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Abstract

This study investigates the role of Modern Dance as a medium of United States cultural diplomacy during the Cold War era, with reference to the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT). The AAADT was the only predominantly Black dance company to perform abroad under State Department funding during the Cold War and the first U.S. dance troupe to perform in the Soviet Union during the Cold War. As Modern Dance is a distinctly American form of dance, the U.S. State Department sent Modern Dance groups—like the Martha Graham Dance Company—abroad to promote democratic values. The State Department sent Ailey’s company to the Soviet Union amid the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, when American racism captured headlines across the globe. At this moment, the world was increasingly critical of the U.S. government, who took no action against anti-Black racism ravaging the nation. Attempting to foster greater diplomatic ties with other nations, the State Department used Ailey’s predominantly-Black company as a pawn to obscure American racism at home. Several of Ailey’s pieces, however, embodied the struggles of Black Americans. Ailey, in his choreography, therefore challenged U.S. cultural diplomacy and refuted the antiracist message the United States sought to convey by sending his company abroad. Through analysis of two pieces Ailey brought on his 1970 Soviet Union tour—*Blues Suite* and his widely-acclaimed *Revelations*—this study examines, through primary and secondary scholarship, how Alvin Ailey presented an alternative narrative of democracy in the choreography he brought to the Soviet Union, one that acknowledged the interlacing of adversity and triumph in the Black American experience.

Keywords*:* Dance, History, American Studies, Cold War, Performance Studies, Modern Dance, Civil Rights, Black History

Introduction

This study investigates the role of Modern Dance as a medium of United States cultural diplomacy during the Cold War era (1945-1991), with reference to the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the only predominantly Black Modern Dance company to perform abroad under U.S. State Department funding during the Cold War. According to historian Jessica Gienow-Hecht, the term "cultural diplomacy" takes on several different meanings in "variable circumstances."[1] In her article, "What Are We Searching For?: Culture, Diplomacy, Agents, and the State," published in *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy* in 2010, Gienow-Hecht describes three schools of thought in defining the meaning of cultural diplomacy: first, cultural diplomacy is "an instrument of state policy," in which lies a "tension between propaganda and diplomacy"; second, cultural diplomacy is an "instrument to work at the exclusion of politics" which would "establish ties with countries that were politically unpalatable"; third, Cultural diplomacy exists "beyond the realm of the state."[2] Gienow-Hecht also discusses several other scholarly definitions of the term; for instance, as scholars Maki Aoki-Okabe, Toichi Makita, and Yoko Kawamura contend, cultural diplomacy entails "the promotion abroad of 'national culture' and interactive international cultural exchange."[3] Historian Annika Freiberg considers cultural diplomacy "diplomatic exchange by nonstate actors who, in the name of a nation, people, or larger ethical question, attempt to accomplish a change in foreign relations."[4] Educator and writer Yuzo Ota, more broadly, argues that cultural diplomacy is "any undertaking to promote the culture of a country by people who identify themselves with that country."[5]

For the purposes of this study, I shall combine both the first and third "schools of thought" that Gienow-Hecht describes, along with the three other definitions she introduces, to fashion a definition of the term "cultural diplomacy" with reference to the Cold War era and United States involvement. In this definition, I exclude Gienow-Hecht's second school of thought because, first of all, cultural diplomacy did not work "at the exclusion of politics." Indeed, as historian Victoria Phillips points out in her 2020 book, *Martha Graham's Cold War: The Dance of American Diplomacy*, the U.S. government believed that cultural diplomacy presentations "should be planned and 'planted' to implement propaganda themes."[6] Because cultural diplomacy served as a propaganda initiative for the United States, cultural diplomacy was indeed a political endeavor. As a further counter to Gienow-Hecht's definition, given the Cold War context, the U.S. government did not restrict cultural diplomacy to "countries that were politically unpalatable." In fact, American cultural diplomats often travelled to nations where new political climates were just beginning to develop. For instance, and as I shall further explore, several United States cultural diplomacy initiatives involved sending artists abroad to decolonizing nations.[7] In doing so, the U.S. government sought to promote democracy in these countries

[1] Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried, *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy* (Berghahn Books, 2010), 4.

[2] Gienow-Hecht and Donfried, *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy*, 9-10.

[3] Ibid, 10.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Victoria Phillips, *Martha Graham's Cold War: The Dance of American Diplomacy* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 37.

[7] Ibid, 77.

seeking a future political system to adopt. With all of these ideas in mind, I shall define Cold War cultural diplomacy as an "instrument of state policy," in which there lies a "tension between propaganda and diplomacy," which sent artists—who were "beyond the realm of the state"—to participate in cultural exchange abroad.[8] Thus, I consider cultural diplomacy in the Cold War era, from the United States' perspective, to have been a combined effort between the U.S. government and the artists the State Department sent overseas.

The historiography on Cold War cultural diplomacy through Modern Dance is scarce, as the subject is relatively underdeveloped in terms of research. The first written scholarship on dance diplomacy emerged only in 1999, with the book *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* by Naima Prevots. An additional problem with the present scholarship is that hardly any source describes choreographer Alvin Ailey's work as a global diplomat in great detail. A wide range of sources well-document the work of Modern Dance choreographer Martha Graham. Others describe the dance diplomacy of Classical Ballet choreographers such as George Balanchine and Merce Cunningham. Although Alvin Ailey played a large role in United States cultural diplomacy, the present Modern Dance research hardly includes Ailey in this narrative of cultural exchange. Not until 2015 with Clare Croft's book, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange*, does Ailey's role in cultural diplomacy become prominent in the scholarship. In her book, Croft explores how race, gender, and sexuality influenced the experiences abroad of Cold War dance diplomats. As a result, Alvin Ailey enters the narrative. Indeed, Ailey faced various intersectional battles abroad as both a Black and gay choreographer. Croft's discussion of Alvin Ailey and cultural diplomacy, however, is limited. Croft's study of Ailey only consists of a single chapter entitled "Refusing Modernist Formulas of Second-Class Citizenship." In this chapter, Croft groups Ailey's dance diplomacy with that of other Black dance artists. As a consequence, Croft spends a limited time with Ailey. Unlike any other major work on Modern Dance diplomacy until this point—and a theme this study explores in depth—Croft discusses how the U.S. government sent Ailey's company abroad in the midst of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement when American racism captured headlines across the globe. At this moment, the world was increasingly critical of the U.S. government, who took no action to stop racism ravaging the nation. Since the U.S. government sought to foster greater diplomatic ties during the Cold War, while also promoting American democracy throughout the world, the State Department used Ailey's predominantly Black company to obscure their racist politics at home. Several of Ailey's pieces, however, embodied the struggles of Black Americans. So, Ailey, in effect, refuted the antiracist message the United States sought to convey in sending him abroad. As Croft's scholarship introduces the argument that Ailey's dance pieces contradicted American diplomatic imperatives, this study builds upon Croft's foundation. This study will explore the thematic content in the repertory Ailey's company performed abroad, specifically, Ailey's *Blues Suite* and *Revelations*, which depict the affliction in the Black American experience. In doing so, this investigation aims to increase Ailey's presence in the historiographical landscape of dance diplomacy, examining how Ailey appropriated this diplomacy to challenge American white supremacy.

