

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Rachel Russell, a Ph.D. candidate in theater and drama at Northwestern University, to discuss choreographer, anthropologist, and advocate for African dance, Pearl Primus. So first, could you give us a bit of an introduction to her and her work?

RR: Sure. Pearl's full name is Pearl Eileen Primus. She was born November 29, 1919 in Port of Spain, Trinidad, which is the capital city of Trinidad and Tobago. She moved to New York City with her family when she was two years old and grew up in Midtown Manhattan. She ran track growing up, which I think contributed to her lovely jumps and leaps that she was known for. She went to neighborhood schools, and then she graduated from Hunter College High School before graduating from Hunter College with her degree in biology and pre-medical science. She was initially on the path to becoming a doctor, but unable to find a job due to discrimination, she found herself with the National Youth Administration. It was a federally funded program for youth to get job training. The New Dance Group was a part of that, and that's what led her to dance and all of the wonderful work that we know from her.

AT: So she studied with a bunch of really impressive folks like Martha Graham, Charles Weidman, Ismay Andrews. Particularly interesting is Asadata Dafora, which I apologize if I mispronounced that, but he was a big proponent of African drumming in the U.S., just as Pearl became a big advocate for African dance.

RR: Yes. She also studied with Jane Dudley, Sophie Maslow, William Bales, and a couple other people that will come up. What I loved about learning more about Pearl Primus's history is that within her family, she more or less knew her background. And so she grew up knowing of her being of African descent, and in particular, her parents were descendants from the Ashanti of Ghana. And so her interest in African dance was already simmering through her family relationships, and then it was spurred by coming into contact with Asadata Dafora, and also Belle Rosette, who was also from Trinidad, and was influential Pearl Primus and her work together when it comes to Caribbean dances.

AT: So my understanding is that one of the big difficulties with the African diaspora is that a lot of people don't know their specific heritage because of the transatlantic slave trade, but she also studied a lot of different African cultures as well, right? Like it wasn't just the one that she was specifically descended from.

RR: Yes. Because even though she knew of her grandparents being Ashanti from Ghana, most if not all of us in the diaspora were a mix of many different peoples. And so the mapping of the states that we know now and the countries that we know now were kind of placed onto people groups. And those people have long histories of interaction and dance and are part of bigger groups and smaller groups and various interactions and travels. And so as an African diasporic person, an African diasporic dancer, and I think especially for Primus, it's like, "oh, I need to know all of us." And she talks about this and some of her other works of dance connecting her to herself, but also connecting her to other people. And so to know all of us is to know all of you. And then it goes back out. So it's always in a moving relationship.

AT: And so she didn't begin formally studying dance until she was 21, which is relatively late for dancers in a lot of genres. But what's really interesting is that she started with the New Dance Group where she wasn't just learning technique, but also activism because their motto was, "dance is a weapon of the class struggle." So from the very beginning of her dance studies, they were inextricably linked.

RR: Yes, yes, very much so. There's an interview with Joe Nash, who talks about meeting Pearl Primus and them dancing together and her not being formally trained. And they performed at the World's Fair together,

which I think was really interesting. So the World's Fair happened in New York City in Queens and the buildings and things are still there. And he said they performed the Virginia Reel, the cakewalk and the Lindy Hop and that she picked up on it really easily, even though she didn't have a lot of formalized training. And so I'm thinking her experiences of experiencing discrimination and then finding dance. And later on, she talks about dance being her medicine and dance being a language for her. Dance was just so much that, "oh, I may not be able to do activism in other ways, but I see things that are happening to me and to the people around me. And I'm going to dance about it." They're not separate. Like, "oh, this is my language. This is what I can use to speak." She was living in a time of the Red Scare and World Wars and where do you direct all of the feelings, all of the anger. I think dance is a really productive place to put it.

AT: It's interesting when we're talking about how physical her dancing was. And my understanding is that that's one of the big differences between like modern dance versus ballet is the energy and the movements and sort of the force and the emotion over just making a lovely aesthetic.

RR: It's kind of how the movement comes across. Because ballet, I think can be very hard and forceful and painful, but I think it's more directed towards the dancer and what their bodies have to go through. And so it's the goal of ballet is to not show the effort and not show the work, not show the pain. In modern dance, there's more use of weight. There's the use of the ground and in and of itself, whether rolling in and out of the floor. But just feeling and using the weight to create swings, to create motion, to propel through space, the ability to release the joints, release the spine. You're allowed to really explore in a different kind of way and get a little more earthy. The aesthetic goals of modern can be what you decide you want them to be. And so you can speak a lot of different languages within that. In ballet, you can speak many different languages, but the goals are just very different.

AT: Well, and the overall aesthetic is much less rigid. It doesn't have to conform to exactly what people have been doing for hundreds of years.

