

**The reclamation of dignity: The History of dance for Black Women in the United
States**

Amy Abraham

In 1896, Ada Overton Walker, a dancer, actress and singer, joined Bob Cole's All Stock Theater Company, a theatrical training school and stock company. Well-known for her dancing, she performed with the company for two years before joining the famous African American opera singer Sissieretta Jones's Black Patti Troubadours.¹ This proved a radical career choice for her, given the negative perceptions surrounding women, particularly black women, in the theatre at the time. However, Ada Overton Walker used the radicalness of her position to simultaneously make a career for herself and change perceptions of black female dancers. She used dance and images of the popular Gibson girl to assume the role of the ultimate or quintessential cultured African American female performer of the late 1800s both on and offstage.² Critical to the forging of black culture and popular culture as a whole; black people have used dancing as an integral part of expressing resistance towards white oppression while simultaneously achieving entertainment. For African American women specifically, dancing, throughout history, has become a method by which they can foster community, pleasure and agency. Black women have continuously been neglected by historical memory, and though there is an emerging wave of largely feminist scholarship, dance as a framework, has been largely ignored. This is likely due to the extremely minimal amounts of existing first-hand accounts from black women in early African American history, particularly working-class women.

Though this paper begins its examination with the enslaved Africans in the colonies, it must be acknowledged that the historical roots of their dances lie in West Africa itself. The unique movement of limbs seen in African-American dancing is both undeniably and directly influenced by these roots. The demands of slavery and the larger structure of colonialism insisted

¹ Paula Marie Seniors, "Ada Overton Walker, Abbie Mitchell, and the Gibson Girl: Reconstructing African American Womanhood," *International Journal of Africana Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2007): p.3
²Ibid.

upon a complete erasure of identity, culture, and agency. This paradigm resulted in even the specific movement within the dances being altered or diluted.³ Furthermore, there is evidence of "dancing" on the ships during the Middle Passage as well as during slave auctions.⁴

Acknowledging the significance of this historical background, the focus of this paper will remain on the importance of dance for black women in the United States from the plantation to the Harlem Renaissance.

During the enslavement period of African Americans in the United States, roughly 1776 to 1865, dancing for those in bondage was a double-edged sword in that it was both another technique of control implemented by slave owners as well as a means of reclamation. Slave owners would hold plantation parties where they would oversee the drinking, dancing and singing of bondspeople. In doing so, they were also attempting to master the pleasure of their slaves by allowing them the freedom to move their bodies how they please while simultaneously controlling the environment and circumstances under which they were allowed to do so. This was done to quell any ideas of insurrections and to "maintain morale". The concern was that those enslaved would be able to form a collective identity and as a result, revolt against their oppressors. Thus, dancing became another way in which the movement of those enslaved was controlled. Those enslaved would reclaim some bodily agency through the organization and participation in their own illicit dance parties that would occur deep in the woods at night. These partygoers used dance to find delight in their bodies, display their physical skill, master their own bodies through competition with others and express their creativity or discontent with their

³ Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Jookin: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press, 2010)

⁴ Hazzard-Donald, *Jookin: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press, 2010), p.6

masters.⁵ They participated in what formerly enslaved people would reflect upon later as "respectable" dancing to the tunes produced by fiddles, voices, banjos, and flutes.⁶ This demonstrates early understandings of what was and was not considered "acceptable" dancing as well as how these dances continued to be popular into the 1900s. Dancing was also used by bondspeople as a means of criticizing and mocking their masters through imitating the traditional steps of a dance but adding a twist.⁷ Dancing was not only a means of resistance; it was also used as a method of communicating and a way of fostering community. This was done through both secular and sacred (religious) dance, particularly through "call and response" dances.⁸

Though there is not much evidence for gender-specific dances in the times of slavery, there were crucial gendered implications at slave parties. An important aspect of slave parties for women was the opportunity to demonstrate skill through dance competitions. Enslaved people would often hold dance competitions, where one had to execute complex dance moves while maintaining a controlled outward demeanor. Women could compete against men, allowing them to demonstrate the strength and agility of their bodies, in comparison with men, who were recognized more frequently for their physical power. It acted as a form of entertainment and pleasure they could participate in throughout their lives (even into older age). Competitions involving dance provided women relief from gender hierarchies' as well as the usual imposing gaze and violence of slaveholders.⁹ Dancing provided enslaved women avenues for other elements of creativity because they were able to take great pride in making specific clothes to

⁵Stephanie M.H Camp, "The Intoxication of Pleasurable Amusement: Secret Parties and the Politics of the Body," in *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p.61

⁶ Camp, "The Intoxication of Pleasurable Amusement: Secret Parties and the Politics of the Body," p.76

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Emery, "Black Dance in the United States, from 1619 to 1970" p.45