While the topic of diplomacy through Modern Dance is an understudied field already, what the current scholars have in common, perhaps with the exception of Clare Croft, is a lack of

[8] Ibid, 9.

discussion on the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The limited scholarship on Ailey's work abroad is particularly striking, as the United States Congress in 2008 recognized the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater as "A Vital American Cultural Ambassador to the World."[9] This resolution explicitly acknowledges the global significance of Ailey's company. Where dance scholars do reference Alvin Ailey in their work, no scholar fully analyzes the historical context of Ailey's achievements abroad, such as the complex nuances of the Civil Rights Movement working in tandem with Cold War cultural policies. In essence, as there is much information about Ailey's international work yet to uncover, this study aims to add to the developing research field of cultural diplomacy through Modern Dance while also exploring the relationship between Modern Dance and the Civil Rights Movement. Ultimately, this study seeks to eliminate what historian and anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot considers historiographical "silences," and, more generally, to amplify Alvin Ailey's contributions as a global diplomat in the Cold War.[10]

The Cold War and Cultural Diplomacy

The U.S. government began practicing cultural diplomacy at the beginning of the Cold War, just after the United States emerged as a "capitalist superpower" after the Second World War.[11] Indeed, as historian John Lewis Gaddis argues in his 2005 book *The Cold War: A New History*, the United States—a formerly "isolationist" nation in terms of foreign policy—"could not continue to serve as a model for the rest of the world while remaining apart from the rest of the world."[12] In addition, as Gaddis further contends, "the Americans emerged from the war with their economy thriving."[13] Coupled with their victory against the Axis powers, the U.S. fared well in the Second World War. As Gaddis further argues in his 1972 book, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947*, "the United States had come out of the war with a monopoly over the world's most powerful weapon, the atomic bomb," and, therefore, had the technologies to "shape the postwar order to their liking."[14] The nation's newfound superiority on a global scale provided the U.S. government the space to interfere in international affairs, which set a precedent for their cultural diplomacy practices later to ensue.

The U.S. government first instituted cultural diplomacy under the Eisenhower Administration (1953-1961). Due to the increasing threat of Communism in other nations, combined with the fact that the US had gained global hegemony after the Second World War, President Eisenhower called for the creation of an Emergency Fund for International Affairs to finance cultural performances abroad.[15] In his initial proposal, Eisenhower requested funding to "stimulate the presentation abroad by private firms and groups of the best American industrial

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[9] U.S. Congress, House, *Recognizing and commending the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for 50 years of service as a vital American cultural ambassador to the world*, H Res. 1088, 110th Cong., 1st sess., introduced in House April 8, 2008, https://www.congress.gov/bill/110th-congress/house-resolution/1088/text

[10] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 27.

[11] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: 2005), 14.

[12] Gaddis, *The Cold War*, 15-16.

[13] Ibid, 8.

[14] John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947*, *Fulcrum.org* (Columbia University Press, 1972), 355.

[15] Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 11.

and cultural achievements" in order to "demonstrate the superiority of the products and cultural values of our system of free enterprise."[16] As dance historian Naima Prevots states in her 1999 book *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War*, the first written scholarship on dance diplomacy, Eisenhower designed this Emergency Fund to "make the United States more competitive with the Soviet Union and to persuade undecided or left-leaning communities that the American way of life was superior to Soviet communism."[17] Considered a "giant propaganda offensive" against the Soviet Union, yet a source of "competition and pride" for the Americans, these presentations served to promote American culture in nations threatened by Soviet control and Communist influence, including the Soviet Union itself.[18]

While cultural exchange consisted of performances in music, theatre, and dance, this investigation will explore Modern Dance specifically. Indeed, Modern Dance emerged in the United States in response to Classical Ballet, a dance style the renowned Modern Dance artist Martha Graham deemed "too artificial, too arrogant, and way too un-American."[19] Modern Dance, therefore, originated as a distinctly American form of dance. In presenting dance pieces abroad that embodied American values and "promoted the American dream," popular American choreographers, including Martha Graham herself, essentially became diplomats for the United States, extending American hegemony through their artistry.[20]

Although several dance artists toured abroad during the Cold War, important to this study is Martha Graham, who traveled to promote democracy in nations newly freed from colonial rule. As Prevots recounts, the U.S. State Department first sought to send Martha Graham to Southeast Asia in 1955, in the wake of the Vietminh—the Communist-led nationalist movement of Vietnam—defeating the French colonial forces.[21] Due to this Communist victory, Eisenhower described his "domino theory" stating

> "Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the 'falling domino' principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly...Then with respect to more people passing under this domination, Asia, after all, has already lost some 450 million of its peoples to the Communist dictatorship, and we simply can't afford greater losses."[22]

Eisenhower, according to this domino theory, believed that "if one nation in that area fell to Communism, the others would inevitably follow, thereby creating a politically dangerous

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[16] Prevots, *Dance for Export*, 11.

[17] Ibid, 135.

[18] "Hope for America: Performers, Politics and Pop Culture Cultural Diplomacy." Exhibitions - Library of Congress, July 11, 2010. https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/hope-for-america/cultural-diplomacy.html; Prevots, *Dance for Export*, 22.

[19] "Dancing to Different Rules: How Four Rebels Changed Modern Dance." The Kennedy Center. John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

[20] Claudio González Chiaramonte, "The Evolution of U. S. Cultural Diplomacy in the Cold War." México y la Cuenca del Pacífico 10, no. 28 (2007): 19-42.

[21] Ibid, 44.

[22] *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1952–1954, Volume XIII, Part 1, Indochina, eds. Neal H. Petersen and John P. Glennon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1982), Document 716, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v13p1/d716

situation."[23] For this reason, Eisenhower and the State Department sent the Martha Graham Dance Company to Southeast Asia in 1955 to encourage those nations to embrace democracy instead of falling victim to the "strong Communist parties vying for control in new and often unstable governments."[24]

The most recent scholarship on Martha Graham's work as a dance diplomat is Victoria Phillips' previously mentioned book, *Martha Graham's Cold War: The Dance of American Diplomacy*. Published in 2020, this book documents Martha Graham's involvement in cultural diplomacy throughout the entire span of the Cold War, from the rise of the Iron Curtain to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Phillips describes Graham's diplomatic engagements abroad, while also detailing the relationship between Graham's choreography and American democracy. Phillips mentions Graham's renown dance piece, for instance, *Appalachian Spring*. This dance piece, which centers upon the American frontier, embodies "uninhabited land that represented hope and promise for the future through land development and modernization brought by freedom and democracy."[25] *Appalachian Spring* also, through the "overt depiction of the prairie house and the frontier Preacher," celebrated "religious freedom" in America, which could turn nations against the Soviet "atheists."[26] Martha Graham brought *Appalachian Spring* on many tours, as the piece communicated a message of freedom under American democracy. Through this example, among many case studies of Graham's other dance pieces, Phillips highlights how Martha Graham, through her choreography emblematic of a romanticized America, served as a cultural diplomat in the United States' fight against Communism.

