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Pearl Primus Collection

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1995-2006

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[About SCUA](#)

[SCUA home](#)

[Credo digital](#)

[Scope](#)

[Inventory](#)

[Series 1. Audio recordings](#)

[Series 2. Video recordings](#)

[Admin info](#)

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[xml version](#)

[print version \(pdf\)](#)



[Read collection overview](#)

A pioneer of African dance in the United States and a vital scholarly voice, Pearl Primus burst onto the scene in the early 1940s as a choreographer, performer, composer, and teacher. Born in Trinidad in 1919 and raised in New York City, Primus was introduced to performance through the National Youth Administration and the New Dance Group. Her interest in the dance cultures of Africa and the African diaspora formed the conceptual center of her work throughout her career, drawing upon her deep scholarly research. In addition to her creative work, Primus earned a doctorate in anthropology from NYU and taught at a number of universities, including the Five Colleges. She died in New Rochelle, N.Y., in October 1994.

Conducted with Pearl Primus' fellow dancers, musicians, friends, and collaborators between 1995 and 2005, the interviews comprising this collection were recorded by Peggy and Murray Schwartz for use in their book, *The Dance Claimed Me: A Biography of Pearl Primus* (New Haven, 2011). The oral histories provide insights into Primus's sometimes controversial life career, her performances, teaching, and legacy.

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Background on Pearl Primus

A pioneer of African dance in the United States and a vital scholarly voice in anthropology, Pearl Primus burst onto the scene in the early 1940s as a choreographer, performer, composer, and teacher. Born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, on Nov. 29, 1919, Primus emigrated to New York City with her parents Ernest and Emily at the age of two and as she grew, she set her course on a career in medicine.

Earning a BA in Biology at Hunter College in 1940, Primus entered the graduate program at New York University intent on her pursuit, but finances soon thwarted her plans. To fund her education, she looked for a position as a laboratory technician, but discovered that racism barred her from employment. In a move that dramatically altered the direction of her life, she found a position with the New Deal National Youth Administration, and almost overnight she was plucked from working with costumes to working as a dancer. She never looked back. Although the NYA folded soon thereafter, Primus kept on her feet and auditioned for the left-oriented New Dance Group, winning a scholarship in 1943 that enabled her to become the group's first African American student.

Even at this early stage of her career, Primus's extraordinary talent was widely lauded, and almost as soon as she began to study, she began performing her own work. Her theatrical debut came at the 92nd Street Y on Feb. 14, 1943, where she performed her own "Africa ceremonial," "Hard-time blues," "Rock Daniel," and "Strange Fruit," the latter bearing an powerful political message -- a characteristic of much of her work -- drawing on the anti-lynching movement. In 1943, she signed on to an engagement with a racially integrated nightclub, the Café Society Downtown, and she later performed with her own troupe and in productions of *Showboat*, *Emperor Jones*, and *Caribbean Carnival*.

The rich dance cultures of Africa became a particular focus of Primus's work from the beginning, buoyed perhaps by the influence of the later stages of the Harlem Renaissance. She was among a group of colleagues and friends including Adadata Dafora and Katherine Dunham, eventually also Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson, who shared similar interests in exploring African cultures. For her part, Primus brought a scholarly intensity and rigor to her interests, pursuing her research from the African continent through the diasporic communities in the Caribbean and southern United States, typically immersing herself in her subjects quite literally. During the summer 1944, for instance, she toured the South to study firsthand the African roots of dance and music, posing as a migrant worker and working in the cotton fields.

While in the south in 1948, Primus was awarded a \$4000 research grant from the Julius Rosenwald Fund which enabled her to spend eighteen months traveling from Senegal and Liberia to the Belgian Congo and Angola, living and working closely with the people she studied. Her experiences profoundly influenced her subsequent work, which was further enriched by travel in the Caribbean, Europe, and the Middle East, and by study with dancers from a range of traditions, from Martha Graham to Doris Humphrey, Hanya Holm, and Charles Weidman.

Primus's commitment to research and teaching both grew steadily during the 1950s. Earning an MA in educational sociology from NYU in 1959, she was named director of a performing arts center in Monrovia, Liberia, and in 1963, she and her husband Percival Borde opened the Primus-Borde School of Primal Dance. Still busy as a performer, she eventually earned a doctorate in anthropology at NYU in 1978, where she bore the distinction of becoming the first person to fulfill a language requirement with dance.

Settling in New Rochelle, N.Y., in 1979, Primus and her husband established the Pearl Primus Dance Language Institute to offer classes that reflected her interest in blending African and Caribbean dance forms with modern dance and ballet techniques. She ended her performing career in 1980, but continued to teach and lecture, serving as director of the Cora P. Maloney College at SUNY Buffalo and for between 1984 and 1990, as a Professor of Ethnic Studies in the Five Colleges Consortium. She was the recipient of numerous prizes and awards over her career, including the Liberian Star of Africa, the Scroll of Honor from the National Council of Negro Women, and, in 1991, the National Medal of the Arts.

