Theatre Survey (2024), **65**, 208–226
doi:10.1017/S0040557424000231

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Recruiting Places: Pearl Primus's Plans for Global Activism through Community-Engaged Dance Theatre

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In the summer of 1944, Black modern dancer Pearl Primus searched for authenticity. Over the past year, she had achieved critical success for her modern dance choreography that protested racial injustice in the South, informed by a leftist political mission. However, she thought something was missing. She explained to *Dance Magazine*, "I had done dances about sharecroppers and lynchings without ever having been close to such things."[1] In search of that missing component, Primus traveled from New York City, her home since she was a toddler, to the US South. A budding anthropologist, she went to live among Southern communities as a way to retool her protest choreography and make it more authentic. Unbeknownst to them, Southern community members would be recruited by her to provide inspiration for her performances and the leftist political stance that fueled those works. In identifying authentic expressive practices of the South through her anthropological practice, transferring what she found to her choreography, and then performing that repertoire on New York stages, she would further develop her ability to instill in Northern audiences the necessity of leftist activism.

Slightly under five years later, Primus embarked on a different research trip. With the financial aid of a Rosenwald fellowship, she traveled to Nigeria, Congo, Ghana, Angola, the Cameroons, Liberia, and Senegal for eighteen months.[2] Similar to the motivation for her 1944 trip to the South, she would use ethnographic tools to study dance and expressive practices. Primus still hoped to learn what she considered to be authentic movement. However, she no longer sought to use that movement to enrich existing protest dances. Instead, she planned to teach dancers in the United States practices she would learn in Africa. She and her American dancers would continue these dance forms on concert and community stages nationwide. During her stay in Africa, Primus filled her diary with stories of the acceptance she felt on the continent and the transformative effect that acceptance had on her.[3] When she arrived back in the United States, she turned

Many thanks to Susan Manning for her thoughtful feedback on the direction of this article. Thank you to Claudia Kinahan, Jonathan Rizzardi, and Tara Rodman for engaging with this research and offering comments at various stages.

her career to focus on choreographic representations of dance traditions she had encountered across Africa.

What was Primus doing between these two trips? Scholarship on the seminal figure in modern dance either focuses on her early protest pieces and impact on racial representation in the art form or her post-Rosenwald fellowship works that centered African traditions. Susan Manning and Richard C. Green have shown how Primus challenged modern dance expectations of race and political engagement with her protest dances of 1943–4.[4] Rebekah Kowal has demonstrated how Primus's African trip informed a new direction in her career aligned with the civil rights movement and premised on ideas of the "effectiveness" of choreography to bring about transformation, especially in ritual contexts.[5] Farah Jasmine Griffin bridges these two periods of Primus's career by positing that Afrocentricity was always a part of her aesthetic even if not labeled as such.[6] These studies of Primus, however, do not address her conspicuous slowing of creative output between 1944 and 1949 or the significant changes in her praxes of ethnography, community engagement, and political dance during that period. For an artist as important to the history of modern dance and performance ethnography as Primus, this gap in scholarly documentation triggers the question of what was happening that compelled her to change from a dedication to performed ethnography in the South to a commitment to ethnography across Africa. The stakes of attending to this gap, I suggest, lay in the act of rehistoricizing a key figure in performance history in such a way that uncovers the political turmoil that contributed to a quiet moment in her career. I show how sometimes the seemingly innocuous durations in which an artist appears to plateau can obscure rigorous (re)negotiations of how to make and fund performance.

In this article, I turn to archival material to examine the political and artistic challenges Primus faced during the gap in major choreographic output in her career between 1944 and 1949. Specifically, I analyze a proposal Primus crafted for a community-engaged dance theatre troupe during this period. This troupe would include Northern Black stage performers and Southern Black community members whom she would recruit from local churches. The Northern and Southern factions would unite for an overarching goal of advancing democracy around the globe, engaging in an effort akin to what Sonja Arsham Kuftinec has described as an "energy of mutual exchange and transformation" in community-based theatre.[7] Primus continually rearticulated and retooled this plan from the time she arrived home from the South in 1944 to her application for a Rosenwald fellowship that would commence in December of 1948. I demonstrate how her unfulfilled dream for this Black dance theatre troupe reveals the ways in which she navigated the financial and political complexities of leftist dance and international engagement. Those navigations, in turn, explicate how the changing landscapes of leftism and modern dance during the 1940s impacted the opportunities and professional viability available to artists.

My analysis of Primus's differing ways of working with communities and the modes of political engagement they entailed builds on the work of Joanna Dee Das, Rebecca Kastleman, and Anthea Kraut. These scholars have shown how Primus's contemporary Black dancer-anthropologists Katherine Dunham and Zora Neale Hurston (both also winners of Rosenwald fellowships) negotiated the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557424000231 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fault lines of Black performance, anthropology, political engagement, and pressures from funders or producers. As I argue here, Primus's transition from a praxis of performed ethnography to a proposal for community engagement enabled her to articulate a distinct border politics that spoke to her political and financial pressures as the landscapes for leftism and for modern dance changed. Her shifting, yet persistent, attempts to form a community-engaged dance theatre troupe paved the way for her 1949 career redirection to focus on Africa. Further, in answering the question of what Primus was doing during a significant lacuna in documentation of her career, I provide a new understanding of the relationship between transnational leftism and modern dance or dance theatre.

I use the term "dance theatre" to describe Primus's intended troupe because she vacillated among the labels of dance, music, and theatrical performance. Similarly, she alternated among those genres when describing the findings of her 1944 ethnographic research trip to the South that ignited her desire to form this troupe. Those vacillations, I suggest, elucidate her theorization of Black quotidian performance. For her new troupe, she hoped to harness Southern Black community members' everyday expressive practices, especially those from church services, when training her new recruits in techniques from the concert stage. Her generic slippages demonstrate her theorization of Black Southern church services as multidisciplinary performance sites. The multidisciplinarity of her proposed troupe illuminated the technical range she identified in her Southern recruits based on her ethnographic experience.

