

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

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In 1896, Ada Overton Walker, a dancer, actress and singer, joined Bob Cole's All Stock Theater Company, a theatrical training school and stock company. Well-known for her dancing, she performed with the company for two years before joining the famous African American opera singer Sissieretta Jones's Black Patti Troubadours.¹ This proved a radical career choice for her, given the negative perceptions surrounding women, particularly black women, in the theatre

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

Attending dances as an enslaved woman was inherently a form of resistance because it put women's bodies at further risk than it did men's, further stressing the importance of the activity in their lives. Planters gave passes to attend dances more frequently to men than to women, meaning that women were much less likely to have passes when attending parties. Due to this, it places

bodies of women were more exploited, used and controlled. This was due to both women's actual and imagined reproductive labour as well as their unique forms of bodily suffering, most commonly, their sexual exploitation that distinguished their lives from men's. By sneaking and

were established. The term came to mean a pleasure house which would signify either "a bawdy house or house for dancing, drinking and gamblin." ⁴⁵ For dances performed embodied the

images and activities that the middle-class was trying to steer away from. Therefore, we see

dances, and dancing becoming an arena for class conflict and a source of tension within the black

community. Whether ⁴⁶ ~~the~~ ⁴⁷ ~~the~~ ⁴⁸ ~~the~~ ⁴⁹ ~~the~~ ⁵⁰ ~~the~~ ⁵¹ ~~the~~ ⁵² ~~the~~ ⁵³ ~~the~~ ⁵⁴ ~~the~~ ⁵⁵ ~~the~~ ⁵⁶ ~~the~~ ⁵⁷ ~~the~~ ⁵⁸ ~~the~~ ⁵⁹ ~~the~~ ⁶⁰ ~~the~~ ⁶¹ ~~the~~ ⁶² ~~the~~ ⁶³ ~~the~~ ⁶⁴ ~~the~~ ⁶⁵ ~~the~~ ⁶⁶ ~~the~~ ⁶⁷ ~~the~~ ⁶⁸ ~~the~~ ⁶⁹ ~~the~~ ⁷⁰ ~~the~~ ⁷¹ ~~the~~ ⁷² ~~the~~ ⁷³ ~~the~~ ⁷⁴ ~~the~~ ⁷⁵ ~~the~~ ⁷⁶ ~~the~~ ⁷⁷ ~~the~~ ⁷⁸ ~~the~~ ⁷⁹ ~~the~~ ⁸⁰ ~~the~~ ⁸¹ ~~the~~ ⁸² ~~the~~ ⁸³ ~~the~~ ⁸⁴ ~~the~~ ⁸⁵ ~~the~~ ⁸⁶ ~~the~~ ⁸⁷ ~~the~~ ⁸⁸ ~~the~~ ⁸⁹ ~~the~~ ⁹⁰ ~~the~~ ⁹¹ ~~the~~ ⁹² ~~the~~ ⁹³ ~~the~~ ⁹⁴ ~~the~~ ⁹⁵ ~~the~~ ⁹⁶ ~~the~~ ⁹⁷ ~~the~~ ⁹⁸ ~~the~~ ⁹⁹ ~~the~~ ¹⁰⁰ ~~the~~ ¹⁰¹ ~~the~~ ¹⁰² ~~the~~ ¹⁰³ ~~the~~ ¹⁰⁴ ~~the~~ ¹⁰⁵ ~~the~~ ¹⁰⁶ ~~the~~ ¹⁰⁷ ~~the~~ ¹⁰⁸ ~~the~~ ¹⁰⁹ ~~the~~ ¹¹⁰ ~~the~~ ¹¹¹ ~~the~~ ¹¹² ~~the~~ ¹¹³ ~~the~~ ¹¹⁴ ~~the~~ ¹¹⁵ ~~the~~ ¹¹⁶ ~~the~~ ¹¹⁷ ~~the~~ ¹¹⁸ ~~the~~ ¹¹⁹ ~~the~~ ¹²⁰ ~~the~~ ¹²¹ ~~the~~ ¹²² ~~the~~ ¹²³ ~~the~~ ¹²⁴ ~~the~~ ¹²⁵ ~~the~~ ¹²⁶ ~~the~~ ¹²⁷ ~~the~~ ¹²⁸ ~~the~~ ¹²⁹ ~~the~~ ¹³⁰ ~~the~~ ¹³¹ ~~the~~ ¹³² ~~the~~ 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as black women began to make careers out of dancing and performing, they also began to advocate for the recognition that working in the entertainment industry did not detract from their womanhood.

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

The Harlem Renaissance allowed black women to become instruments of culture, even if they didn't see themselves as such. Take Florence Mills, known for her dancing in

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