⁹ Camp, "The Intoxication of Pleasurable Amusement," p.76

wear to dances. These clothes, for these women, energized and empowered them to participate in dances. It also, allowed them to exercise creativity and control, despite being aware of how ill-fitting the garments were.¹⁰

Attending dances as an enslaved woman was inherently a form of resistance because it put women's bodies at further risk than it did men's, further stressing the importance of the activity in their lives. Planters gave passes to attend dances more frequently to men than to women, meaning that women were much less likely to have passes when attending parties. Due to this, it was more likely that women had to sneak out in order to participate.¹¹ Black women in bondage faced harsher repercussions if caught, especially from patrollers, further stressing the importance of these events. Also, because they would be up all night preparing, dancing and drinking instead of sleeping, the women who participated withheld their bodies from the gratification of the slaveholders. Their bodies would be weary from the night's activities, therefore, they wouldn't be able to perform the next day as their masters necessarily wanted them to.

Slavery insisted upon complete control over those enslaved. This included exercising control over every movement made by the body. Stephanie M.H Camp looks at these parties through the framework of the body. She argues that for those who encounter oppression through the body, it becomes an important site not only of suffering but also of enjoyment and resistance.¹² In doing so, she changes the way we look at resistance on the plantation by emphasizing the workings of gender differences within enslaved plantation communities. The

¹⁰ Camp, "The Intoxication of Pleasurable Amusement," p.61

¹¹ Camp, "The Intoxication of Pleasurable Amusement," p.72

¹² Stephanie M. H. Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861," *The Journal of Southern History* 68, no. 3 (2002): p.561, doi:10.2307/3070158

bodies of women were more exploited, used and controlled. This was due to both women's actual and imagined reproductive labour as well as their unique forms of bodily suffering, most commonly, their sexual exploitation that distinguished their lives from men's. By sneaking and dancing the night away, thereby stealing their bodies back for a period of time; those who attended secular parties acted on the assumption that their bodies were more than inherently and solely implements of agricultural production.¹³ Essentially, participating in these dances empowered enslaved black women, in particular, to crack away at all of the restraints placed on them by slaveowners. Post-emancipation, the gendered violence continued, but so did dancing and its ability to give black women an opportunity to use their own bodies for their own pleasure.

Although slavery insisted on the destruction of African culture in order to discourage homogeneity; emancipation further caused an immense change to the community. Despite the efforts of whites to continue to restrict mobility as much as possible, black men and women found ways to travel and incorporated dance into their lives. Many achieved this through performing as entertainers in minstrel shows as well as the emergence of the blues as a musical genre. Both cultural movements clashed with the "race improvement" many free, northern African-Americans were pushing for. In alignment with the "politics of respectability", black men and women attempted to "uplift the race" through education, resources, clothing, and beauty.¹⁴ This meant an adherence to a white, middle-class way of life in order to gain acceptance in a racist society, even through dance. These same upper-class, urban African Americans held public dances that closely resembled their white counterparts, with the prominent dances performed being the waltz and the polka. In contrast, in the south, "jook" halls

¹³ Camp, "The Intoxication of Pleasurable Amusement," p.91

¹⁴ Hazzard-Donald, *Jookin: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press, 2010), p.69

were established. The term came to mean a pleasure house which would signify either "a bawdy house or house for dancing, drinking and gamblin."¹⁵ The dances performed embodied the images and activities that the middle-class was trying to steer away from. Therefore, we see dances, and dancing becoming an arena for class conflict and a source of tension within the black community. Whether or not it was in a "jook" hall or a dance hall, dancing for all African-Americans post-emancipation was a symbol of freedom and liberation.

There are many similarities between black women's situation at slave parties and the early 1900s dance halls. Much like how black women during slavery risked more by attending illegal parties, they also faced harsher backlash for attending dance halls. Domestic workers received criticism from the black middle class and white employers for participating in recreation at jook halls. Black women were portrayed as socially dangerous and capable of corrupting both the white masses for whom they worked and men due to their "sexual promiscuity" whilst dancing the night away.¹⁶ Precisely how enslaved women had done as well, staying out all night at these dance halls meant withholding their bodies the next day from white employers. This shows how dancing has continuously been seen as competing with labour, and the ways in which black women recognized and took advantage of this. A continuing tradition was the competition between men and women through dance by "working hard" as a symbol of superior performance. Like at slave parties, this was particularly important for the women, not only because it was an opportunity to show off their physical abilities, but also because working was not associated with femininity, womanhood or respectability.¹⁷ In the Harlem Renaissance,

¹⁵ Hazzard-Donald, *Jookin: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture*, p.79

¹⁶ Tera W. Hunter, "'Dancing and Carousing the Night Away,'" in *To 'joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.180

¹⁷ Hunter, "'Dancing and Carousing the Night Away,'" (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.181

as black women began to make careers out of dancing and performing, they also began to advocate for the recognition that working in the entertainment industry did not detract from their womanhood.