Primus's shifting genre descriptions for her troupe also demonstrate how she envisioned it in response to external political and funding pressures. Her descriptions of the troupe's primary artistic medium varied based on her audience. For Black publications, she underscored the musical element of the group, explicitly building on the momentum of Paul Robeson's and Lena Horne's advances in music, fame, and racial justice.[8] Tellingly, she consistently emphasized the synthesis of music, meaning, and movement for Black writers, implying a connection between her troupe and musical theatre or revue productions that produced celebrities. For dance periodicals, she highlighted technical innovation in movement, setting herself apart from the established repertoires of Dunham and Hurston.[9] Engaging Southern community members' quotidian expressive practices was a means through which that technique could be accessed by the field of modern dance. In a general letter to funders, Primus combined these approaches. She focused on the novelty of her project and the importance of training a dance group, situating dance as the vehicle through which she could contribute knowledge of African diasporic culture, Southern expressive practices, and dance innovation.[10] Her varying descriptions of the troupe, however, all neatly fit into how 1940s modern dance stakeholders wrote of the burgeoning genre of dance theatre.[11] In attending to her troupe as "dance theatre," I highlight how that hybrid form particularly enabled Primus to relate her project to a variety of potential supporters.

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Primus danced to ignite social change in her early career. In 1941, when an undergraduate in Hunter College, she began dancing at New Dance Group, a leftist modern dance collective on New York City's Lower East Side. She performed on major

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concert stages and in communist rallies in New York with this group. New Dance Group's motto that dance was a weapon in the class struggle permeated her training and choreography. At the same time as her early training with New Dance Group, she performed in an ensemble of Trinidadian dance artist La Belle Rosette (stage name of Beryl McBurnie) in Caribbean-themed concerts. She brought these modes of training into her choreographic work by building a unique take on modern dance technique enhanced with inspiration from blues and African dance. Issues of class, race, and diasporic identity across intra- and international borders coalesced in Primus's artistic viewpoint.

As a key dancer and then teacher in New Dance Group, Primus was steeped in leftist politics. The sphere of leftism in which she was entrenched during her early training was loosely demarcated. As Doug Rossinow explains, the left-liberal bloc from the 1880s through the 1940s broadly included cultural critics and artists, activists, politicians, and workers with sympathies towards leftist principles of social reform and liberal politics critical of capitalism.[12] The Popular Front of the 1930s widened the reach of this left-liberal bloc by bringing communists into significant overlap with liberals and leftists. These seemingly disparate people and groups shared a common critique of capitalism and Fascism as well as support for racial equity. According to Rossinow, "a transformative concept of social progress . . . opened a door between liberal reformers and left-wing radicals."[13] It was this widened Popular Front leftist bloc inclusive of communist sympathizers in which Primus lived and worked during her early career.

Primus embarked on her first solo recital in 1943 and met immediate success. Critics particularly remarked upon her pieces focused on Southern injustices, especially her solos *Hard Time Blues* (1943) about the plight of a Black Southern sharecropper (Fig. 1) and *Strange Fruit* (1943) about a white woman at the scene of a lynching, confronting the atrocity in which she had been complicit. While her modern dance career was taking off and she made her Broadway debut, she began studying anthropology.[14] Her desire to imbue her Southern-themed dances with authenticity enabled her to put her new anthropological ambitions to work. She would perform ethnographic research in the South as a way to infuse her critically acclaimed dances about the region with authentic movement, meaning, and political charge. That authenticity, she hoped, would ultimately aid her in garnering support from Northern leftist audiences.

Artistic methods and political methodologies were inextricably connected for Primus during the 1940s. As she was preparing for that first trip in the summer of 1944 to Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and South Carolina, she used interviews about it as a means to articulate a transnational politics.[15] This transnationalism fit within her early 1940s context that had already witnessed the far reach of the Popular Front and its allied groups such as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which comprised a transnational working class built from the migration of workers from North America, Europe, Russia, and Asia to US metropolises.[16] The CIO might best be described, per Michael Denning's seminal study of leftist culture during the twentieth century, as "proletarian globe-hopping."[17] During World War II, the global reach of the Popular Front and CIO entailed support for the war effort. Primus aligned with the CIO and was a key presence at their events. In a photograph from this period, Primus can be

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Figure 1. Pearl Primus dances *Hard Time Blues* (1943) at Café Society, a downtown New York City nightclub, as her liberal, integrated audience members watch her plea on behalf of Southern Black sharecroppers, 1940s. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. *Photo:* Rosalie Gwathmey. © 2024 Estate of Rosalie Gwathmey / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

Figure 2. Pearl Primus, military veterans, and union members discuss the war effort and raise money for the CIO's War Relief Committee, a program to provide wages to laborers and children in countries engaged in the fight against Fascism, 1940s. American Dance Festival Archives.

seen at a CIO event, fundraising for the war effort with military veterans and CIO members (Fig. 2). For Primus, though, the war effort and the loose leftist, communist, and liberal bloc in support of it could not be divorced from a fight for racial justice in the United States.

When discussing her plans in an interview in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, to go on an undercover ethnographic research trip to the South and comply with Jim Crow, she stated, "I'm militant and I don't tolerate racial abuse, but there is food for me in the South and I'm not going to let my personal scruples stand in the way this time. I'm going to comply with all their Nazi-like rules because I'd hate to let people know who I am."[18] She set Jim Crow in line with Fascism abroad by comparing racial injustice in the South to abuses perpetrated by Nazis in Europe. Her global view and comparisons of racism to Nazism connected her ethnographic research trip to the larger cause of World War II. She would come face to face with the atrocities of Fascism in a way aligned with soldiers at war abroad.