RR: No, no, no, you can create your new thing, which is also something beautiful about Pearl Primus is using all of the knowledge over time that she was creating her own technique, her own way of training the body and the mind, the spirit, for her own goals and interests, but like reflect. And so yeah, that's the beauty, I think of modern dance and she came at a time of contemporary modern dance where there was even more breaks away from more of the codified techniques of like, she studied with Graham, so she learned Graham technique, studied with Charles Weidman, she learned Weidman-Humphrey technique. They had their own particular ways, but she came at a time where she was allowed to break free, explore her own movement, especially as somebody who didn't have that long history of formalized training. She was able to bring all of the knowledge that was in her body through the technique of her life to the stage.

AT: That's interesting because I think you get that with visual art as well, where not necessarily, realism, but like abstract art is very much, "they never told me how to do it right. So I didn't worry about doing it wrong." But what's interesting is that, as you said, she is learning technique. It's not that she's just making this up out of nowhere. And similarly, this intersection of anthropology and choreography is really fascinating because it feels like the word "authentic" gets thrown around a lot. But she really was working to ensure that she was being true to the different people she was representing. Because as you said, she's trying to incorporate all of these different elements to connect with people in as many different ways as possible. But she wasn't just randomly appropriating, "oh, that's a cool move." She was actually, like, for example, going to the Deep South in 1944, immersing herself with sharecroppers and incorporating fieldwork into the choreography. She's going to Africa and living with different people and doing like an 18-month research and study tour of the Gold Coast

and Angola and Liberia and Senegal. And she's actually really immersing herself with different people to truly understand the movements before she incorporates them into the work, it feels like.

RR: Mm hmm. Yeah, it's responsible. It's recognizing the depth of what is already there and it's honoring, it's like, I want to learn and how do you learn? You sit at the foot of the teachers and really soak it in and really understand it, like the nuances. It's a culture of respect. It's like deeply loving. And it's a desire to know as a fully embodied person, the movement comes from a place. And I think Pearl Primus, she had a cultural understanding of movement. Like she was like, "dance is born out of culture. And so therefore it is born out of people. And so I need to go to people and be with them and understand the culture that is producing the dance."

AT: And so she actually completed a PhD in anthropology at New York University in 1978. So she'd been working for decades at that point. And I've heard stories that like she was so well accepted into communities that, for example, she was declared a man so that she could learn the dances only assigned to men. In Nigeria, the Oni and other people felt that she was such a part of the community that they initiated her into the commonwealth and conferred on her the title of Omowale, a child who has returned home. So she's definitely not doing the tourist thing where it's like, "Oh, I went and lived among the people." She is actually really coming in with that open heart and open mind and wanting to learn.

RR: I believe it's like I am you and you are me. We are separate, but we are also one people. And I think that came out of her upbringing and the rise of pan-Africanism. Because she got to that wonderful point, but she had an FBI file opened on her for some of this beautiful work that she was doing in that previous time period. And so, she's doing it out of the love of people and the recognition of what's happening around her. And she's also being watched because of it. She's gaining critical acclaim for her dancing. And the FBI is looking into if she's actually a citizen. The Harlem Renaissance is happening. And she's dancing. And she's connecting with all kinds of people all over.

AT: Which of course, J. Edgar Hoover's FBI would immediately find suspicious.

RR: Immediately find suspicious because she's also performing in cafe society in places where, like, Oh, it's the threat of communism. And these impacted her travels later on, impacted her being able to renew her passport in order to do these trips, to the continent of Africa, to go to Liberia, to be able to return. So she's doing all of this work, but not without the threat of existence. It's an ongoing thing. And I think it's really important to think about, Oh, wow, she got to this point of the PhD and she got to the beautiful dances that we know of her. And we know of her leaps and we know of her jumps, but like, do people know about the FBI file that was opened and then closed and then reopened again? As she was doing this work, that almost possibly would not have happened if there weren't other interventions, for the FBI to allow her to continue to dance.

AT: Look, I feel like all the cool kids had FBI files at this time. (RR: Yes.) Where were a lot of them, is all I'm saying. And usually the Red Scare targets are the coolest people who were doing stuff at this time. That's all I'm saying. But I wonder if part of why they were concerned about her was that even from her debut performance, she was quite popular and successful. Like if she hadn't been so good at what she did, and if people hadn't been so interested in her work, because she was performing at Carnegie Hall, she was doing Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, performing on Broadway. She later toured with her own company in her own name. So I do wonder, if she hadn't been as high-profile, I don't know that the FBI would have cared as much about her.