The Soviet Union also sent dancers abroad. Importantly, the Soviet Union government sent the Bolshoi Ballet—the leading Ballet company in the Soviet Union—to perform in the United States throughout the Cold War, their first U.S. tour starting in 1959. As Cadra Peterson McDaniel argues in her 2014 book, *American-Soviet Cultural Diplomacy: The Bolshoi Ballet's American Premiere*, because of "peaceful coexistence" diplomacy between Nikita Khrushchev, former leader of the Soviet Union (1953-1964), and President Eisenhower, "the Soviet leaders of the 1950s employed the arts to gain acceptance within the minds of contemporary capitalist citizens."[27] The rationale of the Soviet Union was that "through cultural diplomacy, Americans would applaud the outstanding Soviet artists and eventually this applause would translate into approval for Soviet politics."[28] Just as the United States weaponized Modern Dance to achieve the diplomatic goal of turning the world toward the capitalist way, the Soviet Union employed Ballet "to showcase the superiority of their system and emerge victorious."[29] Unlike United States cultural diplomacy, though, which involved sending dancers across the globe to turn nations away from Communism, the Bolshoi Ballet travelled only to the United States. As McDaniel further points out, "Visiting artistic troupes' outstanding performances not only would

[23] Prevots, *Dance for Export*, 44.

[24] Ibid, 45.

[25] Phillips, *Martha Graham's Cold War*, 258.

[26] Ibid, 137; 125.

[27] Cadra Peterson McDaniel, *American-Soviet Cultural Diplomacy: The Bolshoi Ballet's American Premiere* (London: Lexington Books, 2015), 202.

[28] McDaniel, *American-Soviet Cultural Diplomacy*, 29.

[29] Ibid, xxi.

demonstrate Communism's superiority but would also expose American audiences to Soviet ideals thus eroding Americans' anti-Soviet stance and eventually ushering in the anticipated historical triumph of Communism."[30] Since the United States was the largest opponent of Communism, the Soviet Union found it necessary to target the United States particularly in this "nonviolent competition."[31]

The Cold War and the U.S. Civil Rights Movement

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was the only predominantly Black Modern Dance company to participate in cultural exchange; the company began touring during the peak of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Initially, the Dance Panel of the American National Theater and Academy, "the consulting agency that vetted performers for State Department and USIA-sponsored appearances abroad"—composed of several famous American dancers—refused to send Black performers abroad.[32] Once racism in the United States made headlines throughout the world during the Civil Rights Movement, however, the State Department found it imperative to include Black artists in their diplomacy. In doing so, the United States government sought to mask racial tensions at home. At this juncture, according to Naima Prevots, "it was imperative to present a more positive image of American race relations" in order to "combat criticism of the conflict between democratic ideals and racial inequities."[33] After all, as historian Mary Dudziak questions in her 2000 book *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, where she argues that "civil rights reform was *in part* a product of" the Cold War, "How could American democracy be a beacon during the Cold War, and a model for those struggling against Soviet oppression, if the United States itself practiced brutal discrimination against minorities within its own borders?"[34] Alvin Ailey's dance company thus, to the State Department, served as an "antidote" to guard against the publicity of American racism and deter the world from aligning with the Soviet Union.[35] Indeed, part of the Soviet Union's allure—which drew many African American artists toward Communism throughout the twentieth century—was the Republic's consideration for racial equity not found in the United States. In fact, the Soviet Union frequently took advantage of the publicity of American racism and used this problem to fuel pro-Soviet propaganda campaigns throughout the Cold War and create "anti-American propaganda."[36] As former Secretary of State (1961-1969) Dean Rusk argued, when it came to decolonization efforts in other nations—these decolonizing countries grappling with whether to adopt a capitalist or Communist system once liberated—"the Communists clearly regard racial discrimination in the United States as one of their most valuable assets."[37] In essence, American racism cast a negative

[30] Ibid, 18-19.

[31] Ibid, xxi.

[32] Catherine Gunther Kodat, *Don't Act, Just Dance: The Metapolitics of Cold War Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 78.

[33] Prevots, *Dance for Export*, 5-15.

[34] Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3-12.

[35] Ellen Graff, "Review: *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War*," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 19, no. 2 (2001): 137-40.

[36] Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 12.

[37] Ibid, 185.

light upon the United States during the Cold War, and the Soviets used this flaw to their advantage. After all, as Kudziak further argues, "efforts to promote civil rights within the United States were consistent with and important to the more central U.S. mission of fighting world communism."[38] Because the media exposed the hypocrisy of the U.S. government during the Civil Rights Movement, the State Department sought to ameliorate the situation, but only to salvage the faltering image of American democracy and improve diplomatic ties in the long run.

In 1970, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater became the first Modern Dance company to perform in the Soviet Union during the Cold War.[39] Other Modern Dance troupes until this point, such as the Martha Graham Dance Company, had only performed in nations threatened by the Communist sphere of influence. Because Ailey's company travelled to the Soviet Union specifically, the United States could directly confront the Soviet Union with their message of integration, whether these efforts were genuine or not. The U.S. government thus sought to nullify claims of American racial inequities prevalent in Soviet propaganda. While abroad, Ailey's company performed various dance pieces that embodied the Black American experience. Ailey's renowned *Revelations*, for instance—which he brought on every State Department tour—illustrated the struggles of Black Americans. In presenting this narrative of affliction, Ailey complicated the imperatives of the U.S. government, who attempted to depict American race relations positively to the other countries. To this mission, the United States Information Agency (USIA) came into being in 1953, shortly before the establishment of Eisenhower's Emergency Fund. The USIA's goal was to show other nations that the United States's "objectives and policies are in harmony with and will advance their legitimate aspirations for freedom, progress, and peace" and likewise "establish a mutuality of interests" with these other lands.[40] Most importantly though, as Prevots points out, "it was the role of the USIA to publicize the program's artists and attractions" and "get advance press, radio, and newsreel coverage as well as reviews."[41] During the Civil Rights Movement when Ailey went on tour, as the dance historian Clare Croft mentions in *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange*, USIA materials "positioned benevolent, white federal legislators as the primary actors in the civil rights movement" and likewise "emphasized racial integration as a soothing balm for the wounds of slavery."[42]

To illustrate how the USIA depicted the U.S. Civil Rights Movement in their publications, Croft references a 1965 pamphlet called *For the Dignity of Man: America's Civil Rights Program*. In this pamphlet, the USIA undermines the power of grassroots organizations in achieving Civil Rights in the United States, rather suggesting that democracy "embodied by white male legislators…was the best system for achieving racial progress."[43] For instance, the pamphlet shows President Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which, according to a 1965 piece in

[38] Ibid, 12.

[39] "History - 1970: Alvin Ailey Goes on Landmark USSR Tour." Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Accessed February 12, 2021. https://www.alvinailey.org/history-1970.

[40] Prevots, *Dance for Export*, 12-13.

