by including historical perspectives, racial and cultural politics, and an examination of critical interpretation of the piece. His text, along with Dunning’s text on Ailey and Ailey’s autobiography provide sufficient information in learning more about Ailey and *Revelations*.

**The Dancing Body**

In order to understand the dancing body, an investigation of the body in motion is needed. This investigation of the body determines if dancing bodies carry the ability to transcend nonverbal and nonwritten text. Particularly, what is meant by dance? In *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies in Dance*, Jane C. Desmond gathers essays of dance critics who all explore different elements of dance and cultural studies. Desmond contends that applying cultural studies to dance will allow a transmission of how, why, and what is meant by a body in motion. According to

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Desmond, all forms of dance are subject to a broader interpretation than what is seen by the viewer; it is a complex work of art that can be dissected into many small microcosms. Some of these microcosms include feminism, body politics, dance narratives, and performance. Many of the essays in Desmond’s text contend that economic status, nationality, and race play a major role in how a dance is viewed and perceived.

*Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* written by Julia L. Foulkes includes many of the same microcosms as Desmond’s text. This text is more historic and it deals with modernism in organized dance. Unlike *Meaning in Motion*, *Modern Bodies* focuses more on the influences of Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey. Foulkes creates a more diverse understanding of gender issues in dance during the early to mid twentieth century. One main weakness of this text is that it focuses more on the life, choreography, and the success of Martha Graham. In discussing Ailey, Foulkes does not provide as thorough of an explanation or interpretation of the moving body as she does with Graham. In the conclusion titled “The Revelations of Alvin Ailey,” Foulkes acknowledges the uniqueness of Ailey’s choreography which changed American modern dance by revealing communal measurements of the body in the United States.4 Although Foulkes does not mention much on Alvin Ailey, she does provide ways in which gender, society, and sexuality play a role in the development of modern dance. She also introduces

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the notion of how African-American dancers faced limitations in modern dance because of the composition of their bodies.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild confronts stereotypes that have influenced negative attitudes about the African-American dancing body in *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*. Dixon Gottschild deconstructs how race and body interfere in concert dance. Historically, the African-American body has been a guilty pleasure in the Europeanist viewpoint since arrival of Africans on the American continent. For instance, Dixon Gottschild offers stereotypes surrounding the African-American buttocks as a method to enlighten scholars. She uses Sara Baartman as an example in her research. Sara Baartman was born of a Khosian family in the Eastern Cape of Africa in 1789. She worked as a slave in Cape Town until she was sold and transported to London in the early nineteenth century. Baartman, also known as the Hottentot Venus, was a South African woman whose body was displayed in England and France until her death in 1815. Her body was displayed mainly for her genitalia and buttocks. For Europeans, the size of Baartmans’s buttocks was primitive and was negatively viewed; conversely, many secretly found it fascinating as well as desirable.

The same holds true for Josephine Baker. Baker could be seen as a twentieth century Sara Baartman in the sense that both were popularized by their “assets;” however the difference between the two women was that Baker was able to redirect the once negative stigma of African-American buttocks into something positive.

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Baker’s ability to redefine her own body allowed her control over her fame and popularity. Dixon Gottschild successfully gives substantial evidence of how European Americans encourage, support, and utilize the African-American culture as a capitalist investment. Although European Americans exploited African-American bodies, they continued practicing prejudice and racism to contain African Americans socially. No other publication successfully examines the dancing body and how it has the ability to reconstruct cultural stereotypes.

**Representation**

In *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Brenda Dixon Gottschild reviews a host of dance genres considered a part of American dance. Dixon Gottschild asserts that the American dance tradition is heavily shrouded in African roots. In contrast, many academics suggest that “subtextual Africanist correspondences” are almost always present in American performance. The Africanist aesthetic involves many elements such as music, religion, community, and body movements that affect everyday life; it is through this Africanist aesthetic that a cultural representation is developed. Dixon Gottschild writes of how European-American men demeaned the representation of African Americans in minstrelsy (a popular form of American entertainment where European-American men performed in black face in order to exploit caricatures of African Americans while making fun of their dialect, dance, and physical appearance). Minstrelsy revealed an opposition for African Americans living in European

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America, simultaneously being visible and invisible, the same as many African-American dancers and choreographers. The earliest portrayal of Black dance was introduced in the *New York Journal*, which described, "Mr. Tea, a Negro Dancer," a character in stage entertainment on April 14, 1767. European Americans would use minstrelsy as a way to reaffirm their power in American culture by mimicking African Americans. Ironically, this helped to maintain the Africanist aesthetic on American stages. Dixon Gottshild’s discussion of representation is conveyed as a presence of cultural identity that helps people survive and prosper.

Modern dance, unlike African-American dance, was deemed to be more acceptable in a social structure, although the two are synonymous. Modern dance, usually thought to be a Euro-American dance form, segregated dancers, choreographers, and audiences. In Susan Manning’s *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, she investigates the social and historical factors that inform the separation of African-American dancers by examining critical assumptions of race. Some of the factors included in her study are class, gender, and sexuality as representation. For many years, modern dance has been taught as a Euro-American dance form to segregate dancers of many ethnicities. Manning includes the concept of blood memories as a method for creating modern dance using Ailey’s life as an example in her research. She contends that Ailey decided to use his “blood

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7 Dixon Gottshild, 83.

memories"9 to create Revelations. "I had lots of what I call blood memories, blood memories about Texas and blues spirituals and gospel music and ragtime."10 Manning studies blood memory in racial context, showing how it is represented in both Euro-American dance and African-American dance. She differentiates that Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey separate the historiography of modern dance and African-American dance to birth a cultural representation of the art form. For instance, the blood memory of Graham differs a great deal from Ailey. More specifically, Manning refers to Graham as having one specific blood memory whereas Ailey has many blood memories. A blood memory is used to explain a common event that most people can relate to or have personally experienced. On the other hand, Ailey’s blood memories are an explicit history shared by African Americans.11

African Americans have used visual arts as expressionisms and culture to account for shared pasts in order to protect their culture. These expressionisms provide a vehicle for African Americans to declare and retain the beauty of the African American.12 Herman S. Gray explains expressive arts in the African-American community in Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation, which investigates assumptions of image, visibility, and African-

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10 Ailey Ailey in Four by Ailey: An Evening with the Ailey Alley American Dance Theater, producer and director Thomas Grimm, 140 min., Danmarks Radio/ZDF/RM Arts with ORF, 1986, videocassette.

11 Susan Manning, Modern Dance Negro Dance Race in Motion (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 211.

American representations as an entry of African-American culture into national culture. The African-American culture has been commodified in such a sense that many negative portrayals and stereotypic exaggerations have been unfairly quilted into the fabric of mainstream American culture. African Americans have contributed many successes to American culture; however, the representation of African Americans says differently. Gray attempts to encourage positive images of African-American representation in three sections: strategies, tactics, and moves. Throughout the text, he highly emphasizes the importance of self-identity and cultural identity as it relates to positive images of African-American cultural representation. For instance, Gray feels that there is a connection between one’s identity and one’s lived experiences and imagination resulting in expressive arts; this thought may be applied to Ailey. Ailey relies on his childhood experiences in rural Texas as an expressive art to promote the beauty of African-American identity.
CHAPTER THREE

"BLOOD MEMORIES"

The Great Depression of the late 1920s and 1930s served to be a specifically difficult economic period in the United States for all of its citizens. During this time of economic hardship, the country also faced racial segregation for African Americans, especially those living in the South. Also during this time, on January 5, 1931, Alvin Ailey, Sr. and Lula Elizabeth Ailey gave birth to their first child, Alvin Ailey, Jr., in the small town of Rogers, Texas, sixty miles outside of Austin. Lula was only sixteen-years-old when she gave birth to Ailey. Ailey shared one small house with twelve other relatives consisting of his parents, grandfather, aunt, uncle, and cousins. Ailey’s birth added another mouth to feed to the already poverty stricken household. African Americans during the depression found it especially difficult to find work needed to support themselves and their families. When Ailey was three-months-old, his parents moved from the house they shared with three generations of family members to a cabin on a large farm. Ailey, Sr. knew all too well the mental anguish of trying to provide a comfortable environment for his family; so much that, he left the household when Ailey was six months old. His absence left Lula a single-parent.1

After Ailey, Sr. left his family, Lula determined to make a better life for herself and her child. She learned quickly the pains and struggles of, not only becoming a single-mother, but also becoming the only provider for her family. Lula worked many jobs that ranged from housekeeper to cotton picker. She even worked as laundress for European Americans to provide for her growing son, Alvin. She also planted her own vegetable garden which helped feed her and her son. On a few occasions when work was scarce, Lula would simply pack up her son and their belongings in search of work in other nearby towns.

It was in rural Texas that Ailey experienced his first blood memories. "I had a lot of what I call 'blood memories,' blood memories about Texas, blues, spirituals, gospel music, ragtime music . . . folk songs, work songs . . . I had very intense feeling about those things." Memories of his childhood in rural Texas were filled with images of African-American men, women, and children having fun, working, and for the most part enjoying life. Ailey saw adults working very hard during the week, cooking and cleaning for European Americans, and picking cotton in the fields as they anxiously awaited the weekend. Ailey found solace in aspects of African-American life that were secular and sacred on the weekends. African Americans in small rural areas of Texas used Saturdays as a secular release to free themselves from the pressures of work. African Americans would "dress to impress" to enjoy the sounds and sight at the Dew Drop Inn in Navasota, Texas. The Dew Drop Inn was a juke joint or café in which people drank alcohol, danced, and socialized into the wee hours of the morning. In some instances, trouble

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2 Ailey Ailey in Four by Ailey: An Evening with the Ailey Ailey American Dance Theater, producer and director Thomas Grimm, 140 min., Danmarks Radio/ZDF/RM Arts with ORF, 1986, videocassette.
brewed at the Dew Drop Inn. The songs of love affairs and violent, atmosphere resulted in fights and in rare occasions, killings. The drunken, fun-filled nights at the Dew Drop were ended by the sounds of trains and church bells.³ To the surprise of Ailey, many individuals who participated in the excitement on Saturday evenings at the Dew Drop Inn also participated in the sacred release of Sunday morning service at True Vine Baptist Church.

For many African Americans, church was the center of their communities; and True Vine served as the center of Ailey’s community. Sunday morning religious practices were routine events in African-American communities. African Americans took much pride in adorning their bodies in their “Sunday’s best” to praise and worship the God that allowed them saving grace each day of their tormented lives. Sunday morning worship services included the delivery of the gospel by a preacher and the singing of spirituals by the choir. Spirituals were a necessity in the African-American community in order to sustain a cultural shared consciousness.⁴ “The church was always very important, very theatrical, and very intense. The life that went on there and the music made a huge impression on me.”⁵ Ailey enjoyed watching and listening to the sights and sounds of worship service. For instance, baptism services during that time were a communal event. Individuals draped themselves in white as they walked in a processional to the town’s

³ Jennifer Dunning, Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance (Cambridge, MA, Da Capo Press, 1999), 104.