Primus also put this political stance directly into her choreography. Prior to her trip to the South, she premiered *Our Spring Will Come*, a piece set to a poem titled *The Underground* by Langston Hughes. Published in the communist periodical *New Masses*, Hughes's poem, dedicated to "anti-Fascists" in Europe and Asia, used graphic language of violence evocative of Jim Crow and contemporary injustices abroad to connect the anti-Fascist struggles of those persecuted by, in Hughes's words, "Nazis, fascists, headsmen / Appeasers, liars, quislings."[19] Primus combined Hughes's graphic poetry of torture and wrongful deaths with intense movement evocative of such violence.[20] Just as Hughes's words evoked World War II and its centralization of Europe, Primus's invocations of global causes in interviews or onstage often entailed an emphasis on the fight against Nazism in Europe as a rallying point to which other efforts for justice could be attached.

In connecting her trip to the South as well as her choreographic oeuvre with the fight against Nazism, Primus clarified her attention to leftism transnationally as well as to the Double Victory (Double V) campaign. Started in an African American newspaper, the Double V campaign linked the war against Fascism abroad with that against racism, specifically Jim Crow, in the United States. The Double V campaign fueled African American activists' work to draw on the energy of wartime mobilization and its national rhetoric of democracy as a means to fight racial injustice.[21] In addition to articulating her support of the war effort and domestic struggles against racism, Primus's use of the Double V campaign allowed her to position her protest works as immediately relevant to her integrated, liberal modern dance audiences. For example, when performing at the 92nd Street Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association, the site of her solo choreographic premiere and many subsequent performances, she showcased her political and artistic stance for an audience of wealthy white New Yorkers, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe (many of whom were part of the CIO), Black Americans, and an interracial crowd of artists. Critics from dance periodicals, New York's major newspapers, communist publications, and Black newspapers all reviewed her recitals. Primus impressed upon critics the global implications of her work and the Double V campaign in general. She asserted that, in addition to Black Americans, she wanted her dances to "apply to Jews, Turks, Russians and Indians," because to be human "is no individual problem. It is a world problem,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557424000231 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 3. Pearl Primus poses as a sharecropper, 1940s. American Dance Festival Archives. *Photo:* Louis Melançon.

a wide and far-reaching thing."[22] As an artist who danced on the fault lines of modern dance, Black, and leftist networks for funding,[23] she knew how to render her work both particular enough to be politically urgent and general enough to not alienate any critics or audience members.

Upon arriving in the South, Primus visited churches to harvest authentic creative inspiration. As she told a writer for the *Afro-American* newspaper after explaining her choice to go "incognito" for the trip, "I've studied churches [in New York City] and could get my material from them, but I want more authenticity."[24] She continued, "I want to base some dances on their actions at services."[25] She would attend church services in disguise, analyze the congregation's practices, and then take some of what she saw in the field site into her dances for the concert stage. A portrait series from this period shows how she understood sharecroppers' dress and demeanor (Fig. 3). Her plan resonated with what D. Soyini Madison has delineated as performed ethnography, or experiences from the field site transferred to the stage.[26] This method of performed ethnography implied that, for Primus's agenda, the Southerners did not necessarily need to fight injustice themselves. Rather, their authentic creative material would provide her with means to compel her Northern audiences to recognize and combat racism in the South as part of the larger effort against Fascism during World War II. In other words, the South might have been her recruiting place for creative inspiration, but the North was the location in which she would attempt to transform audiences into activists.

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Primus's emphasis on authenticity resonated with the negotiations of authenticity by Hurston and Dunham, her fellow Black dancer-anthropologists, in staging their ethnographic findings. Kastleman and Kraut have demonstrated how Hurston maneuvered through ideas of authenticity in her ethnographic performance work as she either sought to present accurately performance from her field sites on New York stages, or used the trope of authenticity as a marketing ploy, respectively.[27] Dunham, in contrast, used a process VèVè Clark has termed "research-to-performance," in which she recreated through her dance company memories of dances witnessed during her anthropology field visits.[28] Dunham also created her own dance technique, which, as Das points out, reimagined dance traditions for both modern dance and the regional forms she studied through ethnographic methods.[29] Authenticity for Primus was a characteristic of a given community that led to a deeper understanding of their history and contemporary struggles. She feared that the Southerners would not "act naturally" and reveal that authentic movement if they knew of her modern dance stardom.[30] The authenticity she would gain from observing the Southerners and then put into her dances would render her protest works against Jim Crow even more poignant for her Northern audiences.

Primus's hope for authenticity directed both her use of performed ethnography and of the Double V campaign. Performed ethnography operated as a way for her to enter the battlefield of the Jim Crow South, find performance material that spoke to racial histories and contemporary activism, and use that in her dances that would resonate with struggles for democracy around the world. In Primus's praxis of performed ethnography, neither the research process nor the final performance involved explicitly discussing her creative procedures or products with the people of her field site. In utilizing the Double V campaign as her mode of activism, she connected the South to injustice abroad but did not need to engage community members from either locale as direct contributors to her artistic process.

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After expressing high hopes for her trip and the ways in which it would enable her to connect the fight against Jim Crow to the struggle against Fascism abroad, Primus came home to New York City bitterly disappointed. She spoke to numerous Black newspapers and dance publications in disparaging ways about poor Black and white Southerners she had encountered. She emphasized a severe poverty and lack of recreational activities in the South, reporting that everything had been "ugly to [her] there,"[31] conveying her displeasure with the aesthetics she encountered. Whereas she had hoped to use this trip to increase the authenticity of her dances about lynching or sharecropping, she made no changes to those dances after returning to New York. Although she choreographed new dances on Southern themes, her choreography did not significantly differ from that before her trip. Reviewers continued most often to reference the Southern-themed pieces she had created before heading South. In contrast to her pretrip intentions, her anthropology remained disconnected from her creative output. In fact, in the many interviews she gave about her experiences in the South, she rarely mentioned ways in which she would utilize her findings in her dances.