[41] Ibid, 40.

[42] Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 21.

[43] Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats*, 21.

the Harvard Law Review, would provide "important new federal protection from discrimination in areas that greatly affect individual activity."[44] Although several Black leaders of the Civil Rights Movement surrounded Johnson during the legislation's signing, the pamphlet crops out the attendees and instead focuses solely upon Johnson. As Croft argues, "The emphasis on legislation credited only the white men of the federal government with leading the United States away from its racist past."[45] In crafting this narrative, the USIA places the "triumph over segregation" in the hands of the lawmakers as opposed to the many Black Americans who fought to secure their rights.[46] The USIA materials also depict, in several cases, "happy scenes of an integrated America." [47] As Croft contends, these scenes were "a far cry from the truth of African American life" during Ailey's time abroad.[48]

Ailey's choreography, however, contradicted these false narratives. Croft argues that Ailey's *Revelations*, for instance, was "a statement about African American self-determination that disrupted the progress narratives about African American life circulated in other USIA [United States Information Agency] materials."[49] According to Croft's interpretation, the piece "depict[s] African American people overcoming obstacles through individual will drawn from community strength." [50] *Revelations*, therefore, presented a counter narrative to what the State Department sought to convey in their circulations.

The Soviet Union positively received Ailey's work during his time abroad, his Soviet tour concluding with "a Leningrad audience's chanting "thank you" in a 23-minute ovation."[51] Returning to the idea that the Soviet Union promoted racial equity to a greater extent than the United States, this study, therefore, will explore the thematic content in Ailey's choreography to explain why the Soviet Union elicited this positive response. Through his depictions of misery and anguish amidst the African American population, Ailey presented a less-romanticized vision of America in his dance pieces from his dance diplomat counterparts, such as Martha Graham. Indeed, as Victoria Phillips argues, "the contrast between Ailey's *Revelations* and Graham's *Appalachian Spring* could not be more striking."[52] With these contrasting motivations in mind, this study argues that Ailey expressed his own interpretation of American democracy in his choreography. Through analysis of two pieces Ailey brought on his 1970 Soviet Union tour specifically, *Blues Suite* and his widely acclaimed *Revelations*, this study examines how Ailey presented an alternative narrative of democracy in the choreography his company performed abroad, one that acknowledged the struggle in the Black American experience.

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[44] "The Civil Rights Act of 1964," *Harvard Law Review* 78, no. 3 (1965): 684–96.

[45] Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats*, 22.

[46] Ibid, 23.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid, 17.

[50] Ibid, 16.

[51] Anna Kisselgoff, "Ailey Dancers Set Russians Cheering." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Jan. 21, 1971. https://www.nytimes.com/1971/01/21/archives/ailey-dancers-set-russians-cheering.html.

[52] Phillips, *Martha Graham's Cold War*, 163.

Ailey's Soviet Tour, 1970

In 1970, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater became the first American dance company to perform abroad in the Soviet Union during the Cold War.[53] While the U.S used Ailey's company to promote racial progress discourse abroad, Ailey's choreography, in reality, disrupted these false narratives. Two important pieces Ailey brought on his Soviet Tour, for instance, were his first major work, *Blues Suite* (1958), and his widely acclaimed *Revelations* (1960). Both dance pieces depict the highs and lows of the Black American experience. Initially, when first choreographing these pieces, Ailey paired them together to comprise an "all-black evening of dance," which would start with *Blues Suite* and end with *Revelations*.[54] According to Ailey himself, these dances were "blood memories" of his experiences growing up in a racially segregated Texas during the Great Depression.[55] Throughout his upbringing in Brazos Valley, Texas, Ailey experienced acute racial disparities. For instance, the Black community of the Brazos Valley region, including Ailey's own mother, worked primarily in "white people's kitchens" or "cotton fields."[56] During this dark time, Ailey also witnessed the importance of several spaces particular to the Black community, such as the river, where baptism and spiritual renewal occurred, and the church, a source of celebration and pride. In addition to the religious arena, Ailey's community also spent time in the secular realm. The Dew Drop Inn, for instance, was a popular spot for the Black residents of Brazos Valley. This spot, as Ailey describes, was "the place where the adults had fun."[57] Ailey delineates the connection between the secular and spiritual spaces in his autobiography, stating, "many of the same people who went to the Dew Drop Inn on Saturday night went to church on Sunday morning. In dance I deal with these two very different worlds. *Blues Suite* is a Dew Drop Inn; *Revelations* is the church."[58] Since both of these locales complement each other in illustrating Black American life in Brazos Valley, Texas, Ailey pairs them in performance. Dance historian Julia L. Foulkes, in her book *Modern Bodies*, agrees that both pieces convey complementary messages, stating that

> both *Blues Suite* and *Revelations* focused on the experience of African Americans. Ailey felt that Blues Suite was "a somewhat angry statement about the racial conditions [of the

[53] It is worth mentioning that before touring the Soviet Union in 1970, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, under the auspices of President Kennedy's Special International Program for Cultural Presentations, toured Southeast Asia. As previously mentioned, decolonization efforts were happening throughout Southeast Asia, and the U.S. government expressed concern over whether these nations would fall under Communist influence or, instead, adopt democracy once colonization ended. Attempting to steer the nations in Southeast Asia toward democracy, the U.S. government sent Ailey's company to perform in that region. The tour would begin in Sydney, Australia, and continue for three months in Burma, South Vietnam, Malaya, Indonesia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan. Ailey's company also performed in Africa in 1968, also to promote democracy in decolonizing nations.

[54] Alvin Ailey and A. Peter Bailey. *Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey* (Bridgewater, NJ: Replica Books, 1999), 97.

[55] Susan Manning. "Blood Memories," *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 179.

[56] Ailey, *Revelations*, 19.

[57] Ibid, 22.

[58] Ibid, 22-23.

> United States], and that Revelations was a very positive, very spiritual expression of our creating an environment in which we could survive.[59]

Foulkes' analysis thus supports the notion that *Blues Suite* and *Revelations* are bookends in the Black American experience. Whereas *Blues Suite* focuses upon struggle and despair, with bursts of triumph laced throughout the piece, *Revelations* begins with the solemn note on which *Blues Suite* ends but concludes with joy and pride. At this juncture, no longer was Ailey's narrative of Black America a lamentation of the troubled spirit; by the final pose of *Revelations*, both the dancers and audience alike are united in celebration. In conveying these themes of struggle and eventual liberation in the choreography he brought to the Soviet Union, Ailey suggested paths forward toward a brighter future for Black Americans, emerging from the previous generations of misery. In general, as dance scholar Jennifer Dunning states in her book *Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance*, both "*Blues Suite* and *Revelations* had allowed Alvin to pour out his past and his wry affection for the world that had made him what he was."[60] At the same time, as dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz argues, "early performances of *Blues Suite* and *Revelations* (1960) established the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater as the foremost dance interpreter of African American experience."[61] In communicating his criticisms of the negative treatment of Black Americans, which began in Ailey's youth and haunted him throughout his life, Ailey presented to the Soviet Union his own vision of American democracy: one that obstructs opportunities for the African American people.