The preacher dipped people in the lake to make them new and whole in the eyes of God while the choir sang jubilant songs of praise.

Another of Ailey’s blood memories came derived from visual observations within the sanctuary. The spirituality of African Americans introduced cultural expressions which are reflected in prayers, songs, and dance. Some of these expressions are created in the dramatic manner in which the body responds to events within the sanctuary. Through prayer and song, the body has the ability to renew an individual’s faith.

Included in Ailey’s blood memories of the sanctuary are members of church leadership. For many rural African Americans, church leaders served as protectors for African-American communities.

In 1942, at the age of twelve, Lula and Ailey moved to Los Angeles, California. The move to Los Angeles was an exciting time for Ailey because life in southern small towns only gave a limited view to what the world had to offer. Ailey first attended an all-white school where he felt uncomfortable and comments, “I just couldn’t relate to those people.” After attending the all-white school for three months, he enrolled in George Washington Carver Junior High School, a culturally mixed school. There he was involved in extra-curricular activities, the school glee club, and he made many friends of other minority ethnic groups.

After graduating from junior high school, Ailey entered Thomas Jefferson High School in fall 1945. Ailey’s interest in concert dance peaked after a field trip to

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7 Ailey, 33.
downtown Los Angeles to attend a performance by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Once his interest formed, he became more aware of dance movements in film. During the 1940s, there were few African-American performers in films. He would often imitate the elegance and style of European-American dancers, Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly. Astaire and Kelly were the two main performers that showcased the talent and the athletic style of dance.8

Ailey began to venture alone to the theater district of downtown Los Angeles on the weekends. Pearl Bailey, Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, and Art Tatum were a few of the legendary artists he saw while on his weekend trips to the theater district. One afternoon he saw an advertisement for Katherine Dunham and her Tropic Revue. Ailey was shocked to see that Dunham, an African-American woman, was featured on the advertisement. He had the opportunity to watch the Katherine Dunham Company perform at the Biltmore Theater. He endured a life-changing experience after watching the Dunham dancer. He expressed, “I was completely hooked from the moment I saw those Black dancers doing dances taken from all over the world.”9

Katherine Dunham became one of Ailey’s early influences. This African-American dancer, choreographer, and anthropologist was best known for merging African, African-American, South American, and Caribbean themes and dance movements into her choreographies. She studied at the University of Chicago and in the Caribbean. “What Miss Dunham was doing was Afro-Caribbean. It was blues: it was


spiritals; it touched something of the Texas in me.”

Dunham’s approach to dance was to utilize certain movements then transform them until they were defined into her own unique style. During the 1940s, Dunham established the Dunham School of Dance and Theater. In 1947, the school was renamed the Katherine Dunham School of Cultural Arts, Incorporated. She relied on early studies to improve her methodology and was able to successfully introduce African-American dance to modern dance.

Initially, Ailey had no interest in becoming a dancer. During his growth and development into adolescence, he would often hear from peers and adults that men did not dance. The idea in African-American communities, both rural and urban, was that if a man danced or wanted to become a dancer, his sexuality was questioned. Ailey did not want to be labeled as “sissy” or “gay.” It was not until his friend Carmen de Lavallade danced at a school assembly that encouraged him to enter the world of dance. He watched in complete amazement as de Lavallade commanded the stage. One day when de Lavallade saw Ailey practicing a gymnastics routine, she expressed to him, “you ought to be dancer.” He knew that if he wanted to become a dancer, he would soon be faced with obstacles and a barrage of taunts. Ready for the challenge, de Lavallade would allow Ailey to attend dance classes with her at the Lester Horton Dance Theater (LHDT).

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10 Ailey, 41.


12 Gitenstein, 17.
Lester Horton was a modern dance choreographer and one of the best known pioneers of American modern dance. He began his career as a designer and stage manager of a theater. He became interested in the culture and dance of Native Americans. His first attempt in choreography came, in 1928, when he choreographed the movements for *The Song of Hiawatha*, a theatrical pageant. Horton organized his own dance company in the early 1930s, the very first multi-racial modern dance company in the United States. He developed a technique that accentuates strong and minimized torso movement which provides a stabilized core in which expressions are derived from the movement of legs and arms. This method would become known in modern dance as the "Horton Technique."\(^{13}\)

Ailey did not join the LHDT immediately. He sat quietly watching de Lavallade as she took classes. As a gymnast, Ailey realized that he may be disciplined and strong enough to participate in one of Horton’s dance classes. After participating in his first dance class, he loved it. Horton felt that Ailey had immense talent and should seriously consider a career in dance.

After Ailey graduated from high school, in 1948, he worked as an office clerk at the Atomic Energy Commission. That fall he entered the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). He majored in Foreign Languages in hopes of becoming a teacher. He was excited in his decision to take Horton’s advice, although his new schedule was filled with him less excitement. Ailey had to wake up early in the morning to take long bus rides to attend classes during the day at UCLA. After completing his classes in the

afternoon, he had to ride the bus to the Horton Studio, which was one hour away from UCLA. In 1949, he transferred to San Francisco State College to remove himself from Los Angeles and to get away from dance. His decision to leave dance allowed him more time to focus on his education. He worked odd jobs such as tax clerk and he loaded and unloaded luggage from Greyhound Bus Company to fund his education.\footnote{14} During that time, Horton encouraged Ailey to return to dance. Ailey did just that after he transferred to Los Angeles City College. He was offered a work study from LHDT, where his natural talent for dance evolved. He took dance classes and worked as part of the stage crew, learning the most about dance and dance production.

Under the direction of Horton, Ailey was exposed to proper dance technique and various dance genres; however, his showmanship and ability surpassed Horton’s expectations. Horton taught Ailey ways in which cultural dance traditions could be used to create choreography. This granted Ailey the ability to use multiracial influences in his own choreography.\footnote{15} Six months after Ailey rejoined LHDT, Lester Horton suddenly died in November 1953.

After Horton’s death, Ailey took over as choreographer of LHDT in hopes to maintain the Horton legacy and the LHDT. Ailey’s first piece of choreography \textit{According to St. Francis}, debuted at the Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival in 1954. He created \textit{According to St. Francis} as homage to Lester Horton. “IHe is the reason I do all

\footnote{14} Ailey, 53.

this . . . When you came into the world of Lester Horton you came into a completely creative environment—people of all colors, music of all nations.”

Many critics did not particularly like Ailey’s choreographic debut. They felt that the piece was entirely too long and lacked substance. However, the criticisms did nothing to taint Ailey’s love for dance. He immersed himself in perfecting his choreography and explored a wide range of movement that would later change modern dance.

After the Lester Horton Dance Company disbanded, Ailey spent the next few years perfecting his craft. He danced in the movie Carmen Jones starring Dorothy Dandridge. Herbert Ross, choreographer of Carmen Jones, invited Ailey and de Lavallade to appear in the Broadway musical House of Flowers starring Pearl Bailey. He and de Lavallade travelled to Philadelphia to audition for the Truman Capote’s production, which was scheduled to open December 1954. House of Flowers opened in New York to diverse reviews and continued on the Broadway circuit for five months. The production served to be ahead of its time dealing with interracial relationships. Ailey did not receive any accolades for his performance, but he remained faithful in his growth as a dancer. New York allowed Ailey a wide range of opportunities in dance training. He studied with Katherine Dunham, Martha Graham, Karel Shook, Hanya Holm, Anna Sokolow, and Doris Humphrey. His reputation slowly grew in the dance sector of New

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York. He was later offered appearances in *The Carefree Tree* (1955), Harry Belafonte’s *Sing Man, Sing*, and became the lead dancer in *Jamaica* (1957), which starred Lena Horne.¹⁸ *Jamaica* was Ailey’s last musical.

From the inception of Ailey’s career as a choreographer, he wanted to showcase as much of the African-American experience through dance. He gathered a small group of African-American dancers to skillfully portray this experience on stage. The result of this small group would later grow into the most well-known repertory to date. Ailey wanted to establish a company where he could dance and create his own steps. He also wanted his company to emphasize the importance of the African-American experience and to display the contributions of African Americans to American culture through the arts.¹⁹ Ailey’s decision to create his own dance company did more than preserve the African-American experience through dance; it provided opportunities for African-American dancers to perform. Immediately after the dance group was formed, Ailey wanted to re-create the sounds and sights of his childhood. “I decided that my first great contribution to the world as a choreographer would be *Blues Suite*, a dance about the Dew Drop Inn of my Texas childhood.”²⁰

On March 30, 1958, Ailey premiered with ten other dancers as the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at the Ninety-second Street Young Men’s-Young Women’s

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²⁰ Ailey, 91.
Hebrew Association (YM-YWHA) in New York City. \textsuperscript{21} Bluess Suite, Ode and Homage (tribute to Lester Horton) and Cinco Latinos (dance expressing Latin themes) debuted at this performance. Ailey received high accolades for his choreography and dancing in Blues Suite. It was an instant hit. Blues Suite was created on the basis of traditional jazz and is presently apart of the company’s repertoire.

At a time when music was a major outlet for African Americans, Ailey took advantage of African-American music’s popularity. His choreography completely reflected the jazz genre, pulling from the aesthetic of the jazz era. Blues Suite took the place in a “sporting house.” \textsuperscript{22} The “sporting house” in Blues Suite is synonymous with what is commonly known as jook joints in small rural towns. The experience of attending a Saturday night at a jook joint may not be fully understood by modern day African Americans; however, Ailey was able to capture the spirit and intensity present in Blues Suite, allowing the viewer to become one with the past.

Deriving Blues Suite from his childhood memories, Ailey expressed the importance and power of African-American culture. In a note in the program for Blues Suite, Ailey writes, “the musical heritage of the southern Negro remains a profound influence on the music of the world . . . during the dark days the blues sprang fullborn from the docks and the fields, saloons and bawdy houses . . . from the very souls of their creators.” \textsuperscript{23} Although the arrangement of Blues Suite has changed since its debut fifty

\begin{footnotes}
\item[21] Mazo, 11.
\item[22] Dunning, 104.
\item[23] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
years ago, the historical components are present. From beginning to end, one is taken on a journey through jazz and the southern rural roots of jazz.

The men and women of *Blues Suite* are made known and slowly begin to diminish the lifelessness of the bodies in “Good Morning Blues,” a section within the piece. The men represented field workers, gamblers, trade workers, and railroad workers, while women represented the flirts and lovers of these male workers. In a harmonious setting, these individuals lived lives that began tranquil and ended rambunctiously. The performance did not create instant affluence for Ailey and his dancers so much that, his dancers kept regular paying jobs during the day while rehearsing at night.