Primus took her disappointment in the South to the office of the *Daily Worker*, a communist publication, later in the summer of 1944. She thought that the *Daily*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557424000231 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Worker administrators in New York City must have been unaware of the true severity of Jim Crow. The *Daily Worker* responded to her request to increase efforts to fight Jim Crow by saying they could not do so because the country was at war.[32] It is unsurprising that the *Daily Worker* rejected Primus's plea because, as Erick S. McDuffie explains, the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) "officially opposed the Double V slogan on the grounds that it disrupted national unity for winning the war."[33] The *Daily Worker*'s response to Primus thus elucidated the Double V campaign's limitations. Connections could be made among Nazism in Europe, Fascism around the world, and Jim Crow in the US South, but large-scale action and direct aid from communist organizations were focused on Europe.

Primus grew doubtful about the extent to which communist organizations in the United States or transnational leftist networks actually helped Black Americans in comparison to other racial or national groups.[34] She was not alone in sensing the inadequacies of the Double V campaign as well as of the CPUSA. As Dayo F. Gore argues, the Double V campaign "signaled the early shifting tide against black communists."[35] Both the Double V campaign, with its reliance on the war in Europe, and the CPUSA, in its rejection of that campaign, fostered a greater attention of their followers to the war in Europe than to that waged against racism in the South. After her run-in with the *Daily Worker* Primus gradually ceased her use of Double V rhetoric and its particular way of dismissing national borders while inadvertently centering Europe. She would later count her experience with the publication as her reason for growing disillusioned with the CPUSA,[36] though the veracity of that claim was questionable due to her continued connections with communist organizations. Whether or not her encounter with the *Daily Worker* caused her to rescind her alignment with CPUSA, it did spark a decentralization of Europe in her activism.

In addition to questioning her political stance, Primus grew ambivalent about the relationship between her anthropology and choreography. She no longer desired to find dance material in the South and perform it herself in the North. One moment from her 1944 trip, though, gave her hope for future engagement with Southern communities. While in the South, she had encountered a 95-year-old woman singing "Go Down Moses." This woman, according to Primus, shared that "moderns" in the North, as the woman termed it, sang spirituals "all wrong."[37] When describing the encounter, Primus went on to explain that "the people in the South are begging for education, and waiting for someone to awaken them to their own strength and potentialities."[38] Now, following her trip, she desired to return to harness the performances of community members, such as that elderly woman, but to do so while training that community in codified performance techniques of the North. Whereas in that 1944 trip she planned to transfer expressive practices she saw from the field site to the stage, she now hoped to work with community members, teaching them and then cocreating new material. She would not need to bring material from Southern church services or quotidian gatherings to the North to convince Northern leftists of the urgency of fighting Jim Crow. The Southerners themselves could do so by channeling their everyday expressive practices into Primus's choreography alongside Northern stage performers. In order to form this troupe and use it to achieve democracy, she needed money.

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In 1946, Primus wrote to funders about a proposed return trip to the South and a dance theatre troupe that would innovate a process for community-engaged performance. She explained her purpose "to continue to express the history and culture of the Negro people through the medium of dance."[39] She listed four objectives: (1) study African culture; (2) trace connections between Black expressive practices around the world and US American folk dance and song, through visits to revivalist churches; (3) create dance pieces that express contemporary emotions of Black folks in the South; and (4) train a performance group using performers and materials she found in Southern communities and stage performers from New York City.[40] After asking for financial assistance, Primus concluded the letter, "I am the only one working on it in my field of dance," separating herself from Hurston and Dunham.[41] In distinguishing her work from Hurston's and Dunham's, Primus made space for herself in the fields of dance and anthropology by forming a touring company that would use Northern Black artists to engage Southern Black community members through performance to achieve national democracy. In other words, community engagement was her unique method that would set her apart from Hurston and Dunham.

Primus had been planning since the fall of 1944 to fundraise $2,000 for her, her Northern artists, and a camera person to go to the South and organize a twenty-five-person chorus.[42] She sought Black conductor Dean Dixon, who served as guest conductor for the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, to lead the musical portion of the group; local Southern churches would function as what she termed the "recruiting places" for community performers.[43] The group's rehearsals and performances would not be a way of bringing art to underresourced areas or rehearsing for social change, as in prominent models of community-engaged performance. Rather, in embodying an amalgamation of regionally specific Afro-diasporic practices channeled through Primus's choreography, the group would raise awareness of the horrors of Jim Crow and the necessity of fighting injustice.

To raise money, Primus enlisted the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), a leftist civil rights organization with links to the CPUSA and international anti-Fascist struggles.[44] SNYC rooted itself in Black cultural production of the US South.[45] It utilized the Double V campaign in its efforts, and saw US-based issues of enfranchisement, labor, and racial justice as connected to "global struggles against fascism, colonialism, and white supremacy."[46] Primus adopted the SNYC's focus on the US South and African diaspora in global efforts against Fascism and colonialism while avoiding its use of the Double V campaign and its frequent, even if inadvertent, attention to Europe. SNYC's headquarters in Birmingham, Alabama,[47] helped her to show to her potential Northern sponsors the possibilities in the South for activist causes. SNYC's structure fit Primus's goals because of its allowance for women leaders. According to McDuffie, the SNYC "served as a key, wartime site where black women radicals cultivated black left feminism, forged a community of black women radicals, and built the southern black Popular front."[48] SNYC's powerful women leaders would serve as evidence that their members would be willing to support Primus's artistic leadership. In other words, she

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could prove to potential Northern donors that, through SNYC, she had access to a Southern community ready to be engaged. This was crucial because she had already told Northern reporters that Southerners were wary of visitors from the North, and she had painted a dismal picture of the region.[49]

Primus's use of SNYC in her fundraising and publicity efforts while avoiding its Double V rhetoric signaled a new political agenda of Black internationalism for her. The end of World War II in 1945 also provided an apt opportunity for her to discontinue her references to Europe in interviews or in dances. As Tanisha Ford explains, Black internationalism of this period "encourage[d] a global lens on the oppression of Negroes throughout the African diaspora and the larger structures of capitalism and imperialism that united all non-white people in struggle for self-determination."[50] Altering the particular kind of transnationalism implied in the Double V campaign, Primus situated the transnationalism of her new campaign as that of the Afro-diasporic routes across both intra- and international borders. Engaging Southern communities was a way for her both to articulate a distinct border politics, by resituating transnational leftism to center the African diaspora, and simultaneously to prove the necessity of her troupe's engagement of those communities.