Alvin Ailey's *Blues Suite*

Among the pieces Alvin Ailey brought to the Soviet Union was his first major work of choreography, *Blues Suite*. Although *Blues Suite* does not garner as much critical acclaim or attention in critical discussion as *Revelations*, this piece serves as a prelude to *Revelations* and establishes the pain-stricken narrative of Black America with particular reference to the Great Depression era in Brazos Valley, Texas. First performed in 1958, *Blues Suite* celebrates the Dew Drop Inn of Ailey's upbringing. The Dew Drop Inn, according to Ailey in a 1989 television special, was "a place where only Black people went."[62] As Ailey further mentions, the Dew Drop Inn was where the working people of Brazos Valley "struggled, laughed, and made love."[63] Ailey also describes these brothels in his autobiography, stating

> Folks got together there on weekends. For the adult party-goers, it was the place to be. My mother was in there, and everybody was doing what were considered to be nasty dances. The Dew Drop Inn was a rough place. The women wore bright, flashy red dresses. The men wore equally flashy suits. The men also carried big knives called Texas Specials and did a lot of fighting. There was one Dew Drop Inn which was a real honky-tonk out on

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[59] Julia L. Foulkes, "Coda: The Revelations of Alvin Ailey," *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 182.

[60] Jennifer Dunning, *Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 364.

[61] Thomas DeFrantz, "Stoned Soul Picnic: Alvin Ailey and the Struggle to Define Official Black Culture," *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, eds. Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 220.

[62] Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, "'Blues Suite' by Alvin Ailey," YouTube Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4WL1FS3Ao0&t=43s.

[63] Ibid.

> the road with a little bar, crude furniture, and a blaring jukebox. I would hang around on the outside and watch people fall out of there at three A.M…[64]

While this venue was certainly "the place to be," as Ailey points out, the conditions he describes, at the same time, were not ideal. Indeed, Ailey points out here that "The Dew Drop Inn was a rough place." Even with the material conditions in shambles, however, the inhabitants of the space find pleasure, free from the torment of the segregated South and its contentious racial politics. Furthermore, by playing into the raunchiness and unkempt essence of the brothel through the dancers' movements and behaviors, Ailey underscores the disenfranchisement of the Southern Black population during the Great Depression. At the same time, however, Ailey also communicates how his people found happiness even in the presence of this post-Reconstruction racism. Throughout the piece, therefore, there lies a tension between the struggle and triumph of Black Americans. Through this tension in *Blues Suite*, Ailey depicts how despite brief spurts of positivity, the Black American experience is filled with inescapable limitations.

While there are several interpretations of Ailey's *Blues Suite* choreography, each perspective agrees that the piece conveys a message of suffering existing amidst a night of fun. Indeed, as dance scholar Thomas F. DeFrantz argues in his book *Dancing Revelations*, the characters in *Blues Suite* "conveyed the fleeting pleasures of dance buried in an evening fraught with fighting, regret, and despair."[65] As Ailey also points out, each section of *Blues Suite* represents a different room in the Dew Drop Inn, as "each room" in the Dew Drop Inn "had its own identity."[66]

From the first movement of the *Blues Suite*, Ailey communicates sentiments of struggle in the Black American experience. The dance piece begins with several male and female dancers sprawled throughout the stage and adorned in black and white costumes. The dancers perform slow, sensual movements to the rhythm of blues music containing the refrain "I just can't be satisfied." At the end of this section, all the dancers drop to the floor in agonized poses, conveying a first glimpse of anguish in the piece.

The second movement of *Blues Suite* embodies the strength amidst the pain of the Black male figure. This section features several male dancers dressed in black clothing accessorized with scarves. Unlike the previous movement, this section has a much more upbeat demeanor and also moves at an accelerated pace, which contrasts with the slow-moving elements of the first piece. Through this contrast, Ailey presents the range of experiences in the Dew Drop Inn, from the relaxed and sensual to an agile quickness just moments later. The male dancers, who perform swift leaps across the stage and jumps full of muscular power, radiate strength and athleticism. This movement ends with the dancers reaching their hands out, scanning the audience for reprieve from their present situation. While the choreography throughout the movement embodies masculinity, this pleading gesture at the conclusion communicates an impression of agony in spite of masculine strength.

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[64] Ailey, *Revelations*, 22.

[65] Thomas DeFrantz. *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 38.

[66] Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, "'Blues Suite' by Alvin Ailey," YouTube Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4WL1FS3Ao0&t=43s.

In contrast with the masculine second movement of *Blues Suite*, the third movement, alternatively, features a trio of female dancers. In this section, Ailey communicates the loss of innocence in the narrative of the Black American experience. Throughout the movement, the dancers perform challenging technical movements such as arabesques and leg extensions, which the women execute in a slow, fluid manner. The section is indeed sensual and tactile; the women perform intimate, grasping gestures that demonstrate how the dancers are in touch with their bodies. The ballet, however, is also pure, which Ailey conveys through the women's white, strikingly angelic dresses and delicate movements. Throughout the movement, the dancers also help each other off the ground, showcasing solidarity among the women in the Dew Drop Inn. Just like the previous two sections, the movement concludes with the dancers on the ground. While on the ground, the dancers gently fold their arms, which displays a sense of vulnerability. For the music in this section, Ailey uses the song "The House of the Rising Sun," which contains the line "my sister now is gone." This lyric, in addition to the choreography, demonstrates the innocence the women lose, not only in the barrel house, but also in their life experiences. Indeed, when Ailey was five years old, his mother was assaulted by four white men.[67] So, Ailey's painful "blood memories" pervade his choreography. Ailey, therefore, uses the Dew Drop Inn—where female innocence is lost in the brothel—as a conduit to express his scorn for his perception of the systemic vulnerability of Black women in America.

Contrasting with the somber note on which the third section ends, the fourth movement of *Blues Suite* encompasses a banter through dance between a man and woman. In this duet, the dancers appear to inwardly have affections for each other.[68] In this movement, 'backwater blues,' Ailey demonstrates the more positive aspect of the Dew Drop Inn as a source of pleasure. The entire essence of this section is highly sensual, and the two dancers partner with each other. After the dancers perform a series of sensual yet technical movements, the music stops with the female dancer's foot perched atop the man's back. Instead of the woman "winning" the dance battle, however, which her final stance suggests, the narrative continues without the music. As the man exits the stage, he takes the woman's scarf. In turn, the woman must grab the scarf back from him, though the female dancer smiles at this outcome. After a brief moment of physical tug-and-war with the scarf—the female dancer eventually ascending the ladder—the woman wins her scarf back. In an unexpected outcome, the woman jumps off the ladder to land in the man's arms, and the two exit offstage together with smug faces. In this section, Ailey conveys sensuality as an outlet and reprieve from the pain of American racism.

