

# Dance Claimed Me: Pearl Primus

A review of  
*The Dance Claimed Me: A Biography of Pearl Primus*

by

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*The Dance Claimed Me: a Biography of Pearl Primus* by Peggy & Murray Schwartz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011, pp. 324; ISBN 987-0-300-15534-1).

Pearl Primus, dancer, choreographer, activist and scholar, could not have been more aptly named – several times. Born Pearl Eileene Primus in 1919 (sources vary) in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Dr. Primus (as students and colleagues called her)/Miss Primus (as many dancers still call her/ Mna (as others were invited to call her: “mother who did not birth you”) was, like the gem, valued for her luster. She was precious and valuable, “a virtuous or highly esteemed person; a fine example or type.” Even the earliest, now obsolete ocular-related definitions of “pearl” apply to her as a lens focusing on the best of our cultures and the worst of our society. This perspective is from the classical Latin word “primus,” meaning first. Lists of “firsts” --like being declared a man by a Watusi chief, or being invited home to dinner by a grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan (p. 219) - - can be both tedious and problematic, but Omowale (“Child Returned Home,” the name the venerated Oni of Ife, spiritual leader of the Yoruba), was irrefutably one of a kind. Peggy and Murray Schwartz caringly cast this Pearl of great price before us in their *The Dance Claimed Me: a Biography of Pearl Primus*.

There is a surprising paucity of detailed documentation about Pearl Primus. The sketchy accounts that do exist rarely go into the depths of her personal battles or the breadth of her achievements in the arts and in education. While *The Dance Claimed Me* gives an unprecedented basic biographical accounting of “who, what, when, where, how” and even multiple “whys,” these details are mere portals into the true life of Pearl Primus, the true premise of the book. Peggy and Murray Schwartz spent many intimate hours with Miss Primus, particularly during her later years. They acknowledge that the book was taking shape and evolving since 1995 with conscious dedication since 2003 (p. 6).

In the spirit and tradition of the West African griot, and consistent with the transcendent spirit of Miss Primus and her life, the Schwartzes succinctly state that the subject of the book is how she “went beyond” to create “another perspective” (p. 2). *The Dance Claimed Me* goes beyond the basic facts to reveal the person, Pearl Primus.

Following the tone-setting “Introduction,” the book is divided into eleven chapters that chronicle Miss Primus’s life from her birth in Laventille, a poor neighborhood in Port of Spain, to her death in her New Rochelle, New York, home and the scattering of her ashes off the easternmost tip of Barbados. “The ashes were released and formed themselves in a straight line –pointing straight to Africa” (p. 247). The acknowledgment section then precedes two appendices titled “Pearl Primus Timeline,” and “Interviews.” In the “A Note on Sources and Documentation” section the authors briefly describe the variety of sources upon which they relied, including their own personal knowledge and experiences. The “Notes,” “Works Cited,” and “Index” sections conclude the book. An exciting, compact 16-page photo gallery is placed in the middle of the book between pages 132-133. These photos are particularly helpful in transporting the reader into the world of the book --“the dance,” the Pearl.

The titles of the chapters concisely reveal their contents. The first chapter, “From Laventille to Camp Wo-Chi-Ca,” discusses Miss Primus’ life from her birth in Trinidad through her working as a dance counselor at a rural New Jersey camp (Camp Wo-Chi-Ca) in the early 1940s. The social environment at the camp supports the interracial bonding that is at the core of much of her future life and work. It is here where she enters a circle of left-wing artists who help to shape American culture in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. However, while artistically invigorating, these associations will later cause her problems. The chapter titled “A Life in Dance” then takes us through Miss Primus’s earliest days as a dancer and choreographer. The third chapter, “African Transformations,” takes us on her life- and art-changing trips to Africa, while the next chapter, “Teaching, Traveling, and the FBI,” talks of the triumphs and travails of touring, including some of the consequences of her earlier associations. The fifth and sixth chapters, “Trinidad Communities” and “Return to Africa,” take us back home and back to the Motherland with “Mna” prior to her embarking on her innovative interdisciplinary (before the concept was popular) pursuit of formal higher education in the seventh chapter, “The PhD.”

“The Turn to Teaching and Return to the Stage,” “Academic Trials and Triumphs,” and “Transmitting the Work,” the eighth through tenth chapters, reveal both the external and complex internal challenges of this gifted teaching artist. The final chapter, “Barbados: Return to the Sea,” gives us a sense of Miss Primus transitioning to yet another phase or form of life, a transcending, rather than the ending of her life in death.

Although it may have provided a slightly more traditionally linear reading experience, I am glad that I resisted the urge to preview the book (the life) by reading the concisely detailed “Appendix I: Pearl Primus Timeline.” Instead, I participated in the loving literary *pas de deux* that the Schwartzes penned.

The eleven chapters of the book take the reader chronologically from Dr. Primus' beginnings in Trinidad and then New York, through her rise as a modern and ethnic dance luminary; numerous pilgrimages throughout North America, Africa and other parts of the world; her turmoil with the Jim Crow South, the FBI and the oft-times fickle world of academe; and finally to her reconnection with higher roots in Barbados. However Peggy and Murray Schwartz craft the journey as a dance, often in somewhat circular patterns peppered with exuberant leaps of lush details reminiscent of Miss Primus' signature dance moves. Early on, my penchant for the traditional made the periodic repetition of certain facts tedious. However, like participants in various religious rituals that Dr. Primus experienced across cultures, I was lost in the dance, ushered in by the palpable love and respect that the authors have for Pearl Primus –her life, her legacy.

Peggy and Murray Schwartz seamlessly pass the reader from one partner to the other, almost undetectably going back and forth between each other's personal narrative voice. Several times their detailed descriptions of many of Miss Primus' dances made me want to leap out of my seat and start moving, or simply to burst out in applause. They do not rely solely on their own imagery, however. Throughout the book there are multiple excerpts from Primus' own writings. Her words dance –even her scholarly writing. The following passage from the book is from her dissertation:

Then I saw her. Zo Bundu came pulsing like a million hearts and arteries beneath the calm discipline of feminine strength. The patina of her sculptured head and headdress created strange shadows around her austere eyes. The carved rolls around her neck seemed to move softly like ocean swells (p. 165).

Besides challenging gender norms and stereotypical perceptions of beauty, Ms. Primus challenged social and cultural norms, even within her own “subcultures.” She did not limit her focus to the African Diaspora, but rather embraced “transculturalism” before the term existed and at a time when the concept was unpopular in most circles. Both a grandfather and her first husband were Jewish. Unlike many Black artists/activists of her era, she celebrated the multiple cultures that make up this country and the world. While some might challenge their “right” to do so, it is fitting that her friends and former colleagues Peggy and Murray Schwartz have produced this tribute to this precious Pearl -*The Dance Claimed Me: a Biography of Pearl Primus*. Yes! – the book claimed me.