Instead of describing her proposed troupe or existing protest dances against Jim Crow in relation to Nazism in Europe, as she had previously done, Primus explained her choreography and contemporary political issues in terms of Africa. For example, when speaking of the African lineages in her work, she explained to a writer for the *Chicago Defender*:

> I see Africa as the continent of strength; it is a place with ancient and powerful civilizations, civilizations wrecked and destroyed by the slave-seekers. I know an Africa that gave the world the iron on which it moves, an Africa of nations, dynasties, cultures, languages, great migrations, powerful movements, slavery, competition, communism —all that makes life itself. This strength, this past, I try to get into my dances.[51]

In Primus's remarks to the *Defender*, capitalism and imperialism tied her dances to the plights of the African continent and a capacious understanding of the African diaspora. Her emphasis on Africa aligned her with what Penny M. Von Eschen has called the "diaspora politics" of the 1940s: as Von Eschen explains about this period, "with the demise of European hegemony and the emergence of strong anti-colonial movements on the African continent, African Americans claimed a shared history and argued that independent African nations would help their struggles for political, economic, and social rights in the United States."[52] Primus described the Africa on which her work was based as steeped in a long history of the problems and possibilities most urgent in her contemporary geopolitics. Issues of disparate nations, cultures, and languages within a continent spoke to continuing concerns from World War II of Fascism overtaking disparate regions, as well as the struggles for self-determination among African nations working toward decolonization. Powerful movements and enslavement evoked Primus's activism against Jim Crow. Her commitment to leftist politics worldwide spoke to efforts against the competition of capitalism. In turning her focus to Africa, then, Primus could take part in diaspora politics. In particular, an attention to decolonial efforts across

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the African continent enabled Primus to link her fight against racism in the South to that against colonization in African nations. It is in this turn to African politics that crucial groundwork for Primus's later career focus on African dance manifests.

Even as her plan entailed an intranational synthesis through performance and an international unification through consciousness raising, Primus divided the North and South when describing her intended troupe. When speaking of her plan to return to the South and form the new group, she would often begin by telling her interviewers how horrible she found the South to be. For example, when speaking with *Dance Magazine*, she started the segment of her interview on the South—a common practice for her—by describing a lack of food in the region, which caused her a vitamin deficiency, and focusing on the extreme poverty and lack of physical health in the area.[53] Or, painting a grim picture for the *Afro-American*, she recalled, "the poverty in the South is unbelievable, and the shacks in which both the colored and whites live are equally bad. The colored hate and fear the whites with intensity, and vice versa."[54] Crucially, in this comment for the *Afro-American*, she not only emphasized poverty and injustice in the South but specifically did so in a way that underscored a tension between Black and white community members.

In implicitly addressing interracial tension when dividing the North and South, Primus was able to instill concern in her likely funders—upper-class, liberal, leftist, or communist Black and white activists or dance patrons—that the South was a dangerous place far different from the North. More important, if it was not ameliorated, the South's racial tension could cross regional divides and come to the North. As Ford shows, Northern politicians and activists sometimes made distinctions between racism in the North and South as a means to fundraise for their causes, drawing on donors who feared that stories of racial violence in the South would become a reality in the North if action was not taken.[55] In that mindset, money and, in the case of Primus's plan, artistic training from the North could transform the South and promote harmony and democracy across the nation. As Primus went on to explain to her *Afro-American* interviewer, after advertising her plan to return to the South and organize a group with Northern artists, "We simply can't forget about our people in the South. They need education, culture, and strength to fight for democracy, and we artists in the North have got to give it to them."[56] Her Northern funders could aid democracy and racial justice in the South while also quelling the chances of racial unrest in the North if they helped her to use Northern artists to train Southerners in dance, theatre, and music. Community-engaged performance was an apt vehicle for Primus's mission. Aside from her shifting views on choreography and anthropology, it was more advantageous for her to advertise a project of community engagement that would facilitate peace than her previous project of performing an authentic portrayal of Southerners' practices. She could narrate the Southern political and cultural landscape in ways that would convince Northerners of the need to support her work to engage those Southern communities, and use that engagement to promote peaceful democracy across the nation and beyond.

Primus provided her potential sponsors a sense of artistic accomplishment in the North and the racial uplift that those successful artists could bring to Southerners. She stressed the need to instill pride in Southern communities by criticizing their existing points of regional pride. For instance, she remarked to the *New York*

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Amsterdam News that in Charleston, South Carolina, "leading citizens" reflected "a sad commentary on our people" by taking her on a tour of landmarks from enslavement "as a matter of pride."[57] Although the Charleston citizens' pride could have been a pride in resilience rather than in the landmarks themselves, Primus used it as an example of a desperate need to give Southerners a new cultural product of their own in which they could be proud—something she could provide by engaging them in her troupe's Northern artistry. Part of her work of engaging Southern communities would be uplifting them in a way based on Northern ideas of propriety. This emphasis on community engagement for racial uplift helped Primus not to alienate potential liberal funders with her typically more staunch communist politics. The cultural education and pride achieved through her work would coalesce Black Americans of the North and South into a shared community.