Ailey's depictions of pleasure in the 'backwater blues' movement transition into joy in the fifth section of *Blues Suite*, where male and female dancers partner dance with each other to upbeat and jubilant music. In the middle of the movement, another man—who dance scholar Ramsay Burt calls the "misfit"—and a woman enter the stage and attempt to dance with each pair of dancers.[69] Ailey renders this section comedically, as the other dancers relentlessly reject this pair of misfits. Eventually, the music grows slower, and the two outcast dancers begin to

[67] Ailey, *Revelations*, 19.

[68] In early versions of the piece, Ailey himself played the role of the man in the duet.

[69] Ramsay Burt, "Alvin Ailey and Black Masculinity," in *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1995), 131.

dance with each other. All the dancers onstage now fall into a series of slow, partnering movements, which reinscribes the sensual atmosphere from the 'backwater blues' section.

After a second upbeat section of dancing, the positive energy onstage ceases as *Blues Suite* comes to a close. In these final moments of the piece, Ailey communicates the inescapable pain amidst the pleasure in the Black American experience. The solemn mood begins with a bell tolling. In this moment, the misfit male dancer, who created the comedic aspects of the previous movement, now retreats alone to a chair onstage. The man wrestles and struggles in his chair while sobbing uncontrollably. An inexplicable terror strikes his face. Upon what seems a brief moment of reprieve, the man approaches a ladder onstage. He anxiously clutches this ladder as the music in the background declares the same solemn refrain from the first movement: "I just can't be satisfied." While the misfit suffers, the other dancers form a circle and hold hands while sinking to the ground in agonized poses. Through these gestures, Ailey conveys a sentiment of collective pain within the community. As the bells continue to chime, the misfit man approaches the center of the stage and stands adjacent to his male counterparts. The other male dancers fall to the floor and reach their arms outward toward the audience in a pleading gesture. The misfit man, now seated center stage, begins to swing his head in a circular motion until his head jerks to a resting position. As the misfit holds his final pose in stillness, a second male dancer strides blankly toward the audience while the female dancers sway slowly in distress. The previous excitement among the dancers, in this section, transforms into anguish. In ending *Blues Suite* on this melancholy note, which contrasts with his depictions of pure joy, Ailey communicates an impression of inescapable suffering.

Equally important to the choreography in conveying the message of inevitable distress is the music in the piece, which Ailey has rendered in the blues style. Of the music in *Blues Suite*, in a 1958 program note, 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 full-born from the docs and the fields, saloons and bawdy houses…indeed from the very souls of their creators…[70]

In *Blues Suite*, Ailey is concerned with elevating the Black musical heritage, and in a sense, reclaiming these genres that, started by Black people, influenced the Western music tradition. This music, however, emerged from a space of sorrow and a state of pain. Ailey, through his choreography, reconsiders the pain of the music genre's initial creators and places the blues in their rightful hands. In addition to Ailey's note, dance historian Thomas DeFrantz delineates the connection between blues music and dancing in his book *Dancing Revelations*, stating

> blues dancing stood explicitly for the ephemeral release from overwhelming social inequities suffered by African Americans. The frame allowed Ailey to implicate harsh political realities in the formation of intensely flamboyant and entertaining blues dance styles.[71]

As DeFrantz describes, the blues serves as a vehicle of "release" from the toil of the African American people. While still creating a dance piece that audiences found entertaining, Ailey enmeshes a lamentation of the Black spirit within his positive choreography. In addition, New York Times dance journalist Clive Barnes contends in a 1976 review of *Blues Suite* that this

[70] Dunning, *Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance*, 410.

[71] DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 38.

"wonderful arrangement of traditional black music from the barrelhouse to the blues," conveys "how close Mr. Ailey can get to his people's soul and his people's agony."[72] For this reason, not only the choreography, but also the musical arrangement, is characteristic of the struggle in the Black American experience.

Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*

In addition to *Blues Suite*, Ailey also brought his renowned *Revelations*, another "blood memory" piece, on his 1970 Soviet tour. This piece, according to Ailey in his autobiography, was "about trying to get up out of the ground."[73] Ailey also includes in the piece "the purification rite" of baptism and elements of "church happiness," such as singing and waving fans, from his "early Texas memories."[74] Building upon this religious theme, also important to *Revelations* is Ailey's use of spiritual music. Just as *Blues Suite* incorporates blues music as an expression of the Black American soul, *Revelations* uses the medium of the spiritual. As Ailey states in his autobiography,

> The songs are poetic, and the rhythm that grows out of them is black rhythm. The songs are truthful and a real coming together of music and ideas through dance. The songs also represent a coming together of many things in my head—of youthful energy and enthusiasm, of my concern about projecting the black image properly. They reflect my own feelings about being pressed into the ground of Texas; they re-create the music I heard from ladies in Texas who sold apples while singing spirituals, memories of songs my mother would hum around the house, and the songs I sang in junior high school. We would sing "Rocka My Soul" in my junior high glee club. The songs in Revelations are all of those things. And I think they have meant a lot to audiences everywhere.[75]

The music in *Revelations* recalls Ailey's positive experiences in his Southern upbringing. At the same time, the spiritual music also conveys an impression of hope. For instance, according to a 1964 postscript by poet Langston Hughes—a friend and eventual collaborator of Ailey—in the program notes for *Revelations*,

> The spirituals sing of woe triumphantly, knowing well that all rivers will be crossed and the Promised Land is just beyond the stream. The spirituals ask no pity—for their words ride on the strongest of melodies, the melody of faith. That is why there is joy in their singing, peace in their music, and strength in their soul.[76]

Just as in *Blues Suite*, the music in *Revelations* functions alongside the choreography in communicating Black American life. In general, *Revelations,* as Thomas DeFrantz argues, embodies a "release from physical slavery" and "historical triumph, a movement toward freedom."[77] While the piece begins with movements invoking the horrors and brutality of slavery, the ballet transitions into a baptism scene and, ending in a church-inspired setting, finishes with a "narrative optimism."[78] The dancers in *Revelations* portray "people in physical bondage

[72] Clive Barnes, "The Dance: Ailey's 'Blues Suite,'" *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Aug. 20, 1976.

[73] Ailey, *Revelations*, 98.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid, 101.

[76] Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, 213.

[77] DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 16.

[78] Ibid.

invoking, through their movements, spiritual deliverance."[79] In tandem with the backdrop of spiritual music, the dancers' bodily movements in *Revelations* symbolize the journey from misery to triumph among the Black American population.