RR: Yeah, I've read her full file and they tracked her through performance reviews and performance announcements as she was doing this traveling. They had informants placed in venues. Because of her ability to build bridges using dance, it created, like interracial solidarity was threatening, especially the economic component. So that along was her pan-Africanism, along with her performing in venues or receiving support of people affiliated with communism, really put a spotlight on her.

AT: I do wonder how much of her work helped bridge the empathy gap for a lot of people because the whole premise of the empathy gap is that it is harder for us to relate to people who have very different lived experiences than we do, and particularly if you're a privileged person who's never had to understand marginalized experiences. And so I do wonder how much of her bringing culturally African movements and other aspects into a mainstream audience space was just, as you said, helping people relate to each other.

RR: What I love about, especially like the earlier moments when Primus was gaining notoriety, she performed in non "traditional" performance spaces. So she performed in cafes and in nightclubs. Because of her dance background, she didn't do entertainment style movements in those venues. Like she performed her modern dance in the nightclubs with bare feet. Like I can only imagine being in a sultry smoky nightclub and you're talking with your friends about the latest news and people are drinking and smoking at that time and lots of loud conversation and loud music is going on. And then all of a sudden, Primus stands up on the stage in modern dance costume with bare feet and begins to dance out whatever needs to be danced out to connect with herself and connect with other people and that being so shocking that no other things can continue on because this performance is happening. And so it draws people in, it probably breaks down their understanding of the Black dancing body. And then from there, it's like, "oh, I want to see more." And so it brings people in and I think it brought people to her in ways that they probably had to think and challenge and grow themselves. And then if they're already there in the space, they're already probably have commitments to change. And then like from there, it just becomes more of a fruitful launching pad to continue on that journey.

AT: I'd also like to dig in a bit more on the art as activism aspect of her work. So as a couple examples, *Strange Fruit* was based on a poem by Lewis Allen. A lot of people may know the Billie Holiday song of the same name. And so that was depicting the aftermath of lynching through the remorse of a woman who has realized how awful this is to show that even a lynch mob can experience penitence. *Hard Time Blues* was protesting sharecropping and was based on her experience living and working with sharecroppers. And then at her Broadway debut in 1944, she performed a work that was choreographed to a Langston Hughes poem, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*. So that one was about the inequalities and injustices imposed on the Black community, while also showing comparisons between the ancestry of Black people and showing that through four major rivers. And so she really, she wasn't on the FBI list just for being awesome, is what I'm saying. She was definitely doing things that would have made them angry anyway.

RR: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. She was awesomely airing all the dirty laundry in ways that are super important, because it's different when it's art. I've been in protest space of marching and seeing the police response to that. I've experienced the police response to that. And I've been in protest space when it's been dance. And I've seen the police response to that. And it's different. It is the difference between, seeing people lining up with riot gear versus seeing people stand and watch. That's now, but still I think that impact of, like she was able to say what she needed to say. She was able to use dance as a medicine for her and others, but she was also able to speak truth to power and be like, "this is happening and this is not okay" in the way that's like, people are going to like, "Oh, I want you to come here and do that again. I want you to come here and do that again. I want you to travel" and that build strength, that build solidarity. And it's helping to create change in a way that I don't think people always recognize dance and the arts as having the ability to have a tangible impact on

society amidst people's material reality. Performance always has an impact, I believe, like impact just is a thing that is, that this not making a choice is still making a choice. But with the intention behind it's like, "I'm going to use my art to say something. and I'm going to use my art to make a difference. It's like, "yes, I do have an FBI because what I'm seeing is not okay. And I'm going to dance about it. And you're going to be mad because you like it. And it's real. And it's the truth."

AT: I mean, I think what you're getting into is the fact that there are so many different ways to communicate, but we tend to just default to words and ignoring the power that art has means that you're cutting off all of these different avenues of communicating and spreading your message and hopefully persuading people.

RR: Mm hmm. Because what I love about dance as a dancer, like I'm not just a dance scholar, I dance and perform myself. And even in taking class, like taking class in languages that you don't speak, you're still able to learn, you're still able to understand, you're still able to communicate with people without verbal language. And there's just something really beautiful about that. And just thinking about the importance of it, the importance of gesture, you can just have a whole meaning, have a whole new understanding, forge so many new connections with people. And you know what it is and they know what it is because you were there together, but no words were ever exchanged. And that has a lasting impact on all the people that experienced it. And also like it makes me think about accessibility, for like people who are maybe unable to speak or unable to hear or unable to see, dance can tap into the other senses. It makes me think about young children that are pre-language. It just opens up so much. It allows people to, to see, to feel, to be with one another, to get messages, no language needed, which is also very threatening because you can't track it in the same way because there were no words involved. You can leave no trace except for the impact that is on the people. You would never know a performance has happened here, but it resonates in the space and the people were forever impacted.