Primus was married twice: in 1950, she was joined in an interracial marriage to Yael Woll, the son of a principal of the Torah School on the Lower East Side, and then in 1954, she married dancer and choreographer Percival Borde, with whom she held a close working partnership that lasted until his death in 1979. Primus died from the effects of diabetes after a brief illness on October 29, 1994. She was survived by her son, Onwin Borde.

Scope of collection

Conducted with Pearl Primus' fellow dancers, musicians, friends, and collaborators between 1995 and 2005, the interviews comprising this collection were recorded by Peggy and Murray Schwartz for use in their book, *The Dance Claimed Me: A Biography of Pearl Primus* (New Haven, 2011). The oral histories provide insights into Primus's sometimes controversial life career, her performances, teaching, and legacy.

The interviewees include Joan Myers Brown (founder of the Philadelphia School of Dance Arts and Philadanco), Kwesi Camara (percussionist and dancer), John Tunisi Davis (percussionist), Lynn Frederiksen (dancer and choreographer), Jacquelyn Hairston (dancer), Montego Joe (percussionist, Margo Lehman (past President of the American Dance Guild), Herb Levy (Primus's attorney), Muriel Manings (dancer), Donald McKayle (dancer and choreographer), Joe Nash (dancer and historian), Elizabeth O'Brien, Gaynell Sherrod, Joe Trupia (Director of Music for the NY State Education Department), Steven Vendola, Mary Waithe (dancer and choreographer), and Donald Washington (general manager, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater).

Inventory

Series 1. Audio recordings

2003-2005

19 audiocassettes

Brown, Joan Myers: oral history

2004 Feb. 14

Audiocassette

Box 1: 1

Camara, Kwesi: oral history, part 1

2003 Oct. 11

Audiocassette

Box 1: 2

Camara, Kwesi: oral history, part 2

2003 Oct. 11

Audiocassette

Box 1: 3

Davis, John Tunisi: oral history

2003 Nov. 08

Audiocassette

Box 1: 4

Hairston, Jacquelyn: oral history

2003 May 20

Audiocassette

Box 1: 5

Lehman, Margo: oral history

2005 Aug. 13

Audiocassette

Box 1: 6

Levy, Herb: oral history

2003 May 08

Audiocassette

Box 1: 7

Manings, Muriel: oral history

2003 Apr. 15

Audiocassette

Box 1: 8

McKayle, Donald: oral history

2003 June 06

Audiocassette

Box 1: 9

McKayle, Donald: oral history [inaudible, loud restaurant]

2003 June 06
Audiocassette
Box 1: 10
Montego Joe: oral history

2003 Oct. 18
Audiocassette
Box 1: 11
Montego Joe: oral history

2003 Oct. 18
Audiocassette
Box 1: 12
Nash, Joe: oral history

2003 June 04
Audiocassette
Box 1: 13
O'Brien, Elizabeth and Lynn Frederiksen: oral history

2003 June 18
Audiocassette
Box 1: 14
Sherrod, Gaynell: oral history

2003 Oct. 17
Audiocassette
Box 1: 15
Trupia, Joe: oral history

2003 May 13
Audiocassette
Box 1: 7
Unidentified [blank?]
Audiocassette
Box 1: 17
Vendola, Stephen: oral history

2005 Sept. 24
Audiocassette
Box 1: 6
Waithe, Mary: oral history

2003 May 26
Audiocassette
Box 1: 16
Series 2. Video recordings
1995-2006
Nash, Joe: oral history
1995 Dec. 18
5 Beta cassettes
Box 2: 6
Washington, Donald: oral history
1995 Dec. 18
5 Beta cassettes
Box 2: 2
Washington, Donald and Joe Nash
1995
9 VHS tapes
Box 3: 1
Urban Bush Woman (Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, artistic director): Walking with Pearl: Southern Diaries
ca.2006
DVD
Box 1: 1
Choreographed to honor the artistic legacy of Pearl Primus. Africa Diaries (2004) refers to the trips to Africa that Primus took, beginning in 1948, to conduct the anthropological research. Southern Diaries (2005) refers to the trip which Primus made during the summer of 1944 to live and work with poor migrant workers in the rural South.

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Gift of Peggy and Murray Schwartz, Dec. 2013 (2013-199).

Digitized content

The videotapes have been digitized and are available for viewing in our digital repository, Credo.

Separated Material

a copy of Peggy and Murray Schwartz, *The dance claimed me: a biography of Pearl Primus* (New Haven: Yale, 2011) is available in SCUA's rare book collections (RBR 2201).

Processing Information

Processed by I. Eliot Wentworth, June 2016.

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English

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Search terms

Subjects

Brown, Joan Myers
Camara, Kwesi
Choreographers
Dancers
Davis, Tunisi
Frederiksen, Lynn E.
Hairston, Jacquelyn B.
Lehman, Margot
Levy, Herb
Manings, Muriel
McKayle, Donald, 1930-
Montego Joe
Nash, Joe, 1919-2005
O'Brien, Elizabeth
Sherrod, Gaynell
Smith Art Enterprises
Trupia, Joe
Vendola, Steven
Waithe, Mary
Washington, Donald

Contributors

Primus, Pearl [main entry]

Genres and formats

Audiocassettes
Betacam-SP
Videotapes

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