Primus's view of the "community" in "community engagement" was grounded in a transnational mission for democracy and anti-Fascism that was geographically located within the African diaspora. Although she wished to unify her Northern and Southern performers, she did not minimize their differences in her discussions of the intended group. Instead, she drew attention to their regional differences and related expressive practices. The group would overcome these differences by training the Southerners in performance techniques for the concert stage and uniting for a political goal. An experience of the African diaspora and a dedication to justice would bind the community created by the troupe. This view of community as experiential resonated with what Nadine George-Graves has explained as that of Black women artists Barbara Ann Teer, Ntozake Shange, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar. For those women, according to George-Graves, "[t]he African Diaspora becomes not a site of dispersion but rather a means to congregate. It is an experiential foundation for creating societies committed to redressive justice, camaraderie, social interrogation, and change."[58] Primus's performers would come together through their experience of a regionally diverse African diaspora dedicated to justice across borders. That community, though, was riddled with power dynamics consequent to the actions Primus needed to take in order to try to secure funding for the project.

Primus also sought support for her project from modern dance producers. The stakes of emphasizing how community-engaged performance necessitated, and served, codified techniques were central in her solicitation of modern dance supporters. Modern dance faced a financial crisis during the 1940s due to a decrease in its funding structures. Stakeholders sought to claim a unique place for the art form in contrast to musical theatre and the growing genre of dance theatre.[59] These leaders, many of whom had sway in funding sources Primus utilized, argued that technique was of utmost importance. In order to appeal to those supporters and prove her dance theatre troupe to be a contribution to the field, Primus worded her project proposals and descriptions of Southern performance in terms of, what she called, "tremendous technique, imagination, agility, and speed."[60] Writing in *Dance Magazine* at the same time she drafted her letter to funders, Primus described a Southern church service:

> On my trip South of the Mason and Dixon line in 1944 I discovered in the Baptist churches the voice of the drum—not in any instrument but in the throat of the preacher. I found the dynamic sweep of movement through space (so characteristic

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> of Africa) in the motions of the minister and the congregation alike. I felt in the sermons the crashing thunder-dances of Africa and I was hypnotized by the pounding rhythm of song.[61]

Primus's *Dance Magazine* article worked to assuage potential sponsors' concerns that her troupe's use of music and narrative rendered it too far from modern dance. She described a preacher's speech in terms of his throat, emphasizing the physical technique of sound. She explained the preacher's and congregation's movement as though detailing formal aspects of choreography. Her affective response to a sermon neglected narrative elements that might have been present and reflected her contemporary theories of kinesthesia in modern dance.[62] In a remark that would have been acutely felt by modern dance readers anxious about the future of the art form, Primus asserted that African-descended dance forms set into relief the relatively minor role dance played in "our modern society," signaling the New York modern dance scene of her readers.[63] In addition to securing funding, Primus's rendering of Black expressive practices in terms of technique highlighted the necessity for her community-engaged process. She needed to recruit Southern community members to bring such technique into modern dance. Part of the contradictions of her plan, Primus's goal to unite Northern and Southern performers entailed an absorption of the Southerners' practices into modern dance by way of dance theatre. Her focus on modern dance technique when speaking of the South with dance publications shows how she fit her project to the assumed desires of her audience at that moment.

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Despite multiple attempts between 1944 and 1947, Primus never fulfilled her hope for the Black dance theatre troupe. There could have been several possible reasons. The FBI was following her closely. Its file on her detailed her dances based on the US South, performances at leftist rallies for racial justice, and her communist connections. The kind of work she hoped to achieve with her dance theatre troupe would have raised red flags to the FBI. Primus and those around her knew she was being surveilled. Some of her colleagues even gave interviews about her and her work. Perhaps her precarious position contributed to a lack of success in her fundraising efforts. In fact, Primus's records do not indicate whether she actually received any funding from SNYC or any other Black cultural or modern dance network. As she dedicated much effort to planning and replanning the troupe, its lack of materialization resulted in what has appeared to be a plateau or gap in her career.

Primus's continual efforts to start her border-crossing dance theatre troupe were an anomaly for her career. She was quick to discard any dance works or plans that did not meet immediate success. For example, only one dance in her 1943 choreographic debut did not receive a good review; she never performed it again. A study of her recitals and reception throughout the 1940s reveals that any of her works that did not receive critical praise were almost always immediately retired from her repertoire. Abstract modern dance solos were the only other works that she continually performed despite poor or no reviews. Her persistence in performing the abstract solos suggests that she was attendant to shifting trends in modern dance and a need to keep up with those changes.[64] She continued to present dances that did

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not receive critical uptake only when doing so could be interpreted as a way to prove her place at the forefront of modern dance.

Primus's pattern of dropping material that did not meet critical success begs the questions of why she instead persevered in her plans for the North–South dance theatre troupe, and why that persistence matters. I suggest that the stakes of Primus's continual efforts to start the troupe were tied to those of her hold on the shifting politics and aesthetics of the funding circles she pursued. Her consistent references to the intended troupe in interviews were crucial in offsetting the appearance of a career plateau to critics or producers, who impacted artists' professional viability during a time of significant change in modern dance funding. Artists working in modern dance during the 1940s did not have the ability to take a break from creative output for an extended period and still be immediately seen by stakeholders as up-to-date on the latest trends in the art form. Further, Primus's work to navigate across those changing ideals in politics and performance contributed to what has appeared in existing scholarship as a jolting turn from her focus on protest against Southern injustices to an emphasis on African dances with transformative possibilities. In examining the demands of funding dance between Primus's Southern trip and her African trip, her complex negotiations of how to make, market, and fund performance surface.