The new-found success of *Blues Suite* encouraged Ailey to enter the studio to start work on another piece. In 1959, he decided to relive his “blood memories” and invent the experience of his religious roots in Texas. The result of these memories was *Revelations*. *Revelations* debut on January 31, 1960 at the Ninety-second Street YM-YWHA. *Revelations* was divided into three sections: “Pilgrim Sorrow,” “Take Me to the Water,” and “Move, Members, Move.” Although the entire piece was set to spirituals, the three sections were completely unique, remaining consistent with the overall scope of the African-American religious experience. After the premier of *Revelations*, Ailey and his company received a fervent standing ovation and exceptional reviews. Many critics declared this to be a masterpiece and praised Ailey for making himself a pioneer in modern dance. *Revelations* earned so much success that it has remained in every performance of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater (AADT) for nearly fifty years.
The success of *Revelations* introduced Ailey to monetary success and popularity. In October of 1960, Ailey and his troupe were invited to the Clark Center of the Performing Arts as the resident company in New York. This honor was important because it allowed Ailey and his troupe a home studio for rehearsals. At the new rehearsal studio, the dancers would perfect old pieces and create new ones. Ailey revived Horton’s *The Beloved* and premiered Joan Butler’s *Portrait of Billie*, a choreographed sequence about singer Billie Holiday. He also presented new works of his own such as *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, choreographed to the music of Samuel Barber, and a duet with de Lavallade called *Roots of the Blues*. The duet premiered at the Boston Arts Festival in June 1961. In December 1961, Ailey introduced another choreographed dance that would become the widely known *Hermit Songs*. *Hermit Songs* was also choreographed to the music of Barber and featured Ailey in a dance solo.

In 1962, the United States State Department applauded the success and cultural importance of Ailey and his dancers. The AADT was invited to attend and participate in President John F. Kennedy’s International Program for Cultural Presentations. Ailey and his dancers were given the opportunity to serve as cultural ambassadors of the United States on five continents. This was an amazing feat for anyone, but it especially provided a sense of achievement for African-American dancers and choreographers. Soon the AADT would travel to Africa, Asia, Australia, Brazil, Europe, and the United States of Soviet Russia. While on tour, the AADT presented *Revelations, Been Here and Gone*, a suite displaying African-American folk dances, and Glen Tetley’s *Mountain Way Chant*.

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24 Cruz, 56.
a suite based on the rituals and culture of Navajo Indians. The AADT was the first American dance company to travel the USSR in over fifty years and was the first African-American dance company funded by the U.S. State Department to travel to Southeast Asia. The AADT was the very first African-American dance company to ever perform in Southeast Asia.

In 1962, Ailey also created dances for the Robert Joffrey Ballet, which included *Feast of Ashes*. Ailey would later begin teaching classes at the Clark center and toured with his company throughout the United States. The AADT mainly toured at university and college campuses. The following year, Ailey created a ballet for the Harkness Ballet based on mythical characters, Theseus and the Montaur, titled *Labyrinth*. *Labyrinth* was later named *Ariadne* and was a hit for the Harkness Ballet.\(^25\) Also in 1963, the AADT appeared at an exhibit in Chicago, Illinois. The Century of Negro Progress was given to commemorate one hundred years of African-American influences. That fall, the AADT traveled to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil to perform at the Music and Dance Festival.

The AADT originally began with ten African-American dancers. By 1964, Ailey decided to integrate the company. However Ailey felt that African-American themes expressed by dancers should be expanded to include all dancers, not just one race of dancers.\(^26\) Ailey opened his dance company to other ethnic groups such as European Americans, Japanese, and Puerto Ricans to demonstrate the company’s ability to produce a company that would improve race relations in dance. He wanted to emphasize ways in

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\(^{25}\) Dunning, 192.

which different races present similar material. "I’ve always felt that I wanted to celebrate the differences in people. I didn’t want all the same bodies, or all the same color, in my company." Ailey preserved the Horton legacy by having a multiethnic dance company.

The new company reinforced that Ailey understood the needs of modern dance. Modern dance was stereotypically a European art form; however, Ailey felt it necessary for modern dance to represent bodies of all colors. The same way Ailey shifted to an integrated company, his choreography became more abstract while it included more genres of dance. This integration allowed him to become more acceptable in American dance. He would later go on to choreograph pieces for major ballet companies including the Paris Opera Ballet, the Royal Danish Ballet, the American Ballet Theater, and the Ballet Internacional de Caracas.

The next few years, the AADT would continue touring abroad. In 1964, the AADT toured London. By 1965, he decided to stop performing. He loved and enjoyed the excitement of dance but felt his talents were better suited in marketing the company and creating new choreography. The AADT became more reputable with each sold out show. Ailey midly enjoyed the new fame of his company. With his company’s new fame, there were new challenges. One challenge was funding. Ailey’s decision to stop performing provided him more time to strategize ways to garner economic support.

To ensure guaranteed funding, he worked diligently to create new meaningful dances. He would also make an event out of performance nights. Ailey contracted the talents of other dancers as his special guests. He planned parties for opening night performances in which he increased ticket pricing. Soon, people were anxious to attend.

27 Mazo, 13.
the AADT performances because they knew they were going to be treated to something special. Ailey’s charm and business savvy helped acquire the donations of wealthy individuals who promoted the AADT through touring and advertisements.

The AADT did not tour the United States in a major performance tour until 1968. Ailey was surprised that in the United States large theaters were sold out to individuals who wanted to experience the Ailey Spirit. Things were beginning to look promising for the AADT. Ailey never imagined that the AADT and his vision for the arts would ever gain as much success as it had. He was proud of the company’s reputation and all that it offered modern dance. While Ailey’s professional career soared, his personal life presented challenges. Unfortunately, he experienced a host of pressures in his personal life. He lost the support of Alvin and Edel Holtz, his business peers. On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. This event also added to the building stress Ailey endured. He confided to his closest friends that the price of success was becoming too high for him to pay.

The AADT was the leading dance company that featured the talents of African-American dancers and choreography during the 1960s. Its success spearheaded the emergence of many other African-American dance companies. The Dance Theater of Harlem (DTH), one of the more known African-American dance companies, was established by Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook in 1969. Ailey, Mitchell, and Shook were all once connected through dance many years earlier. Ailey’s relationship became strained when Shook shared with Ailey that he really should not become a choreographer. Shook felt that Ailey was not cultured enough because he did not visit museums and
knew nothing about music. She expressed, on many occasions, that “Ailey did not live up to the potential of a dancer.” Although Mitchell and Shook were helpful to Ailey, the AADT surpassed the success of the DTH.

The Dance Theater of Harlem evolved in dance world in the late 1960s. Mitchell allowed the current social and political problems of the United States to inspire him in developing a dance company. The DTH was founded as an all African-American ballet company. Both Ailey and Mitchell wanted their companies to provide dance leadership to young African-American youth; however, Mitchell did not integrate his company. Mitchell also remained faithful to teaching students the fundamentals of classical ballet. The DTH was often criticized for separating African-American dancers, limiting their progress in dance. Many critics felt that Mitchell needed to create a repertory reflecting African-American dance. Although, both the AADT and the DTH are now both internationally acclaimed, one is more widely known than the other. The identity of the DTH was more orthodox than the AADT.

One main difference between the AADT and the DTH was each company’s ability to evolve meaning from choreography. The DTH was known for performing traditional ballet such as *Giselle* or *Swan Lake*. It was amazing to see African Americans perform these ballet classics; however, it did not grant the DTH the same success as the AADT in the dance world. Another difference between the AADT and the DTH was integration. The AADT integrated, affording the company more opportunities for travel.

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28 Alley, 77.

and funding. This exposure allowed the AADT to maintain their sensational reputation.

In 1969, Ailey embarked on another milestone. The AADT would visit schools to expose children to dance. Many of these children lived in environments where there was little or no presence of modern dance in their communities. He dreamed of one day opening a school so all children would have an opportunity to experience professional dance. Ailey opened his first school in Brooklyn, New York. It was named the Alvin Ailey Dance Center (AADC), which was later changed to The Ailey School. When the school first opened, enrollment was one hundred twenty-five students. The school formed two divisional levels. Students in the junior-division level ranged from the ages three to fifteen and students in the professional-level ranged from fifteen and older. Ailey developed a curriculum that would teach children a variety of dance techniques, which included modern dance, jazz, tap, and ballet. The junior-level division offered a wide range of courses for children learning to dance. The professional-level offered courses in creative studies, dance academics, and dance technique. It was extremely important to Ailey that all children interested in dance had the ability to attend his school. His open admission policy made this possible. At the Ailey School students received support and guidance from Ailey and his staff and were encouraged to be themselves. The establishing of The Ailey School gave him a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

On Lula Cooper's birthday, in 1971, Ailey debuted a work that would become a signature piece, Cry. Cry was choreographed for Judith Jamison. This gift to his mother made her extremely happy because it was the story of her life through dance. Alice
Coltrane, Chuck Griffin, and Laura Nyro provided musical arrangements for the piece. The theme presented in *Cry* was the strength and determination of the African-American woman. He, not only gifted *Cry* for his mother, but gifted it to all African-American women. *Cry* was created from a host of images and experiences. *Cry* began with a female dancer draped in all white. A long sleeve body suit is paired with a flowing white skirt. One example of images used by Ailey was a white shawl that is transformed from a baby’s blanket to a wash rag to shawl to a turban. The shawl was representative of memories of Ailey watching his mother clean and scrub floors. The transformation of the shawl into many useful forms may be thought of as an escape mechanism to display how African-American women find strength and power within their daily hardships.

Ailey paid tribute to his idol Duke Ellington in 1974. “Ailey Celebrates Ellington” was featured at a Duke Ellington festival in New York. The legacy of Ellington’s music was accompanied with the smooth choreographic moves of Ailey. Ailey choreographed many of the dances for the festival. Performances that night included *The River, The Mooche, Night Creature*, and *Reflections in D*. Ailey also created *Pas de Duke* two years later especially for Jamison and ballet dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov. The same year, Ailey created the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble (AARE), also known as Ailey II, established from the need to provide stage experience to the students of The Ailey School. Started as a workshop, the AARE began travelling throughout the United States. The main mission of Ailey II was to create a cultural community that extends to community enrichment. A year later, Ailey formed another

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group under the direction of Kelvin Rotardier. The Alvin Ailey Student Workshop provided advanced students an opportunity to receive extra dance training. These students were also granted a more demanding performance schedule. The ensemble's reputation rapidly grew, surprising the dancers and Ailey.

In 1976, Ailey received the National Advancement of Colored People's Spingarn Medal; an annual award for exceptional achievement by an African American. Others who received this award include George Washington Carver, Bill Cosby, Reverend, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks. Ailey's contributions to the dance world did not go unnoticed. He was awarded with honorary doctorate degrees from Adelphi University, Bard College, and Princeton University. While Ailey accomplished a lot of milestones being an African-American male in the modern dance, his personal life was still filled with torment.

From the outside, Ailey looked as though he had everything, but Ailey faced isolation within his inner self. Although Ailey had many friends, he remained a very private person. Many of his friends did not know the daily struggles he faced. Ailey's seclusion came, in part, from his homosexuality. For a number of years, Ailey masked his sexuality in fear that it would damage his career. In hopes of keeping his image pure, he continued living a secret promiscuous life engaging in "gutter" activities. He found it difficult to trust others; however, he was willing to try any method of escape. He allowed the world to consume him. The pressures of his double life began to build. Ailey

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31 Dunning, 297.