The first section of *Revelations*, entitled "Pilgrim of Sorrow," encompasses somber movements that depict struggle. "Pilgrim of Sorrow" begins with the movement "I've Been 'Buked," which starts with the curtain closed. As the curtain rises to the humming of a spiritual, the audience witnesses several dancers grouped together in the center of the stage whose arms are stretched outward and their eyes are gazing upward in agony and hope. The female dancers wear earth-toned dresses, evoking Ailey's "out of the ground" message, and the male dancers wear clothing made of jersey rope, which, according to Ailey, "takes on extraordinary tensions" when the body moves.[80] At the beginning, the dancers tensely stretch downward into the earth yet also upward toward the heavens. Soon after, the dancers' arms join upward, their palms facing out toward the audience, which creates a sense of vulnerability and pleading. Just afterward, the dancers' arms shift into an arced position and their heads drop, conveying a sentiment of agony. The dancers once again slowly lift their hands toward the sky, this time observing their palms. The dancers' hands soon reach their maximum point, and their palms extend outward toward the audience in a pleading gesture. The group then disperses, each dancer performing a different series of leg extensions and turns alone. Some dancers sink to the ground, while others remain standing, but at the end of the sequence, the dancers retreat to the center group, which communicates an impression of community strength. After returning to the characteristic arced arms position, the dancers move together as a unit with their arms open and their focus upward. The dancers then raise their arms upward, and in fragmented segments, turn their palms out toward the audience. The dancers disperse and rejoin once more, repeating the same movements from the beginning of the piece. As a final gesture, the staggering motif reoccurs as the dancers move their arms outward in a fragmented motion and then down to rest at their sides. At the end of the movement, the dancers gaze upward once more. In general, through "I've Been 'Buked," Ailey starts *Revelations* on a mournful note but provides the space for the dancers to emerge from.

In addition to "I've Been 'Buked," the "Pilgrim of Sorrow" section contains two other movements, "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel" and "Fix Me, Jesus," which communicate a desire for deliverance amid sorrow. The first movement, "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel," involves a trio of three dancers. The dancers perform tormented movements, such as contractions and gestures that evoke the toiling of the earth, thereby posing a connection with the horrors of slavery. The movement ends with the dancers lying on the ground reaching upward in desperation, further exhibiting the message of struggle while also demonstrating a yearning for upward mobility. Furthermore, the next section, "Fix Me, Jesus," is a pas de deux between a man and a woman, who perform slow movements full of strength and technique. There are several moments of rising and falling where the male catches the female dancer. According to an analysis by dance scholar Julia Foulkes, this rising and falling was "repeated in a quick series that emphasized the upswing of the movement rather than the gravity-laden force of the fall."[81] Foulkes therefore

[79] Ibid, 6.

[80] Ailey, *Revelations*, 99.

[81] Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 181.

suggests that "Fix Me, Jesus" conveys hopefulness in the presence of strife. According to this reading of "Fix Me, Jesus," in tandem with the upward-reaching arms in the final pose of "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel," these two movements, which follow "I've Been 'Buked" in the dance lineup, communicate that despite the agony, the people will prevail.

After "Pilgrim of Sorrow" comes the second section of *Revelations*, "Take Me to the Water." Based upon Ailey's childhood observations of baptisms in Texas, this section depicts baptism as a rite of passage into the spiritual realm. Ailey marks the transition from pain to joy through the deliverance of baptism. The first movement, entitled "Processional / Honor, Honor" illustrates the beginnings of the baptism ceremony. Adorned in white costume, the dancers fold their hands in prayer and perform isolations of the waist and contractions of the spine. These bodily movements suggest that the dancers are truly traversing through water in preparation for a baptism. Several other dancers carry white staffs, while a female dancer holds an umbrella, both of which create a ceremonial, parade-like essence. As the dancers move freely through the space to an upbeat drum soundtrack to prepare for the baptism, Ailey enshrouds the section in an overall sense of joy.

In the second movement of "Take Me to the Water," entitled "Wade in the Water," the jubilant essence of the movement continues. This movement features three dancers: the dancer with the umbrella from the previous section and a male and female who are baptized. The umbrella-toting dancer, in this movement, performs gestures that invoke an impression of baptizing two other dancers. After their "baptism," the duo moves about in celebration. The musical refrain soon shifts to a more positive rendition of the song "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel," and the two dancers recreate the agonized movements from "Pilgrim of Sorrow," such as the arc shape. These shapes take on a new meaning in the celebratory context of the baptism, however, because now the dancers are free.

The final section of "Take Me to the Water" is the male solo, "I Wanna Be Ready," which features a male dancer dressed in white, embarking upon a spiritual journey. The dancer embraces his spirituality throughout the movement, rising and falling with gestures demonstrating both technique and strength. As dance journalist for the New York Times Clive Barnes says, this section shows "great kinetic control."[82] The dancer gestures upward toward the heavens, with his chest open, showing his personal desire to win favor with God as a newly baptized man. In general, contrasting greatly with the imagery of pain in the first movement, "Take Me to the Water" shows a positive transformation away from sorrow resulting from the baptism tradition.

The third and final section of *Revelations*, "Move, Members, Move," poses the greatest contrast with the sorrowful beginning of the piece; this section depicts community triumph in the face of adversity. Unlike in *Blues Suite*, where agony prevails, Ailey transforms the narrative and presents, as Foulkes points out, "the joy and hope of survival."[83] The first movement in this section is "Sinner Man," which features a trio of men who perform agile turns and leaps to upbeat music, evoking sentiments of transformation toward a new life upon the baptism. At the end of the movement, the men hold out their arms and gaze upward at the heavens, suggesting a sense of religious renewal.

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[82] Clive Barnes, "The Dance: Ailey's 'Blues Suite,'" *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Aug. 20, 1976.

[83] Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 182.

The next three movements, "The Day is Past and Gone," "You May Run On," and "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham" all blend together and continue the message of happiness and pride emerging from a place of strife. In "The Day is Past and Gone," female dancers wear yellow dresses and bonnets, evoking the imagery of "Sunday Best" clothing. The dancers carry fans and fan themselves while dancing, which also includes sitting on stools. "You May Run On" comes directly after this movement. In "You May Run On," an ensemble of male dancers enters the stage, each man partnering with a female dancer. The men and women dance together, though the women continue dancing in their seats. These two movements, in general, are a precursor to the positive mood that lasts for the rest of the piece.

"You May Run On" segues into the final section of *Revelations*, "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham," which ends the piece on a positive, triumphant note. In this section, the men ask the women to dance, and the dancers perform celebratory, happy gestures in this Sunday morning landscape. The dancers smile and clap throughout the movement, conveying sentiments of pleasure and positivity. The movement ends with the dancers kneeling on the floor with their arms in an upward gesture, but their hands are no longer pleading. This time around, the dancers are now confident and proud of their identity. Although the dancers are on the ground at the end of the piece, their victorious gesturing of arms stretched upward and outward conveys that the dancers have, indeed, come out of the ground.

Despite the previous suffering the dancers depicted onstage at the start of *Revelations*, their former anguish transforms to happiness by the conclusion of the piece. As poet Langston Hughes points out in his aforementioned 1964 addition to the notes in the program, *Revelations* conveys that "all rivers will be crossed and the Promised Land is just beyond the stream."[84] Of course, just after the baptismal interlude of "Wade in the Water," the dancers have crossed the threshold and have, indeed, reached the Promised Land. This "juxtaposition of bald euphoria and deep despair," in the words of Thomas DeFrantz, thereby renders *Revelations* a representation of overcoming the obstacles that American racism presents.[85]

Analysis and Discussion

Both *Revelations* and *Blues Suite* communicate the adversities faced by Black Americans and thereby present Ailey's own vision of American democracy. Because these dance pieces demonstrate the pain of Black Americans while also celebrating the triumph in overcoming obstacles, the messages of these pieces challenged the pro-integration narratives by the U.S. government that Clare Croft outlines. As Croft says of the movement "I Wanna Be Ready" in *Revelations*, for instance, "the image of a lone black man struggling against physical limitations and oppressive darkness might have evoked those widely circulated images of black Americans pressing forward despite violent backlash from white supremacists and federal, state, and local governments" in the audiences.[86] Indeed, "I Wanna Be Ready" was not the only section that incorporated this message. From the melancholy conclusion of *Blues Suite* to the sorrowful undertones and bodily shapes of misery in "I've Been 'Buked" and "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel" in *Revelations*, Ailey's choreography depicts the Black American struggle. At the same time,

[84] Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, 213.