Dance was consequently used as a means of activism. Recalling Ada Overton Walker; she used dance and the theatre as a means of uplifting herself and her race. Through the choreography and dancing of several shows, such as *The Origin of the Cakewalk* in 1898, *The Octoroons* in 1899, *Williams and Walker's Policy Players* in 1899, *The Red Moon* (1908-1910), and the "Salome Dance" (1912), she embodied black women's beauty standards and campaigned for the rights of African-Americans.¹⁸ Both on and offstage she publicly addressed the experiences of African Americans and specifically tackled the question of the love scene taboo, which prevented black performers from engaging in love scenes on stage. Similarly, Katherine Dunham, an anthropologist and dancer, fought for racial uplift and argued that dance could be an arena in the fight against racial inequality. Dunham used dance to explore and promote ideas of inclusion and the African diaspora throughout her life and the various social movements that occurred, from the New Negro Movement to the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. Her book reveals how dance became one of her tools for survival, and how it became the medium through which she could navigate contradictions of belonging and exclusion.¹⁹

The Harlem Renaissance allowed black women to become instruments of culture, even if they didn't see themselves as such. Take Florence Mills, known for her dancing in *Shuffle Along*, who according to a newspaper account, said, "But I'm not famous . . . I have my own way of

¹⁸Seniors, "Ada Overton Walker, Abbie Mitchell, and the Gibson Girl: Reconstructing African American Womanhood," p.4

¹⁹Joanna Dee. Das, *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.16

dancing— and singing— and it happens to be popular".²⁰ Black women were also responsible for bringing international attention and acclaim to many popular dances in the United States. Ada Walker's "cakewalk" is an example of this. She was in demand internationally by white elites to teach them her version of a dance that originated in slavery.²¹ Another example of this is Josephine Baker, who is most remembered for her introduction of the "Charleston" and "Black Bottom" to European audiences, thereby making these dances international.²² Both Mills and Baker began their careers in dancing and singing at a young age, and Baker in particular got her start in vaudeville performances. They were influential as choreographers and as dancers on Broadway stages; their work forever changed musicals, as well as the way dances were performed and spectated by audiences.²³ This demonstrates the extent of the power and influence that dance gave black women. Unfortunately, both women, despite their crucial influence on dance culture, are often overshadowed by their male counterparts.

Dance is so much more for black women than a rhythmic movement in response to a tune. It has been used as a connection to deep ancestral roots, a channel for creativity, a means of resistance to white domination and as a method of reclamation. The common critiques of dances today being too promiscuous is nothing new when discussed within its historical context. They are rooted in ideas of racism, sexism and classism that can be traced back to the slave trade. Furthermore, the lack of scholarship on the topic denies black women their historical due diligence and credit for the establishment of much of today's popular culture. By allowing these

²⁰ Leonore Lynne Fauley Emery, "Black Dance in the United States, from 1619 to 1970" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1971), p.298

²¹ Veronica Jackson, "Restructuring Respectability, Gender, and Power: Aida Overton Walker Performs a Black Feminist Resistance," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 10, no. 1 (2019): p.270-271, doi:10.5070/t8101044150

²² Emery, "Black Dance in the United States, from 1619 to 1970," p.306

²³ Emery, "Black Dance in the United States, from 1619 to 1970," p.307

ideas in relation to dance to prevail, we continue to deny black women agency and enjoyment over their own bodies. As Ada Overton Walker describes, "a woman certainly does not lose her dignity by choosing a life on a stage".²⁴

²⁴ Jackson, "Restructuring Respectability, Gender, and Power: Aida Overton Walker Performs a Black Feminist Resistance," p.263-264

Bibliography:

- Camp, Stephanie M. H. "The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861." *The Journal of Southern History* 68, no. 3 (2002): 533. doi:10.2307/3070158.
- Camp, Stephanie M.H. "The Intoxication of Pleasurable Amusement: Secret Parties and the Politics of the Body." In *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, 60-92. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
- Das, Joanna Dee. *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Emery, Leonore Lynne Fauley. "Black Dance in the United States, from 1619 to 1970." PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1971.
- Hazzard-Donald, Katrina. *Jookin: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture*. Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press, 2010.
- Hunter, Tera W. "'Dancing and Carousing the Night Away'." In *To 'joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War*, 168-86. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Jackson, Veronica. "Restructuring Respectability, Gender, and Power: Aida Overton Walker Performs a Black Feminist Resistance." *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 10, no. 1 (2019). doi:10.5070/t8101044150.
- Seniors, Paula Marie. "Ada Overton Walker, Abbie Mitchell, and the Gibson Girl: Reconstructing African American Womanhood." *International Journal of Africana Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 38-67.