32 Ibid., 335.
did not know how to maneuver feelings of his personal life into his professional life, so he overshadowed his professional life. He worked constantly, making it difficult to develop and maintain a serious relationship. Ailey was willing to accept criticism based on race; however, he felt his sexuality was off-limits.\(^{33}\)

Ailey constantly doubted his own successes and his own well-being. He felt that he had not fully escaped from tribulations of his childhood and that no matter how popular his dances became he still questioned his success.\(^{34}\) Ailey soon became frustrated with everything and everyone around him. He felt that he was cursed with the success of *Revelations* and had to perfect his choreography. The pressures of his life and career began to affect his health. He was placed in a mental health institution where he learned how to handle his manic-depression. After being prescribed Lithium and released from the mental health institution, he received some bad news that would change the rest of his life. His good friend, Joyce Trisler, died. He first met Trisler while he was a dancer at LHDT. The death of Trisler made Ailey frantically contemplate his life. His mind was filled with thoughts of his own death and ways to escape his current frustrations. The AADT and Ailey traveled to Paris. While in Paris, Ailey lived a wild and carefree life filled with drinking, smoking, and sex, but his need of a carefree life was short-lived. After the AADT toured Paris, they returned to the United States, and he decided to take control of his life and returned to rehearsal studio.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.

\(^{34}\) Ailey, 140.
Ailey worked extremely hard on his choreography while back in the studio. *Memoria* was choreographed after the death of Trisler. He realized that this dance was a direct reflection of memories and the abstract images of Trisler. Soon after sections of *Memoria* were formed, Ailey began to feel the pressures created when choreographing a new piece. In order to deal with these pressures, he used cocaine. The cocaine provided Ailey with a high that made his thoughts larger than life. High on cocaine, Ailey wanted *Memoria* to be over the top with theatrical elements. The dance featured the ghostly spirit of an African-American woman who returns to the living realm to be with her male lover that she was departed by death. During this time, cocaine-use clouded his judgment and caused him to have severe mood swings. Ailey would steal, became involved in street fights, and played for hours with his imaginary dog, “Lucky.” He was so down that he felt that there was nowhere else for him to go but up.

Ailey realized in 1982 that he needed to cease his wild behaviors and fill his life with purpose once again. Ailey decided that he would have to trust others and learn how not to do everything by himself. Delegating responsibilities was not comforting at first, but he knew that was one reason why he used alcohol and drugs was for an escape. Ailey began to feel joy, “I was suddenly happy... rationally happy, the best kind of happiness you can have.” The next few years helped Ailey maintain his happiness because he became more aware of his purpose and accomplishments in modern dance. That same

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35 Ibid., 137.
36 Ibid., 139.
37 Ibid. 146.
year he received the United Nations Peace Medal. The National Association of Schools of Dance granted the AADC accreditation. In 1985, the AADT was the first modern dance company to travel on a United States government-sponsored tour of the People’s Republic of China since the normalization of Sino-American relations. Two years later, he received the Samuel H. Scripps Dance Festival Award, modern dance’s highest achievement.

In 1988, Ailey received the Handel medallion, the highest cultural honor, in New York City. That same year he also received the Kennedy Center Honor Award. The award was given to him because of his contributions to the American culture. Other notable recipients of this award have been Lucille Ball, Bob Hope, and Frank Sinatra; Ailey was honored among the most influential entertainers in the industry. He was elated to receive the award; however, many at the awards banquet questioned Ailey’s health. They felt that his physical appearance was deteriorating. He would often miss rehearsals because of a lack of energy. On many occasions, Jamison would have to fill in for Ailey at rehearsals. Consequently, Ailey asked Jamison to take over as company director in 1989.\textsuperscript{38} Although, his health quickly declined, he still travelled to ensure that his legacy in his schools continued to thrive.

In 1989, in Kansas City, Ailey went on to establish the Ailey Camp, another program for children. The summer camp provided recreation for children who faced socio-economic, academic, and domestic disparities. The camp permitted students to explore their own creativity while in an environment that supplied student with role

\textsuperscript{38} Cruz, 84.
models. The mission of his program was to instill self-esteem in students to develop future leaders. Students participated in studies that ranged from government, communications, career development, conflict resolution, as well as dance. Today, the Ailey Camp serves children in Kansas City, New York, Boston, Atlanta, and Chicago.

On December 1, 1989, Alvin Ailey died in New York City at the age of fifty-eight. His memorial service was held at St. John of the Divine Cathedral in New York. The memorial service was titled, "A Celebration of Alvin Ailey, Jr.: Going Home." Forty-five hundred people attended the memorial. Maya Angelou, Ailey's friend from Los Angeles, recited a poem in his honor. She compared his death to the falling of a great tree disrupting everything surrounding it. The AADT performed sections of *Cry* and *Revelations*. Ailey's body was flown to Los Angeles for an intimate service at First Baptist Church of Artesia, the church where Ailey's family attended. The family of Ailey buried him on December 13, 1989 at the Rose Hills Memorial Park.

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39 Rennert, 10.
CHAPTER FOUR

REVELATIONS

While Ailey often pulls inspiration from the African-American experience, many of his works are conceptual and have no main plot.\(^1\) However, Ailey’s choreography has always introduced aspects of the black aesthetic. Ailey’s piece, *Revelations*, is centered on American Negro spirituals and conjures an aesthetic spirit. *Revelations* is more conceptual in movement than any of Ailey’s other works. The musical intensity and graceful movements supply a sensory awareness that is associated with the pains and joys of African Americans of the rural south throughout three centuries.\(^2\) *Revelations* tells of how, throughout history, African Americans have endured pain, sorrow, joy, and contentment. It suggests that a cultural awakening is present in the African-American community that shifts from desolation to victory.

Ailey wanted *Revelations* to be a part of an evening of black dance that showcased, not only dance, but African-American music. He proposed that the evening would display “the coming and the growth and reach of black culture.”\(^3\) *Blues Suite*

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(1958) introduced the evening of dance. The piece was set to African-American music, specifically jazz and blues. The second part of the evening, Ailey debuted Revelations. The music used in Revelations was influenced by spirituals and southern gospel. More specifically, Revelations was designed to portray a sequential range of African-American religious music from songs of sorrow to upbeat gospel. Both Blues Suite and Revelations convey similar African-American themes, however, Revelations proved itself to be the fan favorite since its debut on January 31, 1960 at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA in New York City.

The debut performance included sixteen song selections, a live chorus of singers including soloists and a production time of over one hour. Revelations is a suite of songs that takes the spectator on a mythical, yet realistic journey. Ailey divided Revelations into three sections, also known as a tripartite. Using a chronological sequence, Ailey opened Revelations with “Pilgrim of Sorrow.” He wanted to build suspense by using slow movements that focused on limb extension. Ailey used mainly earth tones colors and slow songs. The second section of Revelations, “Take Me to the Water,” transitioned with body movements becoming more fluid. Ailey used more calming colors in costuming and lighting. “Move, Members, Move,” the final section, exhibited a jubilant celebration in a space that dramatizes the African-American church. These colors induce feelings through light levels, therefore, adding an emotional constituent to the performance. In performance, earth tone colors deliver feeling of wretchedness, neutral colors provide feelings of tranquility, while bright and vibrant colors are used to provoke happy feelings.  


After the premier of Revelations, he received enthusiastic reviews regarding the piece however, it did not reach its full popularity until it was edited years later. The initial program for Revelations included “Poor Pilgrim” and “Weeping Mary,” both sections were sung by soloist Nancy Redi; “Wonder Where,” a solo dance for Merle Derby; “Round about the Mountain” and “Morning Star,” a trio and quartet of women dancers, respectively; “My Lord What a Morning;” and ended with “Elijah Rock.”

Although the piece has evolved and changed tremendously since its debut, the arrangement has remained consistent since it was edited during the 1960s. The program for Revelations after it was edited is as follows:

**PILGRIM OF SORROW**

I’ve Been ‘Buked

Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel

Fix Me, Jesus

**TAKE ME TO THE WATER**

Procesional/Honor, Honor

Wade in the Water

I Want To Be Ready

**MOVE, MEMBERS, MOVE**

Sinner Man

The Day is Past and Gone

You May Run On

Rocka’ my Soul in the Bosom of Abraham

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In discussing the aesthetic nature of the choreography in *Revelations*, it is important to note how different this dance is from Ailey’s other works. For the purpose of this research, the beauty of the body is examined to demonstrate how dance is used to display a Black aesthetic in *Revelations*. Although the researcher offers possibilities of African-American beauty, dance aesthetics in art, is a difficult task to determine what beauty is. In search of how Ailey constructs a Black aesthetic in *Revelations*, the researcher utilized methods of analyzing performance that aids in understanding dance and the body. These methods used to analyze *Revelations* are gestures, music, and costuming. Each of these categories helps create a standard for analyzing the choreography of *Revelations*, which helped it to become a successful dance in African-American dance, as well as modern dance.

Ailey uses the human body in a manner that displays fluidity, transitioning between slow and frantic bursts of energy. In dance, gestures intensify the range of choreography for the dancer and the spectator. These gestures present in visual performance varies among theater, film, and dance; however, the researcher observed one gestural status to help understand components within the choreography of *Revelations*. Friction, a status of dance, consists of intrusions in the atmosphere used while the body is in motion. This same friction also consists of the spectator’s ability to identify movement. Namely, gestures/motions of dance are interactions between dancer and spectator. In some cases, gestures/motions have the ability to tell stories. Ailey allows himself to become a griot of motion, thus involving the spectator to feel similar emotions he felt as a child.

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9 Pavis, 128.
In addition to discovering how Ailey’s movement/gesture helps to create an African-American aesthetic, the researcher uses characteristics of African Dance as a foundation to aid in the explication of *Revelations*. Unlike westernized dance, styles of African Dance are more ritualistic and expressive in movement. African Americans, unconsciously, have the ability to retain movements that are African-based. Researcher Barbara S. Glass identified ten important characteristics of African Dance. She offers: (1) African Movement Vocabulary is an African dance characteristic in which the entire body is in motion while a dance is performed; (2) Orientation toward the Earth reveals the Earth is the giver of life and represents permanence.\(^\text{10}\) This characteristic is displayed as the dancer’s body bends toward the Earth; (3) Improvisation is an innovation of dance that does not interrupt dance tradition, but allows the dancer to bring individuality to a dance performance;\(^\text{11}\) (4) Circle and Line Formations describes a dance usually performed in a circle or straight line formation; (5) Importance of the Community is an African Dance characteristic that emphasizes; (6) Polyrhythm pertains to music containing a number of different rhythms at one time; (7) Percussion is the leading beat that dominates music, usually a drum; (8) Pantomime is a movement or series of movements that reflect life activities; (9) Something in Hand is an African dance characteristic that utilizes objects held by dancer as a part of choreography; and (10) Competition is a rivalry between two or more parties.\(^\text{12}\)

Music, in some instances, is an accompaniment to dance. Although, the


relationship between dance and music may vary depending on the type of dance; music helps create an inviting mood for spectators to receive dance and gives a foundation of what is to be interpreted by the dance.\textsuperscript{13} When Africans were forced into enslavement in America, their captors and owners attempted to rid them of their African culture. The familial structures of the enslaved were divided; African names were changed to more Westernized names; and the enslaved were forbidden to speak their native languages. However, dance and music, remained deeply rooted in the lives if the enslaved; keeping the strength and heritage of African tradition alive.\textsuperscript{14}

Ailey reveals the same strength and heritage of the African tradition by using a musical expression of African-American tradition; spirituals. African Americans used aspects of their everyday lives and their heritage to create spirituals. Bernice Johnson Reagon espouses that spirituals serve as a direct link to African-American survival and unlike any other historical components; they have the ability to evoke feelings of pride when heard.\textsuperscript{15} Spirituals used by Ailey enhance the performance by giving the viewer a narrative that transcends through the dancers’ movements. He includes songs rich in polyrhythms and percussions, two important characteristics of African and African-American dance, to allow an exhibition of physicality of the human body. Lyrics of spirituals facilitate a host of emotions while aiding to Ailey’s own examination of movements gathered from his blood memories. He preserves a spirit of music and dance in a theatrical narrative.\textsuperscript{16} In \textit{Revelations}, these spirituals serve as a link between

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Bernice J. Reagon, \textit{We’ll Understand Better By and By} (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 13.
\end{thebibliography}
enslaved Africans to present-day African Americans. These songs also have the power communicate the cultural struggles of African-American history.