Primus fluctuated among networks for Black leftists, Black and white upper-class liberals, communists of mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds, and modern dance. Between her two research trips, as she was attempting both to start her troupe and further her career as an artist and anthropologist, the desires of each of those potential funding bodies—political or artistic organizations and their individual members—changed. Some Black leftists, liberals, and communists, including SNYC, continued to adhere to the Double V campaign. Others moved toward a Black internationalism that centered the African diaspora in its global efforts against Fascism. The efforts for decolonization in African nations played a significant role for this latter political bloc. Both factions, though, recognized the injustices of the South as integral in these worldwide efforts. In appealing to these potential supporters, Primus needed to maintain a transnational political goal that directly engaged the South. Turning to a connection between the continent of Africa and the US South enabled her to avoid a centralization of Europe and take part in the momentum among leftists for decolonization across Africa. As modern dance producers and critics increasingly favored movement technique for its own sake, Primus's narrative or representational works could have been left behind by the trend. In emphasizing that the South had a unique technical contribution to make to the field of modern dance, one that she could access by engaging Southerners in performance making, she was able to suggest a way in which her proposed troupe resonated with the cutting edge of modern dance.

Primus's shift from performed ethnography to a plan for community engagement demonstrates how she maneuvered through political and funding pressures. Her continued attempts to start the dance theatre troupe enabled her to refashion her political and aesthetic interest in the South. Each of those alterations entailed a related refashioning of how she narrated her Black Southern recruits to her Northern audiences. Community engagement functioned not only as an artistic method for Primus but also as a mechanism through which she could appeal to

the funding bodies in which she was enmeshed. Her dance theatre troupe plans during an apparently quiet duration of her career provided her with a testing ground on which she could attune herself to the desires of political and modern dance networks. They also set the stage for her work after her trip to Africa.

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After returning to the United States from Africa in 1951, Primus combined and continued methods from her projects of performed ethnography in the South and intended community-engaged dance theatre troupe. She taught at the Pearl Primus School of Primal Dance, which she had opened in 1947, and then left for her trip to Africa.[65] She built upon her performed ethnography work by teaching students dances she observed or participated in while she was in Africa. Incorporating aspects of her educational and community-focused goals from the dance theatre troupe plans, she devised many lecture demonstrations. For these events held at museum, cultural, or educational venues, Primus would narrate stories of African culture to accompany corresponding dances. In many ways, this work continued her 1944 desire to show New York audiences lived experiences from a distant region.

From 1958 through 1962, Primus proposed and started a new performance company with a nearly identical technical rationale as that of her proposed North–South dance theatre troupe. Upon the invitation of Liberian President William Tubman, she and her husband, Percival Borde, established the Konama Kende Performing Arts Center. She sought out "recruits" for the Center,[66] echoing her language for the North–South troupe. She planned to train the recruits and mold their cultural dances into conventions for the Western theatrical stage. Her work to found the center and to transfer local dances into techniques from Western concert stages fit with similar efforts across newly decolonized African nations to establish dance or theatre companies that fused local practices and Western staging conventions. For example, Senegal both declared independence and witnessed the opening of Ballet National du Senegal in 1960. Ghana gained independence in 1960; its government founded Ghana Dance Ensemble in 1962. Primus's efforts in Liberia also aligned her with an increased focus on African decolonization among Black leftists in the United States. Despite her impressive resume and resonance with similar projects in other African nations, she faced ambivalence, and sometimes scathing criticism, in Liberia for her efforts to mold local dances into standards informed by New York modern dance.[67] From the mid-1960s onward, Primus rooted her career in US higher education. At a variety of teaching positions, she passed on African and modern dance practices, her anthropological praxis, and her ways of combining the two through lecture demonstrations and performances.

It was during the seemingly uneventful duration of 1944–9 that Primus grappled with the choreographic and political methods that undergirded her significant contributions to modern dance, performance ethnography, and community engagement before and after that gap in her creative output. An analysis of her artistic choices during that period sheds light on the impact that shifting priorities of leftism and modern dance had on creative opportunities and professional viability for artists. As an unfulfilled desire, her dance theatre troupe that would unite the US

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North and South poses more questions than answers. However, I have shown, it illuminates the ways in which she was forming (and re-forming) her theories on how to research, make, and fund performance. Primus reflected and responded to the shifting landscapes of leftism and modern dance. Her changing theories built upon her well-documented early protest dances and directly set the stage for her later work in and about Africa. Whether recruiting dancers from New York City, the US South, or Liberia, Primus continually worked to unify disparate communities through her dance, even in the quietest parts of her career.

Notes

1 Ezra Goodman, "Hard Time Blues: Pearl Primus of *Show Boat* Dances for Herself—and People," *Dance Magazine* 20.4 (1946): 30–1, 55–6, at 55.
2 Peggy Schwartz and Murray Schwartz, *The Dance Claimed Me: A Biography of Pearl Primus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 72.
3 Ibid., 76.
4 Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Richard C. Green, "(Up)Staging the Primitive: Pearl Primus and 'the Negro Problem' in American Dance," in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 105–39.
5 Rebekah J. Kowal, "Dance Travels 'Walking with Pearl,'" *Performance Research* 12.2 (2007): 85–94; Rebekah J. Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance: Performing Change in Postwar America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), esp. chap. 4.
6 Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Pearl Primus and the Idea of a Black Radical Tradition," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 17.1 (40) (2013): 40–9; Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists & Progressive Politics during World War II* (New York: Basic *Civitas* Books, 2013).
7 Sonja Arsham Kuftinec, "'Do You Need Help?': Dialogics of Change in Community-Based Theatre," *Theatre Survey* 57.3 (2016): 419–23, at 419.
8 Richard Dier, "Interview with La Primus: Story of a Great Dancer Who Has Been Graduated from Cafe Society into Big Time," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 21 October 1944, 5.
9 Goodman, "Hard Time Blues."
10 Pearl Primus, "Diary by Pearl Primus, 1943–1949," Box 2, Pearl Primus Collection, American Dance Festival Archives, Duke University Libraries, Durham, NC.
11 For modern dance stakeholders' formulations of dance theatre during the 1940s, see Jessica Friedman, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Women Choreographers of 1940s American Modern Dance" (Ph.D. diss., Theatre and Drama, Northwestern University, June 2023), 21–39; https://arch.library.northwestern.edu/downloads/5h73pw49m?locale=en.
12 Doug Rossinow, *Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 2–4.
13 Ibid., 4.
14 Schwartz and Schwartz, *Dance Claimed Me,* 37, 258. Primus studied anthropology and African culture independently until she enrolled in an anthropology doctoral program in Columbia University in 1945.
15 For Primus's disappointment in the South, see Dier, "Interview with La Primus"; Goodman, "Hard Time Blues."
16 Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, updated paperback ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2010).
17 Ibid., 7.
18 Michael Carter, "Pearl Primus Dances Out Social Problems: Entertainer Attempts to Contribute to Interracial Understanding; Tours South to Study Actions in Church," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 22 July1944, 5.
19 Langston Hughes, "The Underground," *New Masses* 48.13 (1943): 14.
20 Lois Balcom, "What Chance Has the Negro Dancer?" *Dance Observer* 11.9 (1944): 110–11; Earl Conrad, "Pearl Primus Tells Her Faith in Common People," *Chicago Defender*, 6 January 1945.