[85] DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 42.

[86] Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats*, 74.

however, Ailey presents joy even amidst these adverse circumstances, as evident through the jubilant partner dancing in *Blues Suite* and the euphoric depiction of a Sunday morning in *Revelations*. Ailey demonstrates that Black Americans will overcome these disparities, thereby matching the rhetoric of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Because Ailey's repertory supported Civil Rights in portraying the difficulties of Black Americans, these dance pieces contradicted the State Department's intentions of masking American racism in sending Ailey's company abroad.

The Soviet Union, as previously mentioned, positively received Ailey's performances. Indeed, as the New York Times mentions of Ailey's performance in Moscow on October 22nd, 1970, Ailey's troupe, a "vibrant" dance company, "won the unrestrained approval of a theater full of Russians."[87] After the final act, Ailey's dancers witnessed "10 minutes of curtain calls."[88] In addition, "scores of Russians, mostly young people, stood in a cold rain pleading for tickets from persons who had them."[89] The article provides evidence that the company danced "now sadly, now gaily" to *Blues Suite*, and the performance concluded with "a long, colorful series of dances done to recorded Negro spiritual music."[90] Since Ailey closes every show in Europe with *Revelations*, this dance featuring a "spiritual theme," as the article describes, could only be *Revelations*.[91] As both *Revelations* and *Blues Suite* were among the lineup that garnered this positive response, Ailey's message had a hand in the success.

Ailey's company's performance in Moscow was not the only engagement in the Soviet Union that received this positive response. In Donetsk, for instance, "the coal-mining capital of the Ukraine," the dance company performed for "consistently full houses."[92] As former Ailey dancer Sylvia Waters mentions in an interview, "the first places [the company] performed were in the Ukraine, like Donetsk and Luhansk."[93] Because Donetsk was among the first locations Ailey's company performed, only the message of the dances, through both the music and dance, as opposed to the company's popularity abroad—certainly, at this juncture, Europe was not yet familiar with Ailey's work—could have influenced the reception of the work. Indeed, as Waters further recalls of her experience on the Soviet Tour, "Russian audiences were extraordinarily enthusiastic, from the beginning."[94] Even Ailey himself, in his autobiography, remembers how "[the company] had a big success in Russia."[95] In a "scrawled entry that races along for thirteen pages," Ailey journaled "Thursday—The day we conquered Moscow!" and claimed the Moscow performance "was indeed one of the finest receptions [the company] ever received anywhere."[96] The achievement of Ailey's company in Russia is particularly meaningful given the Cold War

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[87] James F. Clarity, "Moscow Audience Hails Ailey Dancers." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Oct. 23, 1970.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ailey, *Revelations*, 100; Clarity, "Moscow Audience Hails Ailey Dancers."

[92] "Ailey Dancers Fill Soviet Theater." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Oct. 9, 1970.

[93] Sylvia Waters (The HistoryMakers A2010.108), interviewed by Harriette Cole, October 24, 2016, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 2, tape 6, story 2, Sylvia Waters remembers her experiences touring in the Soviet Union.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ailey, *Revelations*, 100.

[96] Dunning, *Alvin Ailey*, 264.

context in which the troupe performed. Despite the hostilities between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the presence of Ailey's company in the Soviet Union, and the positive response the company received, presents an optimistic moment of cultural exchange, even amidst heightened tensions among the global powers.

Conclusion

While Alvin Ailey certainly depicted American democracy in the choreography he brought to the Soviet Union, thereby fulfilling the purpose of cultural diplomacy, he promoted his own interpretation of American democracy, which acknowledged the disenfranchisement of Black Americans. Ailey therefore exposed the hypocrisy of the U.S. government, who created the illusion of supporting his work abroad by crafting false progress narratives while treating Black Americans as second-class citizens at home. Instead of guarding against American racism in his pieces, Ailey transcended the intentions of the State Department and placed this racism on full display in his choreography. As the Soviet Union found racial equity a more pressing issue than the United States did, Ailey's company, through its critique of racism in America, garnered a positive response from the Soviet Union. Although the State Department seized the opportunity to exploit Ailey's status as a Black man to craft an anti-racist image for the world, Ailey responded creatively to this call. When the world was watching, Ailey rose to the occasion and overcame the nation's false narrative of racial progress by depicting, in his dance pieces about despair and the eventual hope for a brighter future, American racism at its core.

As Ailey's choreography exposed the adversities of American racism and contradicted the anti-racist narrative the U.S. government crafted in sending Ailey abroad, the notion of the performing arts as a vehicle for social commentary becomes prevalent. Indeed, from the 1921 Broadway success of *Shuffle Along*, the first Broadway show to feature an entirely Black cast and creative team, to the contemporary *Hamilton* era, where persons of color depict America's founding fathers, the performing arts have served as a form of agency and self-determination both before and after Ailey's time. Ailey, with his messages of struggle and overcoming in his dance repertoire, falls into this potent tradition of the arts exhibiting social justice themes. Through the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's years of touring, which transcend the Cold War period and still ensue in the present age, the company shared a yearning for societal change with the world, while also creating captivating dance performances. Ailey's cultural diplomacy during the Cold War was, in effect, the start of a longstanding tradition of cultural exchange for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Returning to the previously mentioned designation of Ailey's company as "A Vital American Cultural Ambassador to the World" by the U.S. Congress, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater well-deserves this title, especially due to the important social commentary in the choreography.[97] The Congressional resolution, to this point, notes that "*Revelations* has been seen by more people across the globe than any other work of dance."[98] This statement implies that a wide range of audiences witnessed the narrative of overcoming adversity in *Revelations*.

[97] U.S. Congress, House, *Recognizing and commending the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for 50 years of service as a vital American cultural ambassador to the world*, H Res. 1088, 110th Cong., 1st sess., introduced in House April 8, 2008, https://www.congress.gov/bill/110th-congress/house-resolution/1088/text

[98] Ibid.

Therefore, Ailey's many viewers have a consciousness of both the struggles and triumph in the Black American experience. Ailey's repertory also, according to the Congress resolution, uses "the beauty and humanity of the African-American heritage and other cultures to unite people of all ages, races, and backgrounds."[99] By increasing the global consciousness of the African American culture through performance, and uniting the world with a universal message of equality, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater emerges as "vital" to the world, indeed.

[99] Ibid.

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