Costuming is an extremely important aspect of dance and choreography. Costumes in dance may be designed to either dramatize the movements of dancers or provide an understanding of a particular time, place, and/or event. Ailey uses costuming to enhance the performance of *Revelations* and display another aspect of the Black aesthetic. Clothing in the African and African-American culture has been, and still is, an expressive behavior that exudes a sense of style that is traditionally a part of the black aesthetic. Historically, clothing has been a necessity; but for African Americans, clothing is an extension of self that expresses attitudes surrounding politics, culture, and religion. Clothing in the African-American community, whether festive or somber, is a celebration of what makes the African American beautiful. The African American has faced numerous political, social, and economic oppressions; however, they insist on wearing their best clothing to declare their own self-expression. Ailey expresses the Black aesthetic in *Revelations* through the successful observance of the Black body’s relationship with clothing.

Having seen Ailey’s Revelations countless times, this researcher is aware that sustained analysis could not be supported simply through personal memory and experience. Hence, a 1986 video recording of Ailey’s masterpiece serves as the text for the much of this analysis.

**REVELATIONS REVEALED**

Pilgrim of Sorrow

The first section of this tripartite consists of three spirituals that display a need for

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escape from oppressing forces. Through these songs, he evokes feelings of the people who created these spirituals by using dirges to express pain and loss. In this section, Ailey not only takes the spectator on a journey of pain through the music, but also by creating a desolate atmosphere that prefigures the gesture movements. He uses earth tone colors, specifically various shades of brown, in costuming and dim lighting in all three sections of “Pilgrim of Sorrow.” Earth tones were chosen to signify the body comes from the earth and is returned to the earth.\textsuperscript{18} This section has strong parallelisms with the enslavement of Africans in America. For instance, enslaved individuals believed in the concept of freedom that provided inspiration to overcome tyranny.\textsuperscript{19} However, “Pilgrim of Sorrow” serves as expression of Ailey’s experiences growing up poor and socially inferior in the south during the Great Depression.

“I’ve Been Buked,” the first section of “Pilgrim of Sorrow,” begins with a group of dancers standing with feet shoulder-length apart in a tight communal formation to display an importance of community. The first movement transition the dancers execute is the slight lifting of hands and arms as they tilt their heads towards the sky. As the movements shift a spotlight focuses on the cluster of individuals. Dancers then execute deep torso dips leaning to the left and right of the body, only to return to their initial state of standing upright lifting their hands towards the sky. While swaying in circular motions only using their upper torsos; their feet remain planted on the ground. These deep bends and footing are examples of African dance characteristic; orientation toward the earth.

Within “I’ve Been Buked,” Ailey displays a wide range of gestural techniques. One technique in particular is miming. Upon the second group dispersal to various areas

\textsuperscript{18} Ailey, 98.

of the stage, the dancers hurriedly use their hands as if they are confined by space. This
gestural movement of the hands suggests that their escape is limited. The dancers show a
dire need to remove themselves from their surroundings; however, they only find solace
in the divine power of a higher being. The same is true for African Americans. The
enslaved were dispersed from their families to be sold on various plantations, thus
causing genetic familial structures to be divided. Just as the dancers separated from the
cluster, African Americans found themselves facing experiences in which they had
never suffered. They looked towards religion to attain faith and spiritual renewal,
displayed by dancers in Revelations looking and reaching towards the heavens. “I’ve
Been Buked” demonstrates the history of African-American religion and a testament of
faith.

The African and African-American community emphasizes the significance of the
group. As the African proverb contends, it takes a village to raise a child. Ailey
redefines the importance of community at the end “I’ve Been Buked.” The dancers
revisit the same tight communal formation and stance that was shown at the beginning of
their dance journey. However, the dancers execute a series of sporadic arm movements
that begin with arms outstretched above their heads and end at their sides. The
interesting thing about the arm movements is that each dancer has their own timing and
individuality for the first time, yet at the end all are harmoniously one.

The musical arrangement titled “I’ve Been Buked” begins with an eerie, yet
forgiving tone of despair. The lyrics suggest gestural techniques and movements that
create feelings of wretchedness and unhappiness. Some of the lyrics give the spectator
insight of a group of people that have faced unfair treatment and harsh conditions. With
accompanying movements to these lyrics, Ailey constructs an image of African
Americans wanting and needing liberation from a worldly oppressor. For instance, “Dere
is trouble all over this world,"20 is partnered with movements of bodies running around
the stage looking for liberation. The stage becomes the world; however, the individuals
retreat back to the communal cluster looking towards the heavens for refuge as is stated,
“Ain’ gwine lay my ligion down.”21 Beginning with enslavement religion was
considered to be emotional liberation to compensate for experiences endured during
enslavement.22 The chorus is a repetition of “buked and scorned,” which proposes a
shared group experience. There is also a repeated use of the word “children” that
reinforces a strong cultural heritage. An example of this strong cultural heritage is most
common in the African and African-American oral traditions, where the elders of the
community pass down life lessons to the youth.

“I’ve Been Buked” is followed by “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel.” Ailey
presents two women and one man (once performed by Ailey) that move together in
unison as well as in discordance. The dancers begin the dance in deep pliés that
reinforces the orientation toward the earth. Shortly after the start of “Didn’t My Lord
Deliver Daniel,” each dancer executes their own choreographed dance solo while the
other two dancers share synchronized movements. Ailey bestows another cultural aspect
in African-American community, call and response. Typically, call and response is
found in African and African-American music, fortunately, Ailey brings the call and
response tradition to his choreography. The solo dancer performs the “call” while the
other two dancers make a gestural “response.” Ailey makes each individual’s dance
different without overshadowing the other two dancers. Whereas each individual

20 Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Revelation, New York, NY: Right Track Recording,

21 Ibid.

22 Paul D. Escott, Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives (Chapel
presents his/her own individual struggle through motion, they alternate between experiences that are shared and unshared. In the dancers’ solos are filled with torso contractions, vigorous head rolls, and huge jumps. Within the gestures, dancers also repeat the gesture of hands being bound at the wrist, which suggests enslavement or social oppression.

The accompanying spiritual, “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel” is more rhythmic than “I’ve Been Buked.” The selection has more percussive beats that allow gestures to be more stressed. Lyrics of this song further support that this section references an oppressed group of individuals seeking deliverance. “Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel, and why not every man? He delivered Daniel from the lion’s den, Jonah from the belly of the whale, the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace, and why not every man?” “Didn’t my Lord Deliver Daniel” is filled with imagery of God working miracles in the lives of characters from the Old Testament. These stories and images explained that if God performed blessings for Daniel, Jonah, and the Hebrew children, then God will perform blessings for all people. Just as African Americans during the Civil Rights Era endured insurmountable circumstances; the characters of the Old Testament proved to African Americans that God blesses all people.

“Fix Me, Jesus” is the final section of “Pilgrim of Sorrow.” It displays the strength of African-American faith, thus making a plea to the Lord for deliverance. “Fix Me, Jesus” is a “spiritual aspiration.” In this pas de deux, Ailey features one man and

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23 DeFrantz, 6.


one woman. It may appear that the relationship of the male and female is that of a sexual nature, however, the interaction between the two dancers say differently. The female dancer displays a hidden strength while, simultaneously, remaining vulnerable to the movements of the male dancer. In a number of movements, the male has to support the female dance while aiding her find strength in executing certain movements and serving as a guide for her movements. From this, the researcher gathers that this is indeed a religious affirmation where the male dancer (once performed by James Truitte) is a religious leader who helps the female dancer discover her own spiritual connection.

Both dancers perform movements that seem to be paranormal. For instance, with his back against the floor the male dancer lifts the female dancer above him. While suspended in the air by the male dancer, the female dancer moves her arms in a winged motion to resemble a bird in flight. The imitation of bird in flight is another characteristic of African dance Ailey called pantomime. Ailey also uses pantomime when he recreates the biblical image of Jesus being hung from the cross when the male dancer lifts the female's body as it remains in a cross-like formation. He fills this section with a host of pantomimes that are abstract, yet express emotions that are symbolic in nature. This section ends with the woman balancing herself on one leg on the leg of the male dancer while he is in a half plié. While in this position the female dancer stretches her arms upward as if receiving a spiritual gift. The bodies serve as a template in creating movements and expressions that extend to religious themes.26

The spiritual "Fix Me Jesus, Fix Me" mentions eagerness and longing for the moment Jesus is to grant change within the lives of those tormented and those who have sinned. The start of the song is solemn in nature and then changes when the chorus

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begins a moan-like yet harmonious tone. "Fix Me Jesus, Fix Me" is vastly different from the preceding musical arrangement, because it examines the sorrow and pain, just as "I've Been Buked." The female lead extends "Fix me Jesus, fix me . . . Fix me for my long white robe," while the male lead pleads, "Fix me Jesus, fix me . . . Fix me Jesus, Fix me for my dying bed . . . Fix me for my journey home."27 The journey home in which the songs mentions, represents the heavenly home after death. Movements in combinations with the lyrics recommend the desire that sinners have for Jesus to enter their hearts.

As mentioned previously, Ailey uses earth tones in "Pilgrim of Sorrow.” Costumes in this section are various shades of brown, ranging from dark to light. Eloquently, the dancers move about the stage in their cleverly designed uniforms that visually support each gestural movement. Women are outfitted in dresses that are form-fitting at the top and begin to flow at the waist, while the men wear fitted pants with lose mesh shirts. From Ailey’s choice of costumes, it may suggest that he wanted to display the movements of the black body, as something beautiful.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the black body was viewed as a sexualized object; however, Ailey disrupts this stereotype by allowing one to see how graceful the body becomes while in motion. One may ask, why does Ailey use different tones of brown in choosing costumes for "Pilgrim of Sorrow?" The researcher mentions that Ailey wanted to the colors to represent the earth; it may also be possible that the different shades of brown serve as an attempt display the beauty of all African Americans. Ailey reminds the spectator that African Americans, no matter how physically different, all share the similar experiences that exist from the earth and when a strong bond within the community is formed a beautiful sense of pride is established.