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21 Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 37.
22 Goodman, "Hard Time Blues," 31.
23 See Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, 159.
24 Carter, "Pearl Primus Dances Out Social Problems."
25 Ibid.
26 D. Soyini Madison, *Performed Ethnography and Communication: Improvisation and Embodied Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2018), xviii.
27 Rebecca R. Kastleman, "Staging Hurston's Heaven: Ethnographic Performance from the Pulpit to the Pews," *Theatre Survey* 63.2 (2022): 138–59; Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
28 VèVè A. Clark, "Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro-Caribbean Dance: Katherine Dunham's Choreography, 1938–87," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture,* ed. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 188–204, at 189. See also VèVè A. Clark, "Developing Diasporic Literacy and *Marasa* Consciousness," *Theatre Survey* 50.1 (2009): 9–18.
29 Joanna Dee Das, *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
30 Carter, "Pearl Primus Dances Out Social Problems."
31 Goodman, "Hard Time Blues," 55.
32 Schwartz and Schwartz, *Dance Claimed Me*, 113.
33 Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 129.
34 Schwartz and Schwartz, *Dance Claimed Me*, 113.
35 Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 4.
36 Schwartz and Schwartz, *Dance Claimed Me*, 113.
37 Dier, "Interview with La Primus."
38 Ibid.
39 Primus, "Diary by Pearl Primus, 1943–1949," December 1946.
40 Ibid.; Dier, "Interview with La Primus."
41 Primus, "Diary by Pearl Primus, 1943–1949," December 1946.
42 Dier, "Interview with La Primus"; Goodman, "Hard Time Blues," 56.
43 Dier, "Interview with La Primus.
44 Ibid.
45 Peter Lau, "Southern Negro Youth Congress," *Oxford African American Studies Center* (1 December 2006); https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.43473, accessed 5 May 2023.
46 McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 141–2.
47 Ibid., 142. SNYC's original headquarters had been in Richmond, Virginia. It moved to Birmingham, Alabama, in 1940.
48 Ibid., 141.
49 Dier, "Interview with La Primus."
50 Tanisha C. Ford, *Our Secret Society: Mollie Moon and the Glamour, Money, and Power Behind the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Amistad/HarperCollins, 2023), 64.
51 Conrad, "Pearl Primus."
52 Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 3.
53 Goodman, "Hard Time Blues," 55.
54 Dier, "Interview with La Primus."
55 For example, see Ford, *Our Secret Society*, 210.
56 Dier, "Interview with La Primus."
57 Vickie Thompson, "Pearl Primus Dancers' Feet Infected, Declares Tour's 'Grossly Mishandled': Production Drags; Dancer Plans Suit," *New York Amsterdam News*, 10 February 1945, B5.
58 Nadine George-Graves, "African American Performance and Community Engagement," in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre*, ed. Harvey Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 196–214, at 198.

59 For examples, see Martha Coleman, "On the Teaching of Choreography: Interview with Jean Erdman," *Dance Observer* 19.4 (1952): 52–3; Jean Erdman, "The Dance as Non-Verbal Poetic Image, Part I," *Dance Observer* 16.4 (1949): 48–9; Jean Erdman, "Young Dancers State Their Views: As Told to Joseph Campbell," *Dance Observer* 15.4 (1948): 40–1; Jean Erdman, "What Is Modern Dance?" *Vassar Alumnae Magazine* (February 1948): 19–25; Robert Horan, "Poverty and Poetry in Dance," *Dance Observer* 11.5 (1944): 52–4, 59; Gertrude Lippincott, "Will Modern Dance Become Legend?" *Dance Magazine* 21.11 (1947): 24–7, 40; John Martin, "A Crisis in the Dance," *American Scholar* 9.1 (1939–40): 115–20; "'Modern' Dance Devotees Present Concerts Heedless of Any Profit," *New York Herald Tribune*, 6 November 1949, C2.
60 Pearl Primus, "Living Dance of Africa," *Dance Magazine* 20.6 (1946): 14–15, 45–7, at 15.
61 Ibid.
62 See John Martin, *The Modern Dance* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1933).
63 Primus, "Living Dance of Africa," 15.
64 Friedman, "Hidden in Plain Sight," 102–5.
65 Schwartz and Schwartz, *Dance Claimed Me*, 95, 270.
66 Quoted in ibid., 148.
67 Ibid., 145–6.

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Cite this article: Jessica Friedman, "Recruiting Places: Pearl Primus's Plans for Global Activism through Community-Engaged Dance Theatre," *Theatre Survey* 65.3 (2024): 208–226. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557424000231.