AT: It's interesting as we're talking about the limits of spoken and written words, I would imagine that, obviously I can't speak to the African-American experience from like a lived perspective, but I would imagine part of the power of this universality that we're talking about, that we don't have to have a shared language. I would imagine that that is particularly powerful for African-Americans who are often having to code switch because you are told that the way that you spoke growing up, the way that maybe your natural form of speaking, so not to say that every African American defaults to African American Vernacular English, but that limitation of constantly being told that the way that you and your family and your community speak is wrong, is lesser than, is unprofessional, sounds uneducated, fill in whatever dog whistle racist nonsense you want there, but removing that aspect, that barrier to just say, "well, fine, we just won't use language at all. And we're just going to use something that everybody can relate to."

RR: It makes me think of the history of the transatlantic slave trade, of African diasporic people, not just in the Americas, of being taken from many different people that did not speak the same language already and having to find and create a way to communicate with one another. I think dance has always been present there, but then also how it created new languages like Haitian Creole, the different accents throughout the diaspora. It is a a rich and like special beauty to be able to know yourself and know all of your kinfolk, like all of the African diasporic people, like through dance and through rhythm.

AT: But as we're talking about the fact that she is bringing African dance to audiences, she also has a very influential legacy in terms of students.

RR: From what I've read, she was a wonderful teacher. And in addition to teaching movement and also

teaching theory, a lot of the technique she created was with her students, embodied within them her work with dance and anthropology and writing and taking all that work and putting on the stage is very, very important for those of us within dance studies and as dancers, as choreographers. I think she's still teaching us and will always teach us. I think in addition to being like a dancer and choreographer and a teacher, like her storytelling, they all kind of infused together with deep care and guidance to help grow people to their fullest.

AT: And I think that we've touched on this a bit as well, but when we're talking about all of these different cultural elements and aspects that she's incorporating into her work, it's not just the traditional African cultures. As we mentioned, she's living with sharecroppers and she's part of the Harlem Renaissance. And so she's very much incorporating that African-American culture as its own identity. So we've got jazz, we've got spirituals, we've got blues. And so it's really this beautiful blending of all of these different aspects and showing that they can all coexist, which I think that in itself is really powerful.

RR: Mm hmm. Yeah, they coexist and they make sense in ways that are hard to explain. You can see the remnants and the influences. And to be able to take movement from seemingly disparate places and put them together and have them vibe with one another, I think just shows like the richness of the culture and the history in a way that will and has caused people to see differently. Like you see jazz on the big screen and on the stage, but then to also see movements coming from sharecroppers and realizing these are both movements and they mean something, I think allows people to understand the environment and the people around them in a different way.

AT: I think it's also acknowledging that these things are all interconnected in an evolutionary framework in terms of you know, where did jazz come from? Where did spirituals come from? Where did blues music come from? Hint: not white people.

RR (laughing): Yeah, a lot of people don't know the depths of the history, just thinking about tap dance and even when it comes, not even just on the on the dance side but on the music side as well.

AT: So if we could step back and take a look at the work that you're doing and how Pearl Primus fits into the larger scope of what you're doing at Northwestern.

RR: Dancing, living in New York, listening to people and learning so much more. I was like, "oh, this is an experience that people are having. What I'm hearing is not new." And so I was like, "oh, it's the waiting," which is the name of the dissertation. And I'm in this in this waiting room, the dead are not gone and ancestors are coexisting with the living in this space and Pearl Primus is one of the ancestors in this space that is, like reclaim the space that was initially created for Black women to die. But is now used for respite and healing and connecting. And this room is attached to a house. And things go on in the back rooms of the house where people can commune with their ancestors and other guides. I've been researching into Pearl Primus's life and work to understand her experiences and relationship to this space. Thinking about her own experience and when did she enter the space and who was there in the space for her, both the other living people she was with and other ancestors. And then how is she also in the space as an ancestor communicating and influencing and guiding us living who are coming in and out of the space, as she's one of the four mothers. Because I believe that through her life and through dance and through the creation of her technique that, they're jewels and riches and ways of understanding and things that she wanted us to know, that live in there. And so it's part of trying to understand and work with her to bring some of those out to the foreign, possibly, ways that people don't think about or understand or have them think about a little bit differently in relationship to the overall way to her as a space. Because the larger space, there's a lot happening there.

AT: I mean what's really interesting is that it feels like you're doing something that she did, which is trying to convey how we got to where we are now and what are the different elements that contributed to what we are experiencing in the modern day.

RR: Yes and their implications for the future. The past, the present, the future are all intertwined. Which I think is just part of the experience of being in the space, but it's also important for future generations. I guess she was thinking about future generations and I'm a future generation thinking about future, there's always a past, present, future and maybe not even in that order, happening all at the same time.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.