27 Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, *Revelations*. 
In “Pilgrim of Sorrow,” the body extends the initial moment of sorrow. Ailey used movements to translate the body as a metaphor to feelings imaginable to enslavement and feelings of oppression in the rural south. Since the arrival of African Americans, their bodies suffered abuse, ridicule, and objectification, hence the choice of “I’ve Been Buked.” As the body reacts to scornful treatment, the lifting of hands show that faith surpasses all torments of the world. The lyrics emphasize the body’s announcement that pain is present, but not everlasting. When the body is stressed it undergoes certain motions of fatigue. The motions of the body inform the spectator that all lives, specifically African Americans, experience deep sorrow, but must not remain sorrowful. “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?” alters the body from feelings of anguish to hope. In this section, the body no longer exudes a deep sorrow. It is excited by the lyrical content that lives through the notion that God has not and will not forget his people. The body redefines itself, embarking on another facet of communicating a need for change, in “Fix me, Jesus.” Ailey allows the body to undergo mythical transformations that relay a spiritual continuity that has remained present in many African-American communities since enslavement.

**Take Me to the Water**

In African dance, the dancer makes use of items to either visually extend the limbs while in motion to communicate certain stories. These retentions are present in African-American dance. African-American choreographers continued to use elements of African dance such as cloth, sticks, and masks in choreography. Ailey continued this dance tradition in middle section of *Revelations*. Ailey introduces the spectator to the characteristic of something in hand. “Take Me to the Water” begins with “Processional.” Once again Ailey emphasizes the importance of community by entering in a group of dancers. At first glance, it appears that a cultural ritual is to take place. The group of
dancers is led by a male dancer carrying short stick-like item in one hand and a small piece of fabric in the other. He is followed by a woman doing a series of spins others dancers, and two of which carry decorative poles. Following her are two male dancers who carries his own decorative pole. The last dancer to appear on stage carries a large white umbrella. Bodies' of these dancers enter with distinctive prideful postures foretelling the initiation of something that is to be deemed as praiseworthy.

R. Douglas Hurt uses the personal account of C.L. Franklin to display the emotions of southern baptisms. Franklin remembers his own baptism in Cleveland, Mississippi. He recalls that the members of his church walked in a processional to the Sunflower River, which was ten miles from his church St. Peter's Rock Baptist Church. Excitement filled the atmosphere as church members sang and rejoiced unto the Lord on the riverbank as recent converts were cleansed and said to be born again. He also discusses images of his deacon and pastor receiving candidates for baptism in the water; as they were immersed in the river one by one.28 The events shared by Franklin have strong parallels with Ailey's choreographic movements of "Processional." Ailey also speaks of his own memories of baptism in Cameron, Texas. He vividly recalls watching a processional of people dressed in all white going to the lake for baptism; and as the pastor baptized candidates, the choir would sing "Wade in the Water."29

By using these accounts of southern baptisms, spectators may conclude that the female dancer (once performed by Judith Jamison) carrying the umbrella in the processional may be the mother of the church and the dancers surrounding her are


29 Ailey, 18.
members of the church and candidates for baptism. The first dancer ushers in two candidates for baptism: one female and one male (once performed by Ailey). As the dancers enter the stage their movements are both slow and dramatic, thus demonstrating a ceremonial event is to take place. Once all dancers are on stage, they are then led by a male dancer holding decorative stick and piece of cloth; possibly a pastor. Following him is the lady who ushered in initiates, church mother, and candidates from baptism, and two men holding large decorated poles are in rear; each man holding one pole. From early on in this section, the church mother and the candidates appear to be the focal point, while other dancers perform a series of spins around them.

In “Honor, Honor,” the church mother and the candidates exit the stage briefly as the two male dancers lie on the floor incorporating pole as an extension of body movements, and the other two dancers prepare for the baptism ceremony. When the church mother and two candidates return to stage, everyone else exits. “Honor, Honor” and “Fix Me, Jesus” has similar pantomime movements that display individuals seeking spiritual affirmation being guided by a religious figure. For instance, the male dancer in “Fix Me, Jesus” and the church mother in “Processional,” both offer blessings to those beginning their religious walk. Two of the other male dancers introduce a piece of white, sheer cloth. The formation of the church mother and candidates standing behind the white cloth presents the start of baptism. At this point, the music and lighting changes to convey that the candidates are now baptized.

The musical arrangement for “Honor, Honor” starts with percussive beats lending to the fluid-type movement to the body. The dancers are guided to the “water” by the percussion. “King Jesus lit de candle by de waterside, to see the little children running to be baptized, Honor, Honor, unto the dying lamb;” these lyrics maintain Ailey’s overall

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30 Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Revelations.
demonstration of black worship experience. In the line “King Jesus lit de candle by the waterside” may be interpreted that Jesus offers purification from sins at the water. As the chorus sings, “I pray all day, I pray all night,” the bodies’ of dancers are transformed as if they are in preparation for ritual prayer. The dancers then perform two head rolls while hands are stretched towards the heavens, as the song continues; “my head got sprinkled with the midnight dew.” Ailey ensures movements display lyrical confirmations; as the dancers mimics the act of sprinkling water over their heads using their fingers. African and African-American tradition deem water to be an element of spiritual cleansing and is a source of revitalization. For instance, in some African-American church denominations devote worship services dedicated to the use of water, such as foot-washing rituals and of course, traditional baptisms. Ailey’s inclusion of “Honor, Honor,” gestures and music, gives reverence to personal and cultural purity.

Biblically, the children of Israel had to cross the Jordan River before they could enter the Promised Land, a symbol of freedom for Israelites. The actual events of crossing the Jordan River and wading in the water served as a symbol of entering heaven and obtaining freedom. Ailey creates the same illusion of events with black bodies crossing two ribbons of different shades of blue in “Wade in the Water.” These ribbons represent a body of water, namely a river. Very much like the children of Israel, enslaved

31 Giovanni, 95

32 Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Revelations.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.


Africans also felt that their freedom could only be gained by crossing bodies of water. The church mother leads the candidates into the river. Candidates appear to be hesitant about entering the river, but proceed with faith. While in the river, the dancers' bodies mimic the waves and currents of a large body of water. These dancing bodies begin a series of current-like movements that suggest the troubles of life, while the ribbons are frantically shaken to suggest trouble in the water. While the two initiates are wading in the theatrical body of water they are left alone by the spiritual leader.

Once alone, the two dancers share synchronized movements minutely interacting with one another suggesting that they have commonalities in life experiences, however they are spiritually different. While in unison, the dancers explore a host of isolated shoulder movements, techniques derived from Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham. The dancers begin interacting with one another as a measure to help each other achieve peace within their lives.

Ailey ends "Wade in the Water" with the dancers exiting the stage with movements filled with heightened emotion and spirit. A group of dancers surround the male initiate as he carries the female initiate away after their baptism. While being carried away, the female initiate's body undergoes a series of jerks and shakes as a display of how the Holy Spirit enters the body, "getting the Holy Ghost." Anthony Pinn, states the black body was something viewed as unattractive and only beneficial to labor, however the body was instantly changed and vindicated in a religious atmosphere. This instantaneous act of getting the Holy Ghost is Ailey's way to show that spirit possession is to be celebrated and is an important characteristic of the African-American religious

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37 Foulkes, 182.

worship experience.

The supplementary spiritual, “Wade in the Water,” exhibits polyrhythmic sounds making body the produce rhythmic fluidity in limb extension and leaps. These dancers support the lyrics by acting out lyrics advice using the body. When the lyrics advises the body to “wade in the water,” the body is reserved in motion. When the musical intensity heightens these bodies are no longer reserved. The song also includes advice on going down to the river to pray and wash away sins. The dancers’ bodies appear to be free of any worldly burdens. Ailey’s use of a song full of various percussive instruments serve as foundation for movement adding emphasis to the ritual practices in African and African-American religious ceremonies.

Ending the section “Take Me to Water,” Ailey choreographs a solo dance that revisits the feeling of despair as portrayed “I’ve Been Buked.” This dance, most commonly performed by Dudley Williams, is an intimate cry to God in order to gain acceptance into Heaven. The majority of dance is performed on the ground filled with movement suggesting a desperate need for life change. The spiritual intimacy is introverted in nature because of Ailey’s use of repeated torso contractions and limbs of the body tucked inwards as if in fetal position. The dancer attempts to execute movements while standing but reverts back to the floor. His inability to stand may suggest a weakness in faith or an inner struggle that is faced before completely seeking atonement. The dancer’s movements are controlled in a body that appears to be filled with tension. This allusion is of a sinner nervously awaiting forgiveness of sins. Once again, Aliley uses praying hands and choreographs the dancer to look toward the heavens as reminder that no matter what hardships are faced on earth, a better life will be awarded in heaven. At the end of “I Want to be Ready,” the dancer collapses to the floor with head down, as if tired of fighting a never-ending battle.
Ailey explains movements and gestures in “I Want to be Ready” by using an arrangement with same title. The lyrics beseeches a sinner who understands what it is like to be embraced by the spiritual world, however, he is consumed by the secular world. The song expresses hesitancy in giving up the secular world but at the same time wanting to be adorned with heavenly riches in the line: “I want to be ready, Lord, ready to put on my long white robe.”39 It is from the lyric “If my Lord were to call on me, I wouldn’t be ready to die;”40 the researcher gathers that from the dancer collapsing to the floor at the end of the section represents the surprise coming of the Lord or the death of the sinner, for which the sinner was not prepared.

Although the styles of costumes change in Revelations over time, they remain the same color. Throughout this section, Ailey fills the stage with white garments. The women wear white dresses only exposing their arms and necks. The dresses were carefully envisioned to fully support the atmosphere of a baptism or wading in the water. As mentioned earlier, movements in this section were more fluid than any other section in the tripartite. The dresses were detailed with ruffle-like design that glides when the dancer is in motion. Male dancers wear white fitted pants with white mesh tops; the male initiate with bare chest in “Processional” and “Wade in the Water,” and in “I Want to be Ready,” the dancer wears a fitted white short-sleeved shirt. The men tell stories of strength, vulnerability, and pride. Instead of male dancers having elaborate costumes, Ailey restructures the stereotype of the male body by outfitting them in tight clothing to display strength.41 These bodies in costume, both male and female, exhibit the cultural fixation of purity in black religious worship. Ailey uses the body as a model to display

39 Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Revelations.

40 Ibid.

41 Boston, 145.
clothing; especially wearing whites for ritual ceremonies, as a form of cultural identity for African Americans.

Ailey uses “Take Me to the Water” to show a rebirth of spirit. This spiritual rebirth transcends to individuals of all races; however, it sends a message of African-American cultural rebirth. Ailey honors the strong African and African-American heritage in “Processional” by movements displaying the anticipation of religious rituals.

“Wade in the Water,” describes a soul-enriching event that is translated with outstretched hands, the body’s response to percussion, and bodies undergoing spirit possession.

African Americans during enslavement and in the Civil Rights Era, like the male dance in “I Want to be Ready,” acknowledged a need for change. However, this change was progressively slow. African Americans faced issues of poverty, segregation, and social exclusion in America. They worked for social change and equal rights for all; they prayed harder. The body in this section constructs both the progression and the digression in African-American communities. In “Take Me to the Water,” the body not only wears expressive garments, it is made stronger by showing a spiritual rebirth through baptism and prayer.

Move, Members, Move

The final section of Revelation serves as a joyful expression with deep overtones of African-American worship experience. This section has been referred to as the “golden” section because gold and yellow toned costuming and lighting. “Move, Members, Move” focused solely on the rural gospel church. The use of such vibrant colors not only awakens the spectator, but it also helps create a feeling of jubilation. Ailey draws upon epic memory to link this section of Revelation to an actual celebration of the Black church. He uses the section to give thanks and to show that God’s salvation

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42 Ailey, 98.
is omnipresent. In the Black church, worship mainly consists of testimony, preaching, prayer and music. Ailey announces all these elements in Revelations, but particularly in “Move, Members, Move.”

In African dance traditions, the body may undergo a series of high-spirited movements. Ailey successfully demonstrates the traditions in “Sinner Man.” Although “Sinner Man” begins the last section of Revelations, it is an extension of “I Want to be Ready.” “Sinner Man” is a plea of one giving themselves unto the lord in fear of eternal damnation. This section of “Move, Members, Move” appears to be extremely advanced in choreographic technique. Three men perform a succession of pirouettes, leaps, and rigid falls to the floor, which offers Revelations a more kinetic movement vocabulary. Originally, Ailey created “Sinner Man” for himself and performed it as a solo at least once. Dancers in “Sinner Man” take full advantage of the entire stage. The men give the impression that they are escaping extremes conditions when they are actually running from sins they have committed. The overall message appears declare that one cannot hide from sins and must take responsibility for their lives. Ailey reintroduces the gesture of bondage; hands crossed at the wrists, to display the sinner who aspires to be set free from sin, but will never find refuge until he submits himself to the Lord. These men are not only running from their own sins, but the sins of the world. The most ironic gesture occurs when the dancers run about the stage with sudden pauses of motions thus revealing that a physical, mental, and spiritual breakthrough has been made.

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44 Foulkes, 59.


46 Susan Manning, Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 216.
The spiritual accompaniment inquires to the sinner, “O sinner man, where’re you gonna run to?” Ailey uses this spiritual to taunt the sinner. The sinner runs in search of peace from his sins. The song explains how the sinner runs to the rock, the sea, and to satan, however his running is answered by the Lord, “The Lord said: O sinner man, the rock will be rollin’... the sea will be boilin’... you should be prayin’.” The songs forcefully informs the sinner that he should he should pray for forgiveness immediately. The body shows a keen sense of athleticism and unique ability to maneuver the vivid images suggested by lyrics.

In view of Ailey’s song selection and body movements, the dancers’ costumes were pivotal creating a sense of fear and uncertainty to the spectator. Against a crimsoned background, male bodies emerge bare-chested, bare-feet, only wearing black pants. The image of these bodies adorned in one color reinforces the stereotype that associates the color black as a negative subtext. This negative color association was used to label the African American as something bad and undesirable. Cleverly, Ailey restructures the focus to sin and through body images, he tells how the African American that lived in a segregationist south feared life. Ailey’s decision to have dancers bare-chested makes it available to the spectator to view and understand the results of fear on the body. Through the dynamic movements, the muscles of these dancers show a considerable amount of exhaustion and strain.

The second part of “Move, Members, Move,” “The Day is Past and Gone,” opens with the sounds of a piano while women emerge from different parts of the stage carrying their own stool and fan. The introduction of “The Day is Past and Gone” is similar to what is known in the African-American church as the “Call to Worship.” It defines the

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47 Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Revelations.
48 Ibid.
exact moment when individuals should enter the house of the Lord in preparation for worship. Ailey’s attention to detail helps to create the atmosphere of “old time religion” throughout this part of “Move, Members, Move.” As the ladies enter the stage, they choreographically greet each other. Although the dancers are not speaking, there is a strong usage a paralanguage that aids in conveying that they are in fact saying “hello” and “how are you this morning?” through the use of gestures and costuming. When the last dancer, obviously the lead, enters the surrounding women stop their fanning and look at her as to gain direction as to what is to come. She greets the clusters of women and proceeds to place her stool in the center of the stage. The other dancers surround her fanning quickly. The particular image suggests that the dancers are looking towards the lead dancer (possibly an elder in a rural black church) to receive instruction or words to live by before the church service begins. All of a sudden the lead points to the sky. After the other ladies look towards the sky, they take their seats as the accompanying music states “that time has run out.”

The song, “The Day is Past and Gone,” differs from the musical selections within Revelations; containing qualities of rhythm and blues. The song is filled with wails and moans that distinguishes a foundation in African-American hymns, but is an example of what Anthony Heilbut calls Baptist blues. The body responds to the slow rhythmic sequence created by the piano, however it is energized by the lyrics informing dancers that the “day is past and gone.” The days in which the lyrics speak are of oppression. The bodies begin to interact and react to each other informing of how everyone should remember and appreciate their pasts. “Lord may we all remember when that the time of day draws now.”

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49 Reagon, 233.

50 Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Revelations.
“You May Run On" immediately follows “The Day is Past and Gone.” Ailey keeps the spirit-filled intensity of a rural church service by beginning the section with the female dancers (church ladies) sitting on stools (church pews) armed with fan ready to start Sunday devotion. These women sway their bodies in a rhythmic sequence to allude that the spirit of the Lord is brewing within the church. As the dancers become animated in movement, they turn around in their stools to begin their dance. The male dancers enter the stage to join in with the celebratory movements.

“You May Run On” offers an answer to “The Day is Past and Gone.” The ending line of “The Day is Past and Gone” states that time has run out. Lyrics to “You May Run On” continues with a sermonic tone to advise people to correct any wrongs in their lives. Ailey emphasizes non-verbal communication of the body by allowing the music to choreograph movements. For example, the women stand on stools reprimanding men in disagreement of the men’s behavior as the song voices “Some folks go to church to signify, tryin’ to make a date with the neighbor’s wife... you better leave that woman, leave her alone.”

These women use the body language of pointing fingers at the men to inform them that their actions are not acceptable and should immediately seek forgiveness of coveting their neighbor’s wife. At one moment within “Rocka My Soul” male dancers move the ladies’ stools, after what could be thought of as the sermon, to the back of the stage. The removal of the stools allowed more space for the most energetic sequence of the section. Ailey accurately creates an honest depiction of a ring shout.

51 Ibid.
A true ‘shout’ takes place on Sundays . . . But the benches are pushed back to the wall when the formal meeting is over . . . All stand up in the middle of the floor, and when the “sperichil” [spiritual] is struck up, begin first by walking and by-and-by shuffling around . . . sometimes as they shuffle they sing the chorus of the spiritual, and sometimes the song itself by the dancers . . . Song and dance alike are extremely energetic . . .

Ailey prepares the spectator for the most exciting portion of Revelations. The body languages presented in “Pilgrim of Sorrow,” “Take Me to the Water,” and the first three sections of “Move, Members, Move” are vindicated in this dance selection of Revelations.

In “Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham,” Ailey uses elements of the Cakewalk, as the male dancers are paired with the female dancers to joyously engage the spectator to feelings of triumph and pride. The Cakewalk is a dance that was influenced by African tribal dance that soon became a dance of sophistication for African Americans. Using the body as an instrument, Ailey declares a connection between praise and worship, an aspect in rural gospel churches, to an elaborate social dance, the root of African-American dance in America including a jazz vocabulary. The dancers in “Rocka My Soul” bring the hand-clapping and foot-stomping call and response element of African and African-American dance, to the theater in an attempt to involve the audience in their celebration of spirit and life.

Afterwards, dancers wave their hands as if giving praise to God before standing erect to continue their praise and worship. The ladies then begin a unique style of line dance in which they are in a straight line executing a series of kicks while maintaining a constant motion with fans. As the women retreat, the men step forward to surround a

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53 DeFrantz, Dancing Revelations, 13.
woman who is “catching the spirit.” The men take on the role of church ushers and deacons when they surround a female dancer that is to embark in a spiritual trance. She is joined by another female dancer using her body to praise God. When all the women come forward to join to the celebratory praise, the men add bodily percussion with rhythmic hand-claps. Ailey merges strength and intensity in “Rocka My Soul” with polyrhythmic handling of the body. These dancers use polyrhythmic movements by segmenting the body interdependently by moving the limbs while maintaining a consistent rhythmic structure.\textsuperscript{54} The piece ends with all dancers on their knees with arms outstretched looking towards the heavens as if thanking God for life. Ailey surprises the spectator because the dancers perform the ending of “Rocka my Soul” a second time only with more energy and larger than life motions. Just as the black church invites individuals to Christ at the end of the church service, Ailey invites the spectator to clap, stomp, and join in the Ailey experience.

The song used for choreography is amply titled after the section, “Rocka My Soul.” It concludes the performance by informing the spectator that the sorrows and pains of life make one stronger. “I may be weak but thou art strong . . . my soul is glad, my soul is free, I’m going home to live with thee.”\textsuperscript{55} This song completes the ranges of emotions and provides complementary movements that fulfill movements of “I’ve been Buked.” “Rocka My Soul” fills the body with exuberance. Ailey delivers this feeling by choreographing the body movements and gestures of black religious worship such as hand clapping to music and the body “moving in the spirit.”

In the African-American community, going to church is a religious event;


\textsuperscript{55} Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, \textit{Revelations}. 
however, it may also be a social event. For many years, the African-American church served to be one of the few places in which African Americans had the ability to freely express themselves. Not only do African Americans use church as a place to socially reacquaint themselves with people they have not spoken to in the prior week; they also use church to adorn themselves in the most fashionable attire. For African Americans, work week apparel did not allow for self expression because many African American laborers worked in factories or farms. African-American women, especially, use Sundays as a day to show off new dresses and hats they could not wear the other six days of the week. As quoted in Crowns, Jacquelyn Jenkins expresses that African-American women spends a great deal of time deciding what will be worn on Sunday morning, especially which hat will the complete the outfit.56

These ladies in “Move, Members, Move” are dressed in gold-toned dresses that demonstrate style as a method of presentation, as well as, representation. The dresses are accessorized with two key pieces popular in rural churches; a hat and a fan. The “Sunday hat” and the “church fan,” in the rural south, were used to deter the sun and heat from the ladies who attended these wood-framed houses of worship. Hats and fans were also used as a way that women flirted and communicated. “You can flirt with a fan in your hand, turn it this way and that . . . But a woman can really flirt with a hat.”57 Ailey presents beauty of the African-American culture by displaying the hat as retention of African and African-American tradition. Revelations shows that hats have definitely remained an important decorative accessory in expressing African-American style. Church fans, not only dispel heat, but also express certain emotions through the speed of fanning. For the


57 Ibid., 82.
first instance in the span of *Revelations*, the men are dressed in items that display a style of sophistication. Male dancers are dressed in their own contributions of their Sunday’s clothing: black slacks, white dress shirts, and gold vests. Ailey demonstrates the black aesthetic by presenting the African-American flare for fashion and style. This aspect in the aesthetic reveals the boastful manner in which the African-American embraces self-love and importance through clothing.  

Movements within “Move, Move, Members” actively suggests what the title proclaims. The body is filled with jubilation and movements are more energetic after its rebirth during “Take Me to the Water.” Ailey creates a feeling of an old southern church meeting or revival by demonstrating expressive behaviors present in African-American worship, such as rhythmic moves of the body, music, and clothing. The aim appears to indulge the spectator into a space of happiness that either introduces or reintroduces spectators to the black aesthetic. From “Move, Members, Move,” the spectator is shown how one can “get happy,” commonly known as shouting, despite hardships or unfavorable events in their lives. Movements in “Sinner Man” display that the body has physical limitations when sins are committed; however the body is transformed through spiritual diligence. “The Day is Past and Gone” announces that the time of oppression and pain will end in joy as long as one remains steadfast in their religion. The finale “Rocka My Soul” is a celebration. The body undergoes celebratory movements that translate why the African-American aesthetic should be celebrated.

Alvin Ailey’s choreography is heavily influenced by experiences of his life.

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Ailey offers epic memory as influence of *Revelations*:

*Revelations* began with the music. As early as I can remember I was enthralled by the music played and sung in the small black churches in every small Texas town my mother and I lived in . . . With profound feeling, with faith, hope, and joy, and sometimes sadness, the choirs, congregations, deacons, preachers, and ushers would sing black spirituals and gospels . . . I tried to put all of that feeling into *Revelations*.\(^60\)

From this Ailey uses life as a moving picture. From beginning to end, *Revelations* provides religious affirmations and celebrations.

Another of Ailey’s influences, as he choreographed *Revelations*, was the strong heritage in African-American music history. Spirituals, songs of sorrow, jazz, blues, and gospel were all used as inspiration to choreograph his blood memories, which were also the experiences of other African Americans. The musical legacy used in *Revelations* is Ailey’s contribution of African-American culture to American dance. Beginning with percussive African rhythms, African-American music shares periods of sadness and jubilation in the African-American experience.\(^61\) Through *Revelations*, Ailey gathers his feelings and of African-American music to produce movements that announce the cultural history of African Americans.

Ailey’s style of dance differs from formalized dance. His choreography used the entire body to create an increased dance vocabulary; something that was not explored by many Europeans dance companies. In European dance, dancers usually dance on pointed toes as they maintained good posture throughout a piece of choreography. Ailey’s

\(^{60}\) Ailey, 97.

choreography does not thrive on maintaining good posture. His choreography is excited by using space as expressions of self. An example is repeated as Ailey choreographs a number of movement sequences on the floor. He also utilizes muscle contractions of the body, something not heavily used in formalized dance. He strayed away from creating dances of proper technique to present choreography as an expression of one’s self and life through dance.

Ailey’s use of costuming also makes his choreography unique in the American dance tradition. Ailey used the style of the African-American costuming to display the black body as beautiful. In many instances, ballet performances focus more on technique, while Ailey creates cultural portraits which include the body and costumes. In ballet, the dancer’s uniform is not complete without ballet slippers. Ailey, on the other hand, rebelled against this by creating dances where dancers are barefoot. For years, African Americans maintained self-expressions despite suffering oppression and suppression. Ailey visually celebrates this self expression by including clothing that lends to the body and the music.

He poetically demands that the body’s use of functionalism be explored through musical lyrical selections. The movement of the body also has a mastery of being able to decode expressions that are universal and culturally exclusive. Within this mastery form, he reshapes many of the stereotypes in African-American community. Ailey dancers embraced a jazz aesthetic of dance, not conforming to rules of European dance.

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characteristics. In this aesthetic, the dancers are able to explore individual expression within a group dynamic. Ailey successfully explored individual expression in choreographing *Revelations*, yet integrating a new sense of style to modern dance.

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63 DeFrantz, “Composite Bodies,” 666.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

For hundreds of years, African Americans have endured pains and joys, since their forced departure from the Africa. Alvin Ailey was able to capture in a number of choreographed dances the beauty of the African-American aesthetic from our arrival in the United States to the present. During the span of his career, he created many productions; however, *Revelations* earned him the most success. Although Ailey's other dances speak volumes to the African-American experience, *Revelations* is more than just a ballet of southern life. It tells a universal message of faith and hope . . . concerned about making social statements through dance . . . "*Revelations* is a social statement."¹ It is more than a dance; it evokes the beauty of African Americans. Revelations demonstrates that African Americans have the ability to entertain without the body being subject to ridicule. *Revelations* transmits intellect, love, and pride through dance. This research investigation revealed that *Revelations* is an expression of African-American life, past and present.

Alvin Ailey, choreographer and dance pioneer, has played a vital role in the development of modern dance. Ailey brought together African-Americans and other ethnicities through dance. He also creatively synthesized European and African dance forms which made it possible for the two communities to coexist and learn from one another. Using his own interpretation of the African-American experience, Ailey presented his performances in a manner such that all could understand African-American

¹ *Ailey Ailey in Four by Ailey: An Evening with the Ailey Ailey American Dance Theater*, producer and director Thomas Grimm, 140 min., Danmarks Radio/ZDF/RM Arts with ORF, 1986, videocassette.
life by using modern dance as a cultural medium.

From Ailey’s choreography, one comes to realize the importance of historical context and how it plays a major role in the Black aesthetic. Ailey discusses, in a number of publications, how he was enthusiastic at a very early age about the music played in the small churches in his hometown. For African Americans, the worshipping experience has always been a significant factor in survival. Church in rural towns served as a healing center for those wanting self-improvement and those wanting to maintain a leveled spirituality. The southern Black church gave African Americans a sense of importance. Ailey’s *Revelations* provides strong feelings of happiness, joy, sadness, faith and hope, just as the Black church does. Even considering the title, *Revelations* sets a tone of what is to be delivered to the individual. The term revelation can be thought of as something that is to be revealed by God or the revealing of divine truth, an aspect of spirituality greatly esteemed by many African Americans.

Ailey’s work is culture-conscious. His work includes a dialogue between what is known to be rural and urban dealing with the Black vernacular tradition. Ailey is successfully able to express the concept of faith, the human spirit, and the importance of self. By using choreography, Ailey allows one to become one with an aesthetic that is overlooked, and sometimes forgotten. The aesthetic force of the Black culture extends far beyond choreographed movements. Ailey gives a historical perspective and a purposeful outlook on the actions and reactions of African Americans through his choreography.

Presently, the Black dance aesthetic in modern dance is needed. The Black dance aesthetic helps to create more intimate connection between the dancer and the spectator. Unlike formalized European-styled dancing, the black aesthetic in dance is far more

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innovative. This presence of the Black aesthetic ensures that remnants of the African-American culture are included in dance without relying heavily on technique and form. It allows for self-expression and defines a different quality of choreography. The Black dance aesthetic will further prove that African Americans have a place in modern dance. Ailey’s vision gained African Americans entry into modern dance; however African-American dancers and choreographers must use aspects of the Black aesthetic to maintain and secure Ailey’s vision.

Black dance gave a race of oppressed people a chance to have ownership of something derived from the African continent. This dance gives pride and a mechanism for escape. It has survived many changes and inquiries about its ability to maintain for so long. It is obvious that remnants of the Black dance aesthetic are present in the choreography of today. This aesthetic has reached all individuals as demonstrated in music television. This research further proves that black dance has an enormous effect on modern dance. Ailey created a new style of black dance that amazed audiences across the world. Because of his creativity, Black dance was introduced to the concert stage offering modern dance a broader movement vocabulary.

Today, the Black dance aesthetic lends to choreographers adding to modern dance choreography. This “borrowing” of dance maintains a strong cultural heritage to the past. In today’s dance, the dance aesthetic is present on many stages and television channels throughout the United States. For instance, pop group, Destiny’s Child uses the same black aesthetic in their choreography. Destiny’s Child honors Ailey’s legacy by borrowing from Revelations. In their last group tour in 2007, the popular group, along with their background dancers, reenacted to the opening scene of “Processional.” Equipped with umbrellas and props in hand, Destiny’s Child introduces the Ailey experience to millions of individuals, many of whom are not familiar with Ailey or Revelations. Consequently, the Black dance aesthetic in modern dance reinvents the
African-American culture while effectively displaying the beauty of the Black body.

The researcher feels that this area of study has the potential for future research by conducting a comparative analysis between Black bodies and European bodies in *Revelations*. The Alvin Ailey Dance Theater is a multi-ethnic dance company; however, non African-American dancers rarely perform in *Revelations*. It would be interesting to study the visual effects of European bodies performing *Revelations*. The researcher contends that non African Americans may not have the same effectiveness in studying a dance displaying a Black aesthetic. Ailey presents that the art of dance meets life, *Revelations* presents a piece of work that not only has special meaning to experiences in Ailey's life, but it also tells the story of a group of people who have common shared experiences. The limited use of non African-American dancers would not communicate shared experiences of Ailey.

The study of Ailey's *Revelations* serves as a foundation to study other African-American choreographies and how they use the body as text. These choreographers have created wonderful pieces of dance that received minuscule or no attention in modern dance. For instance, Katherine Dunham's *Le Jazz Hot* (1940) displays African-American life within the jook joints of American-inner cities. Pearl Primus's *Strange Fruit* (1943) and *Hard Time Blues* (1943) are both pieces created in to protest unfair treatment towards African Americans. In 1962, Donald McKayle choreographed *District Storyville*, a piece created around New Orleans Jazz. Talley Beatty, another important African-American choreographer, created *Black Belt* (1969), a piece based on African-American life. Ailey and the choreographers mentioned are just a few African-American choreographers that allow the experiences of life to guide their choreographic expression. The studies of these pieces and others like them are very important in preserving the African-American experience. It provides an innovative method of study that not only views dance as self-expression, but it allows individuals to become history tellers, as well as storytellers of
their culture.

Ailey wanted to create a dance all people could easily enjoy. "I believe that dance is from the people and that it should be delivered back to the people."3 Although Revelations is not limited to racial specificity, Ailey continues the tradition of Black dance by giving Black bodies power to suggest their own representation.4 Ailey uses African-American expressive behaviors to display how African Americans survived this long in America. He offers religion to shape the overall message, but it is through gesture, movements, and costuming that the spectator understands that this is more than just a dance; it is a manifestation of the Black aesthetic.

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4 Susan Manning, Modern Dance Negro Dance Race in Motion (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 213.
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